

Implementing Heterogeneous Classes

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Tracking Self-Assessment

This is not a Yes/No diagnostic tool but a series of prompts for discussion and hopefully an invitation to ask more questions about why certain systems are in place. The questions can help schools look at practices they may not have considered before and identify aspects of tracking.

In a conversion context from a large school to multiple small schools, the word 'school' could be substituted for the word 'class' in some of these questions to identify tracking patterns in student assignment to small schools.

1. Do most classes have a racial and ethnic mix similar to the school as a whole? For instance, if the school is two-thirds black and one-third white, are most of the classes the same or are some 90 percent black and others 90 percent white?
2. Do most classes have roughly equal numbers of boys and girls?
3. Do there seem to be classes where most students' parents are professionals and others where most students come from poor or working-class families?
4. When you attend school programs or extracurricular activities, do the participating students reflect the racial, ethnic, and class mix found in the school as a whole?
5. Are the same students in most of their classes together throughout their school career?
6. Are the same students in most of their classes together throughout their school day?
7. In places like the cafeteria, do students tend to congregate in like racial and ethnic groups? (Students in de-tracked schools with effective pedagogy sometimes note that regular collaboration with diverse colleagues in classes breaks down social barriers in settings like the lunchroom.)
8. If there is ability grouping, do the students move from group to group over time?
9. Do some classes/students have a lot of homework, whereas others have little?
10. Do some classes/students typically read and answer questions on paragraphs instead of whole stories and books?
11. Do some classes encourage in-depth higher thinking skills, while others focus only on basic skills?

12. Do some classes engage students in discussions and thoughtful writing assignments while others do mostly multiple-choice questions?
13. Are there “gateway” courses that, if not completed by a certain point in a student’s career, preclude access to other critical courses later? (For example, what are the effects in your school of not completing algebra in the ninth grade?)
14. Is there an appropriate balance of higher order learning with basic skills for all students?
15. If there are courses such as AP or honors, are they open to all students?
16. Are there ways that student progress is frequently monitored and used to ensure high expectations of outcomes for all students?
17. Do teachers tend to have a different view of the ‘work ethic’ of students in certain kinds of classes as opposed to other kinds?

Adapted from a list of questions entitled “Is Your Child Being Tracked?” in *Rethinking Schools: An Agenda for Change*, edited by David Levine, Robert Lowe, Bob Peterson, and Rita Tenorio (The New Press, 1995).