ABILITY GROUPING

The Concept of Grouping in Gifted Education

In Search of Reality: Unraveling the Myths about Tracking, Ability Grouping, and the Gifted

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The anti-tracking movement has suddenly become anti-ability grouping, resulting in serious side-effects for gifted students who currently are being served effectively in ability-grouped programs that consistently meet their needs. Closer scrutiny of the research frequently cited reveals commonly held misinterpretations and misconceptions. Six commonly held myths are examined and discussed in relationship to educators' efforts to provide the best instructional programs for all students, including those whose abilities place them at the upper end of the spectrum. Practical realities are emphasized in an effort to encourage schools to provide equality of opportunity rather than the same experiences for all. Consideration is given to serving all students more appropriately by overcoming the abuses of past practice and capitalizing on the knowledge that can be gained by careful examination of the literature and its implications for all students, including the gifted.

Educational bandwagons are a dime a dozen. Educators want to be on the cutting edge of educational improvement and are concerned about excellence in education and about providing programs that help their students. The last thing any educator wants to do is to be responsible for educational decisions that are harmful to anyone, least of all to students who already have had too many disadvantages heaped upon them in their lives. Thus, the pendulum swings again, moving from one extreme to another, typically without ample consideration of the impact of the latest trend in education on those students who benefited the most from some of the approaches being abandoned.

One recurring trend that is taking the educational world by storm is the anti-tracking movement. In the '90s, anti-tracking suddenly has become anti–ability grouping. The side effects of this trend are rippling throughout the schools, from widespread efforts to implement the Regular Education Initiative (R.E.I.) for students with learning handicaps to insidious attempts to eliminate programs for highly able or gifted students. In both cases, the motivation has been admirable; the concern is about the negative effects of locking certain students into unchallenging classes and locking them out of educational situations that stretch their minds. Unfortunately, all of the relevant research and its ramifications have not been thoroughly considered. For example, Slavin's research that recommended heterogeneous grouping for all ability groups systematically omitted data from those students in the top five percent of the school population (Allan, 1991). As Robinson (1990) concluded, the omission of gifted students in research studies can lead to dangerous overgeneralizations by those who interpret the results (p. 11).

In our efforts to be democratic, we have forgotten Thomas Jefferson's statement, "nothing is so unequal as the equal treatment of unequal people." Although Oakes (1986) has acknowledged that ability grouping does benefit the highest ability students, she questions whether we can continue to meet their needs at the expense of all others. Can it be that our school systems are actually giving tacit approval to create underachievement in one ability group so that the needs of the other ability groups can be served? This, indeed, is egalitarianism at its worst.

The purpose of this article is to roll away the clouds of misconception about ability grouping and to shine new light on the issues and their impact on efforts to meet the educational needs of gifted students in our schools. Six commonly held myths are examined and discussed in relationship to providing appropriate educational programs for all

students, including those whose abilities place them at the upper end of the spectrum.

Myth #1: Tracking and Ability Grouping Are the Same Thing

Reality. Tracking has been defined as a means of dealing with individual differences whereby educators decide "to divide students into class-size groups based on a measure of the students' perceived ability or prior achievement" (George, 1988). In practice, tracking results in students being assigned full-time to instructional groups based on a variety of criteria, including presumed ability derived from achievement test scores and teacher observations of classroom performance. This often translates to a high-ability group assigned to Teacher A, a middle-ability group assigned to Teacher B, and a low-ability group assigned to Teacher C. Once students are in a certain track, there is very little movement between tracks during a school year or from one school year to another. Consistent placement in the low track clearly leads those students to disenfranchisement in a class system where there are clear differences between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

The commonly accepted meaning of ability grouping, on the other hand, relates to regrouping students for the purpose of providing curriculum aimed at a common instructional level. In elementary schools, this often happens when teachers create more homogeneous reading or math groups while teaching heterogeneous groups for most other subjects. At the secondary level, students may be assigned to high-ability groups in the areas of their strengths and to average- or low-ability groups in other subjects. Ability grouping does not imply permanently locking students out of settings that are appropriately challenging for them; it means placing them with others whose learning needs are similar to theirs for whatever length of time works best.

