Join the national conversation!

Word Generation - Unit 2.24

Focus Words

tracking | aptitude | policy | components | involve

WEEKLY PASSAGE

Academic **tracking** means students are placed into certain classes based on their abilities. Let's say Jasmine shows an **aptitude** for mathematics in sixth grade. She would then be put in advanced math courses starting in seventh grade and continuing all the way through high school. But Oscar, who is in her class, starts off slowly in math so he takes a completely different and easier set of math classes. In her senior year, when Jasmine knows more math than Oscar, is this because of aptitude or experience?

The arguments for and against the tracking **policy** have many **components**. Some people think tracking is a good idea. Students can learn at their own speed. Higher track students do not have to wait for others to catch up with them. Lower track students do not have to deal with students who are faster and get impatient with them for slowing the class down.

People who oppose academic tracking point out that the tracks are decided by testing. Tests can misrepresent students' skills. The people who think tracking is unfair argue that students who do not test well end up in low-level classes where they have fewer chances to learn. Maybe the students who score low on the test just need tutoring or a little more time to learn the same material as the high-tracked students. Tracking opponents complain that schools do not **involve** themselves in helping lower-tracked students learn because they are busy getting higher-tracked students ready for college.

What do you think about this? Is this practice fair? Do kids like Oscar miss out on a better education because they are put into a low track?

TEACHER
Reading Comprehension/Discussion Questions:

- What is academic tracking?
- What is the usual way schools track or place students into aptitude or "ability groups"?
- Why do some teachers and students feel that tracking can benefit some students?
- What groups of students might be hurt through the tracking system?
- Is there a tracking policy at your school?

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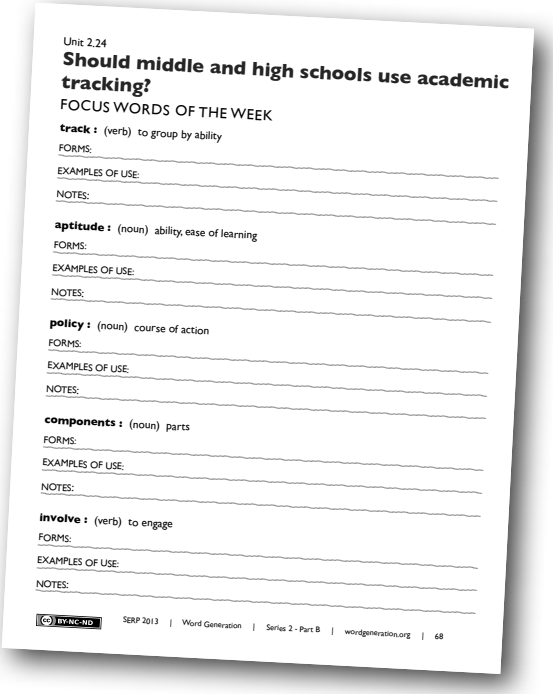
PLEASE NOTE:
THE STUDENT VERSION OF THIS PAGE IS FORMATTED DIFFERENTLY


Unit 2.24
Should middle and high schools use academic tracking?
FOCUS WORDS OF THE WEEK
track : (verb) to group by ability
FORMS:
EXAMPLES OF USE:
NOTES:
aptitude : (noun) ability, ease of learning
FORMS:
EXAMPLES OF USE:
NOTES:
policy : (noun) course of action
FORMS:
EXAMPLES OF USE:
NOTES:
components : (noun) parts
FORMS:
EXAMPLES OF USE:
NOTES:
involve : (verb) to engage
FORMS:
EXAMPLES OF USE:
NOTES:
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Unit 2.24

WORD CHART FOR TEACHERS

This chart is not in the student book. It is a resource for teachers to support students in the use of the focus words each week. Students are provided one page in each unit immediately following the weekly passage with a basic definition printed and space for taking notes.

Word	Meaning	Forms			Related Words
		Inflectional	Basic Word Classes	Prefixes/ Suffixes	
track	(v.) - to group by ability	trackings (pl.)	track (v.)	untracked trackable tracker	
aptitude	(n.) - ability, ease of learning	aptitudes	apt	aptitudinal aptitudinally ineptitude	
policy	(n.) - course of action	policies			police
components	(n.) - parts	components (pl.)		componential	
involve	(v.) - to engage	involves involved involving		uninvolved involvement involver	evolve revolve

Unit 2.24

Should middle and high schools use academic tracking?

PROBLEM OF THE WEEK

Hughes Middle School follows a **policy** of academic **tracking**. The school has advanced math classes for students who have an **aptitude** for math. Choosing students for this program **involves** giving all students a math test with two **components**: calculating and critical thinking. Students must earn a total score of 80% to qualify for the advanced class.

Option 1: Julie received 95 out of 120 points on her math **aptitude** test. Will she qualify for the advanced math class?

A) Yes
B) No

Option 2: On the math **aptitude** test, the calculating **component** is worth 70% of the final grade, and the critical thinking **component** is worth 30%. If Bethany gets half of the calculating problems right and all of the critical thinking problems right, will she qualify for the advanced class? (You can assume that all problems within each of the two sections are worth the same number of points.)

Answer: No. Bethany's score is 65%.

Discussion Question: Tracking involves measuring each student's **aptitude**, and this usually means giving a test. A **policy** of tracking students using a test score means that some students will miss qualifying for a higher track by just a few points. Is it fair for a student to be put into a lower track based on a few points? Is there a way to make **tracking** decisions more fair? What **components** should a fair **tracking** system have? Or is **tracking** just wrong?

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Unit 2.24

Should middle and high schools use academic tracking?

