

Student Tracking and Emotional Well-being

Jacob Edwards

School of Education, University of Washington, Tacoma

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Dr. Weinstein

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to identify whether student tracking impacts students' emotional well-being and if so, determine in what ways it does impact them. The major themes of this paper are the social implications of student tracking, students' feelings of inclusion, and student grouping. Research indicates that there is a relationship between student tracking and students' emotional well-being, and it also identified the negative impacts tracking has on students' emotional well-being and overall educational growth. The findings were that student tracking can exacerbate preexisting inequalities for students; students are negatively impacted emotionally based on where they are tracked and or placed; tracking can negatively impact students' development of their sense of self.

Keywords: Student Tracking: Emotional Well-being: Social Implications: Equity: Educational Growth

Student Tracking and Emotional Well-being

Students in the last 100 years if they went to school then they were most likely to be tracked and placed. The lingering question of “Why did I not see this person or even have a class with them since elementary school?” is simply answered by the system of student tracking and placement.

The placement of students is performed by grouping students according to their perceived ability and achievement levels to put the students on the appropriate track of high, middle, or low. (*Tracking and Ability Grouping in Middle Level and High Schools*, 2020). This has been used by schools in the United States, and many other countries, since the 1930s, and it was revolutionary in its time. Its purpose was to optimize the level of curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of each individual student.

The placing of students in a particular track is a collective effort of teachers' input and students' performance on state exams and other evaluative results throughout school years. Student tracking places certain students in classes with like-minded peers where they will get the extra challenge they may need (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007; Duflo et al., 2011; Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Conversely placing students who don't need extra challenges with each other.

Context

What are the National & Regional Connections?

Student tracking has been controversial. It's been a widely debated practice over the last two decades. There are over 50 million American students who go to public schools and with most school districts tracking students, there is a major need to understand the impacts that the system of tracking may cause. The subjects that students are tracked the most in are mathematics

and reading comprehension. The most debilitating subjects that students' are tracked in are also mathematics and reading comprehension because of how the students' tracks can impact them by getting stuck in a track that stops them from getting into upper level science, social studies, and other classes.

Some scholars stand firm in their beliefs that educational tracking can help to accelerate learning for high-achieving students (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007; Duflo et al., 2011; Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Some even believe that there should be a national student tracking system created and implemented (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007). The goal would be to create the most beneficial learning environment for the students by tracking them early in their educational careers, giving students who test into the higher track an earlier opportunity to be put into advanced courses, and not letting them become bored and complacent in the classroom. However, other scholars contend against those ideas and beliefs because tracking may exacerbate preexisting inequalities by limiting the opportunities for the students who are placed in the lower tracks (Bond & Lang, 2012; Schütz et al., 2008; Wolf, 2015). Other scholars call for the elimination of tracking entirely because of its history of being used to racially segregate schools, and instead promote an equal and equitable educational opportunity for all students (Fisher, 2015; Frazier, 1997; McCardle, 2020).

Local Connection

Over the past two years, I have been at the same school, which is where I did my student teaching, and am now working as a substitute teacher. I have seen students be tracked and then subsequently grouped based off of their test scores and class work. Throughout this district, they put an emphasis on “no student left behind” by helping all children to grow academically and

have an equal chance of success in school. This school specifically has a Title I & Learning Assistance Program, where students are instructed in small groups, and student progress is monitored on a frequent basis (Title I & Learning Assistance Program / Home, n.d.) (Learning Assistance Program (LAP) | OSPI, n.d.).

I have also seen throughout these years that some students get forgotten and it's because of where their scores are on the different exams and such. This happens mostly to students who are just above the standard line or are scoring below grade level but not low enough to qualify for the learning assistance program. Potentially finding solutions for these problems would be extremely beneficial to aid this district on its journey to not leaving any students behind.

Importance To Me

Tracking has been important to me because I went through school being tracked and placed on the middle track and my sibling who is fourteen months younger than me being on the higher track, which created a feud between us and caused me to feel like I did not belong at school. These feelings of not belonging were not because of an inability to do work or because of a lack of intelligence; it was due to the lack of challenge from the track which allowed for complacency and laziness to creep in. The lack of challenge and the allowance for complacency for students who need to be challenged is something that students face all the time going through our current educational system. With the premature timing of the placement into tracks, students are being labeled and being told subconsciously they are expected to behave or achieve a certain way, without being given a chance to live to their potential.

