

2003

## The benefits and liabilities of ability grouping in elementary school classrooms

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*Graduate Research Papers*. 1207.  
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## The benefits and liabilities of ability grouping in elementary school classrooms

### Abstract

Ability grouping, the practice of homogeneously grouping students for instruction, is topic of much debate in education. The purpose of this paper is to identify advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping for students as well as for teachers in the elementary school setting through research of literature available. Further, implications of ability grouping as a method of instruction are discussed.

THE BENEFITS AND LIABILITIES OF  
ABILITY GROUPING IN  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

A Graduate Review  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

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November 11, 2003

This Review by: Jill Miller

Titled: The Benefits and Liabilities of Ability Grouping in Elementary School Classrooms

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

11-13-03

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## Introduction

For many Americans, memories of elementary school include forms of ability grouping. An experience commonly recalled is that of learning to read in small groups with creative names such as the “bluebirds” and “redbirds.”

According to Anne Lockwood, who has extensively researched the effects of ability grouping,

people remember how they were placed and valued in school. This memory is highly personal and usually indelible. To some degree, it probably explains the intensity with which many approach their class reunions. People do remember--sometimes with startling clarity--how institutions such as schools rated their abilities, valued their accomplishments, and sorted them for their futures (1996, p. 5).

The practice of ability grouping began when increasing numbers of immigrant children began attending public school in America, and was “adopted as a legitimate means of sorting out those students who were viewed as having limited preparation or capacity for school from native children” (Wheelock, 1992, p. 8). The use of ability grouping in schools “increased at the turn of the century and became the norm in the United States for several decades” (Moody & Vaughn, 1997). Ability grouping was “revived in the 1950s on the basis of overgeneralization from experience with instructing children in groups with similar learning needs” (Findley & Bryan 1975, p.6). It is estimated by researcher Jeannie Oakes that “approximately 60 percent of all elementary schools still use some form of between-class ability grouping” (Wheelock, 1994, p.7).

Though the practice of ability grouping has endured the test of time, is this practice one that best promotes student learning and achievement in today’s classrooms? In recent years, ability grouping has been widely criticized, in part due to the negative connotations that belonging to a low-achieving group can impart on

students' self esteem. As Lockwood has found, it is evident that many students carry with them vivid memories of the groups they are placed in. Is it possible that placement in a particular group may affect students' learning? The purpose of this paper is to review the scholarly literature related to ability grouping and to explore the benefits and liabilities of this practice in the elementary school setting.

### Research Questions

Specific questions to be explored will include:

1. How are ability groups formed?
2. What are the benefits of ability grouping for high achieving, middle or average achieving, and low achieving students?
3. What are advantages of ability grouping for educators?
4. What are the liabilities of ability grouping for high achieving, middle or average achieving, and low achieving students?
5. What disadvantages does ability grouping present for educators?

### Methodology

To research the effects of ability grouping, three sources of information were be used. These sources include journal articles located through the use of EBSCOhost, an online research database provided by the Elton B. Stephens Company; resources found in the Grant Wood Area Education Agency library, Cedar Rapids, IA; and on-campus resources of the Rod Library at the University of Northern Iowa,

### Definition of Terms

When addressing the effects of ability grouping, it is important to first define ability grouping, as well as other terms for which relate to ability grouping practices. The term "ability grouping,"also known as "homogeneous grouping" is defined by Kulik as "the separation of same-grade school children into groups or

classes that differ markedly in school aptitude" (1992, p. ix). Ability groups "put together children of a given age and grade who have most nearly the same standing on measures or judgments of learning achievement or capability" (Findley & Bryan, 1975, p.9).

