1-1-1994

An Analysis Of The Practice Of Tracking Students In A Junior High/Middle School Setting

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRACTICE OF TRACKING STUDENTS IN A JUNIOR HIGH/MIDDLE SCHOOL SETTING

COTTLE

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An Analysis Of The Practice Of Tracking Students In A Junior High/Middle School Setting

(TITLE)

BY

Veronda Cottle

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Specialist in Education

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1994
YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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4-30-94
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Abstract

This study investigated the tracking programs used in nine Chicago south suburban junior high schools and a middle school in Orlando, Florida. Interviews were conducted with the principals of the ten schools involved in the study. Participants were asked if they had made changes in their tracking programs and why changes were made. In addition, a review of current literature associated with tracking was presented. Included in the review were books and articles related to the formation of an effective tracking program. Recommendations were made for the "best" tracking program to put in effect at junior high/middle schools in general, and Memorial Junior High School in Lansing, Illinois, specifically.

The findings and conclusions from this study indicated that most schools are making changes in their tracking programs by retaining accelerated and enriched classes, known as Track I, for the top 15% of the students, and combining Track II and Track III classes into heterogeneous groupings for the remaining 85% of the students. The rationale for making these changes included the implementation of cooperative learning techniques into the curriculum and parental pressure to maintain Track I classes. Recommendations included the importance of teacher and parent input in the planning process, introducing changes in phases, and beginning the process by eliminating the lowest groups from the tracking program.

Chapter I

Introduction

Young adolescents face significant challenges in today's society. For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For others, it represents their last chance to avoid a diminished future. The intellectual and emotional needs of many young adolescents do not match the organization and curriculum of traditional junior high/middle schools in existence today.

The current practice of placing students in low, middle, and high ability groups, generally known as tracking, has generated a great deal of concern in the educational community. Professional journals are filled with articles citing the need to "detrack" our schools. Yet, many administrators and teachers do not seem to share this concern. In fact, some schools have changed their tracking programs to provide more challenges for their most academically talented students.

A case in point is the tracking program currently in place at Memorial Junior High School in Lansing, Illinois. In order to challenge the most academically gifted students, all students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades were placed in Track One classes which were for the top 15% and Track Two classes for the other 85%. A major concern of the administration was the manner of determining which students would be placed in the Track One classes. It was agreed by the junior high school staff and the administration that placement would be based on standardized testing results, grades, and

and teacher judgment. The Stanford Achievement Test, Eighth Edition, was selected as the test that would be utilized for the student placement. The test was selected as a result of its availability within the school district and because of its reliability. The test is administered at the end of each school year.

Since tracking was implemented in 1985, teachers at Memorial Junior High School have questioned if this practice should be continued. This study is significant because it was designed to recommend the "best" tracking program that can be implemented at the junior high/middle school level.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the tracking programs used in nine Chicago south suburban junior high schools and a middle school in Orlando, Florida, as well as a review of the literature to recommend the "best" tracking program to put in effect at junior high/middle schools in general, and Memorial Junior High School in Lansing, Illinois, specifically.

Research Questions

This study was designed to find the answers to the following research questions:

1. If a tracking program is to be implemented, what is the rationale for doing so?

2. If a tracking program is to be implemented, what guidelines should be followed to make the program effective?

3. If no tracking program is to be implemented, what is the rationale for this decision?

4. If no tracking program is to be implemented, what alternatives could be used?

This study provided a potential resource for junior high/middle school administrators as they consider what type of tracking program, if any, is beneficial for their students.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions are germane to understanding their context for this study:

Tracking. The assignment of students of similar abilities to a classroom group as determined by measures of aptitude or teacher judgment. It can also be known as ability grouping.

Random Grouping. The assignment of students to a classroom group with no regard to ability as determined by measures of aptitude or teacher judgment.

