

## *A Response*

# Equal Does Not Mean Identical

By Sally M. Reis, Sandra N. Kaplan, Carol A. Tomlinson, Karen L. Westberg, Carolyn M. Callahan, and Carolyn R. Cooper

**Detracking alone is not the best means to raise student achievement. Students with different abilities, interests, and levels of motivation should be offered differentiated instruction that meets their individual needs.**

Latoya was already an advanced reader when she entered 1st grade in a large, urban school district. Her teacher noticed the challenging chapter books Latoya brought to school and read with little effort. After administering a reading assessment, the school's reading consultant confirmed that Latoya was reading at the 5th grade level. Latoya's parents reported with pride that she had started to read independently when she was 3 years old and "had read every book she could get her hands on."

In the March 1998 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Jeannie Oakes and Amy Stuart Wells argue in their article, "Detracking for High Student Achievement" that high academic standards "will also bring excellence by requiring all students to demonstrate higher levels of achievement and by providing all students with *equal* [emphasis added] educational opportunities while preparing a more informed citizenry and a better trained work force" (p.38). But what about Latoya? If, as it sounds, *equal* means *identical*, will equal educational opportunities sufficiently challenge Latoya in reading?

### Equal and Identical Are Not the Same

Providing identical educational opportunities for all students will not enable Latoya to increase her reading level, nor will they help her attain more

advanced and more sophisticated levels of accomplishments in reading. Rather, if appropriate curriculum and instruction are not supplied, she will systematically be held back and will stagnate in a system that offers identical opportunities for all students. What she needs is different content, resources, and support! It is clear that in Latoya's class *all children should not be reading at the 1st grade level just because they are 1st graders*. If Latoya has not made any further progress in reading by the end of the school year, she will have wasted valuable opportunities. To achieve at increasingly higher levels in reading and to continue to develop her talents, she will require different, not equal, resources, teaching strategies, and content. How can equal curriculum, instruction, and expectations address the diverse learning needs in Latoya's classroom?

### Why Is Differentiation Difficult?

Latoya is now a 5th grader. When Latoya was in 1st grade, her teacher had to simultaneously meet Latoya's educational needs and address the needs of her classmates, many of whom neither recognized initial consonant sounds nor had begun to read. Four years later, Latoya's 5th grade teacher, looking for information in Latoya's permanent file, noticed the reading assessment completed in 1st grade and read with amazement about her early, advanced reading. As a 5th grader, Latoya is still reading only slightly above the 5th grade level. Her teacher could find no evidence that any curricular or instructional adjustments had been made in previous years to meet Latoya's learning needs. Discouraged about what she perceived as the school system's inability to develop Latoya's talents in reading, the 5th grade teacher contacted the special education coordinator and asked

about provisions to challenge advanced students in reading. The special education coordinator responded with amazement, “We don’t need any services for gifted students. We expect high levels of achievement from all students. And anyway, we don’t have any gifted kids in this school.” The classroom teacher was left wondering what she could do to motivate Latoya, who still seems to have a talent in reading but is achieving only slightly above grade level. Latoya’s story is true.

The needs of students like Latoya are often unmet in their classrooms. All children need to learn and to increase their current levels of achievement, yet whole-group, single-size-fits-all instruction rarely offers the kinds of adaptation required to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. Differentiation is defined in various ways, but it is usually regarded as accommodating learning differences in children by identifying students’ strengths and using appropriate strategies to address a variety of abilities, preferences, and styles. Then, whole groups, small groups, and individual students can equally engage in a variety of curriculum enrichment and acceleration experiences.

Teachers who offer differentiated curriculum and instruction view students as individuals with their own skills, interests, styles, and talents. They tailor their curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of advanced learners by using such strategies as curriculum compacting. This technique eliminates or streamlines content that students already know and replaces it with more challenging material, often based on students’ interests (Reis & Renzulli, 1992; Renzulli, 1978). Other strategies include tiered instruction and assignments, which provide different learning opportunities for students at different achievement levels. Independent study and opportunities for individually prescribed levels of content and instruction are also important differentiation strategies (Renzulli, 1977; Tomlinson, 1996, 1997).

