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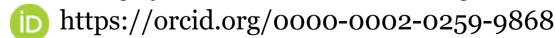

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The Paideia Program is Worth Another Look

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Abstract

Educational opportunity is unequally distributed in the United States, most notably by race and economic status. Commonly practiced in K–12 schools across the country, tracking and ability grouping serve to exacerbate those existing inequities. Recent renewed activism for racial and economic justice, coupled with concerns over learning loss due to COVID-19 school closures, makes this an ideal time for educators to reconsider a formerly well-known and ambitious whole-school reform system called the Paideia Program. The system itself is described and a comprehensive review of research and literature follows. This review demonstrates Paideia's potential to improve educational outcomes and thus help to equalize educational opportunity across demographic lines, in and of itself a rationale for updated research on its implementation and effects.

Keywords: *inequality, tracking, ability grouping, Paideia Program, Paideia method, Paideia seminar, Socratic seminar*

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Introduction

The quality of the education we receive has massive implications for the quality of our lives. Educational attainment is a major determinant of individual life chances and employment opportunities, as well as economic growth on a societal scale (Field et al., 2007). Nearly 40 years ago, Mortimer Adler credited John Dewey with the revelation that truly democratic states must provide for children not only the same *quantity* of education, but also the same *quality* (1982, p. 4). The United States made great strides in the 20th century toward accomplishment of the former but has yet to achieve the latter. Today, evidence abounds that educational opportunity is unequally distributed by race and economic status. Curriculum tracking and ability grouping are two practices contributing to this inequity.

The Problem With Tracking

Gamoran (1992) defines *tracking* broadly as any programmatic division that separates students for all of their

academic subjects, whereas *ability grouping* might refer to a division within a particular subject or even among students in the same classroom. Curriculum tracks appropriate sequences of coursework for students who have been channelled into either college-preparatory, vocational, or general academic tracks (Oakes, 1986). Both tracking and ability grouping are intended to benefit students by allowing educators to better target instruction to their needs and to adjust pacing for students who learn at different rates (Gamoran, 2010; Legette, 2020). In fact, evidence gathered over decades has consistently shown that tracking is thoroughly inequitable, harmful to students, and ultimately unsupportable (Mathis, 2013, p.23).

Children are often tracked based solely upon teachers' gut estimates of their prior knowledge (Oakes, 2005). Students from low-income families, students of color, and English-learners are more likely to find themselves in lower-ability groups or slated for vocational curriculum (Callahan et al., 2010; Gamoran, 2010; Spring, 2016). Both ability grouping and curriculum tracking have been found to reproduce social inequities and to widen achievement gaps by race and class even as they fail to increase productivity (Gamoran, 2010). Teachers of lower-track courses provide instruction that is overall less rigorous and less engaging (Burris et al., 2008; Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Mathis, 2013; Northrop & Kelly, 2019) and tend to communicate lower expectations for behavior and achievement (Mayer et al., 2018). Reduced expectations can result in a diminution of student humanity and the imposition of a ceiling on their achievement—all without addressing the more systemic causes of their disadvantage (Rojas & Liou, 2017). Perhaps even more profoundly, classifying students by perceived ability influences how these children view themselves and their intellectual capacities and can ultimately lead to the (mis)shaping of their long-term goals (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Legette, 2020).

Calls and cases for detracking our schools have been made consistently for some time (see Burris & Garrity, 2008; Burris & Welner, 2005; Fierro, 2014; Mehan et al., 1994; Turner & Spain, 2020; Wheelock, 1992b, 1992a); yet, most U.S. schools still make use of tracking in one form or another (Loveless, 2013; Mayer et al., 2018). Whatever the reason for its persistence, the problem of tracking is one deserving of focus and a concerted effort by educational stakeholders to thoroughly examine alternative practices. The conflation of new activism for racial justice and concerns over learning loss due to COVID-19 school closures makes this an ideal time for educators, researchers, and policymakers to take another look at a whole-school reform system called the Paideia Program.