Ability grouping and tracking are often mistakenly interchanged. Author and researcher Anne Wheelock distinguishes these terms from one another:

The terms tracking and ability grouping have narrow and broad definitions. In its traditional sense, tracking refers to the practice of sorting secondary school students into different programs of study, often called "college preparatory," "general," or "vocational." Ability grouping typically reflects similar sorting at the elementary and middle levels. It encompasses both "between-class" grouping, in which students are assigned to separate classes based on perceived ability, and "within-class" grouping in which smaller groups of students at similar performance levels work together in heterogeneous groups.

In practice, however, the distinction between tracking and between-class ability grouping is blurred. In many high-schools, students enrolled in college preparatory classes may still be "leveled" into advanced, honors, standard, or basic courses, with students exposed to distinctly different curricula reflecting each label. In elementary and middle schools, students grouped into gifted, regular, or "low" classes frequently follow predictable paths into specific high school program tracks or levels (1994, p. 1).

It can be clarified, therefore, that tracking is a specific method of ability grouping. Ability grouping encompasses many methods of grouping students: flexible and rigid groupings, temporary and permanent groupings, in-class and between class groupings, groups created for skill-specific instruction (part time instruction) and groups for general instruction (which may be part time or full time), as well as same

grade and multi-grade groupings. Simply put, tracking is a rigid form of between-class ability grouping, in most cases for full time instruction.

### Formation of Groups

Discussion of ability groupings, by name, involves discussion of students' abilities or achievement. Students are typically categorized into groups of "high" or above-average achieving students, "middle" or average achieving students, and "low" or below average achieving students. Students who are "identified -- usually through standardized testing -- as having high or above-average abilities are sometimes referred to as "gifted" or "gifted and talented" students (Wheelock, 1994). It is prevalent for students to be classified by "school personnel into ability groups on the basis of test scores and school records" (Kulik, 1992, p. ix). Considerations for grouping may also include a student's "presumed ability derived from test scores and teacher observations of classroom performance" (Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002, p.109).

While the term "ability" grouping implies that groups are formed solely on the basis of students' abilities, Caldwell and Ford point out

... other factors play prominent roles. Teachers place children in groups on the basis of behavior and personality characteristics, work habits, achievement in other subjects, and home environment. Teachers tend to place children perceived as respectful toward authority in the higher groups. They also assign children who interact well with their peers and display good work habits to higher groups. On the other hand, children seen as immature, lacking in motivation, somewhat noisy, and sometimes confrontative tend to be placed in the lower groups (1996, p. 4-5).

Factors not having to do with the child, such as class size and the number of textbooks available can also impact group placement of students. Opinions of the previous teacher as well as district policy are also considered when grouping

students for instruction. For example, some districts and administrators do not allow groups consisting of all one gender or ethnicity. Finally, opinions of parents who have strong feelings regarding their child's group placement are also considered (Caldwell & Ford, 1996).

When grouping students by ability, it is important that the function of the group must first be identified. Student groupings are commonly created in an effort to create classes in which the range of student abilities is lessened, but curriculum itself is unchanged.

Some school administrators think that it is easier for teachers to teach and for learners to learn in classes where students resemble one another in learning rate. They therefore assign same-grade students to classes by aptitude. The high, middle, and low classes in many of the programs use the same text materials and follow the same basic course of study. The traditional name for this approach is XYZ grouping, but XYZ classes have also been called *multilevel*, *multitrack*, and *homogeneous classes* (Kulik, 1992, p. xi).

A second function of grouping students by ability is to provide instruction tailored for the students within a particular ability group. Grouping for this purpose, called differentiated instruction or curriculum differentiation, is defined by Wheelock to mean "the practice of using different objectives, techniques and instructional materials to organize curriculum with different groups of students, according to their apparent academic ability" (1994, p.75). This form of ability grouping takes place in many fashions, including with-in class groupings, between-class groupings, cross-grade level groupings, and subject area or skill-specific groupings. Programs such as special education, Title I, and gifted and talented programs provide tailored services for students performing at the same ability level.

