

Letter to the Editor (Stamford Advocate)-

I strongly disagree with the opinion, “Children belong in intellectually diverse classrooms,” (Advocate, 10/29/09) by Eric J Cooper. I believe Mr. Cooper distorts the research findings and undermines the serious discussion that needs to take place regarding these important issues.

Mr. Cooper chose to comment on the results of a single study. A more powerful research method is achieved by using multiple research studies and reporting outcomes described on a common scale, a technique known as meta-analysis. Susan Demirsky Allan, a consultant in the Dearborn, MI, public schools and a co-author of a textbook on teaching in mixed ability groups, used meta-analysis to review many studies on ability group research. Pupils with high ability levels were found to be insufficiently challenged and many under achieved in heterogeneous classrooms. Homogeneous grouping for gifted children was found to improve their academic performance.

One of the major criticisms of ability groupings is that it may decrease self-esteem of students with low ability. James A. Kulik, Director of the Office of Evaluations and Examinations at the University of Michigan and a prolific author on the effects of grouping students by ability, used meta-analysis and revealed that low ability students achieved feelings of success when they compare themselves with children of like ability rather than with students of higher ability. Albert Bandura, a Professor of Social Sciences at Stanford University, another prolific author and researcher, noted that students gain the most from watching others of similar abilities.

Mr. Cooper stated “The Shape of the River,” by Bowen and Bok, describes beneficial effects of diverse classrooms. However, Mr. Cooper omitted the fact that Bowen and Bok asserted that no one educational experience is right for all students as students take different pathways to reach their goals. In their book William Bowen, the former President of Princeton University, and Derek Bok, former President of Harvard University, related their findings to the debate about the wisdom of race-sensitive admissions to Universities.

I understand Mr. Cooper’s assertion that students develop skills by being in diverse groups. However, I suggest that students remain in heterogeneous classes for only part of the day. For subjects such as math and language arts, the subjects studied in the research reported above, ability groups may be justified.

I am a teacher and researcher at Rutgers University, Newark, NJ, which was cited by US News and World Reports as the most diverse University in the

US. I have found that some students believe they should be rewarded for effort rather than for achievement. Students who excel are diverse students who demonstrate they have learned they are rewarded for their achievements rather than their effort. Students learn this important lesson by taking many different paths as Bowen and Bok asserted.

I question the ethics of having students' primary role in a classroom be one in which they serve as a role model for other students. Students should be in classrooms in which the learning abilities of all will be successfully met as clearly stated in the parents' opinion published on the same page in the Advocate on the same day.

Elise L. Lev, Ed.D.,
Associate Professor
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
180 University Ave.
Newark, NJ 07102