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Children belong in intellectually diverse classrooms

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By Eric J. Cooper

I hope those who argue for ability grouping in education will come to realize that it is in the best interest of children to learn in more intellectually diverse classrooms. Effort, rather than innate ability, is more essential to sustained academic achievement and lifelong learning. And by collaborating in more diverse classrooms, children also learn to navigate life -- a fact increasingly recognized by higher education and by employers.

In a seminal study, psychology professor Carol Dweck of Stanford University evenly divided her research groups into students who were praised for their intelligence ("You must be smart at this") and those who were praised for their effort ("You must have worked really hard"). Ninety percent of the students who were praised for their effort chose more difficult material to learn. Dweck also found that when we praise children for their intelligence and separate them into ability groupings, "we tell them that's the name of the game: look smart, don't risk making mistakes."

The praised-for-effort group and the praised-for-intelligence group responded very differently to learning. The praisedfor-effort group improved scores on assessments by 30 percent, while the praised-for-intelligence group's score declined by 20 percent. This research and others replicating it found that effort and slow progress, rather than innate talent or intelligence, are most important to high performance. This is the ticket to lifelong

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learning and dramatically improved life trajectories.

Yet no one ought to be surprised that America has valued innate ability over effort in the classroom. We have been focused laser-like on achievement for years, while giving character development short shrift. Students learn that getting As and Bs is more important than sustained effort. This rush through the gates of achievement can stifle innovation, imagination, creativity, critical thinking and collaborative learning -ironically, qualities 21st-century employers say they are looking for in prospective workers. Deep learning, by contrast, comes from the process of learning through trial and error. By inspiring deeper self-discovery in students and inspiring them to develop their intellectual character, we enable learners to transcend lesser

What's more, neuroscience research has found that most memories disappear within minutes. Classroom instruction that is steeped in the arousal of the emotions and the senses of diverse learners helps the brain learn. Educational schools such as Montessori.

with its emphasis on the education of the senses, have recognized broad principles of learning for years. Top-ranked college prep schools often focus on "effort over achievement," "attitude over aptitude," and "character over talent." These schools understand the value of diverse student bodies in their classrooms. As a consequence, they aggressively seek out students of color to join their ranks. Once enrolled, and with the knowledge that each student brings a unique gift to the campus, students are grouped not on ability but the assumption that student strengths and weaknesses are best shared, rather than isolated by preconceived assumptions of ability.

When K-16 students are grouped heterogeneously, they are afforded opportunities to perform at higher levels of achievement, but they also learn to collaborate and gain academically and socially from diversity. "The Shape of the River" (William G. Bowen and Derek Bok), describes some of the beneficial effects of diverse classrooms in higher education, for example.

But while citing the pros and cons of de-tracking in terms of research is a valuable exercise, the cognitive and noncognitive gains of intellectually diverse classrooms can get lost in the argument. These benefits are important. When combined with the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills gained from diverse classrooms, they far outweigh the fears that learning success is dependent on ability grouping. Helen Keller said it so well: "Thank God for my handicaps, for through them, I found myself, my work and my God."

America was founded on the notion of liberty and equality. We consistently honor the principle of liberty and the world remains inspired. But even our strongest international followers must admit we have yet to understand and appreciate, much less honor, the equality part. How we educate all of our children and youth remains the Gordian knot of America's ability to remain an economic and moral leader in the world.

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