Track One. The top 15% of the students attending Memorial Junior High School who have reading comprehension scores of 70% on the S.A.T., SAI (Student Ability Index) scores of 120+, and subject area scores of 90% on the S.A.T.

Track Two. All students attending Memorial Junior High School whose criteria fall below the guidelines for Track One placement.

Middle Schools/Junior High Schools. Schools which contain Grades Six, Seven, and Eight.

Delimitations

1. Outside the scope of this study was the inclusion of self-contained, special education classrooms at the junior high level.

2. The study was limited to a sample of nine Chicago south suburban junior high/middle schools and one middle school in Orlando, Florida, which had tracking programs in place, but had made changes in these programs in the last five years.

Chapter II

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Tracking students is one of the most common and controversial practices in education. It is done at all levels, elementary, middle/junior high, and high school, and it takes many different forms. Yet, whether it is within-class ability grouping (such as grouping first graders for reading) or between-class grouping (such as tracking seventh graders by achievement level), the rationale behind tracking is much the same. It is easier for a teacher to target instruction to meet students' needs if the range of abilities among a group of students is reduced; thus all students will achieve more (Hereford, 1993).

Not only is this practice widespread, it is a singularly controversial activity. In fact, the issue of the effectiveness of tracking and ability grouping may be the single most controversial and unresolved issue in American education today. In the last half-century, there have been over 700 studies on tracking and ability grouping, more than on any other topic in education. Rarely have educational research and common school district practices been at greater variance (George, 1988).

Tracking seems like such a sensible idea, since students come to teachers from such incredibly different points. Students seem widely differing in their ability to learn. They also appear different in their interest in learning, and in their willingness to behave in ways that are conducive to their learning and to the learning opportunities for other students. In fact,

sometimes these differences seem to be the only things that students have in common!

According to George (1988), identifying those differences and reducing such heterogeneity should, then, make it possible for teachers to target their instruction more accurately, and more fully meet students' needs. Teachers should be able to accomplish their tasks with greater efficiency and ease. New teachers, full of energy and enthusiasm, but less prepared to deal with the challenging curriculum of the advanced students, could become seasoned by beginning with classes of slower learners, requiring less content preparation. Experienced teachers, having put in their time as beginners, would be enthusiastic about teaching students who were exceptionally able and eager to learn.

Students in these circumstances should learn better and feel more positive about themselves as a consequence of these groupings. Faster-learning students should profit from being pulled aside and would learn at much more rapid rates, being less bored than otherwise. Future leaders in science, government, and business require special handling and should learn more by being taught by teachers who had become experts in that area of content.

Slower students, on the other hand, would be able to receive the extra help they need when they are in classes specially designed for them, taught by earnest and energetic young teachers. This would also lessen the sense of

frustration and failure slower students feel when in class with brighter faster-learning students to whom they are often unfavorably compared.

Tracking, then, has three general goals. First, it is intended to raise the academic achievement of students above what it would be if those students were placed in heterogeneously grouped (mixed ability) classes. Second, it is aimed at helping students feel better about school, and themselves as learners. Third, teachers should be able to be more effective and enjoy teaching when students are grouped by ability between classes (George, 1988). Yet, much of the research on tracking does not support this rationale. In fact, it often supports the opposite practice of heterogeneous grouping.

This study explored the rationale for implementing a tracking program and what guidelines should be followed to make the program effective. It also explore the rationale for not implementing a tracking program and what alternatives could be used in place of a tracking program. The subsections that are included in the review of the literature are: 1) the benefits of tracking, 2) the disadvantages of tracking, 3) components necessary for effective tracking programs, 4) impediments to a successful tracking program, and 5) alternatives to tracking programs. A review of relevant literature and research is found in Chapter IV which results in an analysis of the problem.