First devised and implemented in the early 1980s, the Paideia Program is grounded in a desire to provide the same rigorous quality of education to all students regardless of background or perceived ability. One of the program's best-known features is its principled avoidance of student tracking in all forms as a practice both inequitable and undemocratic. Paideia generated a buzz in the media and sustained interest through the 1990s, but investment in research on the program has waned despite the continued existence of approximately 100 Paideia schools across the nation (T. Roberts, personal communication, April 10, 2020). The purpose of this essay is to present a rationale for renewed research on the Paideia Program as a non-tracked system of schooling through exploration of extant qualitative and quantitative studies.

The Paideia Program

In 1979, renowned philosopher Mortimer Adler gathered leaders in education to form the Paideia Group. With the publication of *The Paideia Proposal* in 1982, *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* in 1983, and *The Paideia Program* the following year, Adler and his associates aroused a great deal of public interest in the potential of this reform program to improve pre-secondary schooling (Gabbard & Appleton, 2005). The Greek term paideia (παιδεία) refers to the rearing of a child, or else to the education and training they receive. It can also represent the knowledge, culture, and accomplishments achieved through that education (Liddell & Scott, 1986, p. 584). For Christians, the word takes on a slightly different meaning: The Association of Classical

Christian Schools (2020) explains paideia as the shaping of virtue and sharpening of reason in the young so that both are aligned with God's will (*What Is Paideia?*, 2020). We might define paideia generally as the education of children, bestowed to fortify both mind and character.

When he penned the first book, Adler's mission was to inspire radical reform in the area of public K–12 schooling to overcome the elitism entrenched within the system and to replace that system with one of excellent quality that is accessible to all children (Adler, 1984, p. 1). A major goal of the resulting comprehensive reform plan was equality of opportunity and the maximization of potential in all students (Lyon, 1988). Accordingly, rigorous curriculum and instruction are core components of the Paideia Program (Wang et al., 1998), and a Paideia classroom is said to be distinguished from more traditional learning environments by its intellectual rigor and egalitarianism (Roberts & Billings, 1999). Woods (2019) notes that Paideia classrooms are abuzz with pervasive conversation, rather than silent but for the stagnant lecturing of a teacher. The program also emphasizes high expectations for all students (Brazil, 1988; Ravitch et al., 1983; Roberts, 2001; Roberts & Billings, 1999; Wang et al., 1998), the prioritization of high academic expectations rendering it a foil to the setting of unequal and unevenly distributed resources and expectations within tracked systems.

In fact, Paideia takes a strong, principled stance against tracking, challenging the traditional notion that students must be grouped according to their ability (Berry et al., 1995, p. 5) and proposing a robust one-track liberal education for all. Mortimer Adler rejected the premise that some children are not educable in the liberal arts tradition, and it is this "undemocratic prejudice" that typically places children on narrower vocational tracks (Gabbard & Appleton, 2005; Adler, 1983, p. 7). Adler himself described Paideia instruction as "general, not specialized; liberal, not vocational; humanistic, not technical" (1984, p. 6). Ultimately, the goal of a Paideia education is to prepare graduates to earn a decent living, to participate meaningfully and judiciously as citizens of a democracy, and to live intelligently and responsibly, allowing one to "enjoy as fully as possible all the goods that make a human life as good as it can be" (Adler, 1983, p. 18). By definition, a program too narrowly focused on any one subject or skill is not adequately equipped to deliver success so broadly distributed across one's lifetime.

The Paideia Program is built upon three modes of teaching, often represented as columns or pillars in the literature. The first, didactic instruction, is intended to help students acquire basic and organized knowledge in various subjects; ideally, a teacher spends no more than 20% of class time in this mode (Roberts & Billing, 1999). Didactic instruction in a given unit is to be followed by a period of coaching by the teacher, a practice intended to aid students in the development of intellectual skills (i.e., learning to learn). The third mode, Socratic questioning, guides students toward greater understandings and new insights through active and vigorous discussion (Adler, 1984, pp. 7–9; Roberts & Billings, 1999). The modes are complementary, and the Paideia teacher uses all three whenever appropriate to guide students through integrated units of study (Roberts & Billings, 1999, p. 6). As expert facilitators of learning both across disciplines and within their specific subjects, expectations of Paideia teachers are extremely high (Woods, 2019).

