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Segregation by Ability: A Mini-Unit on Teaching Argument

Overview

The purpose of this mini-unit is to integrate short daily warm-up activities into a language arts classroom. These activities are designed to accumulate into a short argument that students write or, though extension, to a longer researched argument. These kinds of warm-up activities make efficient use of classroom time because they build fluency for students *and*, by designing the warm-up as building on each other, give students experience with more complex tasks.

The Use of “Writing into the Day”

Researchers and classroom teachers attest to the value of informal writing for fluency and learning. All writing, however, needs to be purposeful and eventually lead somewhere. Many teachers use the format of “Writing into the Day,” where students write informally during the first 5-7 minutes of the class period. Students settle down, get quiet, and start thinking. This mini-unit draws on the practice of “Writing into the Day” as a means to support students’ learning to write arguments.

Argument Writing as Participation in a Conversation

This mini-unit focuses on the relationship among sources. Researchers and academics often refer to academic writing as a “conversation.” Students start by reading and understanding various voices in the conversations, their positions and points of view. The purpose of the invitation to create a graphic on day 2 is to help students understand the “geography” of the conversation, where the different contributors stand, and ultimately, where the students stand. As they begin to understand the exchanges among authors, students try out their own voice, their own opinion, by locating it among the other voices. Citing the other voices, by forwarding or countering, is the way that students enter these conversations. This mini-unit gives students a brief experience of how to enter a conversation.

Readings

The readings for this mini-unit could be easily changed by topic or reading level. The selection of reading is designed to give students a multi-voiced conversation for them to participate in.

Extensions

When students complete several mini-units like this one, they can choose one that they are especially interested in and bring it to completion as a short argument. Additionally students could extend one of their arguments into a longer piece by augmenting it with their own research. Alternatively, the class can choose one of the topics that they wish to pursue together.

Day 1 (12 minutes)

During the normal “Writing into the Day” give students the following directions:

1. “Read “America’s Future Depends of Gifted Students.”
2. Underline or note in the margin the main claim of the article.
3. Highlight what you consider his strongest evidence.
4. Then write informally for 5-7 minutes:
 - What do you want to know more about?
 - Where do you stand on this issue today?

Keep your writing in your folder.

Day 2 (15 minutes)

During the normal “Writing into the Day” on the following day, give the students the following directions:

1. Read “We Need Quality Education for all Students” by Darrick Hamilton *and* “Tracking by Ability Produces Results” by Bruce Sacerdote.
2. Draw a simple graphic that represents the relationship among these two articles *and* the article we read yesterday.
3. Then write a short explanation of your graphic. Save it to use for tomorrow.

Day 3

On the third day, use the “Writing into the Day” timeslot and give the students the following directions:

1. Take out the graphic and explanation that you composed yesterday and read it over. On the graphic, mark you own position in the conversation.
2. Then write a short argument that makes a claim and cites evidence from the three readings supporting your argument.
3. As you cite your evidence, note in margin of your paper the specific purposes (from Harris) as you introduce and comment on your citation.

TEXT SET

Segregation by Ability

INTRODUCTION



A 2012 fourth-grade “gifted and talented” class in New York City. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

New York City’s schools chancellor, Carmen Fariña, who as a principal [eliminated](#) her school’s gifted classrooms, created a bit of stir [recently](#) by downplaying the importance of the city’s “gifted and talented” programs. Earlier this year, she said she would like to see neighborhood schools [“provide gifted practices to all students.”](#)

Should public schools offer these programs?

Reading #1

America's Future Depends on Gifted Students



Frederick M. Hess is the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

UPDATED JUNE 4, 2014, 5:23 PM

Should public schools have separate gifted education programs? The answer is unequivocally yes, though a puritanical fascination with “closing the achievement gap” has made it harder and harder to say so. Some children are clearly gifted in ways that others are not, and schools exist to provide the resources and instruction that can nurture those gifts. More prosaically, it’s worth noting that the students with special gifts may be those most likely to one day develop miraculous cures, produce inspiring works, invent technological marvels and improve the lives of all Americans.

Insisting that gifted children will “be fine” if we cut these programs is a disservice to these children and a horrific waste of an invaluable natural resource. Indeed, everything we know about brain plasticity, human development and how excellence is the result of copious disciplined practice teaches that we’re putting much at risk when we simply hope that overburdened classroom teachers can provide the teaching and learning that gifted children need. Anyone who has watched a teacher labor to “differentiate” instruction in a classroom that encompasses both math prodigies and English language learners knows it’s unreasonable to expect most teachers to do this well.

Unfortunately, since No Child Left Behind became law in 2002, we’ve seen gifted program suffer a long era of benign neglect amid the rush of attention to race- and income-based “achievement gaps.” The National Association for Gifted Children reports that 14 states [provided no funding at all](#) to local districts for gifted education. In a widely cited Fordham Institute report, pollsters Steve Farkas and Ann Duffett [found that](#) most teachers feel pressured to focus their attention on the lowest-achieving students, with 81 percent saying “struggling students” are most likely to get one-on-one attention. While federal K-12 spending has roughly doubled since 2002, [funding for gifted education](#) has declined from \$11.25 million in 2002 (less than one tenth of 1 percent of federal K-12 spending that year) to \$5 million in 2014.

