

		Test Comparisons (Total)	Test Comparisons Favoring "Mixed" Classes
1984-1985	Remedial	11	11
	Average	11	9
	Accelerated	11	6
1985-1986	Remedial	5	5
	Average	5	4
	Accelerated	5	4
1986-1987	Remedial	6	5
	Average	6	5
	Accelerated	5	3

Fig. 1. Test Comparisons

Eliminating Tracking Successfully

Phil Swartzbaugh

In 1983, Desert Sky Junior High (Phoenix, Arizona) had 38 remedial and accelerated classes. As the 1987-88 school year began, Desert Sky had none. With the exception of certain special education classes and advanced reading and math classes for gifted students, students work in cooperative learning settings.

In the past three years, 21 of 22 test comparisons favored a mixture of remedial students with peers of all abilities. Test scores (combined from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and our own district-developed test) indicate that these students have the most to gain and that their average and accelerated counterparts also benefit from this mixed experience.

In fall 1984, we initiated three sections of mixed (heterogeneous) grouping in reading, English, and math. Unlike our tracked (homogeneous) classes, these classes contained students of all abilities. Our goal was to measure academic growth by comparing achievement of the mixed groups to that of the traditional tracked groups of remedial, average, and accelerated. The three volunteering teachers received training from Johns Hopkins University in Cooperative Learning, a team learning concept that became the key instructional strategy in our mixed classes. At the same time, orientation meetings were held for the parents of children randomly selected to participate in the program.

At year's end, all academic levels in the mixed-ability classes fared well compared to their counterparts in tracked classes (see fig. 1). Remedial students in the mixed classes experienced the greatest overall gains. Average students in mixed classes also experienced achievement gains. Accelerated students in both mixed- and ability-group settings performed quite well with a slight edge favoring the mixed setting. (This simple three-level comparison served us well because we were not looking for statistical significance; we wanted only to be sure we were maintaining or improving academic achievement while we realized the other benefits of heterogeneous grouping.)

During 1985-86, we expanded our program to seven mixed-ability classes. Our own experienced teachers provided inservice. Once again, we were pleased with the year-end test results (see fig. 1). Two years of test data favoring mixed grouping for all ability levels did much to gain further teacher and community support. We credit this success primarily to the implementation of Cooperative Learning.

During 1986-87, an additional 17 teachers received Cooperative Learning training. For the third year in a row, test comparisons showed that all ability levels benefited from mixed/cooperative grouping (see fig. 1).

To modify a school whose operation has depended upon ability grouping for many years is a tremendous challenge. Change is difficult. However, when the benefit to youngsters in terms of higher achievement and greater success is clear, we must accept the challenge.

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Undoubtedly, to change our minds will be a highly value-laden and controversial process. There are few educators or parents who don't have strong opinions about the matter. Often the most vocal and powerful opinions are voiced by those interested in maintaining the status quo, since they see that as the only way to maintain high-quality schooling for the most advantaged students. In multiracial schools, because of the interaction of race, class, assessed ability, and placements, the issue is complicated by the same fears desegregation raises.

Of course, it is helpful for both the public and the professionals to understand that the general laws of the land imply equal access not only to schools but to the education schools are supposed to provide. Further, state documents on schooling almost always include the concept of equity in some form and admonish school boards and educators to eschew practices that discriminate against students because of their race, ethnicity, or religion. This kind of legal, ethical, and moral framework provides educators with the justification they need for pursuing rigorously every avenue likely to make knowledge equitably available in schools.

But, obviously, there are no easy answers, quick fixes, or staff develop-

"If the American public and policymakers hope to retain the notion of a common school . . . much about schools themselves must be changed."

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