

Preventing ‘Pushing for Privileged Passage’: A study of a charter school working to step back from tracking.

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Abstract

One charter school’s path to tracking and *pushing* for privileged passage is examined. The school as it increased in size began to track students first by grade level and then by ability. Realizing that moving mathematics out of the main school program compromised the teaching ideals of the school and potentially student learning. The school has embarked on a program to create a place-based, integrated curriculum developed around mathematics so that mathematics can be reintroduced to multi-age classrooms. Examining the data in terms of trust, size and the behaviors of administrators, teachers and parents at this school in this process are highlighted.

Introduction

There is much research chronicling the negative effects of ability grouping or tracking on both high achieving and low achieving mathematics students (Ballantyne, 2002; Boaler, 2002; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1995; Stevenson et al., 1994; Wheelock, 1992). In a variety of forms the practice has been found to limit the access that low achieving students have to rigorous mathematics content and place undue stress on high achieving students (Boaler, 2002; Callahan, 2005; Hahr, 2005; Lleras, 2008). For some years researchers have called for an end to the practice but to limited success (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Oakes, et al., 2000). The reasons for this failure have been attributed to a myriad of sources including those related to social policy, administrative organization, teacher beliefs, and community factors (Oakes, et al., 2000; Spear, 1994).

Trust

School trust is closely linked to healthy and effective schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth, et al., 2006; Goddard, et al., 2001). A lack of trust conversely has been linked to higher control mechanisms and highly controlled rules and regulations that isolate administrators, teachers and the community (Forsyth, et al., 2006). Lack of trust is also closely linked to the perpetuation of tracking (Johnston, 2006; 2008).

Trust in school can be defined as allowing vulnerability based on the belief that a trusted school party is honest, open, reliable and competent (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 1999). The kinds of and expected roles in these trusting relationships varies depending on whether the role group is a parent, teacher or administrator. The interactions occur across and within groups. The quality of the communication among these groups establishes feelings of trust and trusting relationships or not (Adams, et al., 2009). Failures to convey honesty, openness, reliability and/or competency create failed trust among one or more parties of the role groups (Johnston, 2006; 2008).

Lack of school trust has been linked to a focus shift by any role group member of increased advocating for specific students. Although this focus might be expected of parents it is not expected or desirable from teachers or administrators (Mann, 1848). The lack of trust manifests into increased scrutiny of programs. In mathematics that scrutiny turns to *pushing* behaviors that can form, exacerbate and perpetuate mathematical tracking (Johnston, 2006; 2008).

Size

School size can positively affect school trust. Although physical factors have only a minimal affect on school trust. Role groups can exhibit trusting relationships despite poor achievement levels or student heterogeneity, small schools may have an advantage in that small schools often draw from a more homogeneous community and the ability to clearly communicate common messages to fewer people is advantageous (Adams et al., 2009).

Size has an effect on student grouping practices. Small schools do not have the number of students or staff to be able to offer more than one mathematics level. The smallest schools exhibit even

broader ability heterogeneity. At an extreme one room schools may have students of many ages learning math together. At the other extreme very large schools may have student divided into as many as six mathematics ability classrooms (Johnston, 2006). Growth in the number of students and staffing enables schools to create multiple classes, divide and assign students to mathematics classes by ability. It is common for schools to shift from heterogeneous grouping strategies to tracking as they increase in size (Johnston, 2006).

Pushing for privileged passage

Pushing can be defined as exerting oneself continuously, vigorously, or obtrusively to gain an end or engage in a crusade for a certain cause or person; in essence, becoming an advocate for a particular cause or person (Wordnet, 2006). This definition presents pushing as a positive action. In theory, educators are the pushers or advocates for all students (Mann, 1848). Parents are the pushers or advocates for their children (Crozier, 1997). So how do seemingly positive notions create conflict? The problem lies in who is deemed deserving of challenging material, all children or specific children? If all children do not receive access to advanced mathematics content, how are those children who should receive the attention and material selected? Although neither a plot nor scheme, pushers work to garner access into classes with students receiving advantaged instruction (Kohn, 1998; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Spear, 1994).