Chapter III

Overview

This study was designed to investigate the tracking programs used in nine Chicago south suburban junior high schools and a middle school in Orlando, Florida as well as a review of the literature to recommend the "best" tracking program to put in effect at junior high/middle schools in general, and Memorial Junior High School, specifically. Lists of names and phone numbers were secured through the directory published by the Educational Service Region of Cook County, Chicago, Illinois. The information from the middle school in Orlando, Florida was obtained by this researcher during a visit to the school arranged by the National Association of Elementary School Principals at the annual conference in March, 1994.

Sample and Population

The schools selected were:

1. Brookwood Junior High School, District #167, Glenwood, Illinois.
2. Heritage Middle School, District #171, Lansing, Illinois.
3. Kerr Middle School, District #120, Blue Island, Illinois.
4. Memorial Junior High School, District #158, Lansing, Illinois.
5. Orland Junior High School, District #135, Orland Park, Illinois.
6. Roosevelt Junior High School, District #90, River Forest, Illinois.
7. Sandridge Junior High School, District #172, Chicago Heights, Illinois.

8. Schrum Memorial Middle School, District #157, Calumet City, Illinois.

9. Wentworth Junior High School, District #155, Calumet City, Illinois.

10. Windy Ridge Middle School, Orange County, Orlando, Florida.

These schools were selected because they all had some type of tracking program in place and had made modifications to their program in the last five years.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted interviews with the principals of the ten schools included in this study. The three questions asked were:

1. Do you have a tracking program in place?

2. What changes have you made in your tracking program in the last five years?

3. Why did you make these changes?

The information obtained in the interviews was recorded on notecards.

Data Analysis

The information obtained from the interviews was compared and analyzed to determine the common factors that contributed to the changes made at each school. The study is two-pronged (analysis of literature and interviews) both yielding qualitative results.

Chapter IV

Review of Literature and Research

A major component of this study was to conduct an analysis of the literature and research which exists regarding tracking programs. The review of relevant literature and research is subdivided into the following categories: 1) the benefits of tracking, 2) the disadvantages of tracking, 3) components necessary for effective tracking programs, 4) impediments to a successful tracking program, and 5) alternatives to tracking programs.

Benefits of Tracking

In a study conducted by the Johns Hopkins University and the National Education Association it was found that tracking plans have beneficial effects on student achievement when students remain in heterogeneous classes most of the day and are regrouped by performance level only for those subjects in which reducing heterogeneity is particularly important (Bruni, 1992). The grouping plan should reduce heterogeneity in the specific skill being taught and group assignments should be both flexible and frequently reassessed. The study also found that teachers that adapt the level and pace of instruction in regrouped classes to accommodate students' levels of readiness and learning rates have the most success (Slavin, 1989).

Much of the controversy over tracking programs stems from the manner in which significant research projects have been interpreted. According to Allan (1991), the most destructive aspect of the controversy over tracking and ability grouping is the misrepresentations of the findings, particularly those

of Slavin's best-evidence synthesis (Slavin, 1986), in the popular media. Slavin treated all the studies included in his synthesis as equally valid. He omitted clearly inadequate studies, but gave all studies included the same weight without regard for their relative quality. Allan feels that many publications distort the research findings and undermine serious discussion of an important issue. Many articles fail to take note of Slavin's very important and worthwhile distinction between types of grouping. They also indicate that the research has determined that grouping is academically harmful.

In examining the actual conclusions in Slavin's synthesis, it is essential to examine them according to type of grouping rather then as one amorphous whole. When grouping is separated within-class, comprehensive, and between-class grouping patterns, the results become more specific and useful (Allan, 1991).

Within-class tracking can be accomplished in several ways and can use a variety of educational techniques. Slavin (1986) concluded that such grouping clearly benefits students. Kulik (1989) separated the within-class grouping studies into those designed for all students and those designed specifically for academically talented students. The programs designed for all students showed a positive, but smaller effect on student achievement. This effect was similar for high, average, and low ability groups. The within-class groupings for academically talented students were found to have substantial positive academic effects.