A variation of grouping practices is called cluster grouping whereby small groups of students with similar instructional needs are clustered within a primarily heterogeneous classroom. For example, four to eight identified gifted students at a particular grade level or in a specific subject area may be placed in the classroom of a teacher who has expertise in differentiating curriculum and instruction for them. This practice is in keeping with the need for gifted students to be with their intellectual peers in order to be appropriately challenged and to view their own abilities more realistically (Feldhusen & Saylor, 1990). With cluster

grouping, gifted students may be the only ones grouped together on the basis of similar instructional needs. The other students in their class may comprise a heterogeneous mix, and most of the remaining classes in the school may also be heterogeneously grouped.

If all of the teachers at a given grade level are prepared to provide appropriately differentiated curriculum, the principal may decide to rotate faculty who work in classes where there are cluster groups of gifted students. This strategy can reduce the perceived association between a certain teacher and the "smartest" class (McInerney, 1983). Teachers who work in schools that use cluster grouping report that they have found that new academic leadership emerges in the classes without the cluster group of gifted students; i.e., a new cream rises to the top from among the heterogeneous group.

Myth #2: Ability Grouping Is Elitist

Reality. Elitism might well be defined as arbitrarily giving preference to some group based on a misperception of superiority. Often it is related to an offensive attitude of some group that is or purports to be socially, politically, or militarily superior (P. Plowman, personal communication, January 28, 1991).

However, being able to function at an advanced level intellectually does not, automatically, make an individual better than anyone else. It merely implies a difference that requires an educational response which may be erroneously interpreted by some as giving one group an unfair advantage. Gifted students may be better at many academic tasks, but this does not imply that they should be seen as being better than anyone else. The truth is that most educators of the gifted work diligently to help develop an understanding of giftedness in the context of individual differences rather than as an issue of superiority versus inferiority. This is totally consistent with newly emerging approaches, such as the middle school philosophy, that consider cognitive and affective development as equally important (Hornbeck, 1989).

In reality, keeping one or two highly gifted students in a classroom of mixed abilities actually may have the effect of creating snobbery. Scattering gifted students throughout all of the classrooms in the school may lead them to feel far superior to their classmates and promote arrogance. Imagine, if you will, the gifted student repeatedly getting the answers right and being able to offer complex ideas far ahead of the

other students in class discussions. After a while, the gifted student may well surmise that he actually does know more than all the others. Unless gifted students are placed in situations where they can be challenged by intellectual peers, the possibilities that they will develop an elitist attitude might well be expected to increase.

However, when gifted students are grouped together for instruction, the experience of studying with intellectual peers may actually lower self-esteem somewhat (Feldhusen & Saylor, 1990). There is nothing quite so humbling to bright individuals as discovering that there are other students in the group who are equally capable or even more knowledgeable about given topics than they are. If one goal of education is to help all students develop a realistic appraisal of their own ability, students need to measure themselves with appropriate yardsticks. Comparisons are more likely to be accurate when made with others of similar abilities. Sicola (1990) pointed out the relationship between the unique affective and academic needs of gifted students, indicating that these are " . . . best met through the provision of homogeneous grouping in the areas of giftedness for this segment of the school population" (p. 41). This is why many school districts have chosen to continue to group high-ability students together via such strategies as cluster grouping while grouping all others heterogeneously.

Interestingly, educators have no qualms about identifying outstanding talent in athletics and providing specialized programs for students who excel in that area. As Tammi (1990) commented, "Not all students have the ability or desire to participate on a varsity sports team, yet I have never heard any school official argue that singling out talented athletes for team membership to the exclusion of others is elitist. In fact, school districts and local community agencies go to great lengths applauding these athletes' efforts and supporting them in their development" (p. 44). A similar (though not quite so well-funded) example exists in relationship to giftedness in music. If support for students who demonstrate extraordinary talents in these areas is not considered elitist, why should intellectual giftedness be given short shrift?