## Advantages of Ability Grouping For Students

To accurately determine the advantages of ability grouping, one must take notice of the method of ability grouping used. Researcher James Kulik found that using different methods of grouping has different implications for students. Kulik relates findings from two of the most comprehensive meta-analyses; meta-analyses on ability grouping research conducted by Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins University, and those conducted by Kulik and his research group at the University of Michigan. The meta-analyses study the implications of XYZ grouping (homogeneous groups of students in which the X groups contain the high achieving students, the Y groups contain the average achieving students, and the Z groups contain the low achieving students) in which “the X, Y, and Z groups studied from the same texts and followed the same course of study” (Kulik, 1992, p. xi).

Kulik’s findings indicate

both analyses reached the same conclusions about lower and middle ability students: These students learn the same amount in XYZ and mixed classes. The evidence from the higher aptitude group was less clear. . . . [The] meta-analyses at Michigan found that higher aptitude learners make slightly larger gains in XYZ programs. A higher aptitude student who gained 1.0 years on a grade-equivalent scale after a year in a mixed class would gain 1.1 years in an XYZ class. The Johns Hopkins meta-analyses suggested that gains for higher aptitude students were equal in XYZ and mixed classes. . .

[In addition] some of the studies of XYZ classes examined student self-concepts. Our [the Michigan] analyses showed that the average scores on self-esteem scales were nearly identical for XYZ and mixed classes. Nonetheless, XYZ classes had a small effect on student self-esteem. We found that self-esteem went up slightly for low-aptitude learners in XYZ

programs, and it went down slightly for high-aptitude learners. Brighter children lost a little of their self-assurance when they were put into classes with equally talented children. Slower children gained a little in self-confidence when they were taught in classes with other slower learners (Kulik, 1992, p. xii).

In summary, XYZ grouping provides slight benefits in achievement for higher aptitude learners, and slight benefits in self-esteem for slower learners. The small effects of XYZ classes reveal that "XYZ programs are thus programs of differential placement but not differential treatment" (Kulik, 1992, p. xii).

The distinction between differential placement and differential treatment of curriculum is an important one. When analyzing results of programs utilizing different curriculum and teaching methods for students of different ability levels, "both the Michigan and Johns Hopkins meta-analyses found that cross-grade and within-class programs usually produce positive results. . . . The average gain attributable to cross-grade or within-class grouping was between 2 and 3 months on a grade equivalent scale. The typical pupil in a mixed-ability classroom might gain 1.0 years on a grade-equivalent scale in a year, whereas the typical pupil in a cross-grade or within-class program would gain 1.2 to 1.3 years. Effects were similar for high, middle, and low aptitude pupils.

Cross-grade and within-class programs appear to work because they provide different curricula for pupils with different aptitude. In cross-grade programs, students move up or down grades to ensure a match between their reading ability and their reading instruction. In within-class programs, teachers divide students into ability groups so that they can work on different materials with children of differing ability levels. Curriculum varies with student aptitude in these programs. The programs thus differ in

an important respect from multilevel classes (Kulik, 1992, p. xiii).

Kulik's findings regarding within-class and cross-grade programs not only indicate that these forms of ability grouping do indeed benefit students, but also shown is the correlation between matching curriculum and instruction to the needs of the students. In this way, student-centered curriculum is revealed as being most conducive to student learning. This correlation is further exemplified in Kulik's findings regarding special accelerated and enrichment classes for high achieving students.

In accelerated classes, students cover information more rapidly than do students in non accelerated classes, thus completing the prescribed curriculum in a shorter amount of time. Enrichment classes, on the other hand, follow the traditional curriculum at the same pace as average achieving students, but do not spend their whole day studying this curriculum. Rather, enrichment classes provide students with opportunities to pursue additional activities such as foreign language, higher order thinking skills, occupation simulations, and much more,

The meta-analyses conducted by Kulik and his research team found that "in the average study, students in the enriched classes outperformed equivalent students in mixed-ability classes by about 4 to 5 months" (1992, p. xiv). Students in whole class acceleration programs were compared to students "who were initially equivalent in age and intelligence;" the accelerated students demonstrated superiority of "nearly one year on a grade-equivalent scale of a standardized achievement test" (Kulik, 1992, p. xiv). It is evident that students of higher achievement benefit greatly from accelerated and enrichment programs.