The practice of comprehensive full-day grouping of pupils into different classrooms on the basis of general ability or IQ is not supported by Slavin's best-evidence synthesis. However, it is vital to note that he did not find evidence of academic harm to students in this form of grouping--only lack of academic gain. In contrast, Kulik (1989) found that students grouped in classes according to general academic ability slightly outperformed non-grouped students. Achievement test scores for students in high ability classes showed a (0.04) positive effect attributed to students being placed in this group. No effect was shown for those students placed in low-ability classes. The strongest positive effect size was for students in high-ability classes (0.04) and no effect for those in low-ability classes. In a separate analysis of gifted and talented programs, Kulik (1989) found that students performed significantly better than they did in heterogeneous classes.

With regard to the practice of regrouping for specific subject areas, Slavin (1986) concludes that such an approach can be instructionally effective, particularly when it is done for only one or two subjects; it greatly reduces student heterogeneity in a specific skill; group assignments are frequently reassessed; and teachers vary the level and pace of instruction according to student needs.

Allan (1991) believes the following statements are supported by research results and may reasonably be applied by educators when considering the advantages of tracking.

1. Gifted and high-ability children show positive academic effects from some forms of homogenous grouping. One positive academic effect results from acceleration of classes that are specifically designed for gifted students. Another positive effect is the use of specially trained teachers who utilize a differentiated curriculum. In fact, all students, whether grouped or not, should be experiencing a differentiated curriculum that provides options geared to their learning styles and ability levels.

2. Average and low-ability children may benefit academically from certain types of grouping, particularly elementary school regrouping for specific subject areas such as reading and mathematics, as well as from within-class grouping. These benefits may be small. These students show very little benefit from wholesale grouping by general ability.

3. The preponderance of evidence does not support the contention that children are academically harmed by grouping.

4. Students' attitudes toward specific subjects are improved by grouping in those subjects. However, grouping does not have any effect on their attitudes toward school.

5. It is unclear whether grouping has any effect on the self-esteem of students in the general school population. However, effects on self-esteem are small but positive for low-ability children and slightly negative for average-and high-ability children. There is limited evidence that remedial programs have a positive effect on the self-esteem of slow learners.

The Disadvantages of Tracking

Oakes (1985) considers tracking by ability as one of the most divisive and damaging school practices in existence. Students placed in lower academic tracks or classes in the middle grades are locked into dull, repetitive instructional programs leading at best to minimum competencies. She believes the psychic numbing these youth experience from a "dumbed-down" curriculum contrasts sharply with the exciting opportunities for learning and critical thinking that students in higher tracks or classes may experience.

Goodlad's (1984) review on grouping states that because minority youth are disproportionately placed in lower academic groups, tracking often serves to reinforce racial isolation in schools, helps to perpetuate racial prejudice among students, and may increase alienation toward school among lower achieving students. This consequence is especially damaging in the middle grades, when young people's impressions regarding the value of those racially and culturally different from themselves begin to become entrenched.

Oakes (1992) agrees that throughout the grades, race, social class, and track assignments correlate consistently. Low-income students and non-Asian minorities are disproportionately enrolled in low-track academic classes while advantaged students and whites more often are enrolled in the high track. These groups lack equal representation in programs for gifted and talented students.

A longitudinal study of Midwestern junior high school students conducted at the University of Michigan found that students assigned to low-

ability math classes consistently displayed lower self-esteem. Over time, they misbehave more in school and eventually they are more likely to drop out. Black (1992) states that this report indicates that by the end of tenth grade, low track students are at least 12% more likely to drop out than students in higher tracks.

A more serious drawback identified by recent studies is that teachers inevitably drop their expectations when they walk into a classroom full of students labeled as low achievers. In a study of junior and senior high schools, Oakes (1985) found that high track students learn skills in a context of ideas, have better materials, and attend classes where the general climate is more positive than in lower-track classes. For example, students in higher tracks read literature such as "Romeo and Juliet" and are asked to use original thinking to answer questions. In contrast, lower-track classes work on reading selections and fill in the blanks on work sheets. "Low-ability students tend to get a curriculum empty in terms of ideas," says Oakes. "Skills have become gatekeepers to ideas."