Myth #3: Ability Grouping Inevitably Discriminates against Racial and Ethnic Minority Students

Reality. For too many years, the inequitable use of assessment procedures did result in minority and economically disadvantaged students

being under-represented in high-ability classes and programs for the gifted. However, educators of gifted students have made great progress in refining their identification methods. Wide-spread efforts are being made to overcome the inequities of over-reliance on standardized test score data and assumptions that too often have been made about students who, although gifted, may not fit the stereotype of high achievers with positive attitudes toward school. The direction is away from sole reliance on standardized tests and toward improved approaches that include studying the behaviors of students for indicators that gifted potential exists (Richert, Alvino, & McDonnell, 1982). For instance, methods devised by Frasier (1987), Gay (1978), Silverman and Waters (1988), Swenson (1978), Torrance and Ball (1984), and others are being implemented in order to better identify minority children who are gifted and/or talented. Moreover, significant attention is placed on training teachers to identify gifted students by observing their behavior. At the same time, behavioral descriptors are used to identify other underserved populations, who also have not surfaced due to a heavy emphasis on standardized test scores and classroom performance. Preschool and kindergarten children (Rogers & Silverman, 1988), creative thinkers (Davis & Rimm, 1985), nonproductive gifted students (Delisle, 1981), and gifted students with learning disabilities and other handicaps (Whitmore & Maker, 1985) are among those groups who are being screened more accurately using improved methodology.

Eliminating ability grouping because of inequitable identification procedures is tantamount to throwing out the baby with the bath water. Furthermore, singling out racial and ethnic minority students as the only disenfranchised group is misleading. The intent of gifted programs has not been to exclude certain populations. However, the identification procedures used in the past clearly needed revision, and improved methodologies are already being implemented.

Myth #4: Gifted Students Will Make It on Their Own; Grouping Them by Ability Does Not Result in Improved Learning or Achievement for Them

Reality. Studies by Feldhusen (1989), Kulik and Kulik (1991), and Oakes (1986) confirm what gifted educators have known for years: Gifted students benefit cognitively and affectively from working with other gifted students. Oakes (1986) specifically reported on the beneficial effects of the advantages that many high school students in top tracks receive from

their classes. Feldhusen (1989) reviewed data from several studies conducted by himself and his colleagues and concluded that

> . . . grouping of gifted and talented students in special classes with a differentiated curriculum, or as a cluster group in a regular heterogeneous classroom (but again with differentiated curriculum and instruction), leads to higher academic achievement and better academic attitudes for the gifted and leads to no decline in achievement or attitudes for the children who remain in the regular heterogeneous classroom. Gifted and talented youth need accelerated, challenging instruction in core subject areas that parallel their special talents or aptitudes. They need opportunities to work with other gifted and talented youth. And they need . . . teachers who both understand the nature and needs of gifted youth and are deeply knowledgeable in the content they teach (p. 10).

Although some studies have been done (Slavin, 1990) that indicate no increase in achievement test scores for high-ability students who have been grouped together, the omission of gifted students from such studies makes generalizing to this population highly questionable (Featherstone, 1987). Also, ceiling effects make it extremely difficult to determine whether or not students' learning was enhanced by homogeneous grouping unless off-level testing was used to assess achievement. In other words, grade-level achievement tests fail to reveal growth for students who already perform in the top percentile ranks because they have reached the ceiling of the test—the highest scores attainable for that age group. Only by administering instruments designed for older students can the actual achievement gains be determined for students whose performance places them in the extreme upper range.

Another critical issue needs to be considered: the goals of the gifted program and whether its purposes are actually focused on increasing academic achievement. What gifted students learn should be measured by far more comprehensive criteria than increased achievement test scores. Equally important are the development of socialization and leadership skills, experience with complex concepts and challenging learning, and opportunities to pursue topics in great depth. If such a program is more concerned with helping gifted students work together to grapple with global concerns that are complex and substantive, increases in achievement test scores in specific subject areas are not really appropriate for measuring success.