Students who are placed on a lower track are being told that they struggle more than their peers, which in reality may not be the case it might have just been a case of immaturity because

they were not allowed to develop in the time they needed. Knowing that they are capable of performing tasks but being led to doubt themselves can hurt a child's motivation to learn and try in school activities and can lead to negative emotions they carry about themselves outside of school. Figuring out a finer-tuned system for tracking students to find a better way to assist students' social and emotional well-being is something I believe could help better many students' lives and experiences throughout their educational journey.

Importance To My Students and Community

Gaining a better understanding of what tracking does is important for improving our current system of education. If there is an impact on students' growth socially and academically then finding out different ways to improve their education to promote an equitable environment would be beneficial for everyone in the community. Students who have struggled with the current educational system could have a chance to excel and live to their potential if the schools can make the adjustments needed to create an equitable learning environment.

Tracking is important for my students because I have yet to see a student leave any of the subgroups in the Title 1 LAP over the last two years of being at this school. It seems as if the students are consequently stuck in this lower track and separated from their peers for most of the school day and overall year, spending anywhere from one to three or more hours in these small groups. Students can be very emotional, and many have a hard time covering their feelings, thus wearing their hearts on their sleeves. When I am in different classrooms, I see the looks on the student's faces when they are pulled for groups multiple times a day and their looks range from happy, sad, unbothered, and my least favorite, embarrassed. When I started this project, I aimed

to see if there was a connection between student tracking, the subsequential placement of students, and their emotional well-being.

Purpose & Focal Question

The purpose of this project is to examine if there is a relationship between student tracking and students' emotional well-being. The focal questions for this project are: does tracking have an impact on students' performance and growth throughout school? How does tracking impact students' emotional well-being? What are the equity impacts of tracking?

Literature Review

This project explores the use of student tracking in elementary school and the social and emotional impacts it may have. The importance of understanding what student tracking does for all students is to see if the continued use of student tracking justifies 94% of public schools in the United States using some form of student tracking (NCES, 2020). Within this project students' emotional well-being is addressed and analyzed in relation to student tracking. Emotional well-being itself can be attributed to many factors. There are three main categories that these factors fall into: self-perception, perception of others, and mental health (McConville et al., 2017). Factors including stress, depression, and anxiety can lower a student's well-being as well, all three being great concerns in the academic world presently (Santos et al., 2023).

In this section, the existing literature was used to investigate the relationship between student tracking and students' emotional well-being. Also looking at how tracking impacts students' overall growth and development throughout their educational career. Doing this by gathering background information about the system of student tracking and students' overall emotional well-being. The three key themes of the paper that will be discussed in the literature

review are: The social implications of student tracking, the student's feelings of inclusion, and student grouping.

Social Implications of Student Tracking

In this section, I will look at how the literature approaches the social and educational implications of student tracking. Studies have investigated the potential relationship between early educational tracking and social and academic implications for students, indicating that early tracking can increase the risk of educational inequality (Barth, 2004; Hanushek, 2006; Contini & Cugnata, 2020; Copur-Gencturk et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2003). Studies have also shown that tracking students who have disadvantageous family backgrounds may lead to inequalities overall for these students (Hanushek, 2006; Contini & Cugnata, 2020; Bond & Lang, 2012).

For example, in Butler's (2008) empirical, qualitative study of students' comfort level and ego with help-seeking in math classes based on students' mathematics tracking, they used a Motivational Orientations Questionnaire as the method for data collection. The study's population was over 800 students from 12 different schools. The study found a difference between the higher and lower-tracked groups, and it was their willingness to seek help. Specifically, there was a relationship between the higher-tracked students not wanting or feeling able to reach out and ask for help when they needed it, as opposed to the lower-tracked students who are much more open and willing to ask questions and receive help when needed.

Similarly, Spielhagen (2010) investigated students' social experiences during mathematics instruction and found that the social needs of the students were being impacted by tracking, with the students placed in higher-level math classes tending to have more positive

perceptions of their abilities and greater confidence in their math skills compared to the students in the lower-level classes. The students in the lower-level classes showed signs of feeling demotivated and less confident in their abilities, which may produce a negative impact on the student's academic performance.

Hallam et al. (2004) identified some effects of student grouping and that students from this study were already aware of the process of how they were grouped and placed. This research found that grouping can lead to negative effects on low-ability students, who may be stigmatized and have lower self-esteem. The contrast to that is they found out that student grouping can lead to the development of better social skills and attitudes toward learning for all students.

