Educational Tracking—A Democratic and Christian Dilemma

Probably the most controversial practice within American education has been that of curriculum tracking by ability and achievement level. Schooling in America was initially self-tracked into one course of study through voluntary attendance. Before long, however, the need for compulsory education was recognized as a way to force schooling upon the so-called “delinquent minority.” The target population at that time included child victims of criminality and pauperism, non-Protestants, and those of immigrant stock.

The enactment of compulsory education laws laid the foundation for tracking, which continues today. Voluntary compliance at the turn of the century resulted in overcrowded classrooms. Schedules fluctuated, instruction deteriorated, and the learning environment became confused. Chicago school personnel concluded in 1894 that attempting to teach wayward children after the age of seven was practically hopeless. In Boston, school officials established separate schools for the defective, even though the practice was contrary to the ideology of the day. Children relegated to this category were considered ne’er-do-wells and laggards. Among them were the Irish immigrants, blacks, and any others considered unfit for admission to regular grammar schools.¹

Ironically, compulsory education, which was lauded for its efforts to protect children’s rights during the Industrial Revolution, led to the need for tracking a highly diversified school population and has thus been condemned for denying children’s rights! One of the early abuses of tracking illustrates this emotionally charged issue.

Tracking...establishes homogeneous student groups within classes or by classes based upon previous academic performance as evaluated by individual teachers or demonstrated on group-administered achievement tests.

In September, 1920, Detroit school personnel administered an intelligence test to 11,000 incoming first graders. Based upon the findings, children were divided into three different programs. The top 20 percent benefited from an enriched curriculum; the middle 60 percent pursued the regular first-grade coursework; while the bottom 20 percent were taught a simplified course of study. This type of classification was based on the sorting of soldiers for assignments in World War I. Just as recruits were being fitted for military jobs, children were now being “fitted” into the public schools.

This case is particularly appalling since intelligence tests in the 1920s were crude, brief, group-administered, pencil-and-paper measures of ability that should have been used for research purposes only. Furthermore, even today, significant educational placement decisions should not be based upon such a mass screening of six-year-olds! The potential for misclassification under these conditions is endless. A bright child, for example, who has had little experience following directions, too little sleep the night before, who suffers from a visual learning disability, or who is simply immature, could easily be misclassified as less intelligent and thereby locked out of an enriched curriculum commensurate with his or her intellectual ability.

Singling Out Gifted Students

When it became apparent in the Sputnik era of the late 1950s that American public schools were not preparing competitors in the field of science and mathematics, gifted students were singled out as the target population. They were to be the nation’s hope. However, in order to win the space race against the Russians, the American public—and school curriculum experts—had to take another hard look at

¹ Dr. Simpson is a licensed educational psychologist and associate professor of counselor education at Loma Linda University School of Education, Riverside, California.

By Cheryl Simpson
the subjects taught in American public schools.

Although the democratic aim has always been to educate the masses through appropriate but equal means, the goals of schooling have not always been so clear. Revisionist historians have differed radically in their interpretations of policies within American schools. Joel Spring would have us believe that public education is a part of the conspiracy the American Government uses to control its people. The Sputnik panic might be used to support his theory. Bowles and Gintis, along with Tyack, are persuaded that the goals of the Industrial Revolution dictated the aims of American schooling. Children are taught conforming behaviors that will result in adult compliance to the work structure. Such an attitude appears to justify tracking children in order to match their skills with the job market. Cuberly, who has produced the classic work on the history of American education, believes that the schooling process is the outgrowth of democratic principles and that it is thereby democratic in both principle and in practice.

At the present time the United States Government and its people are in general agreement regarding the basic goals of schooling, which Goodlad categorizes as follows: (1) the acquisition of academic and intellectual knowledge, (2) vocational readiness for the economic...
realities of adulthood, (3) socialization into a democratic culture, and (4) self-actualization of one's creative gifts and interests. Seventh-day Adventist educators add to this list the religious aspect of education, which our schools integrate with all of the above. It is not these goals, but rather the means of achieving them that remains hotly debated in educational literature.

The controversy currently focuses upon both the quality and the equality of the means as well as the adequacy of the end product. In his most recent book A Place Called School, Goodlad concludes that the quality of educational opportunity and the quality of classroom instruction correlate significantly and that curriculum tracking presents a serious detriment to both.

**Tracking and Special Education**

With the growing acceptance of special education, the widespread practice of academic tracking could easily become confused with the mandates of Public Law 94-142, which guarantees free and appropriate education for every American child between the ages of three and 21 regardless of personal limitations. Thus, any examination of tracking should distinguish it from special education.

