



Why grouping students by ability makes sense

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: June 7, 2013 at 4:00 am

A recent post by Joanne Yatvin argued against ability groupings of students, saying:

Teaching to the presumed level of a whole class never works as well as hoped because students still have significant differences in work habits, paces of learning, and outside of school experiences. But there is another, more serious problem: the effects on students in the low level classes. Those kids know who they are, why they are there, and resent it. Other kids know, too. In the end, low-level classes can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: “Everybody thinks I’m dumb. I’ll show them just how dumb I can be!”

Here’s a post taking issue with Yatvin, who is a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English and now she supervises student teachers for Portland State University and writes books for teachers.

This was written by Joann P. DiGennaro, president of the [Center for Excellence in Education](#), an organization that supports careers of excellence and leadership in science, technology, engineering, and math for academically talented high school and college students. It sponsors the Research Institute, the USA Biology Olympiad, and the Teacher Enrichment Program.

By Joann P. DiGennaro

The educational goal of communal learning in mixed ability classrooms described by [Ms. Yatvin](#), a teacher at the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University, is laudable, albeit, misguided. Ability grouping, often described as sorting students by their aptitude in a particular discipline for instruction, is a practical solution developed to address the demands of disparate abilities in classrooms. It is difficult to address the persistent challenges presented by students with different levels of skill, experience and preparation in mixed ability classrooms.

Over the years, some schools developed ability grouping to address student achievement. Students who had mastered a skill or concept reported boredom in the designed program, and students who had not mastered a particular skill or concept were lost once the teacher had completed a module. Ability grouping was proposed as a way for schools to offer students more individualized instruction.

Some point to studies showing that ability grouping does not produce “higher overall achievement.” This is a case of selectively reading statistics. To make the claim that ability grouping does not boost “higher overall achievement,” opponents of ability grouping average classroom scores to mask important facts. While many admit that high-ability students do better surrounded by peers of similar aptitude, they challenge that lower-ability students do worse. When you average the gains and losses, opponents claim ability grouping has not made an impact on student achievement.

The assertion that there is no loser in rejecting ability grouping paints an inaccurate picture. The victim is the loss of potential among our high-ability students. If a student is not pushed to the limit of academic ability, that is a loss.

It is vital that we boost achievement among all students and the battle to raise areas of low achievement has been nobly and properly waged for decades. However, this is a separate challenge from supporting high-achieving students. We should not forgo an educational practice that is effective for one group of students while we struggle to identify distinctive strategies to meet the needs of other groups of students.

Often adequate consideration is not devoted to maximizing the education potential of students in higher-level classes. Many claim that there is an implicit message sent by ability-grouping to students in lower-level classes with little to no regard to the message sent to students in higher-level classes. The message sent to high-achieving students is that they should hit the pause button on their learning until other students catch up. In the 21st Century economy, there is not time.