In an experimental, quantitative research study Copur-Gencturk et al. (2022) looked to examine teachers' biases with students in a virtual learning environment, doing so by identifying if teachers' race and gender biases would be seen in a virtual teaching environment. They pulled from a nationwide sample of 989 teachers to critique students' work and to provide a screenshot from within a virtual classroom that showed students explaining their work. They used random assignments with the teachers and the students' work they received to test if the teachers would react differently in response to biases with their randomly assigned students. They looked to identify teachers' evaluation of correctness, student ability, and their recommendations that students be tested for gifted programs or special education services. The results displayed some level of discrimination in teachers' recommendations for gifted programs and testing for IEPs with students who had similar work. The request for testing for talented programs occurred more often with male students and African American students were recommended for IEPs at a higher rate than the other students.

Some scholars argue that educational tracking can help to accelerate learning for high-achieving students (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007; Duflo et al., 2011; Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Some even argue that there should be a national student tracking system in place (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007). Other scholars contend against those ideas because tracking can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities because it limits the opportunities for the students who are placed in the lower tracks (Bond & Lang, 2012; Schütz et al., 2008; Wolf, 2015). Other scholars call for the elimination of tracking entirely because of its history of being used to racially segregate schools, and instead, they promote an equal and equitable educational opportunity for all students (Fisher, 2015; Frazier, 1997; McCardle, 2020).

One study examined the effects of early educational tracking on students' academic achievement and found that early educational tracking may have an impact on students' performance throughout school, the effects being particularly prominent for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Piopiunik, 2014). They found that there may be negative effects of early educational tracking for the students in these disadvantageous groups and suggested that it may be because those students are not given enough time to properly develop their skills and abilities before being tracked and placed.

Students' Feelings of Inclusion

In this section, I will look at how the literature approaches students' feelings of inclusion within their schools, their self-perceptions, and their overall emotions. Students' sense of inclusion is focused on their intrinsic, internal feelings of inclusion, rather than their social interactions. Some studies have investigated the relationship between student tracking and students' sense of inclusivity within their school, which is their emotional state or attitudes

toward school (Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; Neel & Fuligni, 2013; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020).

Legette and Kurtz-Cotes (2021) examined the concept of students' sense of place being attached to the track they are placed. They found that students' sense of belonging has a direct correlation to their academic engagement throughout the remainder of their schooling experience and that tracking can likely influence students' self-identification amongst their different social groups at school. These findings are important, especially during the transition into middle school, because students start to develop their sense of identity during the early adolescence period. Students' math track placement is influential in their sense of academic identity, the students primarily socialize with the students in their same group, which impacts their overall sense of belonging. Tracking can also elevate students' stress levels because being placed on a track can influence the trajectory of the rest of their lives (Lin & Gebel, 2021).

Neel and Fuligni (2013) conducted a comprehensive longitudinal study on the relationship between school belonging and academic motivation. They found that students' sense of belongingness in school, which was defined as students feeling connected to their school environment, is a crucial factor in predicting students' academic motivation and success. The study had a sample size of 579 high school students from diverse backgrounds over the course of three years. They found students' sense of belongingness in school is positively related to academic motivation and achievement. The students who reported a higher sense of belongingness within their school also reported a higher level of intrinsic motivation. On the contrary, students who reported a lower sense of belongingness at school reported lower levels of intrinsic motivation but had higher levels of extrinsic motivation.

Hemi et al. (2023) investigated whether students' perceptions of their peers and teachers' academic achievement goals were related to their own academic achievement goals. They found that students who perceived their peers and teachers as having high-achievement goals also reported having high-achievement goals for themselves. Amongst those students who had high self-achievement goals were more likely to have a positive attitude toward school and to have a higher level of motivation to achieve academically.

Student Grouping

In this section, I look at how the literature approaches student grouping, by which I mean students being placed into various kinds of learning groups and how they work and interact within those groups. Some of the most common methods of grouping students are ability, mixed ability, intentional pairs or partners, and one on one (Tarabini et al., 2022). This is relevant for this research because student grouping is an offshoot of student tracking. These different styles of grouping are important for instruction because they can place students with other students with similar skills and abilities (Feuchter & Preckel, 2022; Hove, 2022; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Slavin, 1990). The following section takes a closer look into the research to see if student grouping has any effect on the students academically and emotionally.

Callahan et al. (2021) found that students who were in the lower-level mathematics placement had a higher level of engagement and participation when in student-led discussion groups. In their 2021 longitudinal study that had a population of approximately 15,000 high school sophomore students from over 750 schools, they found a positive relationship between students' reported participation levels in student-led discussions and math performance with students overall.

