

Heterogeneous Grouping— The Latest, Erroneous Fad

Once again you champion the latest educational fad, heterogeneous grouping. In "Pretending Not to Know What We Know" (May 1991), Carl Glickman perpetuates the popular but inaccurate idea that "Higher achieving students do not do better when together."

Glickman is not the only one in education to reach a conclusion by ignoring contrary data, but, by doing so, he does a considerable disservice.

I refer him to Kulik and Kulik (1991), whose comprehensive meta-analysis concludes: "The evidence is clear that high aptitude and gifted students benefit academically from programs that provide separate instruction for them. Academic benefits are positive, but small, when the grouping is done as a part of a broader program for students of all abilities. Benefits are positive and moderate in programs that are especially designed for gifted students. Academic benefits are striking and large in programs of acceleration for gifted students" (p. 191).

It is true that low achieving students are not aided by being grouped together, and this issue certainly has to be dealt with through school planning. The findings about the benefits of grouping at the top end of the scale, however—while contrary to the current hot reform movement—are findings nevertheless. I do not ask that these facts be liked, but, for those who pretend to scholarship or even fairness, they must be noted.

James J. Gallagher
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Reply: Homogeneity for Exceptional Should Be the Exception

Like the four-year-old who described the world as "green trees and houses," then added, "I might have left something out," I'd like to amplify my statements about grouping.

I stand by the research reports I've studied, and wish Professor Gallagher might have addressed those instead of doing what he accused me of—selecting a study that fits his position and ignoring others.

As an educator attempting to help schools make comprehensive instructional changes, my point was to challenge schools to do what they know to be in the best interest of students instead of perpetuating current practices in their schools.

I would hope that Gallagher is not arguing that his research supports tracking, and I hope I'm not interpreted as supporting all students being grouped together in a uniform and monotonous environment.

Gifted education, like that at my university's Torrance Center, is simply excellent education. When heterogeneous grouping is driven by the principles of gifted education—with appropriate individual, small group, and

large group instruction, and with acceleration and enrichment based on interests, talents and abilities—we have an educational environment that challenges most, if not all, students. What I believe most research indicates is that heterogeneity with a multiplicity of approaches should be the dominant practice and homogeneity for the exceptional should be the exception.

We must study what current practices are doing for and against students and then pilot change. Unfortunately, everyone wants to reform education until reform is directed at his own interest and practice.

Carl Glickman
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Don't Trash Tracking

"The Realities of Un-Tracking a High School" (May 1991) is a perfect example of over-reacting to the current educational scapegoat: tracking in the schools. I find Dennis Evans's trash-can approach to tracking disturbing and his six-step process for making decisions about tracking flawed.

He argues that because enrollment has declined and personnel turnover has been great in the last 20 years, we should reevaluate prevailing practice. Is he seriously suggesting that these phenomena are due to tracking?

He suggests that schools review the research and theory. Every 20 years, rumbling theoreticians offer sweeping proposals for solving problems. These educational rumbles — this time, in the name of restructuring — cause earthquakes. Tracking isn't working, they say, so lets ditch it completely and go back to where we were 20 years ago.

Research cited includes a study of 28 students whose grade point averaged 1.7. Yet these students were tracked in only two subjects. The 1.7 composite indicates a low grade point average in

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non-tracked classes, too, hardly an indictment of tracking. When difficulty increases, will GPA composites not be even lower? Evans says the faculty shared experiences about tracking before deciding to untrack. Were parents involved, too? Were classes designated z level studied for possible improvement? Evans advocates a before-school tutorial for students who need extra help. If regular classes for helping students remove deficiencies have failed, how will tutorials help?

Evans has chosen to perform radical surgery on tracking "with-out undue fuss." But despite all the "shared ownership," returning to a process that didn't work cannot be viewed as new.

The epitaph of this "new" approach has already been written.

Betty LaMance
English Department Chair
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Reply: Root Out Entrenched Practices

In our school—perhaps as in Ms. LaMance's own—tracking was deeply entrenched, and most deeply in the English Department. The commitment to tracking was shaken only after steps I outlined were taken. When teachers took the first step and shared experiences about tracking, those who had

been teaching remedial groups were most compelling. They noted what the "rumbling theoreticians" detail about tracked students: low self-esteem, lack of motivation, no positive role models, and behavior problems. Their views proved more credible to the staff than did the voices of teachers who had no similar experience.

LaMance wonders whether parents should be involved in the decision to untrack. I submit this is a professional decision and parental involvement should be limited to periodic updates.

