

## OVERVIEW

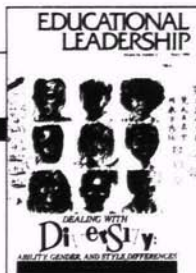


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### RESPONDING DIFFERENTLY TO STUDENT DIFFERENCES

A few days ago I visited the Point Pleasant Elementary School in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, to see how they use cooperative learning to teach reading and mathematics. In accord with Robert Slavin's (1987) model, Point Pleasant students learn in mixed-ability groups within classrooms that are also heterogeneous; in fact, some of the children (I couldn't tell which) were classified as Special Education. I was impressed by how comfortably all of them worked together.

The experience gave me hope as I thought about the subject of this issue. When we asked a panel of ASCD members last year about prospective themes for *Educational Leadership*, the topic rated highest was Student Diversity. When we announced that theme for February, we received so many manuscripts that we decided to publish *two* issues. That response indicates the depth of American educators' concerns about the variety of students they serve.

These concerns stem partly from striking changes in the school population. Today's classrooms house growing numbers of poor, minority, and handicapped students: the ones who generally do least well but also the workers on whom our collective future depends (Hodgkinson 1988).

Perhaps the prime contributor to educators' uneasiness is their cognizance, thanks to advocates and policymakers, that various categories of students—the gifted and talented, the handicapped, the culturally different, speakers of other languages, and so on—all have legitimate needs and rights. They know that girls (the largest "minority") are often victims of subtle discrimination and that students with offbeat learning styles are frequently not well served.

For years American schools have relied on tracking, electives, and special programs to address student variations. Now we are beginning to see that these arrangements do not always produce the results we seek. Goodlad and Oakes (1988) have documented the inequities of ability grouping. Powell and others (1985) have

compared high schools to shopping malls where the customers get exactly what they want but often want very little. Now we know not only that students are different but that some responses to those differences have undesirable side effects.

In most cases these side effects are not intentional but result from teacher and student expectations and attitudes. For example, in this issue John Peterson (p. 24) reports a small study in which remedial students did better in academically oriented mathematics classes than in the remedial classes supposedly designed for them. The reason, he believes, is the difference in climate and activities between the two types of classes.

Other authors give additional testimony that, under the right conditions, dissimilar students can learn together. Stephen Yaffe (p. 29) tells how students of all ages and abilities learn through improvisational drama. Kirsten Haeny (p. 34) describes an unusual arts program for gifted and retarded children. Rita Dunn, Jeffrey Beaudry, and Angela Klavas (p. 50) makes a convincing case for attending to students' preferred learning styles within mixed classes. And Geoffrey Comber, Howard Zeiderman, and Nicholas Maistrellis (p. 39) explain how students of quite different backgrounds and abilities participate in thoughtful classroom discussions.

American schools will continue to offer a wide array of courses and programs, as they should. For example, John Feldhusen (p. 6) says research strongly supports special programming for the gifted. But we must try to avoid the damage done by conventional ability grouping. Fortunately, we have workable alternatives which, while providing for students' academic learning, also help build a sense of community. □

#### References

- Goodlad, J. I., and Oakes, J. (February 1988). "We Must Offer Equal Access to Knowledge." *Educational Leadership* 45: 16-22.
- Hodgkinson, H. (February 1988). "The Right Schools for the Right Kids." *Educational Leadership* 45: 10-14.
- Powell, A. G., E. Farrar, and D. Cohen. (1985). *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Slavin, R. E. (November 1987). "Cooperative Learning and the Cooperative School." *Educational Leadership* 45: 7-13.

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