While participation in accelerated and enrichment programs is beneficial for high achieving students, perhaps they are not the only students to benefit. Fiedler, Lange, and Winebrenner have found that removal of the "gifted" students from a heterogeneous group of students may allow others to shine. Teachers in such

classrooms “have found that new academic leadership emerges,” or, “a new cream rises to the top from the heterogeneous group” (2002, p 109).

Fiedler, Lange, Winebrenner also point out a common criticism of grouping gifted or high ability students is that the practice promotes elitism. Fiedler, et al. offer the following argument against this accusation:

Being able to function at an advanced level intellectually does not automatically make an individual better than anyone else. It merely implies a difference that requires an educational response that may be erroneously interpreted by some as giving one group an unfair advantage. Gifted students may be better at academic tasks, but this does not imply that they should be seen as being better than anyone else . . . In reality, keeping one or two highly gifted students in a classroom of mixed abilities actually may have the effect of creating snobbery. Scattering gifted students throughout all of the classrooms in the school may lead them to feel far superior to their classmates and promote arrogance (2002, p.110).

As participants in class discussions, gifted students are often able to offer more complex answers far more quickly than other students. When this occurs repeatedly, the gifted students may then conclude that they know more than the other students,

Unless gifted students are placed in situations where they can be challenged by intellectual peers, the possibilities that they will develop an elitist attitude might well be expected to increase . . . However, when gifted students are grouped together for instruction, the experience of studying with intellectual peers may actually lower self esteem somewhat (Felderhusen & Saylor, 1990). There is nothing quite so humbling to bright individuals as discovering that there are other students in the group who are equally capable or even more knowledgeable about given topics (2002, p. 110).

In summary, grouping gifted students can prove to be beneficial for both students of other ability levels, and for the gifted students. Removing gifted students from the general classroom allows other students the opportunity to demonstrate skills that may otherwise be overshadowed by gifted students. Further, grouping gifted students provides a “reality check” for those students. Realization that there are other students of equal or even higher ability may humble bright students, thus reducing elitism.

While elitism is viewed as negative in an academic context, it is thought provoking to liken participation in accelerated or enrichment classes to participation in extracurricular activities. In both the arts and athletics, “educators have no qualms about identifying outstanding talent . . . and providing specialized programs for students who excel” (Fiedler, et al, 1992, p.110). Why is it socially unacceptable for brighter students to receive additional learning experiences that the general population of students do not, when society does not condemn athletes or artists for taking lessons and receiving additional instruction to refine their talents?

Finally, it is important to consider the alternative to ability grouping for gifted students. Gifted students who are placed in heterogeneous groups and “taught” curriculum geared toward average achieving students may not actually be learning.

Every student has a right in a democratic society to learn something in school in every class. However, it is possible that the students who may actually learn the least in a given class are the gifted. So much of what they are asked to learn they may have already mastered. When teachers discover this, they may be tempted to use gifted students as classroom helpers or to teach others, thereby robbing the gifted students of consistent opportunities to learn through real struggle. This situation can have a negative impact in many ways, including lowering their self-esteem (Rimm, 1986). Without

regular encounters with challenging material, gifted students fail to learn how to learn and have problems developing the study skills they need for future academic pursuits (Fiedler, et al., 2002, p. 110).

In summary, research reveals that homogeneous groupings with differentiated instruction increases self-esteem of gifted students, while homogeneous groupings may actually decrease the self-esteem of gifted students.