Looking into how students interact and hold peer relationships, Sorenson et al. (2017) conducted a longitudinal, qualitative study from the 2005-2006 to 2011-2012 school years and looked at how classroom peers play a meaningful role in how students learn, focusing more closely to the context-dependent nature of classroom peer influence. Using data from North Carolina over six years, they tried to identify trends of classroom peer effects across multiple grade levels. The findings were that as students get older, they are more likely to be influenced by their peers rather than by their parents and teachers, in terms of academic achievement.

In a qualitative study, Barabas (2021) focused on one school district in Missouri and collected and analyzed the perceptions of the teachers and administrators, looking predominantly at their elementary math program. The district implemented ability grouping and included an accelerated math instruction program. The findings were based on the teachers' and administrators' perceptions, and they perceived the program to be a success because the accelerated math classes had met the needs of the highest-tracked math students – even though the math program, like many others of similar nature, did not meet the needs of the lowest-tracked students (Barabas, 2021; Kulikand & Kulik, 1987). This study addressed a common occurrence of schools deeming success based only on how the higher-tracked students academically perform.

Some studies were done on the use of ability grouping in early elementary school and they investigated the use of within-class ability grouping in both reading and mathematics instruction (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006; Dogan, 2012). Teachers who use within-class ability grouping have a higher likelihood to have a more traditional approach to teaching and have a firm emphasis on direct instruction (Dogan, 2021). One of these studies found that within-class

ability grouping was associated with lower levels of student engagement and motivation, as well as higher levels of anxiety and stress among students (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006). On the other hand, within-class ability grouping with reading instruction was found to have higher levels of achievement among high-ability students and lower levels of achievement among low-ability students.

In a longitudinal, quantitative study of the effects of cluster and ability grouping Matthews et al (2013) aimed to identify whether cluster grouping and within-class ability grouping benefit students' academic growth and achievement. Drawing from a diverse range of students that included 254 elementary school students, 186 non-identified, and 68 gifted students. They looked at their academic scores over three years, using data from the MAP Growth database, where students took tests in reading and math, and found that grouping was beneficial for the mathematics scores, but reading scores remained unaffected. Tracking and grouping are often used as ways to provide specialized instruction for high-performing students, but they can also lead to negative outcomes for lower-performing students who may be placed in lower-ability groups and receive less challenging instruction (Matthewes, 2021).

Conclusion

The information gathered from the literature review shows that tracking impacts students' overall educational growth and self-concept. The separation of students from early educational tracking could lead to overall educational inequalities for all students. There was a plethora of either positive or negative implications of tracking. The different styles of grouping showed benefits depending on the instructor that was using them. The research shows that grouping could be detrimental to students' emotional well-being if not properly used and

implemented. In the next section, I will lay out my action plan with suggestions on how to improve the use of student tracking.

Action Plan

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the focal questions, does tracking have an impact on students' performance and growth throughout school, how does tracking impact students' emotional well-being, what are the equity impacts of tracking? The action plan below is divided into three categories that align with the three themes of my research. These themes are the (1) social implications of student tracking, (2) students' feelings of inclusion, and (3) student grouping.

The site of practice that is being examined is a fairly large school district in Spanaway that covers over 200 square miles with 32 schools that range from pre-kindergarten-12th grade. I chose to use this district as my main informational source because I have lots of personal experience of how this district works and more specifically how my current school operates. I have also been at this school for two years now and have already been employed to teach there for the upcoming school year. I know that the leadership at the school loves to always strive for improvement and wants to create a safe and welcoming environment for all students to learn and grow together. The following tables are a series of recommendations from researchers that are listed out and they emerged from the research on the themes previously listed above. These recommendations range from suggestions for actions that the teachers, school, and or district should make based on the research.

Social Implications of Student Tracking

Table 1 summarizes the social implications that can arise for students because of where they are tracked and placed. The first column in Table 1 addresses the risk that early educational tracking can cause, the limitations it can create for students, and student learning growth. The second column of Table 1 also shows what my school does in relation to the research. The last column of Table 1 shows my recommendations for the actions the teachers, school, or district should make based on the research.

Table 1*Social Implications of Student Tracking*

What the research says	What my school does	What I recommend
Early tracking may increase the risk of educational inequality (Hanushek, 2006; Butler, 2008; Contini & Cugnata, 2020; Spielhagen, F. R., 2010).	My school begins tracking students' growth and performance in Relation to the Star exam starting in kindergarten.	I recommend that the school district looks into the research on the external factors that contribute to students' success.
Student tracking can limit students based on their family background, race, and social and societal pressures (Fisher, 2015; Frazier, 1997; McCardle, 2020; (Piopiunik, 2014; Copur-Gencturk et al., 2022).	My school has a large population of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and strives to create an equitable environment for all students.	I recommend that my school should consider the research about the impact of students' family background, race, as well as the social and societal pressures that come from tracking.
Acceleration of learning from student educational tracking (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007; Duflo et al., 2011).	My school district has a challenge program that is for all elementary school students who qualify for the program located at my elementary school.	I recommend that my district examines the growth of student learning and cross compare based on students track and see if the research's claim is valid amongst our school's student population.
Research should further investigate the development of social skills being affected by student grouping (Hallam et al., 2004).	My school has a Title 1 LAP program that has students working in small groups all day.	I recommend that my school should investigate the potential social benefits of the Title 1 LAP and try to replicate them throughout the

