

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

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[Assignment: As veterans of 12-14 years of schooling, as "consumers" of what the education system has to offer, you ought to have some pretty strong opinions about what you want from the system. In this paper, you are trying to "sell" your readers some idea about the educational experience that you believe to be true.]

(1) A common practice of education in grade schools is ability grouping. On the basis of written exams and other types of tests, students are assigned to a certain group based on their ability or potential. If a child does not place into the high group, his future education and emotional stability may be endangered because of low teacher expectations, poor peer modeling, and slow learning pace. Although proponents argue that ability grouping provides more learning opportunities, this is not the case with those of lower ability, and it may actually depress their achievement. The alternative, mixed ability grouping, lessens problems of labeling, low expectations, elitism, and poor self-concepts because children of lower ability are less obviously identified.

(2) Kelly points out that proponents of ability grouping believe that a properly constructed I.Q. test can tell us "the level of intelligent performance. . . intellectual capacity, and potential" of those tested even at very early stages of their development (9). But this is invalid since the educational future or academic success of a child cannot be accurately determined by tests administered at such a young age. It is important that all grade school children be given the same opportunities in their education, and if some children do poorly on the tests, this does not necessarily mean that they do not have the potential or ability to be in a higher group. As Kelly writes, some children who score poorly might perform well if they were motivated by being placed with high achievers (9).

(3) The processes used to place students in ability groups are far from ideal. From her own teaching experience, Kay Lee is aware of some methods used in forming these groups. Frequently, the groupings are based on information from registration forms and parent interviews. Often a child is grouped by his politeness, ability to listen, and ability to follow directions. With these standards, Kelly believes that children in the middle to upper class will have a greater chance of being placed in a high group since their rate of progress is partially determined by the level of education at home. Parents' attitudes toward education and the language used in the home will have a great influence on children (139). With a greater availability of books, children will be more inclined to develop an interest in reading and learning in general.

(4) Certainly Jackson is correct when he states that the children are essentially "victims of an inbuilt finality of judgment, so hard to overmaster" (qtd. in Kelly 13). The groups formed in grade school are fairly rigid, and there is relatively little change in the assigned group, regardless of the child's performance. Essentially, the high achievers feel intellectually superior and form an elite group, possibly resulting in harmful stereotyping of the other groups.

(5) Proponents of ability grouping may argue that it allows more learning opportunities since the teacher can move at a certain pace while holding the attention of all children in the group. The high ability children are not held back by those who require a slower instructional pace and are able to cover more material in class time. Proponents also suggest that less gifted children can benefit from ability grouping. If they do not have to compete with the higher achievers, they will experience fewer academic failures. Ability grouping from this perspective seems beneficial, but I would argue that it has a negative effect on children placed in lower groups.

(6) Ability grouping in grade schools is unfair and may actually minimize the achievement of those in low groups. In general, students in low tracks are given fewer and poorer opportunities than their peers in higher levels. Slavin argues that "problems of poor peer modeling, low teacher expectations, and slow instructional pace" actually decrease children's motivation to learn (112). Often, teachers of low ability groups are concerned with disciplining certain children rather than with instructing them. While children in high groups help each other, children in low groups tend to be easily distracted. If one student in the group is inattentive or disruptive, this affects the behavior of other students as well. Thus the difference in opportunity available in these groups lies in the group environment rather than in individual ability.

(7) In general, students' grades reflect the way that they are viewed, or labeled, by the teachers. Teachers viewing the low ability children as being inferior also have lower expectations of them. Since students perform according to expectations placed on them, children in lower groups will be less motivated to succeed academically. Kelly points out another possible disadvantage for the lower groups: the most inspiring teachers are usually assigned to work with the higher streamed students, creating an obvious disadvantage for those not in this group (12). Teachers of lower groups develop their curriculum according to group and assign levels of work they feel are appropriate. They may spend less time on preparation for class and use less interesting and less challenging material since their expectations are fairly low. While students in higher groups are challenged by assignments and taught

sophisticated comprehension skills, those in the lower groups move at a much slower pace. According to Kay Lee, teachers are less flexible with the lower groups, and assignments here are highly structured, emphasizing basic comprehension skills. Given this slow instructional pace, some students will not be challenged, and since the gap between the groups continues to widen, the chances of moving up a group become even more unlikely. .

(8) Since teachers of higher groups tend to be more flexible, they are more likely to alter assignments. They also will have more respect for the opinions and ideas of children in the higher groups. Grant and Rothernberg write that teachers are much more likely to chat with the top groups and "create a warmer socio-emotional climate for brighter students" (qtd. in Bracey 702). Thus the "top-ranking students" are likely to find school to be a comfortable setting while the lower groups may shudder at the mention of the word school (702). In a recent study of grade school boys, Kelly found that those in high groups treated the teachers with respect and generally had a good attitude toward school. On the other hand, those in the lower groups seemed uninterested and hostile toward school and teachers. Since the children in low groups felt unwanted by the school, they developed an opposition to it rather than a collaboration with it. There was antagonism between groups and a "delinquent subculture emerged" (14-15).

(9) The flaws of low expectations by teachers and less effective teaching strategies can be reduced by mixed ability groups. The instructional methods for an entire class differ from those used in ability groups--teachers can plan one lesson and set of practice materials. Instead of splitting their instructional time between groups, they can deal with the class as a whole. Mixed groups allow the teacher to circulate and so still give each individual help during in-class assignments. Teachers have the responsibility of working with all students, and it's their responsibility as well to find something positive to say about children of all levels. No one is best at everything, and although a student may be a poor reader, she may be able to read with expression or accurately guess the endings of stories. Low ability children when made to feel worthwhile gain confidence in their academic achievement. Teachers can also encourage class discussions that allow all children to participate. In addition to discussions about the material read in class, teachers can draw on the personal experiences and ideas of students to promote participation from children of all abilities.

(10) Ability groups, as previously mentioned, can curb the academic achievement of those in low ability groups. Besides these educational effects, ability groups can also create problems with children's self-esteem. In general, students in higher groups are viewed more

positively than those in lower ability groups, creating a feeling of inferiority among those in other groups. Kelly writes that ability groups can destroy an individual's motivation and confidence. Segregating those of low ability creates an emotional barrier by labeling them "as different, inferior, difficult, and ineducable" (141). Obviously, this is not an appropriate method of teaching for those requiring a slower pace. .

(11) Small heterogeneous groups are very beneficial to low ability students because they promote working together instead of segregation. According to Slavin, if students are rewarded based on performance of a group or team, they will be motivated to help and encourage one another to achieve (11). Children are given the opportunity to learn from one another, rather than merely competing or failing to work together. In projects such as group discussions and debates, all members of the group are expected to contribute and work together towards the common goal, sharing in all aspects of the project. Group projects provide lower achieving students with more opportunities to receive recognition for their work and effort.

(12) Kelly also supports mixed ability groups, stressing the move away from competition towards cooperation as a prime educational principle. This cooperative atmosphere is essential to the academic and emotional future of children with lesser ability. While competition draws attention to the children's deficiencies, a cooperative environment allows them to build their confidence by showing them that their work is worthwhile. This promotes learning, and, at the same time, avoids the development of emotional difficulties (146).

(13) Sorensen and Hallinan write that students can only learn what they have been given an opportunity to learn (521). Clearly, children in low ability groups are not given the same advantages as those in higher groups, and so face problems in academic performance and self-perception. The alternative is to provide a different type of instruction, such as mixed ability groups, which creates the right social and emotional climate for students of all abilities.

#### Works Cited

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