Without belaboring the bias revealed in the question about whether composite GPAs will be lower when students are untracked, I can report that GPAs were slightly higher in our first year of

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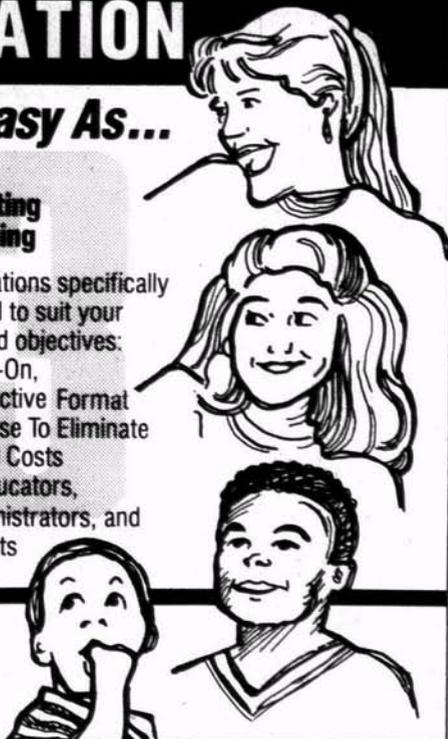
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nontracked programs than in the last year of tracking. Teachers are also commenting on improved student behavior, and referrals to the principal are down. These improvements are possibly a manifestation of the role-model dynamic and increased expectations for students. They may also reflect that some students no longer judge themselves as being "z level."

I find it revealing that LaMance even attacks the concept of tutorial support systems. That type of negativism is one reason I believe educators who are in the process of deciding whether to track or not to track should participate in shared decision-making and not wait for unanimity.

Dennis L. Evans
*Principal
Newport Harbor High School
Newport Beach, California*

Resolution Doesn't Face Up to Affirmative Action

As a new member of ASCD, I was interested in the mailing, "Resolutions 1991" and, in particular, the Affirmative Action for Support Personnel resolution. From the title I suspect the committee thinks it's supporting affirmative action, but the words reflect an attempt, I suspect, to have one's cake and eat it, too.

Affirmative action is based on the notion that because certain groups, usually women and minorities, have been discriminated against in the past, it is necessary to make up for these past injustices by hiring them now. To implement affirmative action, given a finite number of jobs available, it is thus necessary to discriminate in hiring against the previously favored group—usually whites or white males. If one job is available and affirmative action principles are used, the person hired will not be a white male.

However, the committee's resolution says "ASCD supports the adoption of policies to employ and assign all district

employees, both certificated and support, solely on the basis of their professional qualifications and personal fitness for the job." This is not an affirmative action statement. It is an anti-prejudice statement. Perhaps the intent is to say something like "We will not engage in discrimination against minorities in hiring." But, that is not the same as affirmative action. Perhaps the ASCD committee did not want to admit that affirmative action involves turning away people who may be equally or more qualified because their sex or race does not fit the desired goal.

Thus, affirmative action, has much to recommend it and much to make one wonder. We should not pretend that these aren't debatable issues. The Resolutions Committee seems to support affirmative action and suggest there is no discrimination involved in implementing it. I say that the wording is poor and an apparent attempt to avoid facing what affirmative action is: hiring on the basis of gender, race, or ethnic status to make up for past discrimination.

Russell Eisenman
*Associate Professor of Psychology
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Resolutions Chair Replies

Russell Eisenman is correct in pointing out that the 1991 resolution he refers to is somewhat ambiguous. Interestingly enough, at a time when affirmative action is so controversial, the point was not raised in the Resolutions Committee or at the business meeting where the resolution was adopted. That may be because the 1991 resolution, which refers only to support personnel, was considered an extension of a 1990 statement of ASCD position, which noted that "In times of economic stress, employment gains made through educational affirmative action programs may be lost," and stated clearly that "Affirmative action should be the policy of each school entity, regardless of the

method used to balance the budget."

That statement appears in the Synthesis of ASCD Resolutions, which is updated every three years. Therefore we can say that ASCD is on record as endorsing affirmative action, which is generally considered to go beyond employing and assigning employees "solely on the basis of their professional qualifications and personal fitness for the job."

The Resolutions Committee encourages and welcomes proposals for resolutions from all members. Proposed resolutions should include a statement of the issues, the resolution with a brief rationale, and a suggested position or strategic direction for ASCD.

The Resolutions Committee will work with authors to bring proposed resolutions forward for discussion and consideration at the ASCD Annual Conference in New Orleans in 1992. Proposals must be submitted by December 31.

Edward Pajak
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Editor's Note Foreign Language Instruction

A proofreading mistake in Myriam Met's "Trends: Foreign Language" column (September 1991) resulted in a factual error. As printed, the statement said that most states likely will soon require foreign instruction to begin in elementary school. It should have read: "Five states require foreign language instruction in elementary school; several more will likely require it soon or provide substantial incentives to schools that do."

We regret the error.

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