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Students' Feelings of Inclusion

Table 2 summarizes how students after students are tracked and placed develop their social circles, sense of belonging, sense of self, self-perceptions, and overall feeling of inclusion at school. Research shows that students' self-concepts are impacted by their social groups and peers that they see in the classroom. Further research is recommended to better understand students' feelings of inclusion, and students' sense of self-being, and the researchers recommend that teachers need to set higher standards for themselves.

Table 2

Students' Feelings of Inclusion

What the research says	What my school does	What I recommend
Placement affects students' development of social circles and impacts their sense of belongingness (Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020; Sorensen et al., 2017).	My school does place students based on scores and what teacher or classroom is deemed "best fit" for the students.	I recommend that my district/school should investigate students' sense of belonging and development of social circles between the Title 1 LAP students and the other students.
Students' sense of self-being is attached to their track placement (Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; Dogan, 2012).	My school does intentionally place students into their classrooms.	I recommend that my district looks into the research on students' sense of self-being and how tracking can impact this.
Students' perceptions and own academic achievement goals are based on teachers' self-goals (Hemi et al., 2023).	My school has some teachers who do set higher standards for themselves, and it shows by the student's increased desire to learn.	I recommend that my district investigates the research and tries to develop a workshop for all teachers to attend to learn how to set higher goals and create a motivated classroom.

Student Grouping

Table 3 summarizes how student grouping can impact students' growth and development. The research shows that a student's engagement and participation levels are influenced by where they are tracked and placed, and that further research needs to be done on which styles of grouping are deemed beneficial. The recommendations for this are for the school district and the school to investigate the potential benefits of grouping and styles of it.

Table 3

Student Grouping

What the research says	What my school does	What I recommend
Research shows that the students in the lower-level mathematics placement showed higher levels of engagement and participation in student-led discussion groups (Callahan, 2021; Matthews et al., 2013; Hallam et al., 2004).	In lower level tracks, some teachers incorporate student-led discussion groups.	I recommend that my school investigates the results of grouping in mathematics teaching across all grade levels.
Students' having higher engagement and participation levels when working in small groups (Callahan, 2021; Sorensen et al., 2017).	My school incorporates student grouping, but the style of grouping depends on the teachers and participation levels vary.	I recommend my school to further look into the engagement and participation levels of students in the Title 1 LAP and see if there is a noticeable difference.
Research shows students who were on the higher track have a slight inclination toward reading mastery (Contini & Cugnata, 2020).	My district does track students reading comprehension levels. Doing so by using the Star exam to tracks students' growth toward reading and mathematics mastery with every grade levels.	I recommend my schools look into the results of student's Star exams and see if this is beneficial for students across all grade levels.

Conclusion

In the above tables, I have provided suggestions for the implantation of research on student tracking. As discussed in each table, student tracking can limit educational opportunities for students. Students develop their sense of self, self-perceptions, and overall identity during their academic journey. The engagement and participation levels of students are directly influenced by where they are tracked and placed. In the following section, I will discuss this project as a whole, discussing the findings, implications for future teachers, students, and schools, implications for future research, and the limitations of this project.

Discussion

Student tracking's intended purpose was to optimize the educational journey for all students by placing them into homogenous cohorts that are easier to teach and easier for the students to grow collectively. Students get separated and placed into their tracks where it is difficult and nearly impossible to move from one track to another. This has been a regular practice across schools in America for decades and has been proven time and time again to be a harmful practice to students' emotional well-being.

My project intended to investigate the already existing literature on the topic of student tracking and emotional well-being and found that there is a relationship between them and also identified the negative impacts tracking has on students' emotional well-being and overall growth and performance. I wanted to focus on the following questions, does tracking have an impact on students' performance and growth throughout school? How does tracking impact students' emotional well-being? What are the equity impacts of tracking? In the following sections, I will be addressing the findings, implications, and limitations of this project to answer my focal questions.

