

# AN ALTERNATIVE TO ABILITY GROUPING

Differentiation gives all students access to a high-level curriculum to "raise the floors of expectations and the ceilings of possibility."

BY CAROL ANN TOMLINSON

The issue of ability grouping or tracking is an old one, but one in which research findings have generally been steady over the years. Ability grouping is a common approach to dealing with student variance in learning. In general, findings suggest that such an approach to dealing with student differences is disadvantageous to students who struggle in school (see, e.g., Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Gamoran, Nysstrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995) and advantageous to advanced learners (see, e.g., Kulick & Kulick, 1992; Rogers, 1991). It would likely be to our benefit in education decision making to go a step beyond the findings to consider why the results are as they are. That understanding should open the way to developing instructional approaches designed to maximize the growth of each student rather than repeating the now highly predictable patterns of the past. While schools and classrooms are complex and defy easy analysis, at least one root cause for the disparity of instruction in low and high track classes is evident.

## Impact of Teacher Expectations

When teachers work with a class largely or fully populated by students who have not done well in school, teacher expectations fall. That is likely not so much an intentional response as one triggered by below-the-surface reactions. In such instances, teachers draw the conclusion that the students will need tighter discipline, a slower pace of learning, less student-to-student interaction, a focus on fundamental or basic skills, easier materials, and so on. The nature of low-track or low-ability classes thus

typically reflects what one author called a "pedagogy of poverty"—that is, a class in which the emphasis is on compliance, memorizing and repeating information, doing drill and practice, checking work, and so on (Haberman, 1991). Lowered expectations result in curriculum and instruction that not only reflect the economic poverty of students who are overrepresented in low-level classes but are also likely to prepare students for a future of poverty.

In contrast, when a teacher is faced with a class of learners designated as advanced or highly able, the teacher's expectations predictably rise. In these instances, teachers believe they should move at a more rapid pace, use more advanced materials, prepare students to be increasingly independent as learners, and focus on high-level thinking. The nature of high-track classes typically reflects what an author referred to as a "pedagogy of plenty"—that is, one that is focused on making meaning, dialogue, complexity of ideas and thought, authentic tasks, and varied social configurations (Hodges, 2001). In conversations about findings related to ability grouping or tracking, we often overlook two key elements in the research. First, research suggests that students who are often assigned to low-track classes learn as much or more than their high-track counterparts when they have the opportunity to engage with the sort of curriculum and instruction typical of good high-track classes (Educational Research Service, 1992). Second, research that supports tracking advanced learners suggests that when curriculum is appropriately differentiated for these students, their achievement in heterogeneous classes is more positive than when all students in a class are taught exactly alike (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). There is very little research in the tracking literature that examines the impact on student achievement (as well as attitude, attendance, community, and so

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on) of classes in which high-quality differentiation is a persistent reality. Thus, our conversations continue to look at “solutions” in which we either do nothing to deal with student learning variance (one-size-fits-all heterogeneity) or in which we put students into different learning settings that typically provide very uneven learning opportunities.

### An Alternative

If we accept what appears to be a demographic reality—that students in the decades ahead will have a wide range of academic needs—and simultaneously accept the premise that schools should help each student develop the kinds of understandings, skills, and attitudes that will prepare him or her for life in a complex and rapidly changing world in which all students will need to be creators of knowledge (Marx, 2000), then it seems like educational malpractice to determine that some students should be assigned to low-level, often remedial, expectations that seldom result in robust academic gains (Tomlinson, 2004), while others receive opportunities to flourish. On the other hand, it also seems like educational malpractice to deprive students who are ready to move ahead with vigor and enthusiasm of the opportunity to do so.

The concept of differentiation suggests that there is a third alternative to effective teaching of academically diverse student populations. Moving beyond a pedagogy that sorts students and a pedagogy that ignores their essential differences and needs, we would look at classrooms in which all students work with high-level, engaging, meaning-making curriculum in a flexible classroom environment. In such settings, teachers would routinely provide support for students who need additional scaffolding to succeed with meaningful curriculum and for students who need to work at a more complex level. In other words, such classrooms would raise both the floors of expectations and the ceilings of possibility (Tomlinson, 2003).

In an era when academic diversity is a defining element in schools, and when economic viability demands a level of preparation for virtually all students that we once reserved for only a few, neither sorting nor teaching to the middle makes sense. We are likely at a point in educational history when educators have to work as teams of generalists and specialists to deliver higher quality curriculum in a range of ways in order to ensure both equity and excellence to each learner whom we serve (Marx, 2000).

In such classrooms, there is no need to sacrifice the advanced learner for the student who struggles (or vice versa) or to sacrifice the student who, for example, is both very able and speaks English as a second language or has a learning disability. The presence of clear and meaningful learning goals, continual use of assessment data to understand student growth in meeting those goals, and flexible teaching routines allows for attention to a variety of needs—not just the needs of one group of students. Key to developing defensibly

differentiated classrooms is developing teachers who “teach to the top,” simultaneously scaffolding the growth of students for whom academic excellence is already a reality and those for whom it is a new reality (Cone, 1992, 1993; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

As educators, most of us are not yet greatly skilled in developing and guiding such classes (Tomlinson et al., 2003). There are enough examples of them, however, to help us understand how they might operate and what their benefits might be for the full spectrum of students. The question is whether we have the will to move beyond paradigms that seem seriously flawed to those that seem more promising for far more students. **PL**

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