Chapter 19
The Relationship Between Tracking and School Violence

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ABSTRACT

Tracking in the American education is where students are formally assigned/labeled college prep, general, or vocational. In some areas of the United States, tracking/labeling begins as early as kindergarten. IQ and early achievement tests designed to measure “ability” determine track/label placement in the elementary school years, thus setting in place an educational trajectory for the students’ educational tenure. Social reaction or labeling theory holds that criminality is promoted by becoming negatively labeled by significant others. Labels such as “gifted,” “honors,” “average,” “remedial” give certification of overall ability or worth. These labels teach students that if the school does not identify them as capable in earlier grades, they should not expect to do well later. Such labels isolate kids from society and lock them into lives of antisocial behaviors. Labels create expectations that the labeled person will act in a certain way. Eventually these students begin to accept their labels as personal identities, locking them further into lives of crime and deviance.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRACKING AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE

What Is Tracking?

Tracking in the educational system is where students are formally assigned to college prep, general, or vocational curricular paths (Burris & Garrity, 2008). In some areas of the United States, tracking begins as early as kindergarten. IQ and early achievement tests designed to measure “ability” determine track placement in the elementary school years, thus setting in place an educational trajectory for the students’ educational tenure (Alexander & Cook, 1982; Burk, 1994; Burris & Garrity, 2008).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6246-7.ch019
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Tracking systems are referred to by several different names; ability-grouping systems, leveling systems, streaming, and phasing, however, whatever the title or structure, grouping some students together and requiring them to take courses apart from other students is tracking (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 2005; Rosenbaum, 1976; Wheelock, 1992). Students are grouped into tracks with those who are similar to themselves and separated from those who are different (Rosenbaum, 1976). Grouping is based on a ranked criterion such as “ability” or post school plans. College is, of course, considered superior to vocational training; thus groups are unequal in status (Rosenbaum, 1976).

This chapter focuses on the relationship between long-term effects of the school’s grouping/tracking practices; discrimination in assignment, inflexibility to developmental change, inferior education, limited contact with other backgrounds, and rebellion against the stigma, labeling theory, and school misconduct, dropout rate, delinquency rate and violence. In order to explore these relationships we must first understand the creation and history of tracking.

HISTORY

Tracking emerged over a hundred years ago as a solution to a specific set of educational and social problems. Tracking has become part of what is considered to be the ordinary way to conduct education; however, it has continued long after the original problems arose, and long after the social context from which the solution emerged has changed. Tracking is now just a “tradition” in the American education system (Oakes, 2005).

Before 1860 free public elementary schools were scarce; mostly in affluent area of the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic parts of the United States. The mission of these early “common schools”, the term coined by Horace Mann, 1796-1859, was to provide universal education that would increase opportunity, teach morality, citizenship, and leadership, maintain social mobility and promote responsiveness to social progress (Cremin, 1964). The curriculum of these public elementary schools was “common” for all students; reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, geography, and Bible reading. The pedagogy of these public elementary schools consisted of rote learning, recitation, and strong discipline. School attendance during this time was not mandatory. The first compulsory education law was created in 1852 in Massachusetts with twenty-five states following suit between 1852 and 1890; however, these laws were not enforced until the 1900s. The student population attending these public elementary schools were almost entirely white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class children. There was no grouping or tracking until late in the 19th century and then only by ages and grades.

Secondary Schools for teenagers were mostly a private school function during this time. The curriculum of these private secondary schools were Latin and Greek. Only the most elite and affluent white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant youth attended. Tracking or grouping was not a standard practice and the population was homogeneous.

In the late 19th Century the public high school was developed. The earliest free public high schools were established in 1860s in the Northeast (Oaks, 2005). By the end of the 1880s public high schools had put private institutions almost out of business. These public secondary schools were called “the people’s college” (Oaks, 2005). Most youth did not attend the public secondary schools because their labor was needed in the home. The vast majority of the student population attending these public institutions were middle and upper-middle class white youth. According to Tyack (1974), fewer than 10 percent of the nation’s youth ages 14 – 17 years of age were attending public or private secondary schools during this
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