Ability Grouping is NOT Just Tracking Anymore

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Myths & Realities

MYTH #1: Ability grouping and tracking are the same thing.
REALITY: Tracking is a permanent method of streaming children across school years. Flexible ability grouping is used along with preassessment for particular content, skills, lessons, or units of study.
Myths & Realities

MYTH #2: There is strong research support for heterogeneous grouping.
REALITY: Most research suggests that flexible homogeneous grouping (with appropriate differentiation) has a stronger positive effect on achievement (Kulik, 1992; Kulik & Kulik, 1984, 1992; Rogers, 1991, 1993, 2002).

Myths & Realities

MYTH #3: Cooperative learning is better than ability grouping in terms of students’ achievement.
REALITY: Strong empirical research demonstrates that flexible homogeneous grouping has a stronger positive effect on achievement (Lou et al., 1995).
Myths & Realities

MYTH #4: Gifted kids are better served in the regular, heterogeneous classroom.
REALITY: Research suggests that gifted kids need to spend a majority of their time with others of similar abilities, interests, and motivational levels (Robinson, 2003).

Myths & Realities

MYTH #5: Ability grouping hurts the self-concept of kids in the below-grade groups.
REALITY: According to the BFLPE (Marsh, 1987), gifted students suffer a temporary decline in SC when first grouped with others more bright than themselves while struggling learners improve in SC.
“Who said that just because you’re in fourth grade or you’re nine years old that you learn exactly the same way every other nine year old does. You know that’s not true. I love grouping but I know that’s a nasty word in mathematics with standards, but I think grouping is really effective for high kids; extremely effective for high kids. I think it doesn’t make much difference for middle kids. I think they kind of, they’re going to be middle and you know I’m just torn about lows. I don’t know. Sometimes I think it’s bad for them because then they know they can look around and they know they’re in this group and maybe that stifles their ambition to learn. I don’t know. In other ways I think it’s more relaxing for them and they know that okay we’re all in the same boat together let’s see what we can do.”

Myths & Realities

MYTH #6: Cluster grouping is the best way to serve gifted students.
REALITY: Cluster grouping is an organizational model that assumes that teachers will differentiate for gifted students.

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Myths & Realities

MYTH #7: Ability grouping is always the best grouping arrangement.

REALITY: *Flexible* grouping is based on students’ needs, talents, strengths, interests, learning or expression styles, and levels of motivation.

Myths & Realities

MYTH #8: Gifted kids can make it on their own.

REALITY: Gifted kids need high-quality academic, affective, and career education or they may be prone to underachievement, lost to private or home schooling, or dropping-out.
Research on Ability Grouping

- More than 750 studies over the past 130 years.
- More than 300 studies of cooperative learning and acceleration.
- Johnson & Johnson based their support of cooperative learning for gifted students on one study of a 5-day treatment.
- Oakes (Keeping Track) was based on her own case study of 25 secondary schools.

Research on Ability Grouping

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Grouping</th>
<th>Curricular Adjustment</th>
<th>Subject(s)</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
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Some Definitions...

• Cluster grouping
• Between-class or Joplin Plan grouping
• Flexible small groups (FSGs)

Cluster Grouping

• The practice of placing high achieving, high ability, or gifted students in a regular classroom with other students and a teacher who has received training or has a desire to differentiate curriculum and instruction for those target students.

• (Gentry, 1999)
Cluster Grouping

- 3-10 gifted students are placed in classrooms with students of other achievement levels.
- Curriculum is differentiated.
- Teacher of gifted students has received training to work with gifted students.

Joplin Plan

- Preassessment based on specific skill or content knowledge
- Flexible, temporary
- After preassessment, students move to another teacher for instruction
  - Reading
  - Math
- Curriculum is differentiated
- Teachers are trained to teach to students’ levels
Enrichment Options: Out of School

- Field Trips
- Saturday Programs
- Summer Programs
- Governors’ School
- College for Kids
- Music, Art, Language, Computer Camps
- Mentorships

Enrichment Options: Academic Competitions

- Future Problem-Solving
- Destination Imagination
- Junior Great Books™
- Academic Decathlon
- Mock Court
- Others
Full-Time Homogeneous Classes

- Magnet schools
- Special schools for the gifted
- Private schools
- School-within-a-school
- Special classes within the elementary school

Full-Time Heterogeneous Classes

- Mixed-grade classes
- Cluster grouping
- Flexible grouping
- Full inclusion
“The particular program we have, so much of what is done is done whole class so it was everybody at the same step at the same time and while that makes it clean and tidy for me it’s not clean and tidy for the kids.”

Part-Time or Temporary Groups

- Pullout programs
- Resource-room plans
- Special classes
- Activity clubs
- Honors programs
- Performance grouping
- Joplin Plan grouping
“I had one big surprise…I had one student who is remedial math and she tested out in the pretest to be in the top group and so that was a shocker, I thought, ‘Oh, she just either did very well or she got real lucky.’ And she really hung with it and her behaviors, typically she’s a very fatigued child. Her behaviors met the challenge. When she was sent off with her group to do a graphing [assignment],… she was working independently, she was animated; she wasn’t fatigued.”

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**Research on Organizational Strategies**

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<th>Type of Program</th>
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<th>Social</th>
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</table>

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Robert Slavin... argued that research on within-class grouping in mathematics “consistently supports this practice in upper elementary grades.” He also contends that “there is no evidence to suggest that achievement gains due to within-class ability grouping in mathematics are achieved at the expense of low achievers.”

“...because we’re more experienced in math.”