

Grouping and the Gifted

Susan Allan Sets the Record Straight

Response to Allan

To Allan's excellent points I would add that we must be alert to the distortion of research findings to fit certain political and social agendas.

Susan Allan has cogently delineated the issues and misinterpretations concerning ability grouping currently rampant among educators and school "reformers." She has shown us quite clearly that grouping provides positive academic benefits for gifted youth, that children of low and average ability benefit from regrouping by subject in elementary schools, that no one is harmed by grouping and, above all, that self-esteem may be enhanced by grouping for low-ability children and only slightly lowered for average- and high-ability children.

However, she fails to recognize that, regardless of what research says or does not say, an emerging national agenda among nearly all the school reform constituencies is claiming that "ability grouping is bad, it is racist, it must be eliminated." Research is cited and twisted to support that agenda. The linking of ability grouping to racism adds an emotional and inflammatory element to the agenda.

Our best evidence about the conditions of instruction in tracked or ability-grouped classes comes from Jeannie Oakes (1985) and John Goodlad (1984), who used the same database in their research. They tell us that high-track classes get appropriately high-level instruction and that the classes are orderly, on-task, and recognized as excellent by teachers and students. In contrast, low-track classes are often

chaotic, off-task, and less productive of learning; they also include a higher proportion of minority students. However, Gamoran (1990) reports from his review of national survey data that "high school tracking does not increase racial or ethnic inequality per se . . . blacks and Hispanics who are equal to whites in socioeconomic status and prior achievement have at least an equal chance of being assigned to the college track" (p. 3).

The main point, then, is that Oakes and Goodlad have simply described conditions of instruction at different ability or grouping levels. In no way do their results lead to a conclusion that ability grouping should be elimi-

nated. Most directly, they indicate that we have a serious problem with instruction in low-track classes and must find ways to improve instruction for those youths. But surely we must preserve what we are doing well.

The question we now face is how to call a halt to a runaway national agenda in which some school reformers have arrogated unto themselves a political-social agenda that is based on misinterpretation of current research evidence. Susan Allan's statement in this journal may help, but much more concerted effort from knowledgeable educators and parents will be needed to get us back on the right track of school reform. □

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References

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