Discussion of Findings

Impact on Students' Performance and Growth

My first rationale question was, does tracking have an impact on students' performance and growth throughout school? I found that some studies supported the use of student tracking because of the positive impacts it has on certain students' performance and growth, by accelerating the learning process for the higher tracked students (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007; Duflo et al., 2011; Ireson & Hallam, 1999). While other studies condemn the use of student tracking and do not support the use of it, because it can exacerbate preexisting inequalities for all students (Butler, 2008; Contini & Cugnata, 2020; Copur-Gencturk et al., 2022; Piopiunik, 2014; Spielhagen, 2010). Once students are placed on a track they are subsequently trapped on that track, thereby hindering the potential growth and performance for all students. The inequalities in student tracking stem from a wide variety of factors and some of the many factors are students' family background, race, and the social and societal pressures. These pressures can impact students either positively or negatively depending on whether they are placed on a higher or lower track.

Tracking was found to be beneficial for certain groups of students' performance and growth in school because it allowed them to have an improved quality of education, increased opportunities, and access to more resources (Atkinson & Reynard, 2007; Duflo et al., 2011; Ireson & Hallam, 1999). This was predominantly found with the higher-tracked group of students. The benefits of tracking were shown for some students throughout all tracks because the students get placed in groups and or classrooms with peers who have likewise skills and knowledge.

In my experience in classrooms, I see students' growth be negatively impacted by the social and societal pressures that are placed on the higher-tracked students. The students in the higher track develop feelings of being unable to reach out for help because of the stigmas and labels that are placed upon them. They develop the idea of having to be better than the other students and that they never have to ask for help. This can lead to elevated stress and anxiety levels that can lead to students feeling burnt out later on in their education. Tracking was also shown to benefit some of the lower-tracked students because they are often more likely to seek help from others when in need of assistance (Butler, 2008; Spielhagen, 2010). I know this to be true because the students who are systematically labeled and placed on the lower track are much more vocal and open to receiving help because they do not have the same level of pressure for success as the higher-tracked students. Highlighting the impact tracking has on students' growth because of how it directly impacts their ability to use structured support systems that are available to them in their classrooms.

The results from the literature show that educational tracking negatively impacts students' performance in school, specifically when looking at students' home life (Piopiunik, 2014). This happens particularly with students from disadvantageous backgrounds that have drawbacks in their early development that lead to them being wrongly tracked and placed. Students being wrongly placed has been shown to negatively impact students' educational performance and sense of self as a student. I have seen and experienced the problem of students being wrongly tracked and placed many times throughout my personal education and as a substitute teacher. One of the many reasons for this is students may be developmentally delayed in comparison to their peers. Some of the other factors are students being young for their grades,

undiagnosed learning disorders, or not having an allowance for time to practice skills from school at home due to poor living conditions (Piopiunik, 2014). These factors are consistent with factors and problems I have seen impact students regularly. I see students with these problems and know that our current system of tracking will not give them the support they need to perform and grow to the best of their abilities. There are dozens of other factors that can contribute to the overall inequality in students learning that stems from early educational tracking.

Tracking and emotional well-being

My second rationale question was how does tracking impact students' emotional well-being? Through the literature, I found that tracking negatively impacts students' emotional well-being with their sense of belongingness, self-perceptions, and emotions academically (Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021; Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Some of the major ways tracking was found to impact students' emotional well-being are with students' placement in classrooms that do not fit their specific needs, their general track placement, and the impact tracking has on their emotional well-being.

One of the ways I have seen students' emotional well-being be impacted directly by tracking and placement is with their classroom placement. This is because not every teacher can fit each students' specific learning needs and the current system of tracking does not benefit students in the middle or low track. These students are essentially trapped in their track and have no opportunity for growth. I have seen students who feel trapped in their placement develop feelings of not being smart enough because they do not get promoted from their groups when they demonstrate mastery of the topic. This can also cause the students to develop a lower sense of belongingness in school. Students can also get placed in classes that do not challenge them

enough. That can lead students to develop bad academic habits such as becoming lazy or giving minimal effort and it negatively impacts their overall self-concept and self-worth.

I also found in the research that students' adolescent years are when they form and mold their identity, self-concept, and self-perception (Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021). Tracking does not allow for students to intermingle with students from different tracks and it systemically hinders all students' emotional well-being. Students' identities and concepts of themselves are extremely influenced by their peers on the same track. Not allowing students to have the opportunity to interact with one another sets the lower track students up for failure, and to have their identity be formed by the students around them in their similar track. Placing all students who are labeled as low academically in the same classroom and groups does not create an equitable learning environment where these students have a higher sense of belongingness at school. This does the opposite and decreases the students' emotional well-being by lowering their self-esteem and sense of self. I regularly see students have their identities directly reflect their track and placement. Demonstrated by students' behavior in the classroom and how they conduct themselves amongst their peers.