Components Necessary for Effective Tracking Programs

The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented issued a report entitled An Analysis of the Research on Ability Grouping: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (1992). In this report, Kulik observes that the questions that people ask about grouping are not easy to answer. He feels that the answers depend on the type of grouping program. Results differ in programs that (a) group students by aptitude but prescribe a common

curriculum for all groups; (b) group students by aptitude and prescribe different curricula for the groups; and (c) place highly talented students into special enriched and accelerated classes that differ from other classes in both curricula and other resources. Benefits from these programs are positive, with the benefits for the first type of program being smallest and the benefits for the third type being the most positive and important.

Kulik believes that these results are relevant to Oakes's call for the elimination of all forms of ability grouping or tracking from American schools. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that this proposed reform could greatly damage American education. Teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents should be aware that student achievement would suffer with the total elimination of all school programs that group students by aptitude (1992, p. xv).

Kulik feels that the damage would be greatest if schools, in the name of detracking, eliminated enriched and accelerated classes for their brightest learners. The achievement level of such students falls dramatically when they are required to do routine work at a routine pace. No one can be certain that there would be a way to repair the harm that would be done if schools eliminated all programs of acceleration and enrichment.

Guidelines from meta-analytic studies of tracking presented in Kulik's report (1992, p. xv) are as follows:

Guideline 1. Although some school programs that group children by ability have only smaller effects, other tracking programs help children a great

deal. Schools should therefore resist calls for the wholesale elimination of tracking or ability grouping.

Guideline 2. Highly talented youngsters profit greatly from work in accelerated classes. Schools should therefore try to maintain programs of accelerated work.

Guideline 3. Highly talented youngsters also profit greatly from an enriched curriculum designed to broaden and deepen their learning. Schools should therefore try to maintain programs of enrichment.

Guideline 4. Bright, average, and slow youngsters profit from tracking programs that adjust curriculum to the aptitude level of the groups. Schools should try to use tracking in this way.

Guideline 5. Benefits are slight from programs that group children by ability but prescribe common curricular experiences for all ability groups. Schools should not expect student achievement to change dramatically with either establishment or elimination of such programs.

Based on Kulik's research and also on strategies suggested by Slavin (1986), the components of an effective tracking program should include the following:

1. Programs that provide accelerated classes for highly talented youngsters.

2. Programs of enrichment which are designed to broaden and deepen the learning of highly talented youngsters.

3. Programs that adjust the curriculum to the aptitude levels of each group.

4. Programs that prescribe common curricular experiences for all ability groups.

5. Programs that reassess grouping assignments frequently so that students can move from one track to another as their progress or needs warrant. (p. 20)

Impediments to a Successful Tracking Program

One of the impediments to a successful tracking program is the lack of a well defined structure for the tracking program that is in place. According to Oakes (1985), it is important to realize that tracking students in schools is not an orderly phenomenon in which practices, even within a single school, are consistent or even reflective of clearly stated school or district policies. She feels that sorting out what tracking is actually done at a school is rather like putting together the pieces of a puzzle. In the 25 schools she surveyed, only 2 schools had any documents explicitly outlining the structure of their tracking systems. Of these documents, only one was a formal policy statement; the other was a letter of explanation to teachers about the criteria they should use to place students. At the other 23 schools partial information from many sources had to be pieced together to get complete pictures of their use of tracking.

Another impediment to a successful tracking program is the way teachers feel about teaching students in high, middle, and low-ability tracks.

Black (1992) states that the names teachers give the groups might be some indication. In one Midwestern school, teachers called pupils in a high-ability group the "eagles" and pupils in a low-ability group the "crows." In a junior high school in the Northeast, pre-algebra students are "aces", while remedial math students are "zeros."