Special education is moving swiftly toward mainstreaming handicapped children with their nonhandicapped peers for as much of the school day and as many activities as seems prudent while striving to maximize the children's individual success in education. Tracking, however, appears to be moving away from the mainstream by separating students into homogeneous ability and/or performance levels beginning in the early grades and culminating in a segregated curriculum by the junior and senior high school years.

Handicapped students must be individually assessed by a school psychologist and other school personnel before special placement is decided by a multidisciplinary committee of educators. Prior to any departure, either tutorial or total, from the regular classroom curriculum, evaluation must indicate that the individual suffers from a handicap severe enough that only through the aid of special education will the child be able to reach his or her full potential.

In addition, it must be certified that the individual's primary handicapping condition is not caused by lack of personal motivation, socioeconomic deprivation, or cultural diversity, including a poor command of English as a second language. If these conditions are met, all special education placement must then be limited to the least restrictive environment—that which most closely approximates the mainstream, and is—at the same time—most conducive to the educational success of the handicapped individual.

**Types of Tracking**

Tracking, on the other hand, establishes homogeneous student groups within classes or by classes based upon previous academic performance as evaluated by individual teachers or demonstrated on group-administered achievement tests. In the primary grades, tracking most often takes the form of intraclass ability grouping. Tracking within the secondary school generally separates students into different basic programs of study, which may include remedial or general educational diploma requirements, vocational training, or college preparatory curriculum. An honors program may be the highest of four tracks. Specific courses most likely to be tracked include reading, language arts, mathematics, and science.

**Proponents of curriculum tracking argue that categorization is necessary for administrative efficiency, instructional relevance, and academic advancement of students within all ability levels.**

The justification for tracking has been summarized by Alexander and Cook as that of setting up "distinctive, internally coherent programs of study congruent with students' scholastic interests and competencies and tailored to their anticipated educational and vocational needs." Unlike special education, however, tracking is not adequately regulated to protect the civil rights of students. Those placed in the lower tracks may have the ability but not the early training, discipline, support, or motivation to perform at higher levels.

Proponents of curriculum tracking argue that categorization is necessary for administrative efficiency, instructional relevance, and academic advancement of students within all ability levels. In their view, gifted and highly motivated students are thereby freed from the lock-step instruction directed to the average pupil. Low ability and poorly motivated students are channeled into remedial courses of study that emphasize mastery of basic and vocational skills. (To page 38)
Dilemmas of Tracking  
(Continued from page 14)

Several philosophical questions arise in the debate of whether the school curriculum should be adjusted in accordance with individual interests, abilities, and career plans. Most educators would agree that for a handicapped individual the school program must be modified, though the extent to which this is done at public expense continues to be debated.
However, the use of a tracking system affects the educational opportunities and requirements of the nonhandicapped individual. Can such a system be justified? Will it limit the future options of those who are thus categorized?

Is Liberal Arts for Everyone?

Society has always been forced to select which lessons and values it holds most dear. These elements have constituted a liberal-arts curriculum for succeeding generations in preparation for the complexities of their adult lives.

Has the liberal-arts curriculum now been discarded as the American ideal in secondary education? Under what circumstances should any nonhandicapped person be excused from a particular course of study which is determined to be personally distasteful, academically burdensome, or not tangibly related to the adolescent's immediate perception of a specific career goal? Should such decisions be made by local school personnel, legislated by a higher body, or left to the student's discretion?

It can be argued that because the overwhelming majority of secondary students do not pursue higher education, the course of study for these individuals, particularly identified dropout risks, should set aside the liberal-arts emphasis in favor of a more pragmatic approach to the demands of twentieth-century technology.

The converse can be argued just as fervently—that these same individuals should, all the more, be required to study the classic curriculum to broaden their insights into the increasingly pluralistic environment of American life, which they will enter at much earlier ages and with less formal preparation than their college-educated peers.

The liberal-arts concept was upheld in the 1982 Gallup Poll of the American public's attitude toward public schools. Seventy-five percent of the respondents favored strengthening the college preparatory curriculum. The public also wanted much of that same curriculum required for all students whether or not they planned to attend college. In moving toward restoring excellence to education the nation appears to be rejecting unwarranted individualization, whereby a capable student can graduate from high school with a transcript full of credits earned from diluted courses.10

Who Chooses the Track?

