

Ability Grouping

Russell Boyle

Russell Boyle is a Victorian educational consultant and commentator. He believes that children, like adults, learn when educational programs are sensitive to their learning needs. In this article he questions why we continue to place students into classes according to their chronological age.

Singapore was the highest scoring country in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study. This outstanding performance focused world attention on the system of education in Singapore. How is it that students from such a small country can outperform the rest of the world?

Streaming

Eighty percent of curriculum time in the first four years of primary school in Singapore is devoted to the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills. At the end of Year 4 students are grouped according to their ability and placed in one of three language streams. The first stream, comprising the most academically able students, study either Higher Chinese, Higher Malay or Higher Tamil. The second and largest cohort study one of Chinese, Malay or Tamil. Less able students in the third stream study one of Basic Chinese, Basic Malay or Basic Tamil. All three streams study the same English and Mathematics curriculum although the time devoted to each study may vary according to the learning needs of the different streams. Students move from one stream to another during Years 5 and 6 on the basis of performance and on the recommendation of their School Principal.

At the end of Year 6 students take the Primary School Leaving Examination. The results of this examination are used to allocate them to one of four secondary school streams: Special, Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical).

The most able students are admitted to the Special stream. They study English and the mother tongue at a higher level than do students in the Express stream. Students in both streams sit for the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE) "Ordinary" (O) level examination at the end of Year 10. Students in the Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) streams sit the GCE "Normal" (N) level examination at the end of Year 10. Those who do well enough continue for another year and sit for the GCE O level exam at the end of Year 11.

Differential Curricula

The curriculum for the Special, Express and Normal (Academic) streams includes English, English Literature, the mother tongue,

Mathematics, General Science, History, Geography, Art and Crafts, Design and Technology and Home Economics, Moral Education and Music. The curriculum in the Normal (Technical) stream concentrates on developing student proficiency in English and Mathematics. Computer Applications is a compulsory subject for students in the Normal (Technical) stream.

Whilst Singapore's best junior secondary students excelled in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, its least able students managed to perform above the world norm. This provides prima facie evidence that streaming can be of benefit to all students irrespective of ability.

Assumptions

Few Australian schools use ability as the criterion for class placement. It is politically correct amongst large sections of the Australian teacher workforce to espouse the benefits of the mixed ability classroom and to condemn the practice of grouping students by ability. Some teachers oppose ability grouping on the grounds that it labels students as bright, average or dull; others argue that it promotes a social class system that is the antithesis of egalitarianism. Research into the effects of ability grouping upon student learning, self esteem and behaviour is inconclusive and is often read selectively by teachers. We have a tendency to read only what we want to read.

If Australia is to ever deserve the title of "clever country" we must tailor our education system to the learning needs of our students so that they may proceed as quickly as possible or as slowly as necessary towards their educational potential. To achieve this we may need to jettison some long held but ill-founded beliefs about ability grouping. For too long we have clung to a system of grouping students according to year level. We even allow age to determine when a child may start their formal education.

Throughout the world there is increasing interest in grouping students according to ability. The challenge for educators is to develop student grouping practices that enrich the learning experiences of all students. Australian educators could benefit from further study of the way in which education is organised and delivered in Singapore.

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