#### Advantages of Ability Grouping For Educators

The most important components of ability grouping to consider are those that benefit the learner. However, ability grouping offers benefits for the educator as well as for the student. The role of educators is to continually monitor and change curriculum and teaching methods to best help students learn; ability grouping supports this role.

Author JoAnn Caldwell provides a reminder of why ability groups were formed in the book, Where Have All The Bluebirds Gone?.

Educators formed ability groups for a very pragmatic reason, to create groups that are homogeneous in ability in order to facilitate teaching and learning (Hallinan, 1984, p. 230). All children in a class are not able to read the same selection. All students do not need the same skill instruction. It seemed to make sense to group young children of similar abilities together and address their needs in this way (Caldwell & Ford, 1996, p. 1).

Ability grouping allows educators to teach larger numbers of students at their level of achievement. Mixed-ability, or heterogeneous groups of students contain wide ranges of student abilities. Every student has his/her own learning style and level of achievement; a class of students can represent a wide range of student abilities. When grouping students homogeneously (by ability), teachers are able to address a narrower range of abilities, therefore creating a situation in which teachers are able to prepare lessons geared toward the specific needs of students

within the narrower range of abilities. According to Lockwood, many teachers "resist current efforts to detrack schools," (1996, p. 14) or move away from between-class ability grouping. Teachers objections "to teaching only heterogeneous groups can range from a philosophical conviction that tracking and ability grouping provide best structures to cope with students' diverse abilities as well as recognition that they are unprepared to teach in other ways" (Lockwood, 1996, p.14).

#### Disadvantages of Ability Grouping For Students

The students of today are the citizens of tomorrow. As educators, we need to look at ways to best prepare students for their roles in the next century. It is important that we help students develop comfortable relationships with other students and with persons of authority (Caldwell & Ford, 1996, p. 17)

The words of Jeanne Olsheke ring true; educators do need to prepare our students for their roles in a diverse world in which they will encounter people with many different abilities. Heterogeneous groups provide students with opportunities to work with other students with many different abilities, preparing them for life in the real world, which is a deficit of homogeneous instruction.

Studies have shown that both high achieving students and low achieving students can learn from one another, and that it is beneficial to include all students representing all levels of achievement in a grouping of students. "In carefully constructed heterogeneous groups of learners, high-achieving students profit from diverse points of view, learn how to articulate their own arguments, and benefit intellectually from the free exchange of ideas with other students" (Lockwood, 1996, p. 8). On the same note, low achieving students benefit from the abilities of higher achieving students. When participating in discussions, "low-ability pupils rarely have the range of cognitive insight to challenge each other's ideas or

elaborate on their own ideas” (Web, 1989). Mixed-ability groupings allow these students to participate in meaningful discussions and to develop cognitive abilities. Social constructivist approaches to children’s learning support collaborative learning. Lyle writes:

“Vygotsky’s work on the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and what can be achieved when a mixed ability group pool their ideas has been very influential. Following on Vygotsky, Bruner’s ideas on scaffolding (1983, 1985) have helped us think about the kind of help a teacher or more competent peer can provide to support learning. . . .

There is a growing body of research evidence which suggests that when learners work alongside more advanced peers they can ‘borrow’ understanding from their learning partners (Wray & Medwell, 1991) where, according to Vygotsky (1962), ‘what a child can do in collaboration today, he can do by himself tomorrow.’ In a recent book on differentiation, McNamara & Moreton (1997) recommend collaborative learning in mixed-ability groupings as an important way for teachers to meet the needs of all pupils in the classroom (Lyle, 1999, p.287-288).

Students grouped homogeneously are not given the opportunity to reap the benefits of collaborating with students of varying ability levels.

Contradictory to the notion that higher ability students will be held back by lower achieving students,

of the hundreds of research studies conducted on heterogeneous groups, the vast majority conclude that high-achieving students do not lose ground in diverse-ability classes. In almost every case, classroom environment is found to be far more important than student enrollment. When curriculum and instruction are engaging, students of all levels benefit, including the most confident learners (Wheelock, 1992, p, 76).

