

TRACKING AN INDICTMENT

Kim Marshall

Most American children go to schools that segregate them into "smart", "average", and "slow" classes according to their supposed ability. Kids usually stay in the same track all the way through school, and the group they are in has a lot to do with what teachers expect them to accomplish and what the kids think of themselves.

The idea behind tracking is that it is easier to teach a class that is more or less at the same level, one in which all of the kids can begin at roughly the same rate to read, write, add and subtract, and that bright kids shouldn't be held back by being in the same room with slower kids. But good teaching can negate both of these rationalizations; the fact is that tracking does much more harm than good.

It is almost impossible to separate the winners from the losers on the basis of test scores or subjective teacher recommendations; in my own teaching I have found brilliant kids in the lowest classes and plodding thinkers in the top classes. What a tracking system does tend to do is put the kids who enter school with the most handicaps from family and their environment in the bottom classes, thus stigmatizing and humiliating them while flattering the "smart" kids who need encouragement the least.

But regardless of how inefficient and perverse tracking is, kids are under a great deal of pressure to take the system's verdict about their brains and ability to heart. Whether the hierarchy from "smart" to "dumb" is artfully concealed in class names like Bluejays and Robins, or blatantly obvious like 6-A and 6-F, kids realize their position in the order and figure out which way is up. Starting from the early grades, this system acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy which turns some kids on to learning and helps drive others out onto the streets.

The bottom classes become dumping grounds of learning problems and disruptive behavior, and often pick up a negative psychology of their own, making the teacher's job exceedingly difficult. The collective mood can be something like, "We're the dumb class and we can't do nothing," which puts even the best teachers under inexorable pressure to lower their expectations or give up on the kids.

Ironically, tracking creates problems for the smart kids too (although the damage isn't as serious as it is for their less fortunate peers). Being in the elite classes leads many kids to be proud of little more than their cleverness in school and stand on the shoulders of others for their self-esteem. The atmosphere in these classes is often a competitive rat-race in which kids are never fully satisfied unless they are first, are constantly haunted by the fear of being toppled from their perch, and never develop other talents and friendships with kids who are different from themselves.

The alternative to tracking is to mix kids randomly into heterogeneous classes, which makes good educational sense in ways that harken back to the days of the one-room schoolhouse. First of all, one of the most important ingredients of learning is a sympathetic environment free of fear and stigma and supportive of a wide range of interests and talents.

Second, slower and relatively disadvantaged children learn faster when they rub shoulders with brighter, more advantaged peers than when they are isolated with kids at their own level, and this process doesn't hurt or hold back the bright kids (according to the Coleman Report of 1966). But you don't necessarily have to go outside a public school building for this mixing of advantaged and disadvantaged; every school, whether it is in a wealthy suburb or a ghetto, contains a wide range of ability--almost a cross-section of the society at large. This means that doing away with tracking and mixing kids randomly within a school creates almost as much of a mixture of ability as you would get by integrating between schools in different areas.

Third, one of the best learning experiences, as any teacher or parent knows, is trying to explain something to another person. This is the big payoff for brighter kids in heterogeneous classrooms if they are encouraged to share what they know with their peers. And the flow of informal learning is by no means one-way; the "dumb" kids have a surprising amount to offer their more fortunate peers.

Finally, a class of kids at many different levels of ability puts the teacher under more pressure to see kids as individuals and come up with a wide variety of materials and a method of reaching different levels and learning styles,

(continued)

TRACKING . . .

as well as encouraging the teacher to open the classroom to the possibilities of informal learning. So, ending a tracking system might catalyze the best, most individualized teaching.

Some teachers are not willing to meet this challenge and might continue to stigmatize the slower kids; this raises a tricky area of judgment for principals on how fast to push the process of ending tracking without adverse effects on some students. A further qualification is that there are clearly some kids who have such an accumulation of learning problems that they should be taught separately by specialists in very small classes and integrated with their peers only when they are ready.

Ending tracking would not only help kids feel and learn better in school; it would also begin a process of reconciling a whole range of divisions and conflicts that tracked schools have set up between kids. It would prepare teachers and students to live in classrooms full of very different people, and help them accept the differences without seeing them in terms of inferiority and superiority. Ending tracking is a microcosmic change that can be made with relative ease within the small and manageable community of a school; yet it might be a necessary precursor for the much more difficult decisions involved in real social and racial integration between schools.

Studies conducted in schools without tracking have failed to show any dramatic improvement in test scores. But this is hardly the point; test scores don't measure whole areas of intellectual and emotional growth, and as long as there is no detrimental effect on learning (none has been reported), there are plenty of other reasons more vital to the lives of children for ending tracking.

We need to rid our schools of this sorting and branding and humiliating of children. We need more schools that don't channel people into particular jobs on the basis of I.Q. scores in the early grades, but let them keep their minds open about what they can become. We need any change that will discourage lazy lecture teaching and encourage teachers to treat kids as individuals. And we need to break down the barriers between "smart" and "dumb", athletic and bookish, rich and poor, winner and loser. Schools don't have to parrot the inequalities and divisions of the larger society; they can indeed be crucibles of change by becoming joyful, integrated communities themselves.

KIM MARSHALL is an elementary school teacher in Boston, Massachusetts, and the author of Law and Order in Grade 6-E, Little, Brown and Company.