There are three levels of *pushing*. Some pushers may work at all of these levels over a period of time while others may only apply one or two in their quest to garner advantaged placement for their focus student. The levels have scope (foundational, combative, and strategic) and order (Investing, Pressuring and Lobbying). (Johnston, 2006; 2008).

School districts with varying trust levels among the differing role groups exhibit different levels of pushing behaviours. Role conflicts (teacher or administrators who are also parents) play a role in the kinds of pushing behaviours adopted. The greater the extremity of mistrust among the varying role groups the more pervasive the pushing behaviours can be (Johnston 2006; 2008)

The School

Oakview Community School (OCS) is a charter school that opened in 2007. Located in a rural school district in the northwest United States, the school serves 204 students in grades 1-8. The school has a mission of delivering an integrated curriculum to mixed-age classes using place-based, project-oriented instructional strategies.

The school is divided into four levels. Level I houses students in grades 1, 2 and 3. There are three teachers with approximately 20 students in each class who are evenly distributed from each of the age levels. Level II mirrors the level one configuration but works with students in grades 4, 5 and 6. There are two level III teachers. These teachers serve students in grades 7 and 8. One teacher specializes in math/science while the other does social studies and Language Arts. The level III math/science teacher is the only qualified mathematics teacher on staff.

Charter school staff is not held to the same staffing requirements as non-charter counterparts (Center for Education Reform, 2002; SRI, 2002). At OCS both administrators have little formal training in education (one is a journalist and the other previously worked in university admissions and has partially completed a teaching degree in mathematics and science). All of the teachers are certified to teach in the state except one who is certified in a Midwest United States. Teachers have from 3 to 25 years experience. Only one teacher on staff is certified to teach mathematics (the level III math/science teacher). The remainder have a much stronger knowledge of the social sciences and Language arts content areas.

OCS took a proactive role in fitting into the community in which it resides, proactively interacting with parents. The schools location, on the main street of the small university town, provides easy access for students' weekly 'out and about' experiences into the community to learn about food, ecology, conduct service projects and interact with willing businesses and university faculty. Administrators are very proactive in communicating with parents via twice weekly email messages. Quarterly whole school events are scheduled often at times when community events are also on the calendar so that students, their parents, and school staff can attend both. Grade-level teachers work together to organize various grade-level presentations for whole school events and less frequently do

grade level or cross grade level events that culminate learning activities. Conference are held three times a year (one before school starts, one in the Autumn, and one in the Spring)

The mathematics program at OCS has been problematic over the two years since the school was started. Following year one instruction, teachers expressed anxiety about delivering standards-based mathematics instruction in an integrated manner. It was observed that mathematics instruction was neglected in many projects. Evidence was also seen in state standardized test results where students showed weak performance. 70.2% of the students in grades 3-8. This number was lower than both the district and state averages (75%, 77% respectively).

In response to these concerns, administrators with agreement of teachers changed math instruction. During the 2008/09 school year mathematics was taught by grade level using a purchased mathematics curriculum. Level 1 and 2 students left their main multiage classroom and travelled to one of the other teachers' rooms for mathematics instruction. Each of the three teachers at these two levels took on instruction of one grade. For grades 7 and 8 with only two teachers on staff, the separation of mathematics into grade level groups meant that multi-grade instruction at this level has been eliminated for all subjects.

Within 4 months of the change to grade level mathematics grouping teachers in the school began to shift specific students into new mathematics classes. These placements were changed when a teacher observed behaviors in a student that appeared advanced. One student was moved from a grade 1 mathematics to a grade 2 mathematics class. 3 students were moved into higher mathematics level classes among the Level II teachers and 7 students were moved into higher grade level classes in the level III.