In fact, in a study at Johns Hopkins University comparing student progress in heterogeneous classes using the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition Curriculum (CIRC) to those in homogeneous classes, "reading and writing performance of the heterogeneous grouped students surpassed that of the homogeneously grouped ones at all levels" (Wheelock, 1992, p. 76.) Linchevski and Kutscher conducted three studies to investigate the effects of teaching mathematics in a heterogeneous setting as compared to a homogeneous setting. In their article, they state

The findings of the first two studies indicate that the achievements of students need not be compromised in a heterogeneous setting; on the contrary, the achievements of our average and less able students proved to be significantly higher when compared to their peers in same-ability classes, whereas highly able students performed about the same (1998, p. 533).

A second deficit of homogeneous instruction lies in the fact that curriculum and instruction often vary from group to group, resulting in different standards to be learned for students of differing abilities. It is understood that curriculum should be tailored to meet the needs of students, and will therefore be presented in a manner which best addresses the needs of the students. However, "the work of those such as Dreeben & Barr (1988) and Tizard et al. (1988) indicates that children in different mathematics ability groups may receive a different quality of mathematics instruction" (Ireson, 2002, p. 260). Ireson conducted a study in which she found that "teachers reported differences in the quality of the work planned for different ability groups in addition to quantity of work completed" (2002, p. 260).

Wheelock points out that

students grouped at the top are much more likely to receive instruction that develops critical thinking, depth of knowledge, and practice in problem solving and applying learning to create new information and knowledge.

Students at the top are also more likely to experience hands-on science learning, math applications, research assignments, and opportunities to read and discuss challenging literature. In contrast, students at the bottom are often grouped in classes that emphasize rote learning, basic skills-oriented review, and fragments of literature.

Not only do students in remedial settings receive less demanding curriculum, but they're also more likely to have teachers with less classroom experience (1994, p.12).

Differences in expectations for students in different ability groups are held by both students and teachers occurs as well. "Teachers make fewer demands on low group students and set less exacting standards" (Oakes, 1985). Less able readers do not view themselves as capable readers and writers. Low expectations often result in "a self fulfilling prophecy of low-performing students, thereby contributing to a cycle of failure and lowered academic achievement and motivation (Caldwell & Ford, 1996, p. 8).

Students may actually find themselves "stuck" in a low ability group due to the differentiated instruction. "Since those comprising each group are taught as a group most of the time, it is difficult for any one child to move ahead and catch up with children in a more advanced group, especially in mathematics" (Wheelock, 1994, p. 12). Although ability groupings are not intentionally rigid, groupings tend to be more permanent than flexible.

Early ability groupings reinforce later tracking. As the "slow" students move more slowly through a sequential curriculum, they almost inevitably come to seem less "ready" for the more challenging material at the secondary level. With some students offered more enriched learning activities than others, early differences in learning become more pronounced. Placing different groups of students in settings that offer still

more differentiated levels of curriculum and instruction comes to seem inevitable (Wheelock, 1994, p. 13).

Amazingly, "it is not uncommon for a child in the most advanced group to have progressed five times as fast as a child in the least advanced group over the course of a year" (Wheelock, 1992, p. 229). To prevent this cycle of differentiation from occurring, Findley and Bryan recommend

provision should be made for frequent review of each individual's grouping status as part of the instructional program. The evidence that ability grouping results in practically permanent assignment of children to low or high groups, with resultant "orderly sedimentation" and consequent early dropout makes a regular program for reviewing group placement absolutely essential. Even this, however, is generally less promising than heterogeneous grouping (1975, p.5).

