

**German and American Schools**

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 | Tracking in the German and American schools is systematically different but the problems and consequences of tracking remain the same. American schools have no official tracking system but it occurs nonetheless. In elementary schools teachers often group children in class by reading or math level. In high schools students are placed in classes by their ability at a certain point in time, normally 8th grade. Parents are able to override or challenge their child’s grouping status due to the informality of the system. The German school system, on the other hand, is designed to track students onto a permanent path by the time they reach the 7th grade. Parents can petition the State if they disagree with their child’s placement, although few do (Schnepf 2002).In both Germany and America the benefits of tracking/ability grouping are debated. Americans tend to hold a more negative view of tracking (Abbeduto 2006). They see their education system as an equal opportunity for all children to advance in society. With that said many middle to upper class parents who believe their children are “above average” pressure schools to keep some form of ability grouping. They are concerned that in a heterogeneous classroom the lower ability students will bring down the high achievers. This belief is not completely unjustified, without the resources to plan out different assignments and optional learning opportunities higher ability students will not receive the same level of challenge. So we are left with a problem, should students receive equal materials or equal challenges. Germans on a whole favor their permanent multi tracked system. There is a perceived notion that these tracks are scientific and fair although the data consistently reveal that children’s educational achievement varies greatly within the respective school tracks to which they are allocated. It turns out that socio-economic factors play a large role in who the teachers select for the more prestigious schools. Children from rural areas, pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds and boys in general have a significantly lower probability of being selected even when their educational ability is similar to that of their urban and better socially placed counterparts (Schnepf 2002). Another problem with the German tracking system is that it uses early selection, which increases the risk of misallocating students to the wrong track (Brunello 2004). |

<http://sitemaker.umich.edu/case.356/tracking>



Although ability tracking allows for students to have their education cater to their ability levels, there are several negative effects of tracking for both American and German schools. In American schools, tracking keeps low achieving students in low achieving classes with fewer resources and a less stimulating environment (Hawkins, et al., 1988, p. 36). According to the same article tracking does no accommodate diversity in the school system (p. 42). It allows students to be taught only the basic skills, not higher-level skills (Dentzer, E. & Wheelock, 1990, p.113). Certain biases are also exacerbated by tracking. According to Ireson and Hallam (2001), boys are generally in the highest track, or want to be in the highest track more often than girls. The track preference for mathematics for boys is 15% higher than for girls, 13% for science, and 6% for English. Girls often desire the lowest track more often, 10% lower for mathematics, 9% for Science, and 10% for English (p. 89). Gender biases in the American school system often discourage girls from high academic tracks, especially in math and science. Slow students need the presence of the able students to stimulate them and encourage them, and when they are not in the same class, they do not get this motivation. A stigma is attached to lower ability class, which discourages the students. Teachers have problems teach multiple ability groups and generally do not prefer to teach the slower groups.

In Germany , one of the most pressing problems in its highly tracked school system is student motivation (Dichanz & Zahorik, 1998, p. 76). Since they concentrate on content-teaching and teaching as much on a subject as possible, many students find the information they are learning useless and out of date and do not enjoy learning. Children do not get many practical skills, unless they are assigned to a school that teaches solely practical skills. Many students do not have study skills and self-regulated learning techniques. In Germany , all public education, including universities, are free, so many schools have funding issues. Also many teachers have been increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs. They do not receive the respect that they used to, due to unhappy students from the problems previously sited (Dichanz & Zahorik, p. 77).

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Ability tracking is education serves many purposes. It individualizes education (Wikipedia, Ability Grouping), putting children in classes that are more suited to their level- if a child is a high achiever in mathematics classes and a low achieving student in English classes, that child is able to take classes suited to his or her needs. Without ability tracking, all students in the same grade take the same classes; therefore the child who is good at math, but slower in English would be forced to take classes at one level. They could possibly be bored in his or her math class, and struggling in his or her English class. Students can take college prep courses or vocational classes. It also allows teachers to concentrate on mastery learning, in which all students achieve “instructional objectives” (Slavin, 2006, p. 286). Because teachers do not have to slow instruction for slower learners, or move on too quickly for the quicker learners, students will not be left behind with too few skills or students will not be bored. According to Lev Seminonvich Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, students learn best when they are within their “zone of proximal development (ZPD),” the level that lies directly above the learning level they are currently present at. If children are in a class with children who are all at the same ZPD and level of readiness, they are in the optimal learning situation. However, there is not a consensus to whether ability tracking is helpful or harmful.

According to Adam Gamoran et al. (1997, p.325), the tracking used in math classes is a “serious impediment to the academic progress of low-achieving high school students.” The problem worsens in low-economic communities. Students coming from low-income homes or minority students are far more likely than affluent White students to be placed into lower track and remedial track classes (Oakes and Guiton, 1995, p. 4). Some critics also say that tracking can serve to widen the gap between the slower students and the academically talented students (Gamoran and Mare, 1989, p. 148). In Germany, where there is virtually universal tracking, critics argue against the use of ability tracking because of its adverse effect on student motivation, the needs of the youth, teacher dissatisfaction, the role of the family, and a shrinking school budget (Dichanz and Zahorik, 1998, p. 76-79).

Tracking serves the same purpose in both the United States and Germany . It helps to individualize education and caters to the students’ levels and abilities. In both countries however, there are many staunch critics of the system.

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**Argumentative Essay Writing Prompt**

There are three high schools in Germany: the Gymnasium, Realschule and Hauptschule. Students are tracked in these high schools based on student academic ability and motivation. Only students attending the Gymnasium are allowed to apply to colleges and universities. Students decide which school they want to attend in the 4th or 5th grades. Should students be grouped by ability?

Read the following sources carefully. Then write an essay in which you defend or challenge ability grouping in schools. Support your response with textual evidence and inferences drawn from both sources.

Develop your essay by providing textual evidence from both texts. Be sure to follow the conventions of standard English.

**Expectations for Exemplar Essays:**

* Must have textual support from *both* texts
* Analysis must be approached from *both* writers’ views
* Organization must support the writer’s task
* Must use conventions of standard English
* Must *cite your sources*

**The argumentative essay will be scored based on the 6+1 Writing Traits for Ideas and Organization**

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| Positives about ability grouping | Negatives about ability grouping |
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Your personal opinion: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Support from the text for your opinion (Remember to include which source your support comes from.)

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