A General Thought on Tracking

The system of tracking students through their academic careers seems to work best for the administrations and teachers, but logistically I think that it does more academic damage to the students who are hardest to teach, ultimately those that the schools should be striving to reach. There is a constant debate that I have with myself, even as I write this journal reflection, because I want to say that tracking is a bad thing, but yet, I can’t imagine a system without some distinction and differentiation among students.

While I am divided over the tracking system, I am more satisfied with the move from the traditional numbered levels (1, 2, 3, etc.) to the system of labeling students according to the following scale (AP, Honors, Accelerated, and Academic). At the very least with this wording it makes students feel as though they have academic worth. For a student of the lowest level to be deemed academic still appears to sound scholarly; however, this raises a red flag to me. I feel that even with a change in the name those students in the lowest levels still will know they are in the lowest levels. It is almost a façade that the administration is trying to impart on the distinction that exists within the school.

Another problem I have is the message that is being promoted with respect to the division students according to their ability levels. It is possible that student will think, if teachers and administrators are putting me in the lowest level they must think I am not capable of succeeding at a high educational level so therefore there is no way I can learn and do better. Therefore, these students don’t do better and in turn teachers then feed into this mentality by beginning to think that maybe there is no hope for the lower track students so they too lose the drive. Thus, what is created is a vicious self-defeating cycle where students stop trying and teachers stop caring to try; rather they just push students along.

On the other end of the tracking system (AP and Honors levels) there doesn’t seem to be as many issues, for here students strive to succeed and teachers encourage and want the best for all their students. A greater level of self-motivation generally exists among upper track students. This end of the educational breakdown is most familiar for me because I was one of the upper track students in high school. I enjoyed my classes, being challenged by both teachers and classmates, and I enjoyed learning. I have a hard time imagining, as I am sure that most student of this educational status, a classroom that is completely and utterly random. Would work really get accomplished? Would learning really take place? You have to wonder whether “smarter” students could benefit those students who are at a lesser academic level, and whether the lower track students would even care to better themselves through the upper track students. Sadly, I think that the dichotomy in the classroom would be too different for real success to occur in the classroom. I think that this situation would create more frustration than progress because at the very least where frustration exists so does a large amount of unhappiness, therefore, creating less of a desire for all students to want to come to school and to want to do well

I just don’t know what to do with the tracking system. The educational abilities of all students are different and while each individual is different, enough similarities exist that enable tracking to be at least somewhat effective. To have a complete and random mix of academic abilities in the classroom would seem an impossible feat in which to adequately teach all students; to provide for them the most challenging academic setting.
Tracking at Upper Darby High School

The current system of tracking at Upper Darby is the older numbering system, which at the high end starts at Advanced Placement and terminates at a low level track 3. It is my understanding that they are looking to make a change to the naming of the track level in the upcoming years. Based on my student teaching experience and observations of the faculty at the high school there are many stigmas and stereotypes associated with the different levels of students. Because I don’t teach any level 3 classes, the basis for this journal is merited solely on my observations of teachers who have these students in class.

Based solely on these observations and conversations among faculty members, to teach a track 3 class becomes something of an undesired chore to the teachers. The students are unruly, unmotivated to learn and disrespectful. Classroom time becomes more of an exercise of behavior management than of learning. The students continually do poorly on tests and quizzes and are unmotivated to do anything academic unless points are awarded to their grades. Then when points are given they receive less than full credit due to a lack of effort to do the work. I can understand why teachers of these students complain. These kids are hard to reach, possibly coming from hard upbringings and an educational system, which they feel, faults them. I can imagine feeling frustrated if I had to teach these students. I think that the complaints the teachers have serve to vent their desires to want to help these students, but their inability to adequately do so.

The students that I teach couldn’t be anymore different then the ones just described. I teach level 1 students in my chemistry classes. My students are a joy to teach. There are only minor classroom management issues, and the students do the work that is asked of them. All are respectful and courteous in the classroom. Academically, these students are average kids who receive mostly A’s, B’s and C’s. They are not as naturally gifted as the AP or Honors track students, but they are motivated to learn and put in the necessary work needed to succeed academically. Other teachers who have level 1 students and higher feel the same way, satisfied and happy with the students they teach.

It really is a shame to observe the different attitudes that teachers have towards students collectively grouped and associated according to their track level. However, if the elimination of tracking where ever to happen and all students of all academic abilities were in all classes, I think that the same attitudes would still exist. There would still be the students who are a joy to teach, those that do all of their homework and those students who cause major behavior problems, and are unmotivated to learn. This is just reality. I think that the good in tracking is that all the students that are more motivated to learn are amongst others who are also motivated to learn and greater academic accomplishments are possible. While as a teacher I want to reach all of my students, there is a realist side of me who sees that this will not always be possible. I think that schools in general do the best they can do to help all students.