Though itemization of the philosophical and ethical objections to Adler's work lies outside the purview of this essay, it is at this point I wish to recognize that much ink has been spilled in legitimate debate and discussion of Adler's advocacy of the Western literary canon and his contention that a liberal arts education is best for all students. Of course, it is extremely important to examine the philosophical underpinnings and ethical implications of any and all educational programs; at some stage of their decision making, administrators considering the introduction of Paideia methods in their schools should avail themselves of the opinions and analyses of those who argue against the use of Paideia, if only to gain a clearer view of the program as a whole. The purpose of the review is not to lobby administrators, however, or even to defend Paideia's honor on philosophical or ethical grounds but rather to encourage educational researchers to conduct further study on implementation procedures and outcomes among schools that have already committed to the program.

A Review of Paideia and Related Studies

In the early 1980s, a member of Chattanooga's (TN) philanthropic Lyndhurst Foundation became inspired by the principles in Adler's *Paideia Proposal* and began organizing for reform; evening meetings (attended by local parents and civic and business leaders) led eventually to a decision by Chattanooga's Board of Education to adopt the Paideia Program in district schools (Wheelock, 1994). A number of studies arose from the transition and implementation effort. Paideia in Chattanooga garnered incredible local interest, and soon after its inception saw snowballing parent demand for the expansion of the program (Gettys & Wheelock, 1994). In an analysis of the professional development undertaken to support the Paideia rollout, Gettys and Holt (1993) remark upon the fervor it fueled in the community: "Word of mouth advertising for these schools made them the most sought after public schools in Chattanooga with parents camping out to submit their child's application" (p. 7).

A comprehensive report compiled by Barnett Berry et al. (1995) covers a wide range of topics relating to the introduction of Paideia principles and methods in Chattanooga, including the decision to expand the reform efforts after the Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences and, later, the Chattanooga School for the Liberal Arts, demonstrated ample evidence of Paideia's success (Berry et al., 1995, p. 19). Comments of students at the School for the Arts show they favored the egalitarian format of classroom activities, observing that "it's not just teachers talking" and "teachers do not go through the same routine day in and day out" (Berry et al., 1995, p. 17).

In "Chattanooga's Paideia Schools: A Single Track for All—And It's Working," Wheelock (1994) discusses the gains made by the Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences, citing the percentage of graduates who'd gone on to attend 4-year colleges and 2-year programs; the notably high daily attendance; the number of National Merit finalists and semifinalists; and high grade point averages (p. 88). Hart (1989) remarks upon the relatively high test scores at CSAS after its first year of operation; in fact, they were the highest in the city (p. 172). In addition, Wheelock (1994) lists a number of "enabling conditions" for achievement established in the city's schools after the Paideia rollout, including widespread access to rigorous; single-track liberal arts curriculum; assignments that support independent thinking; and student evaluations focused on individual progress rather than comparisons or rankings (pp. 88–89). Polite and Adams (1996) examined the seminar experiences of students and teachers engaged in Socratic/Paideia Seminars in a Chattanooga middle school via interviews, observations, and document analysis, finding that the seminars were a viable means to improving cognitive and social development of middle-school aged students.

Outside Chattanooga, the Paideia Program resulted in positive change for many schools and untold numbers of students. Brazil (1988) penned a sweeping report of the first year's implementation of Paideia in a Chicago high school. While the participating researchers were unable to analyze student scores on the citywide Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), Brazil reports that failure rates in reading, math, and social studies declined for Paideia students (which, he notes, ran contrary to expectations given the rigorous nature of the Paideia curriculum). Surveys revealed other positive changes, such as more active classroom discussions and improved student behavior, while students and teachers found the program both "challenging and rewarding" (Brazil, 1988, p. 150). Also reporting in Chicago, Wallace (1993) presented a slew of positive impacts on schools and students participating in the Paideia Program, including better attendance, a greater percentage of students scoring above the bottom quartile on TAP, lower failure rates across disciplines, and improved attitudes toward teachers (Wang et al., 1998, pp. 64–65).