Myth #5: Providing Heterogeneously Grouped Cooperative Learning Experiences Is Most Effective for Serving All Students, Including the Gifted

Reality. Every student has a right in a democratic society to learn something in school in every class. However, it is possible that the students who may actually learn the least in a given class are the gifted. So much of what they are asked to learn they may have already mastered. When teachers discover this, they may be tempted to use gifted students as classroom helpers or to teach others, thereby robbing the gifted student of consistent opportunities to learn through real struggle. This situation can have a negative impact on them in many ways, including lowering their self-esteem (Rimm, 1986). Without regular encounters with challenging material, gifted students fail to learn how to learn and have problems developing the study skills they need for future academic pursuits.

Cooperative learning is designed to be used with either homogeneous or heterogeneous groups. Johnson and Johnson (1989) noted, "There are times when gifted students should be segregated for fast-paced accelerated work. There are times when gifted students should work alone. There are times when gifted students should compete to see who is best" (p. 1).

Slavin (1990) stated that "Use of cooperative learning does not require dismantling ability group programs. . . . In a situation where acceleration is appropriate, cooperative learning is likely to be effective if used within the accelerated class" (p. 7).

A further point was made by Silverman (1990), who said, "As children veer from the norm in either direction, their educational needs become increasingly more differentiated. A child three standard deviations below the norm (55 IQ) could not profit from placement in a cooperative learning group in the heterogeneous classroom; neither does a child three standard deviations above the norm (145 IQ)" (p. 6). What seems reasonable is to allow teachers the flexibility to determine which lessons lend themselves to heterogeneous cooperative learning groups and which to homogeneous cooperative learning groups and make professional decisions to place students accordingly.

Myth #6: Assuring That There Are Some Gifted Students in All Classrooms Will Provide Positive Role Models for Others and Will Automatically Improve the Classroom Climate

Reality. Classroom climate is far more dependent on factors other than having gifted students in attendance who supposedly will provide role

models of motivated learning for other students. (See Fraser, Anderson, & Walberg, 1982.) The notion that placing gifted students in low-ability classrooms will automatically have a beneficial effect on students who are performing at lower levels rests on several questionable assumptions: that the performance discrepancies will be perceived as alterable by the less capable students; that gifted students are consistently highly-motivated high achievers who will inspire others to similar accomplishments; and that gifted students placed in low-ability or heterogeneous classrooms will continue to perform at their peak even when they lack regular intellectual peers who can stimulate their thinking.

Research indicates that students model their behavior on the behavior of others who are of similar ability and who are coping well in school (France-Kaatrude & Smith, 1985). As Feldhusen (1989) stated, "watching someone of similar ability succeed at a task raises the observers' feeling of efficacy and motivates them to try the task" (p. 10).

Furthermore, heterogeneous grouping may have negative side-effects both on the gifted students and on the others in the classrooms. Gifted students who are a minority of one or who only have, at best, one or two classmates whose ability level approaches their own find themselves either feeling odd or arrogant. If all the other students watch from the sidelines while the smart one provides all the answers, their perceptions of themselves as competent, capable learners suffer. One former student described it this way: "When Bill [the gifted one] was in class, it was like the sun shining on a bright, clear day. But, when he went out to work with other gifted kids, it was like the sun goes over the horizon. The rest of us were like the moon and the stars; that's when we finally got a chance to shine" (Fiedler, 1980).

As Walberg (1989) indicated, "Educators should be realistic about individual differences. Teaching students what they already know or are as yet incapable of knowing wastes effort. . . . Yet our ideal is equality, of opportunity if not results, and we should take each student as far as possible" (p. 5). Equality in education does not require that all students have exactly the same experiences. Rather, education in a democracy promises that everyone will have an equal opportunity to actualize their potential, to learn as much as they can.

Education in a free society should not boil down to a choice between equity and excellence. Providing for formerly disenfranchised groups need not take away appropriate programs from any other group. As the research clearly indicates, gifted students benefit from working together.

Therefore, it is imperative that ability grouping for the gifted be continued. While the educational community moves toward heterogeneity for students who would benefit more from working in mixed ability groups, it should not deny gifted students the right to educational arrangements that maximize their learning. The goal of an appropriate education must be to create optimal learning experiences for all.

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