Unfortunately, recent research indicates that only a small number of teachers offer differentiation in their classrooms (Archambault et al., 1993; Tomlinson et al., 1995). Similar research about high-achieving learners in heterogeneous classrooms indicates that many children are unchallenged and are

not given appropriate levels of curriculum and instruction (Cohen, 1997). In one study, observers in 46 classrooms found that high-achieving students were asked to do exactly what students who achieved at average levels were doing in 84 percent of the activities. Very little differentiation of content or instruction was provided (Westberg, Archambault, Dobyms, & Salvin, 1993).

We have also investigated why many teachers do not offer differentiation. In a survey of randomly selected 3rd and 4th grade teachers in public schools, 61 percent indicated that they had no training in meeting the needs of high-achieving students in heterogeneous classrooms. Fifty-four percent of the responding teachers in private or independent schools indicated that they had no background or training in meeting the needs of such students (Archambault et al., 1993). We also know that preservice and novice teachers understand, but do not have the background and skills to assess or address, the diversity in levels of achievement and aptitude for learning in the classroom (Tomlinson et al., 1995). The good news is that when trained in differentiation, 90 percent of classroom teachers were able to compact curriculum for students who had already mastered the content (Reis et al., 1993). In the same study, we also learned that more training time and differing types of professional development experiences, such as peer coaching, resulted in higher levels of success in implementing curriculum compacting. In another study, we found that when training and support are provided, many classroom teachers can and do furnish differentiation to above-average and advanced students in both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups (Westberg and Archambault, 1995).

### **It’s Not the Grouping That Matters, It’s What Happens in the Group**

Does providing differentiated curriculum and instruction mean that we create inequities, even if it occurs within various grouping options? If one reads the article “Detracking for High Student Achievement” by Oakes and Wells (1998), it would certainly appear so. “But what about the firmly entrenched system of tracking that exposes students

to dramatically different and unequal levels of curriculum?" they ask (p. 38). What does tracking have to do with Latoya? The issue is *not* grouping or tracking, which we regard as two quite different concepts. Tracking is the general, and usually permanent, assignment of students to classes that are taught at a certain level and with whole-group instruction. Grouping is a more flexible, less permanent arrangement of students that takes into account factors in addition to ability, such as motivation, interests, instructional levels, and student effort (Renzulli & Reis, 1991). What is important, in our belief, is what happens within the different types of grouping arrangements used in schools—age groups, instructional groups, or interest groups. We believe that assigning children to predetermined tracks on the basis of ability or achievement is wrong, but so is whole-class instruction with no instructional modification that systematically holds back children like Latoya. All learners in our schools, including those who are advanced, should be challenged academically. The context in which that learning takes place is negotiable, but whether it takes place is not negotiable.

## All Parents Want Their Children Challenged

To argue that parents of high-achieving or gifted students want to create or continue a system of “meritocracy on which they base their privileged positions in society” (Oakes and Wells, 1998, p.41) seems to perpetuate a false belief that pits parents of high-achieving students against all others, a condition simply not backed up either by data presented in the article or by our experiences. Some parents of students identified as gifted may have separate classes as their goal, but in our collective years of experience working with these parents, they have not been the majority.

The thousands of parents with whom we speak each year are more interested in finding the best possible education for their children. In a small manufacturing city in Connecticut, a city where over 55 percent of the population is Hispanic, parents of

high-achieving Hispanic students argued for a return to some form of grouping for their children. Their middle school had eliminated all forms of grouping in all classes. With no appropriate differentiation in the classroom, parents saw that their children were not being academically challenged. Many teachers told the parents that they simply could not meet the needs of students representing a seven- or eight-year range of achievement in some of their classes. The teachers themselves asked for help in flexibly grouping students into clusters within specified classes so that they could better address students’ differing instructional needs.

In a magnet school for high-achieving Hispanic students in Los Angeles, talented students are flexibly grouped for instruction in all content areas. Providing for the academic readiness of learners happens in all sorts of forms in all sorts of schools where educators strive for the maximum development of student potential.

All parents want their children to achieve at high levels and to learn at an appropriate pace, depth, and level of complexity. To blame parents for wanting challenge for their children or to accuse them of creating a meritocracy ignores the very real evidence that some students are not being challenged in school. Instead of attacking the parents of these students, we invite them to participate in the dialogue on school improvement by encouraging open discussion about how schools can address the needs of all children and, indeed, how parents can be active partners in achieving this goal.

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