Alternatives to Tracking Programs

With new knowledge and tools at their disposal, more and more educators at all levels are now exploring alternatives to tracking programs in order to improve schooling for all students. For example, a six-step review and renewal process was developed at Newport Harbor High School, Newport Beach, California, to review the thoroughly entrenched, ingrained, and institutionalized practice of achievement-level tracking, which had been employed for 20 years in the English and social studies departments. These six steps included the following phases: (1) identify, define, and limit the prevailing practice; (2) study the heritage of the prevailing practice; (3) review the research and theory; (4) operationalize the research and theory; (5) brainstorm implications of the practice; and (6) discuss and decide on potential changes in the practice. At the conclusion of this process, it was the general feeling of the staff that if the goal of achievement-level tracking was to assure that the low and middle level tracked students would not be successful, then they had succeeded admirably! The decision was then made to eliminate achievement-level tracking in these subject areas and institute heterogeneous grouping (Evans, 1991).

It is important to note that when heterogeneous grouping is used there is no need to eliminate the challenge and the ideas that make learning interesting even as one works on basic skills for lower-level students. Under California's new literature-based curriculum, most eighth grade students read "To Kill a Mockingbird." Some groups may take longer or need more help, but teachers are finding that everyone is able to discuss the book and its meaning (Rachlin, 1989).

After the initial fear of trying something new is conquered, teachers must be given the support and training that is vital to their success if alternatives to tracking programs are to be implemented. One such alternative is Cooperative Learning in which a group of students pursue academic and social goals through collaborative efforts. Students work together in small groups and assist each other in completing a task. This method encourages supportive relationships, good communication skills, social skills, and high level thinking skill development (Slavin, 1990).

Research has consistently shown that using Cooperative Learning strategies can: (1) increase academic achievement, (2) increase student motivation and enthusiasm, (3) decrease discipline problems, (4) ease tensions due to differences, (5) improve student attendance, (6) enhance social skills, and (7) create enthusiasm for learning. All students (low achievers, high achievers, middle achievers, mainstreamed special education, "at-risk") can profit from cooperative approaches (Slavin, 1983b).

Three important elements must be present for maximum benefit to be derived from using Cooperative Learning as an alternative to a tracking program. These elements are: (1) positive interdependence - the success of the group depends on the efforts of all its members; (2) individual accountability - students are individually responsible for learning the material; and (3) social skills - interpersonal and communication skills that promote successful group interaction (Johnson, 1990).

According to Wheelock and Hawley (1992) implementing alternatives to tracking programs is much more than the regrouping of students from homogeneous groups into heterogeneous groups. They believe it is truly whole-school reform, requiring educators to investigate and adapt a variety of new approaches to curriculum and instruction in the classroom. Sometimes these approaches are developed by individual teachers. Sometimes schools choose to purchase packaged curricula that meet their standards. Whatever the approach, implementation is almost always easier when it is executed by teams of teachers within a school with their involvement and adaptation. Implementing alternatives to tracking is not something a teacher can do alone. What is most crucial to implementation is a commitment to professional development for all teachers.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with the principals of the 10 schools included in this study with each principal being asked if his/her school had a tracking

program in place. They were also asked what changes have been made in their tracking program in the last five years and why were these changes made.

The smallest school included in this study was Sandridge Junior High School in Chicago Heights, Illinois, with a student enrollment of only 64 students. The tracking program was changed at this school because their teachers were trained in cooperative learning techniques and the decrease in their student population made self-contained heterogeneous classrooms easier to implement (G.P. Spila, personal communication, January 18, 1994).