Arambula-Greenfield and Gohn (2004) describe the effects of the Paideia Program over a 15-year period at a Midwestern inner-city middle school. Students smashed through district and state test averages, and disciplinary actions fell to less than half the district's rate. Former students reported great satisfaction with their experience at the school and credited the highly structured program with preparing them for lifelong learning. In a study of Paideia students' perceptions of the program and the quality of their learning, Heipp

and Huffman (1994) found that students regarded Paideia favorably, noting especially their enjoyment of the seminars and the nature of their relationships with teachers (p. 209). Students highlighted the efficacy of the Paideia Seminar to increase their understanding, appreciation for its encouragement of social interaction, and the gratifying challenges inherent in confronting ideas in opposition to one's own views (p. 211). They also felt their teachers displayed genuine interest in their well-being and presented academic concepts in authentic ways (p. 212).

After 2 years of successful Paideia teaching, the principal of an Oakland, California high school remarked: "To say that *The Paideia Proposal* has proved successful is an understatement. The students' enthusiasm and awakening to learning which results from the opportunity to participate actively in their own learning is overwhelming" (Adler, 1983, p. 108). More recently, a California journalist credited the Paideia Program with building Oakland Technical High School into the best public school in the city (Tsai, 2017). Based on an ethnographic study of four schools in their third year of Paideia implementation, Hart (1989) suggested that the Paideia Program improved student ability to effectively discuss challenging literature and adequately support their opinions. Additional positive outcomes across the participating schools included greater unification of faculty; reduction of tracking and ability grouping; increased student engagement; and improvement in the attitudes of both teachers and students.

A number of studies have been conducted on the specific effects of the Paideia Seminar, a type of Socratic seminar and one of the distinctive features of the Paideia Program. Socratic seminars are discursive learning activities modeled on Socrates' method of teaching through questioning; the goals are to enhance the students' ability to think critically, articulate values clearly, and to resolve intellectual conflict (Polite & Adams, 1996, p. 1). Socratic seminars place learning in the hands of students themselves, supporting them as they "find, articulate, and develop their 'voice'" (Ball & Brewer, 2000, p. 3). Ball and Brewer credit the seminar with building classroom community, fostering knowledge connections, improving communication skills, and providing students with a sense of autonomy.

Unlike discussions in traditional classroom environments, Socratic seminars of the type taught in Paideia classrooms feature conversations that support divergent thinking (Lambright, 1995), as well as critical thinking (Teagle, 1987). Powered by student voices, the Paideia Seminar "reflect[s] theoretical assumptions of the sociocultural nature of speech and of egalitarianism associated with dialogic discussion" (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 910). The National Paideia Center itself defines its Paideia Seminar as a "collaborative intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions" about a given text, where learning objectives include the acquisition of both intellectual and social skills (National Paideia Center, n.d.).

Arnold et al. (1988) describe the execution of Paideia Seminars in a North Carolina district. Authors witnessed students "gaining deeper understanding of literature" and displaying "heightened interest in reading and writing;" they asserted that their students were learning to think more critically and had developed higher-order thinking skills (Arnold et al., 1988, p. 48). The authors highlight two student comments to demonstrate their favorable opinion of the seminar format: "I like the seminars because you can… go on an adventure with your book;" and "you can have any opinion you want" (Arnold et al., 1988, p. 48). In another North Carolina study, Chesser et al. (1997) found that the number of 8th graders scoring a 2.5 or above (on a 4.0 scale) on a North Carolina state writing test rose 20.7% over a 3-year period of Paideia implementation; the number of minoritized students scoring in that same range rose 28.5% (Chesser et al., p. 40). This is an especially encouraging finding in terms of closing racial- and class-based achievement gaps.

Davies and Sinclair (2014) enacted a quasi-experimental study of the Socratic method employed by the Paideia Program across six schools in New Zealand, classifying interactions during discussions by participant and type. They found that verbal interactions during Paideia Seminars were predominantly student initiated, while teacher-initiated interactions were more common in traditional classroom discussions; also, the Paideia discussions were both deeper and more complex. Davies and Sinclair conclude that the provision of autonomy

to students and the imperative to provide justification for statements of opinion are educational goals worth pursuing. Indeed, the power of dialogic discussion, as opposed to "teacher-fronted" discussion, is that it includes the voices of all group members, interacting freely as they facilitate meaning-making and participate in shared decisions about the value of various types of knowledge (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 908).