From my observations of the dynamics of UDHS a distinction among academic abilities is a necessity. A clear academic distinction would be visible even if the current tracking system weren’t in place. I just don’t see how anything could be accomplished in the school environment if there wasn’t some sort of differentiation among student performance.
Tracking and Chemistry Classes

Coming from a high school where everyone had to take at least one year of chemistry to graduate, to a high school where only certain academic levels of students could take chemistry was very unusual. Upon hearing this from my cooperating teacher during my first few meetings with her I was taken aback. What did this mean that only certain students were given the opportunity to take chemistry?

Like I’ve already indicated, I was shocked by this discovery at Upper Darby High School. Only those students in track 1 or higher, meaning honors or AP, could enroll in chemistry classes for the semester. All students in tracks 2 or 3 were not even given the opportunity to take this class. To me, it seems wrong to deny a student the right to take an academic class because of the academic level which they are assigned too based on previous academic performance throughout their academic career. From the very beginning I just could not believe that this was the case. Chemistry is responsible for so much of the world around us and to have students leaving the high school environment with out a realization of this scares me. For these students are becoming citizens in society that has the potential to either continue to damage the environment by being uneducated as to the preciousness of life or to make small changes in their daily life because of a class that would have taught them something of the dangers of everyday chemicals and human behaviors. This separation is yet again indicating to the lower track students that they perhaps aren’t smart enough to take certain courses, therefore adding to the cycle of them not doing work or caring about a system of education that doesn’t care for them. I have a study hall of students from lower tracks and the one day this student was paging through a chemistry textbook that had been left on the desk from my previous class. I remember my cooperating teacher asking him a question about what he was reading, and sadly this student responded by saying that he wasn’t smart enough to take this class and that no one would teach him about it. In that moment, my heart broke realizing the message that tracking sent to students in regards to the classes they can take, and those that are deemed unnecessary for them to take. It makes me wonder, if they are not permitted to take this class, what other classes are these students not allowed to take?

Taking one step into the crowded hallways with unruly, defiant students, listening to other teachers discuss the problems they had with directions, respect for classroom equipment, and behavior, and further observing lower track classrooms, I realized why they were not permitted to take chemistry. All of this contributed to a personal change of opinion. Chemistry is a challenging, demanding subject that requires a lot out of the students that take this subject. I feel bad saying this, but I really don’t think this subject is suited for all students. It scares me to think what would happen if these students were careless with chemicals during lab, were inattentive to the Bunsen burner flame during experiments. These high risks and typical behavioral issues with lower track students seem to be a mismatch for a subject that needs care and precision. While I wish these students were able to learn some information about the chemistry in their lives, I could only hope for this to happen in an environmental science class which speaks generally and perhaps more easy to understand. Chemistry is obscure, even confusing at times and I can honestly say that not everyone will or will want to understand it. In effect, the separation of those who can take it from those who can’t helps to alleviate issues that could come from a student who is less willing to try, to one who chose to take chemistry because of a need for it based on their hopes for the educational future.
Tracking in the Classroom

There are general benefits to tracking a student based on academic ability, however, I believe that because of the uniqueness of all students, tracking isn’t fool-proof. While similar academic abilities can be generalized, each student is ultimately different, learning and thinking differently then a classroom full of their peers. Even though I teach all level 1 students chemistry, not all of these level 1 students are the same. Differences are evident in all areas of classroom life, from performance on tests and confidence to organization and willingness to participate in class and to do assigned homework. In this journal I’m going to discuss the dynamics of two of my blocks of level 1 chemistry students.

In block two, keeping in mind that all student are deemed by past teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators to be in the same tracking level in regards to academic ability, I have two students who take few notes, merely listening to the content of the class, perform exception well on quizzes, and have the ability to think critically about questions just to name a few of their classroom traits, and I also have a few students who even after taking down every last bit of my notes, trying some practice problems still struggle to get their grade above the passing point for the course. Two of these students have IEP’s which indicate that they have trouble with organization skills and as such are required to continually remind them to take out their homework planners to write down important reminders and announcements and to periodically check their notebooks to ensure that they are keeping up with notes and staying organized with any worksheets that are passed out. The first set of students described need none of this. This is just a good example of the differences that exist within a prescribed level. This to me gives some support to the argument that the tracking system should be obsolete, that because not every student in the same why bother to group them according to an almost fake system that says they are the same based on a set of standards prescribed by the administration. However, I guess to some extent, abilities in the classroom among similar tracks are more the same then they are different and in this light abilities can somewhat mesh and blend to the point where you can expect the same from all students while realizing that some need to be helped out more and pushed more than others.

Another example of tracking within the classroom comes in my block 4 class. Halfway through the year a student dropped out of her honors chemistry class to join my level 1 chemistry class. This seems like an unusual switch, but according to guidance counselors this student was not necessarily having academic difficulties, but rather was having personality conflicts with the long term substitute. Upon coming to my class, this student had already seen a lot more material in chemistry; she was at an advantage over that of the other students in my class. She was able to calculate problems faster and often upon finishing early would become a distraction to the students around her. Ultimately this is an instance of a difference that exists between students deemed as a certain academic ability.

Differences in the classroom are inevitable. It is a classic case of the importance of getting to know your students so that you can choose activates and make modifications that are best suited for those students all while managing the class as a whole.