The staff at Roosevelt Junior High School, River Forest, Illinois, changed their tracking program in the 1990-91 school year. The current principal was hired that year and asked to help develop the middle school concept at Roosevelt. Tracking was replaced in social studies and science classrooms with whole group heterogeneous classes. Teachers were trained in cooperative learning techniques and plans were made to eliminate tracking in other subject areas over a period of time. English and math classes are still tracked at the present time (G. Niehaus, personal communication, January 11, 1994).

Windy Ridge Middle School, Orlando, Florida, had the most unique tracking system in that all students were placed in heterogeneous classes except for two self-contained gifted classrooms. These students were considered "misfits" because of their extremely high intelligence and their inappropriate social skills. This was a new school founded on the concept of providing heterogeneous classes and cooperative learning for all students, yet,

they chose to isolate their most gifted students. The rationale provided by the principal was that there were enough bright and talented students left in the classrooms to provide different levels of ability for interaction in cooperative groups. (G. Monroe, personal communication, March 9, 1994).

Kerr Middle School, Blue Island, Illinois, was the only school included in this study where classes were deliberately grouped heterogeneously by dividing students at different achievement levels (using standardized test scores) as evenly as possible between classes. This practice was instituted three years ago as part of a curriculum plan to utilize cooperative learning in all classrooms (B. Mackey, personal communication, March 20, 1994).

Heritage Middle School and Memorial Junior High School in Lansing, Illinois, and Orland Junior High School in Orland Park, Illinois, have eliminated Track III classes. All three schools still use a modified tracking program to provide an enriched curriculum for the top 15% of their students. The other 85% of the students are taught in heterogeneously classes that incorporate some form of cooperative learning. Parental pressure to keep the Track I classes was a factor at each school (D. Soustek and R. Shrader, personal communication, January 5, 1994; and P. Yuska, personal communication, February 8, 1994).

Wentworth Junior High School and Schrum Memorial Junior High School, both located in Calumet City, Illinois, still have low, middle, and high ability tracked classes, but a study is underway at both schools to change tracks for the 1994-95 school year. Training in cooperative learning techniques

and parental concern were instrumental in implementing this projected change (G. O'Rouke, personal communication, February 11, 1994; and M. Wierzbickie, personal communication, February 25, 1994).

Brookwood Middle School in Glenwood, Illinois, was the only school included in this study that has completely changed its tracking program. A new multicultural curriculum has been implemented at this school, and one component of the new curriculum was the move to heterogeneous classes for all students (T. Anderson, personal communication, January 21, 1994).

After conducting the interviews with the principals of the 10 schools and analyzing the information gathered, the most frequently significant factors identified for the changes in tracking programs were (1) the teachers had been trained in cooperative learning techniques and (2) that parental pressure was significant in keeping the Track I classes.

Results

The review of the literature and the information obtained from the interviews with the principals of the nine Chicago south suburban junior high/middle schools and the middle school in Orlando, Florida, provided the data for analysis in order to answer the research questions posed by this study.

The first research question asked, "If a tracking program is to be implemented, what is the rationale for doing so?" The rationale for implementing a tracking program would be to provide within-class groupings for academically talented students and to provide average and low-ability students with tracked classes in one or two subject areas.

The second research questions asked, "If a tracking program is to be implemented, what guidelines should be followed to make the program effective?" The research shows that schools should resist calls for the wholesale elimination of tracking. Schools should offer highly talented students the opportunity to participate in accelerated classes with an enriched curriculum designed to broaden and deepen their learning. They should also offer programs that adjust the curriculum to the aptitude levels of each group. The tracking program must also be reassessed frequently so that students can move from one track to another as their progress or needs warrant.

The third research question asked, "If no tracking program is to be implemented, what is the rationale for this decision?" The research shows that tracking often serves to reinforce racial isolation in schools, helps to perpetuate racial prejudice among students, and may increase alienation toward school among lower achieving students. This consequence is especially damaging in the middle grades, when students' impressions regarding the value of those racially and culturally different from themselves begin to become entrenched. This was one of the reasons for the change to a non-tracked, multicultural curriculum at Brookwood Middle School.