Discussion

Even in the short time that this school has been in existence it has quickly shifted towards student tracking in mathematics. Although teachers and administrators did not plan to group students by ability in mathematics they did so. The initial grade-level division was a combined administrative and teacher driven decision. The movement of individual students based on judgments of their mathematical ability is a *pushing* behavior that was teacher prompted (Johnston, 2006; 2008).

The recent growth of the OCS has followed the course of many other growing schools (Johnston, 2006). As soon as it was big enough to start dividing students mathematically it did so. In this act it risked and begun tracking specific students into mathematics classes by perceived mathematics abilities. Despite the negative aspect of this growth the school size has remained small enough to maintain effective communication and a sense of community among the three role groups.

Examining trust issues of honesty, openness, reliability and competency among the three role groups suggests that both the nature of the charter school and the interaction between the role groups involved at this school have for the most part done a remarkable job of developing trusting relationships between the three focus groups. Issues of reliability and competency between the administrators and teachers as they relate to mathematics instruction have put trust at risk between these two role groups and among the teachers.

The nature of participation in a charter school assists in setting up a level of trust that is not present in public schools as all parties participate by choice (Belfield & Levin, 2005; Kleitz, et al., 2000). At this school the administrators participate because their initial vision and application were required to gain funding and district permission to start the school. Teachers work at the school because they feel some affiliation with the tenants of the charter. Some have done so for less pay and all have taken on the job outside the confines of union contract. Parents applied for lottery drawn slots for their child's acceptance the school.

The administrative staff and teachers actively work at bringing all role groups together through invited participation in school-wide and community linked events. The frequent and open communication that occurs between the school role groups fosters feelings of openness and honesty. Trust between administrators and teachers is maintained through weekly staff meetings where the administrators take on predominantly a facilitator role in decision-making but stepping in when decisions stall.

In one area there has been a break down in trust between administrators and teachers at the school. This is evident in the removal of mathematics from the adopted instructional program. The trust loss was valid. The teachers as a whole are not well prepared to teach mathematics in either an integrated or differentiated way to best meet the needs of students in their home classrooms.

Another potential problem identified in this study is in part a symptom of the new schools youth. The charter application lists educational goals and instructional methods that may not be clearly defined and may not be clearly understood by the role group members. Recent research has suggested that charter schools despite intentions to the contrary may not actually teach in ways any different than those offered at local public schools (Hanushek, 2007). How place-based, integrated and mixed-age classrooms looks at OCS is viewed by the three role groups has yet to be defined and yet to be carried out.

At the same time that teachers were beginning to track students by ability they were also revisiting both the appropriateness of the separated mathematics instruction and began working with advisors from the university and a regional place-based charter school to develop units centered on the state mathematics standards. Although the teachers are reticent to return the mathematics instruction to what they perceive as a failed integration. School administrators and the university advisor are actively working towards helping the teachers gain the mathematics content and pedagogical content knowledge needed by working with them to develop and teach place-based, integrated units with multi-age students. One unit is under development and will be implemented during the 2009/10 school year. The goal is to develop 3 units per year that incorporate strong mathematics content over a period of 3 years so that the school can return to the ideals in its charter for all subjects.

Conclusions

There have been many studies documenting schools often unsuccessful attempts to untrack schools (Hatton, 1985; Oakes, 1995; Wheelock, 1992). Alternatively there have been little to no studies of schools documenting the path into tracking practices and the work of these schools to resist that draw. This study provides a rare view of this process couched within a theoretical framework that suggests the importance of school trust in the process (Johnston, 2006; 2008).

It is important to note that this study was of a charter school. The fact that charter schools are designed to foster innovation cannot be ignored. It is probably the conflict between this schools charter and the practice that the parties involved are so willing to work on stepping back from tracking. It is notable, however that regular public schools are fully able to adopt similar teaching practices and in some cases have successfully done so (Boaler, 2002; Wheelock, 1992)

The very existence of choice in this process may have a large impact on the trust relationships between the administrators, teachers and parents involved in this study. There has been some research (and argument) on the effectiveness of charter schools but none about the relationship of charter schools and trust. More research needs to be conducted in this area.

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