Finally, student perceptions, especially those in low achieving groups, are at times adversely impacted by placement in ability groups. Studies of children in homogeneous ability groups "demonstrate that ability grouping may have a negative impact on the self-concepts of children in low-ability groups" (MacIntyre & Ireson, 2002, p. 250). The negative impact on children's self-concept is especially worrisome, as research has indicated that "there is a reciprocal relationship between self-concept and achievement. For example, it has been demonstrated that a lowered self-concept can be a precursor to lower achievement" (MacIntyre & Ireson, 2002, p. 250). Further, it should also be noted that the consequences may be negative not only for those in low-ability groups (who may have underoptimistic self-concepts leading to underachievement) but also for those in high-ability groups, who may develop a crystallized view of their ability that may lead them to avoid challenges which are necessary for effective learning (MacIntyre & Ireson, 2002, p. 250).

## Disadvantages of Ability Grouping For Educators

Educators have the great responsibility of ensuring that each student is challenged daily and provided with the opportunity to learn. Decisions that a teacher makes regarding a student's instruction can have a great impact on that child's learning. Moody and Vaughn describe pressures felt by teachers;

especially in elementary education, teachers are responsible for the frontline decisions about grouping. They are in a position to decide whether they use fixed or flexible groups, whether groups are to be homogeneous or heterogeneous, and how frequently children should move among groups. Teachers are aware that research literature suggests that poor self-concepts are associated with low ability groups (Esposito, 1973), and are therefore concerned about how the academic decisions they make influence the self-concepts of the students they teach (1997, p.348)

Educators have to weigh not only their own opinions as to what group a child should be placed in, but also take into consideration district policies and preferences, the opinions of the child's parents, as well as the child's self-concept and the implications placement in a particular group may have on that self-concept. The ultimate goal, of course, is to place the child in the group in which he will experience the highest level of learning. However, with so many stakeholders, the decision of which group to place a child in is not one to be taken lightly.

Once a child is placed in a group, educators must also closely monitor the progress of each child in an effort to determine if the child's placement continues to be correct. The primary focus of any learning group should be to promote optimal learning for each child. Frequent observations, assessments, and considerations required for each child in a class are time consuming for the teacher.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Thomas Jefferson once said, “nothing is so unequal as the equal treatment of unequal people” (Fiedler, et al., 2002, p. 108). In other words, what is “right” for one person may not be “right” for another. Educators are pressured to ensure that all students receive equal opportunities to learn. Rather than focus on the notion that each student should be entitled to an identical education to another student, the time has come for the focus to shift to the realization that creating identical educational experiences for all students is not possible.

It is possible, however, to learn from the past and to remember lessons learned when planning for the future. Rather than focusing on a particular method of instruction, such as ability grouping, focus should remain on the student and how to best meet the student’s needs.

Educational bandwagons are a dime a dozen. Educators want to be on the cutting edge of educational improvement and are concerned about excellence in education and about providing programs that help their students. The last thing any educator wants to do is be responsible for educational decisions that are harmful to anyone, least of all to students who already have had too many disadvantages heaped upon them in their lives. Thus, the pendulum swings, again, moving from one extreme to another, typically without ample consideration of the impact of the latest trend in education on those students who benefitted the most from the approaches being abandoned (Fiedler, et al., 2002, p. 108.)

It seems that one could argue the benefits and liabilities of ability grouping indefinitely. Like many issues in education, depending on which study one refers to, or whose interpretation, there is research available to support most any opinion of ability grouping. There are, however, several points that emerge in the study of ability grouping. First, ability grouping tends to have greater implications for lower

achieving students and higher achieving students than for those of average achievement levels. Second, careful consideration must be taken when assigning students to a particular group when any form of ability grouping is used. Finally, each student is unique and deserves close monitoring of his or her progress, whether grouped by ability or not. Flexibility and willingness to change as needed, in relation to the teacher, group placement, and type of ability group used is critical. As new research is presented regarding the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping, educators must adjust their practices accordingly. Like all other aspects of education, decisions regarding ability grouping should be made with the best interest of the learner in mind.

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