THINKING SCIENTIFICALLY

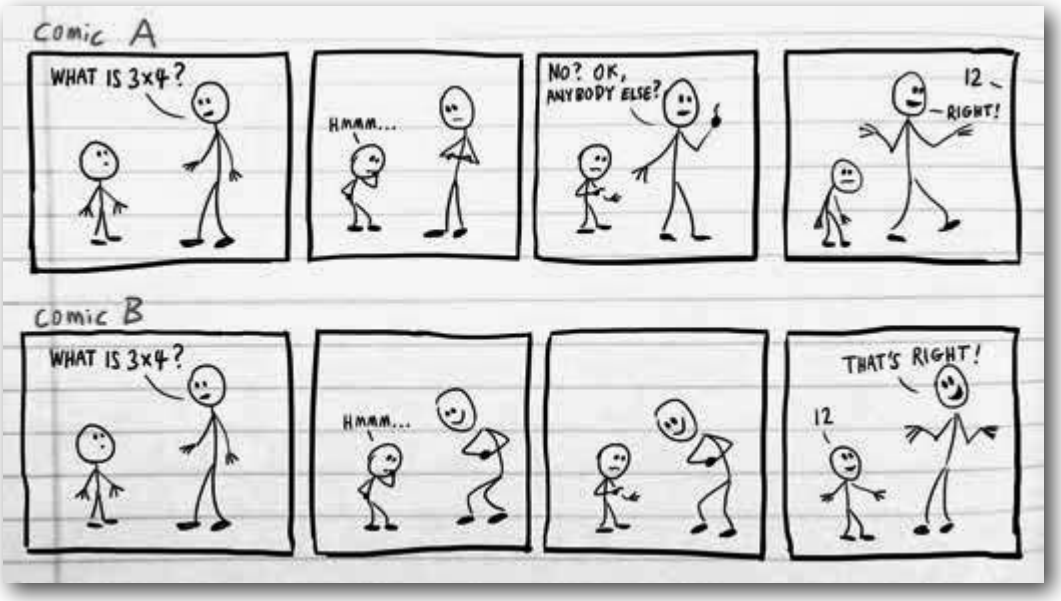
Mr. Seemy has just returned from a teacher conference during which teachers discussed the pros and cons of academic **tracking**. He's interested to hear what his students think about the idea.

"I wish our school used academic **tracking**," sighs Candice. "Different students are good at different things. Separate tracks would make things easier for everyone!"

"Maybe," says Rohan, "but **tracking policies** can **involve** some unintended negative results. I read online about a famous study done in 1964 by a professor named Robert Rosenthal. He told some elementary school teachers that a special new test had shown that certain students were probably about to make huge academic advances. In reality, Rosenthal had chosen the students at random. But at the end of the school year, those students really had done better than their classmates, because of the high expectations of their teachers. And other studies have shown that negative expectations can have negative effects on students."

"I doubt that," says Candice. "I can't see how a teacher's expectations would affect a student's performance."

"I can," says Warren. "Here, let's do a little informal experiment. I'm going to draw two short comic strips. Both show a student and a teacher on the first day of school. I am going to ask people which cartoon shows a teacher with high expectations and see which one they pick."



In which comic do you think the teacher expects the student to do poorly?

Answers may vary. Probably more students will think that Comic A represents a teacher with low expectations.

Why did you make the choice you did about which comic shows which scenario? Do your classmates see these comics the same way?

Comic A: teacher gives up on student relatively quickly. Comic B: teacher treats student's hesitation as a sign of productive thought.

How do you think scenarios like these, repeated many times over the course of a school year, might affect the student?

Both kinds of experience might teach the student to share the teacher's expectations of the student, altering the student's self image and behavior.

Caveat: Maybe Comic A could represent an inexperienced teacher, and Comic B could represent a more experienced teacher who has learned to be more patient and encouraging, regardless of expectations about the student. Or maybe Comic A could be a scene from a math game where students have a certain number of seconds to answer, while Comic B shows the same teacher and student during regular instruction. What we are told to expect in the comic strips can influence how we interpret or judge them, just as what we're told told to expect from a person may influence how we interpret or judge their behavior.

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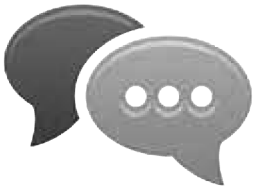
Unit 2.24

Should middle and high schools use academic tracking?



DEBATING THE ISSUE

TEACHER
Whatever the debate format, ask students to use academically productive talk when arguing their positions. In particular, students should provide reasons and evidence to back up their assertions. It may be helpful to read these sample positions to illustrate some possibilities, but students should be encouraged to take their own positions about the issue at hand.

Get ready...

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A Students should be tracked in school. This is the best way to make sure that students are getting the kind of instruction they need for their level.

B Students should not be tracked in school. All students regardless of their level should receive the same instruction, curriculum, and materials.

C Students should be tracked in school in different ways; tests should be used together with other ways of assessing a student's actual knowledge in math, science, social studies and English.

D Students should not be tracked at all. Students should be given opportunities to display their academic aptitudes through the school year. There should be ongoing checks to see where kids are in their learning.

E _____
_____
_____

Get set...

Be ready to provide evidence to back up your position during your class discussion or debate. Jot down a few quick notes:

_____
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GO!

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these.

I believe that...

I agree with you, but...

You make a good point, but have you considered...

Can you show me evidence in the text that...

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Unit 2.24

Should middle and high schools use academic tracking?

WRITE ABOUT IT

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples.
Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

Focus Words

tracking | aptitude | policy | components | involve

TEACHER

Ask students to write a response in which they argue a position on the weekly topic.

Put the writing prompt on the overhead projector (or the board) so that everyone can see it. Remind students to refer to the word lists in their Word Generation books as needed.

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