Administrative choice versus self-selection of tracks constitutes a double bind. Civil-rights activists attack administrative assignment as discriminatory. Student selection may lock a late bloomer out of college due to the short-sightedness of adolescence. Nachmias presents this as "a basic conflict between the choice of an efficient differential structure and an open system providing equal opportunities for all."11

Clearly the advocates of tracking view its practice as a desirable and necessary means of meeting individual student needs. Certain educational researchers have sought to challenge these assumptions. Others have challenged the critics' findings, citing poor methodology as a major factor in the erroneous conclusions drawn.

The strongest criticism of tracking over the years has labeled the practice as discriminatory. Research consensus has established that a disproportionate number of minority students and lower socioeconomic groups are placed in the lowest track.12 Middle to upper class whites are disproportionately represented in the upper tracks. Although this finding is pervasive throughout the literature, Alexander and Cook, along with numerous other researchers, have recently challenged the discrimination theory by concluding that there is "little indication of appreciable socioeconomic, racial, or gender bias in curriculum sorting processes" when the frequently overlooked discrepancies in scholastic accomplishment, school experience, and academic resources before high school are studied. Such a conclusion, however, does not address the circular problem of discriminatory factors operating in earlier life and school experience that may have contributed significantly to such later differences.13

Numerous other concerns have been formulated through research on curriculum tracking. These concerns include the following problems found within the lower tracks, when contrasted with the higher tracks: (1) lower student self-esteem; (2) disproportionately higher delinquency rates; (3) poorer peer relationships; (4) inferior student-teacher interaction;

(To page 41)
Dilemmas of Tracking  
(Continued from page 39)

(5) inadequate counselor advise-
ment in terms of quality and time;  
(6) fewer research-supported suc-
cessful teaching methods in evi-
dence;  (7) the overall negative 
treatment effects of tracking. And 
the list goes on. However, current 
researchers are still attempting to 
supplant the discrimination the-
ory, using more sophisticated 
statistical methodology.14

Numerous research hypotheses 
can be generated regarding many 
of the above findings. However, 
when the low ability and poorly 
motivated students’ track does not 
interface with the higher tracks, 
the curriculum does not offer 
equal opportunity or treatment. 
Such a practice creates a class bias 
that may be in and of itself a 
negative treatment.

Tracking—at Sabbath School

Imagine, for purposes of illus-
tration, dividing a local congrega-
tion into Sabbath school groups by 
assigning the individuals with doc-
torates to one group, all other 
college-educated members to a sec-
tond group, white-collar employees 
to a third, blue-collar workers to 
a fourth, and the unemployed to 
a fifth group.

The college educated, particu-
larly those holding doctorates, 
might be considered—or consider 
theses—more intellectually 
capable of understanding such 
books of scripture as Daniel and 
Revelation. They may prefer to 
restrict their discussion to ad-
vanced rhetoric, whereas other 
groups may need supplemental 
study aids and group discussion in 
simpler terms.

Could we then assume that those 
in the local church who have suc-
cessfully pursued higher education 
are thus more spiritually discerning 
by virtue of their advanced degree? 
Would the decision on their “cur-
riculum” depend on the type of 
degree—academic versus medical? 
Should we assume that those per-
sons without benefit of formal 
education or professional advan-
tage are thereby less capable of 
intellectual debate? Should the 
high achievers be required, encou-
ergaged, or even allowed to narrow 
their spiritual insights through 
such segregation, thereby narrow-
ing the insights of all other groups 
in the process?

Adventist education has 
occasionally been 
accused of subtly urging 
all students to become ministers, teachers, 
doctors, or dentists. 
Tracking, based upon 
previous achievement, 
however, may not be 
the solution to this 
dilemma.

A Christian Dilemma

Such an emotionally charged 
illustration is presented as a refer-
ence point for relating the contro-
versies of curriculum tracking to 
the concerns facing educators in a 
democratic society in general and 
in a Christian community in par-
cular. Answers to the above ques-
tions seem obvious. Yet within the 
context of formal, compulsory 
schooling the issues become 
blurred.

Adventist education has occa-
sionally been accused of subtly 
urging all students to become 
ministers, teachers, doctors, or 
dentists. Tracking, based upon 
previous achievement, however,
class bias in track placements?

5. Will the use of tracking permit education of all students in the least restrictive classroom environment?

6. Could the track system short-circuit interaction of low ability and poorly motivated students with the more capable and enthusiastic students?

7. Are the underachieving but capable students challenged to develop their potential and required to meet standards of excellence?

Seventh-day Adventist educators are admonished to present "an education that is as high as heaven and as broad as the universe." We must attempt no less.

FOOTNOTES

3 Tyack, The One Best System.
8 Goodlad, A Place Called School.
13 Alexander and Cook, American Sociological Review, Davis and Haller, op. cit.