In a study of translanguaged Paideia Seminars, Hamm (2018) recognizes the potential of the format to engage English-learners in critical discussions and to foster equitable dialogic opportunity. She recommends the use of the Paideia Seminar to ensure that English-learner voices are heard in the classroom—ultimately leading to the enrichment of cultural perspectives and the inclusion of viewpoints that would otherwise go unexamined (Hamm, 2018, p. 50). Similarly, Paredes (2017) recommends the adoption of the Paideia Seminar in dual language classrooms, despite challenges of implementation, due to the importance of authentic peer interactions and the sheer enjoyment expressed by the students in sharing their views. Awada and Ghaith (2018) studied the effects of the Paideia Seminar on reading comprehension and reading anxiety among English-learners in Lebanon, finding that the seminar experience improved reading comprehension more effectively than traditional reading instruction; it also improved learners' attitude toward the learning process by decreasing the anxiety spurred by the prospect of reading English texts. A 2020 doctoral dissertation involving application of the iReady reading assessment lends credence to the position that Paideia Seminars improve reading comprehension (Maxwell, 2020). Robinson (2006) explains that the Paideia Seminar's recursive dialogic process is able to improve student synthesis of focus texts while providing a "natural and motivating environment" for the practice of complex reading skills and the exercise of higher-level thinking.

Indications abound of the potential for Adler's Paideia Program to positively impact the educational experiences of K–12 students, while objections to the program argued on purely philosophical grounds necessarily fail to present empirical evidence of either impotence or harm. Indeed, Paideia's potential cannot be doubted, but potential alone is not enough (in most districts) to support the adoption of a reform program that does away with the long-standing practice of curriculum tracking. There is a great deal more work to be done in terms of exploring the actual effects of the Paideia Method on student achievement and students' relationship with schooling. It is to this future work we will now briefly turn.

Suggestions for Future Research

Quantitative studies are needed to determine the real impact of Paideia on academic achievement across various disciplines in elementary, middle, and high schools, in various socio-economic contexts, and with consideration for possible confounding variables. Quantitative results would speak to the Paideia Program's ability to mitigate opportunity disparities by race and class via its rigorous, one-track curriculum and three core teaching modes. Inconclusive results in studies of Paideia's effect on critical thinking skills stemming from inadequate evaluation tools (Dreyden et al., 1991; MacPhail-Wilcox et al., 1990; Shepard, 1998) invites more quantitative work in the areas of both critical thinking development and program evaluation in Paideia schools. Mixed methods research might tie the stuff of quantitative studies to students' and teachers' lived experiences of the program. More purely qualitative work to meaningfully highlight Paideia student perspectives is needed, as well (Heipp & Huffman, 1994). Brazil (1988) expressed a desire to understand Paideia's effect on student self-esteem and attitudes toward school and toward learning in general. Such research would be a welcome addition to the literature, as would any exploration of Paideia's impact on student motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulating strategies, or social skill development. Work to situate Paideia's principles and methods within established bodies of pedagogical theory, along with more and comprehensive analyses of barriers to Paideia implementation (e.g., cost and training requirements), would be useful to stakeholders considering the adoption of the program (see Gettys & Holt, 1993; Schaffer et al., 1997; Stringfield et al., 1997).

Conclusion

There is still much to learn about the Paideia Program, and it has not been my purpose to advocate for its widespread implementation until we understand its effects more fully. I would argue instead that extant evidence demonstrates its great potential and demands our renewed attention as researchers. It is a fact that racial and class inequalities permeate the American education system, and well established that curricular tracking and ability grouping can and do perpetuate those inequalities. In and of itself, the Paideia Program's democratic stance against tracking warrants a collective look in its direction. What's more, Paideia represents a step toward fulfillment of the promise of democracy articulated by Dewey and reiterated by Adler: A true democracy demands excellence and equality of education for all children. Regardless of background or perceived ability, students deserve to be held to the same rigorous standards, to achieve at the highest level of their capacity, and to reap the benefits of a quality K–12 education for the remainder of their lives. As researchers, we ought to leave no stone unturned in search of a program that might deliver on those outcomes! Thus, it is time to direct our efforts as researchers, once again, toward investigation of a program that was established 40 years ago with those very outcomes as its primary goals.

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