Equity of Tracking

My third rationale question was what are the equity impacts of tracking? The literature showed that tracking impacts students' equity in many ways. The impacts found were students having reduced opportunity and access to high-quality academics, high-quality teachers, and resources for all students. Tracking was found to be systemically disadvantageous for certain groups of students according to their race, socioeconomic background, and family background (Hanushek, 2006; Contini & Cugnata, 2020; Bond & Lang, 2012).

The research showed that student grouping helped to increase equity for students because of the social and emotional benefits it creates for them (Bond & Lang, 2012; Callahan et al., 2021). Giving these students the allowance of comfort with the students in the group all being at a likewise skill level. The feeling of comfort can also help improve students' social skills because they get to know the students in their group. This level of comfort and camaraderie is something that I see with the students who get picked up to go to the Title 1 LAP room. They have a very close-knit group that they see and work with every day and they also get the needed lower student-to-teacher ratio, so they do not feel shy to ask multiple questions in front of the classroom. Promoting an equitable learning environment for those students.

While student grouping was shown to be beneficial to creating a positive learning environment for some students the research also found, student grouping to be detrimental to the promotion of equity in the classroom (Contini & Cugnata, 2020; Hanushek, 2006). I see this all the time in classrooms because certain students do not want to work with others because they do not possess the same skill level as them. After all, they are "below them" academically according to where they are tracked. The students' concept of being better was because they were placed in the higher group for the grade level-wide mathematics groups, and they found out they were in the higher group and developed a snarky attitude with their peers when trying to collaborate on group work. Another practice that I see regularly see that does not promote equity in the classroom is with students getting praised for constantly answering teachers' questions. This does not promote an equitable classroom, yet it is a very common practice to see when observing any classroom.

The phenomenon of students' self-confidence being impacted by their placement was seen throughout the research. Identifying that tracking reduces equity for the students on the lower track because they are being stigmatized, leading to lower self-esteem and self-worth (Hallam et al., 2004). Students being stigmatized and having a reduced sense of belongingness is something I see regularly as a substitute teacher. The problem of students being stigmatized and bullied is connected to the overall system of tracking because it does not allow for an equitable learning environment for all students.

Analysis of Future Trends of Tracking

The research shows that there is a need to dismantle tracking in order to create an equitable learning environment for all students. Student tracking has historically been a system used to segregate schools. Researchers have been calling for the elimination of student tracking because of its historic background of separating students based on their race, socioeconomic status, and family background. The researchers instead promote the creation of giving all students the opportunity for an equal and equitable education (Fisher, 2015; Frazier, 1997; McCardle, 2020).

Looking at the future trends of tracking, I believe it is unlikely that all schools and school districts would remove the system of student tracking as a whole. As of now, there is no clear-cut better option for the school districts in the United States to immediately turn to. Nor would it be instantly beneficial for all students to have their overall educational system get overhauled overnight. There is only the hope of turning our currently inequitable learning environment into an equitable one. I think there are several manageable steps to remove the system of student

tracking that the teachers and schools can implement and enact to ensure equal and equitable education for all students, which I will discuss in the next section.

Implications for Future Teachers, Students, and/or Schools

The first step to creating an equitable learning environment is that the school districts should create a ten-year plan to phase out the system of tracking. The next step is to stop the placement of students based on tracking and to let the students be randomly assigned to classes. The third step is to incorporate the use of common assessments throughout all courses. The fourth step is to incorporate repeated teaching methods throughout all courses by having all teachers teach and re-teach important skills for each subject. The last step is to have school-wide or district-wide meetings explaining the importance of teachers holding themselves to higher standards.

The implications of tracking for future students in the Title 1 LAP programs, or similar programs used throughout the United States, is that if they are to continue to use these Title 1 Learning Assistance Programs (LAP) then they need to ensure that they are creating a safe environment for all students involved. The research was not in favor of students being constantly pulled from their classrooms because of the negative impact it has on students emotionally.

The students know that they are in a lower group than their peers, which causes them to have feelings of being left out or left behind by their peers. There also needs to be an easier way for students to be able to test out of the programs. These students are missing out on daily classroom instruction for the subjects that their small groups are working on. Subsequently, they miss out on being a part of group work and ultimately the opportunity to socialize with their classmates. In an effort to reduce the stigma or feeling of seclusion, the school needs to make it

more feasible for the students to be able to test out of the small groups. In hopes that students' emotions do not range from happy, sad, unbothered, or embarrassed and that they all can feel safe and excited to receive the extra help and support during their work within their small groups.