If schools were focused on helping every student reach their potential, gifted programs might seem an unnecessary perk. But in an era where gifted children have been neglected in a well-intended but monomaniacal push to lift the reading and math scores of struggling students, these programs offer a crucial haven for those on whose frail shoulders the future of 21st America may ultimately ride.

Reading #2

We Need Quality Education for All Students



[Darrick Hamilton](#) is an associate professor of economics and urban policy at the Milano Graduate School of International Affairs, Management and Urban Policy at The New School.

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W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1935 essay "[Does the Negro Need Separate Schools](#)" recognized that "the Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education." For Du Bois, "a mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers with hostile public opinion ... is bad," and a segregated school with "inadequate equipment, poor salaries, and wretched housing is equally bad."

What Du Bois wrote about racial segregation is equally true of separation ability. All children should have access to a "talented and gifted" curriculum with teachers and administrators trained to deliver in an environment that expects excellence of all children.

The consequence of tracking students by ability is self-fulfilling. By definition tracking locks students into hierarchical groups. Particularly pernicious is this so-called ability group sorting both across and within schools that is largely defined by race and class position at birth.

Nonetheless, there is an [abundance](#) of [case-study evidence](#) across geography, grade-level and demography demonstrating that "low" achieving students perform better and "high" achieving students perform no worse when all students are exposed to a high level curriculum.

[Rockville Centre](#) on New York's Long Island, is predominantly a white school district. The [Harlem Children's Zone](#) is in a predominantly black neighborhood in New York City. These are two examples of schools in New York State in which the test scores of low achieving black and Latino students improved dramatically after implementing curricular and teaching reforms designed to offer high quality education to all students. Five years after the introduction of an accelerated curriculum for all students in Rockville Centre's only high school, [South Side High School](#), the New York State Regents [pass rate rose](#) from 32 percent for black and Latino students and 88 percent for white and Asian students to 92 and 98 percents, respectively. And a [program evaluation](#) by two economists, [Will Dobbie](#) and [Roland Fryer](#), identified "high quality schooling," rather than the "community program" dimension of the Harlem Children's Zone as the mechanism to increase elementary and middle school math scores enough to close the racial achievement gap.

As Du Bois acknowledged, there is nothing magical or inherently good or bad about exposing black children to white children. What is critical is exposing every child to a high quality curriculum that teaches them to synthesize and fuse information into big ideas with encouraging teachers trained to deliver that curriculum.

I applaud efforts by school chancellor, Carmen Fariña, to de-track New York City public schools, eliminate segregated instruction and provide every child with an excellent education.

Reading #3

Tracking Students By Ability Produces Results



Bruce Sacerdote is a professor of economics at Dartmouth College and a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

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New York City's gifted and talented programs have received a lot of negative attention lately because of past [testing procedural errors](#) and Carmen Fariña's recent comments downplaying the importance of Gifted and Talented programs.

In reality we know from data, from theory and, most important, from decades of experience that ability grouping or tracking can have a big payoff. My [paper](#) with fellow economists [James West](#) and [Scott Carrell](#) examines peer effects among students at the Air Force Academy. We found that students benefit from their peers, but that these peer effects disappear if the group comprises the highest-ability and lowest ability-cadets. My work with economists [Scott Imberman](#) and [Adriana Kugler](#) examines peer effects from the arrival of Hurricane Katrina refugees in receiving schools. We discovered that high-ability students benefit the most from high-ability peers. And in an [experiment](#) in primary schools in Kenya, researchers found that grouping students into classrooms based on prior achievement benefits all students.

Perhaps most on point was a [study](#) by [Caroline Hoxby](#) and Gretchen Weingarth using data from Wake County North Carolina, which found that students benefit from being in classrooms with peers of a similar ability. Admittedly, the specific empirical evidence on gifted and talented programs is both sparse and mixed. Still, [research](#) suggests that the marginal student admitted to gifted programs does not see increased test scores, while students accepted by lottery into gifted and talented magnet schools have higher science scores. Perhaps when students at the margin of acceptance to a particular gifted program are denied entrance, they may be able to find a close substitute leading to small effects at the margin. But an agenda of wholesale elimination of all gifted and talented programs or specialized high schools could have serious consequences for bright but not wealthy students in New York City.

Economists like me frequently hear from teachers and coaches who tell us that the findings in support of ability grouping are dead on. I live in an area that is home to some of the top ski coaches in the United States. They tell me that having a few strong athletes to lead a group is terrific, but also that too much variation within a single group causes the whole process to break down. This is common sense and doubtless explains why most school districts in the U.S. have some form of ability grouping or tracking. Hopefully great students in New York will continue to have great opportunities tailored to their needs.