Letters

A Misleading Look at Grouping

Robert Slavin ("Synthesis of Research on Grouping in Elementary and Secondary Schools," September 1988) advises school administrators to "balance" the possible instructional benefits against the costs of grouping. Unfortunately his "best-evidence" approach to examining ability grouping is so limited that it is misleading, particularly when he addresses the research on grouping gifted students.

In the section "Gifted Programs," Slavin consistently complains of the "systematic bias" that weakens the studies. Only research with carefully matched control groups would satisfy his expectations—and he finds none that meet his standard. Is his disapproval of methodology to be confused with, and then interpreted as, the failure of grouping?

His citations make a knowledgeable reader aware of the research focus of his comments. His assumptions of bias in the Simpson and Martinson study (1961) are assumptions, nothing more. To write only of the research weaknesses in West and Sievers (1960) and in Bauldauf (1959) certainly obscures their findings. Yet it might help to know that West and Sievers concluded there was statistically significant academic achievement, increased opportunity for creative and aesthetic activities, and no significant loss in social relationships when high-ability students spent a half day with their intellectual peers. Again, Bauldauf, reporting on elementary and junior high students with an enriched program in the regular classroom, notes "the enriched curriculum may not have supplied a sufficient challenge to mentally achieving pupils, constituting an interesting or uninteresting busywork."

Even more seriously, when Slavin writes of the 1984 Kulik and Kulik study, he neglects to inform the reader that this relatively recent study (compared with the other citations in the article) is an analysis of 26 carefully selected studies in acceleration. Nor does Slavin note the authors' conclusion "that talented students are able to handle the academic challenge that accelerated programs provide." Slavin reports only the two cavils he has with research method.

Of course, Slavin might have referred to the careful research on grouping elementary school pupils by Goldberg, Passow, and Justman, *The Effects of Ability Grouping* (1966), which showed positive growths of more than a school year for each ability group when curriculum, materials, and teaching methods were adapted for each group. Progress was greatest in the top ability group, they reported, but was limited by the test ceiling. Or Slavin might have explained that Kulik and Kulik's 1982 meta-analysis of 52 studies of the effects of ability grouping on secondary students reported especially clear positive effects for honors classes of gifted students. Or Slavin might have cited (with collegial pride) the seminal research of Julian Stanley on radical acceleration in mathematics (*Mathematical Talent—Discovery, Description, Development*, 1973).

Slavin's article is having unfortunate consequences. Some school people, accepting the article at face value, refer to it as convincing evidence against grouping—even of gifted pupils. I believe the article is much more a limited, subjective, and ultimately negative assessment of the *state of research* on grouping than a balanced treatment of the educational and psychological values of grouping. Those philosophically opposed to grouping will overlook the inadequacies of the article to find support for their position, but those seriously concerned with meeting the educational needs of all their pupils will need to go beyond this article.

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A Sound Plan with One Drawback

Robert Lynn Canady ("A Cure for Fragmented Schedules in Elementary Schools," October 1988) builds a convincing case for parallel scheduling with the promise of more time for direct instruction and a less fragmented school day.

The Newport News (Virginia) school district has been using a similar design for a number of years with one modification: as a cost-effective measure we use art, music, and physical education resource teachers and the school's librarian as the support services and extension activities teachers, rather than one of the "regular" classroom teachers Canady suggests. We have found that the net benefits of parallel scheduling described by Canady remain the same.

Unfortunately, we have also discovered a negative side effect of parallel scheduling. Principals report that they no longer have the flexibility to meet with teachers during the school day to discuss instruction, lesson design, and content concerns. Parallel scheduling prevents the school administrator from using resource persons to "cover" teachers' classes during the day. Before parallel scheduling was implemented, principals could observe and confer with two or three teachers a day. Now, they can only conduct one instructional conference per day, using the only time available—after school.

I do not wish to detract from Canady's plan. It is sound and it works. His cure for the fragmented elementary school schedule simply comes with an undesirable feature for districts heavily committed to instructional supervision. School districts should understand the trade-offs *before* the decision is made to institute such a schedule.

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How Much Math Do All Students *Need?*

Stephen Willoughby ("Trends: Mathematics," October 1988) writes about a major push by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics to make all students take courses in abstract algebra, geometry, and "other exciting topics." Yes, these math teachers find the topics exciting and useful in their lives. They may not see the interests and needs of some of the rest of us.

I suggest that high schools require a course in "Adult Math," which covers percents, basic statistics, logic, and a computer language. Most students will finish in a year. We should also offer electives in simultaneous and quadratic equations, triangles, and trigonometry.

The country does not need everyone to study equations of ellipses or how to combine polynomials. Such topics are unnecessary barriers in high school, and they have high costs. First, they make many students feel dumb and inadequate, and some drop out. Second, forcing students to take specialized courses is counterproductive: it causes many adults to hate quantitative methods, even arithmetic, which they liked as children. Third, extra math means fewer history, art, or language courses for students who want to take them.

Each subject should help students become wiser and better people. History helps us understand political and social issues. Languages help us communicate at many levels. Math should help us deal with many kinds of quantitative issues. Once students learn that much, further work should be offered for those students who like math or science and should not be required for others.

It is time to call a halt to specialized high school math. We should ask successful adults what math they use and not take the word of math teachers for what the rest of us need.

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