

Educational Tracking— A Democratic and Christian Dilemma

By Cheryl Simpson

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.

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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

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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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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

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realities of adulthood, (3) socialization into a democratic culture, and (4) self-actualization of one's creative gifts and interests.⁵ Seventh-day Adventist educators add to this list the religious aspect of education, which our schools integrate with all of the above.⁶ 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 equality 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.⁷ Thus, any examination of tracking should distinguish it from special education.

Special education is moving swiftly toward mainstreaming handicapped children with their non-handicapped 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 cur-

riculum 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

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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 per-

formance 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.⁸

Tracking—Justification and Inequities

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.”⁹ 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)*

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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

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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.

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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 individuali-

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zation, 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 socio-economic 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;

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(5) inadequate counselor advisement in terms of quality and time; (6) fewer research-supported successful teaching methods in evidence; (7) the overall negative treatment effects of tracking. And the list goes on. However, current researchers are still attempting to supplant the discrimination theory, 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 illustration, dividing a local congregation into Sabbath school groups by assigning the individuals with doctorates to one group, all other college-educated members to a second group, white-collar employees to a third, blue-collar workers to a fourth, and the unemployed to a fifth group.

The college educated, particularly those holding doctorates, might be considered—or consider themselves—more intellectually capable of understanding such books of scripture as Daniel and Revelation. They may prefer to restrict their discussion to advanced 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 successfully pursued higher education

are thus more spiritually discerning by virtue of their advanced degree? Would the decision on their “curriculum” depend on the type of degree—academic versus medical? Should we assume that those persons without benefit of formal education or professional advantage are thereby less capable of intellectual debate? Should the high achievers be required, encouraged, or even allowed to narrow their spiritual insights through such segregation, thereby narrowing the insights of all other groups in the process?

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A Christian Dilemma

Such an emotionally charged illustration is presented as a reference point for relating the controversies of curriculum tracking to the concerns facing educators in a democratic society in general and in a Christian community in particular. Answers to the above questions seem obvious. Yet within the context of formal, compulsory schooling the issues become blurred.

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. If, through tracking, the children of white-collar professionals are disproportionately represented in the advanced or enriched curricula, the problem of discrimination versus elitism is compounded.

To condemn all forms of ability grouping and tracking would be naive. Yet to abuse the practice is immoral. Finding the middle ground for Seventh-day Adventist education is not unlike walking through the minefield of public school curriculum decisions.

The issues are grave, the implications controversial. Educators must actively seek to resolve the conflicts between these dichotomies: (1) democracy and elitism, (2) workable teaching conditions and positive dynamics of diverse student populations, (3) individualization and discrimination, (4) flexible scheduling and administrative confusion, (5) adolescent preferences and adulthood requirements, (6) technological relevance and liberal-arts curriculum, (7) tracking and special education, (8) Christian values and subtle bias that tends to favor the children of professionals.

The following recommendations may prove useful in reviewing the advisability of tracking within Adventist schools:

1. Has the differentiation between special education and curriculum tracking been made?

2. Is the institution committed to employing credentialed counselors to direct a guidance program that meets individual students' needs and to advising them of curriculum options?

3. Does the curriculum in each track interface with the next highest track to allow—even encourage—upward mobility among tracks?

4. What are the implications of

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."¹⁵ We must attempt no less. □

ruary, 1980), pp. 151-160.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903), p. 19.

FOOTNOTES

¹ David B. Tyack, *The One Best System* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

² Joel H. Spring, *The Sorting Machine* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976).

³ Tyack, *The One Best System*.

⁴ Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1919).

⁵ John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984).

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 13.

⁷ Samuel A. Kirk and James J. Gallagher, *Educating Exceptional Children* (Dallas, Texas: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1983).

⁸ Goodlad, *A Place Called School*.

⁹ Karl A. Alexander and Martha A. Cook, "Curricula and Coursework: A Surprise Ending to a Familiar Story," *American Sociological Review* 47 (1982).

¹⁰ National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

¹¹ Chava Nachmias, "Curriculum Tracking: Some of Its Causes and Consequences Under a Meritocracy," *Comparative Education Review* 24 (February, 1980), pp. 1-20.

¹² Sharon A. Davis and Emil J. Haller, "Tracking, Ability, and SES: Further Evidence on the Revisionist-Meritocratic Debate," *American Journal of Education* 89 (May, 1982), pp. 283-304.

¹³ Alexander and Cook, *American Sociological Review*; Davis and Haller, op. cit.

¹⁴ Davis and Haller, op. cit.; Goodlad, op. cit.; Jeannie Oakes, "Classroom Social Relationships: Exploring the Bowles and Gintis Hypothesis," *Sociology of Education* 55 (October, 1982), pp. 197-212; J. Rosenbaum, *Making Inequality: The Hidden Curriculum of High School Tracking* (New York: Wiley, 1976); _____, "The Structure of Opportunity in School," *Social Forces* 57 (September, 1978), pp. 236-256; _____,

"Track Misperceptions and Frustrated College Plans: An Analysis of the Effects of Tracks and Track Perceptions in the National Longitudinal Study," *Sociology of Education* 53 (April, 1980), pp. 74-88; Michael D. Wiatrowski, Stephen Hansell, Charles R. Malley and David L. Wilson, "Curriculum Tracking and Delinquency," *American Sociological Review* 47 (Feb-

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