The implication for the teachers is directly related to the impacts on the students that are mentioned throughout the paper. Teachers have a responsibility to try and reach all of their students, while it may be difficult because of the differential in students' levels or means of motivation. As previously mentioned, students' sense of belonging in school is related to their academic motivation and overall achievement, and higher levels of intrinsic motivation were related to a higher sense of belonging as opposed to extrinsic motivation that correlated to lower levels of belongingness at school (Neel & Fuligni, 2013). In order for teachers to create a more equitable learning environment that can help reduce students' negative feelings or emotions, teachers should try to place high-achievement goals on themselves. Students who have teachers with this higher level of self-standards tend to mimic them by having a higher self-achievement goal themselves along with a more positive attitude overall and an increased motivation level and desire to achieve more academically (Hemi et al., 2023). With teachers placing these higher standards and goals on themselves it can help to reduce students' feeling of not belonging and promote higher levels of student engagement and overall create a more welcoming learning environment.

Implications for Future Research

This project looked to identify the relationship between student tracking and emotional well-being and found research that indicated tracking directly impacts students' emotional well-

being. I had found a plethora of research on tracking and the disadvantages it creates for all students, there is still a major need for more research to be done on this topic of students' emotional well-being and student tracking to see how these extremely evident issues with inequalities in education to be addressed and adjusted accordingly for the students to have an equitable learning environment.

I would want to see more longitudinal research studies on the progression or regression of students' feelings of inclusion over their academic careers and more specifically during their transition years from going into middle school and going into high school and putting a higher emphasis on those crucial years. Since students' identities are formed and molded during their educational career that makes it even more important to try and find a way to fix the educational inequalities that stem from student tracking.

Conducting a longitudinal study with progressive check-ins on students from high school through their twenties and seeing if those participants' personal perceptions and personalities change over time. Seeing future research dive into how to properly incorporate grouping with students in the classroom. Investigating how the use of Title I & Learning Assistance Program (LAP), or similar programs, can impact students' emotional well-being, and if they promote growth for students' social skills. I recommend that there be research on the styles of grouping and how to incorporate the most beneficial styles to promote learning and equity in the classroom. The research on tracking and grouping has given me a better understanding of how to run and operate an equitable classroom, but additional research on the topics I addressed would be beneficial for all educators to learn from.

Throughout the research of this project, I faced a problem with simply finding enough research on tracking students' emotional states. When I first started the research on student tracking, I aimed to keep the information recent and relevant to the current situation of tracking within schools, but it was a difficult task with the shortage of research that was directly on student tracking and students' emotions. That is why I dove into student grouping because of the vast research that is currently being completed on students' emotional states in relation to student grouping. Therefore I recommend that researchers study students' emotions throughout their educational journey to see what other aspects of schooling can impact students' emotions.

Limitations of the Project

In my project, I aimed to investigate the connection between student tracking and emotional well-being and found that student tracking is a very commonly used tool, yet it is a very complex and intricate system that creates a slew of adverse problems for students to face when going through school.

I aimed to draw evidence and information from studies that were from the last 10 years then had to expand to the last 20 years after exhausting all of my options for research on student tracking and emotional well-being. The years from which I had drawn evidence were 2003-2023, with the exception of older research, from 1997, 1990, and 1987. I also wanted to keep the research to the United States but found that the standards of education varied from state to state. There were not many research studies focused specifically on my geographical region in the United States. I had to expand to the use of all studies across the country and even some studies from other countries.

The criteria that I aimed to use while vetting research articles was to first see if they were peer-reviewed. Then see if there was any bias for or against from the start. Checking to see if it was a study set up to show the intended results they wanted or if the study was done to truly figure out what was happening with the students.

I used the following search terms to find the research articles for this project. The term I originally searched was, student tracking impact on emotional well-being. Then shifted to finding research on tracking impacting students in any way because of the lack of studies on this topic. That leads me to the inclusion of grouping because of the vast research that is not only more recent but more appropriate for this topic.

Conclusions

When looking at the bigger picture, tracking negatively impacts many areas of students' lives and not just educationally. The social implications of students' identity being built and molded by peers on their similar track, students' sense of belonging reducing as their educational careers progress, and students being left behind due to them being placed on the lower track that has no exit strategy. The previously mentioned issues are detrimental to all students and create a non-equitable environment for students to learn and grow.

In this paper, I have tried to accurately capture and depict the research on student tracking and to cast its benefits and problems.

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