The review of the literature also revealed that students assigned to low-ability math classes consistently displayed lower self-esteem, misbehaved more in school, and eventually were more likely to drop out. This, coupled with the fact that teachers inevitably drop their expectations when they walk into a

classroom of students labeled low achievers, is a significant rationale for not implementing a tracking program.

The fourth research question asked, "If no tracking program is to be implemented, what alternatives could be used?" The review of the literature and research and the information obtained from the interviews with principals show that although tracking can be eliminated one subject area at a time, the most effective alternative is whole-school reform. This requires educators to investigate and adapt a variety of new approaches to curriculum and instruction in the classroom.

The overwhelming reason stated for changing tracking programs by the principals of the nine south suburban middle/junior high schools and the middle school in Orlando, Florida was because their teachers had received training in cooperative learning techniques. Research has consistently shown that using cooperative learning strategies can: (1) increase academic achievement, (2) increase student motivation and enthusiasm, (3) decrease discipline problems, (4) ease tensions due to differences, (5) improve student attendance, (6) enhance social skills, and (7) create enthusiasm for learning. All students (low-achievers, high achievers, middle achievers, mainstreamed special education, "at-risk") can profit from cooperative approaches.

Three important elements must be present for maximum benefit to be derived from using Cooperative Learning as an alternative to a tracking program. These elements are:

1. Positive interdependence - the success of the group depends on the efforts of all its members.

2. Individual accountability - students are individually responsible for learning the material.

3. Social skills - interpersonal and communication skills that promote successful group interaction.

Chapter V

Summary, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

This study examined tracking programs used in nine Chicago south suburban junior high schools and a middle school in Orlando, Florida, and included a review of the literature and research to recommend the "best" tracking program to put in effect at junior high/middle schools in general, and Memorial Junior High School, specifically. Research questions were developed. A population, public junior high/middle schools, and a sample, nine Chicago south suburban junior high schools and a middle school in Orlando, Florida, were selected. Interviews were conducted with the principals of the ten schools selected for the study. The data from the review of literature and the interviews were analyzed. Answers to the research questions were prepared from the data analysis.

Findings

Junior high/middle schools are making changes in their tracking programs. Several of the schools included in this study have changed their programs by combining Track II and Track III classes and retaining Track I classes for gifted and academically talented students. The rationale for making these changes included the implementation of cooperative learning techniques into the curriculum and parental pressure to maintain Track I classes.

Conclusions

Although related research suggests that schools can best address tracking through whole-school reform, most junior high/middle schools have chosen to modify their existing tracking programs. These modifications can provide increased learning opportunities for all students by incorporating cooperative learning strategies that increase student motivation, decrease discipline problems, ease tensions due to differences, improve student attendance, enhance social skills, and create enthusiasm for learning. By maintaining the Track I classes for gifted and talented students, schools can continue to offer challenges and expanded opportunities for these students.

Recommendations

Junior high/middle schools planning to make changes in their tracking program should consider the following action statements:

1. Do become familiar with common arguments in favor of tracked classes and have responses prepared.

2. Do make a plan that involves teachers. Begin with the teachers well-trained in cooperative learning techniques.

3. Do consult with and inform all parents early in the planning stages. Identify parent support and be prepared for tough questions from opponents.

4. Do introduce changes in grouping, curriculum, and instruction in phases, allowing for feedback to the whole school and opportunities for modification.

5. Do begin by eliminating the lowest groups for the tracking program.

6. Do begin with the most enthusiastic teachers who are sold on the idea.

7. Do continue to circulate information about alternatives to tracking, and publicize your successes.

It is the opinion of this researcher that the "best" tracking program to be put in effect at junior high/middle schools in general, and Memorial Junior High School, specifically is a tracking program that incorporates cooperative learning, eliminates as many tracks as possible, and provides opportunities for enrichment and acceleration for gifted and talented students.

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