

“What to Do Next” Series

Article #2 – The Other Achievement Gap

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By Deborah L. Ruf, Ph.D.

How can we better encourage and reinforce the most entrepreneurial and talented among us? We can start by changing the ways we set up schools and the ways we address the very different learning abilities and needs of the students in them.

The well-known “achievement gap” refers to the difference in the average academic performance between our highest and lowest achieving population groups. Closing that gap has led us to focus our attention on students who are struggling with fundamental achievement. As little progress is made to close these gaps, it seems we refuse to explore anything beyond external influences as probable causes for our failures. We rarely speak of *individual* differences in ability. I recently attended a symposium where speakers repeatedly reminded us that “just because we don’t like what the research is telling us does not mean it is bad research.”

I believe our most worrisome achievement gap should be the performance gap we see *within each individual* rather than those between any *groups* of people. Our society benefits from the support and nurturance of our brightest minds, and here’s what the research tells us: A person’s intellectual profile, capacity to learn within different domains—along with certain differences in personality, gender, exposure to opportunities, and luck—is not greatly responsive to outside influences to change it. Twin and adoption studies, as well as Head Start and any number of other early intervention programs, indicate consistently that the brain is like a muscle that can be exercised to perform at its own best level, but when the workouts stop, that muscle strength returns to where it was before.

The spread of human intellectual ability is vast across all populations. By the time children are about seven years old and in first grade, the typical same-aged mixed-ability public school classroom already has 12 grade equivalencies of achievement in it. There is no way to make all people intellectually the same any more than there is a way to make everybody the same sex or the same height. Every individual should be challenged to grow intellectually, and we’re now generally ignoring those individuals with the highest potential.

The United States has one of the widest intellectual ability ranges in the world because our diverse economy has attracted people from all over the world. Populations of other countries actually have different ability averages and ranges, different strengths and weaknesses. For whatever reason (and there are many) only about ten percent of the U.S. population is intellectually capable of professional-level achievement, no matter how hard we push and support everyone else.

We cast aside good approaches to educating every person to the best of his or her ability when we can’t accept that people are innately different from one another from the get-go. We further cripple our efforts when we shame people for doing their best at important occupations that are not considered prestigious (e.g., the trades, services, labor). Indeed, one result of our current emphasis

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on making all students “college ready” is that we are overlooking legitimate, needed job training for individuals whose abilities, regardless of their education, will never make them college ready. Less than one-quarter of the American population has the kind of reasoning and learning abilities that lend themselves to college-level training. Rather than a college degree to earn a good living, we should adjust how we pay people for work they are able to do and give them the training they need to do it well.

How can we better encourage and reinforce the most entrepreneurial and talented among us? Let’s set up campuses where students are enabled to move to classes where what they’re ready to learn is already being taught by teachers who really know their subjects. Let’s start as early as the very first years children attend school. Grouping kids by age for instruction makes about as much pedagogical sense as grouping them by height. There’s no good reason for the practice, and there’s no research to support its efficacy for cognitive or social learning. It would cost less, not more, to group children by readiness to learn, not by grade level or age.

Most ability-grouped classroom instruction and junior high school tracking ended in the 1970s. Both were perceived to pigeon-hole students and take away opportunities. Now, however, most coursework is aimed at a slightly-below-average target group – struggling learners – so they’ll pass No Child Left Behind Act exams. Everyone endures the same seven to eight repetitions of material over six years of elementary school and an equally repetitive pace for middle school. Smart children become bored, tune out, or act out, and those who cooperate learn an under-achievement ethic.

Here’s what the brightest students need instead. The top five percent of learners could finish the elementary curriculum in four years or less. The highest two percent could take three years or less. The top one percent could finish in one or two years (in at least one subject area), and at least one child in the school probably would be smart enough to do it all in less than one year. Does anyone wonder why they don’t want to go on to college and graduate school? All they can picture is more of the same. They’ve rarely experienced real competition or real soulmate friendships, because anyone who is like them got spread out – blended – into other classes to make it “fair.” Everything is too easy and boring for eight or nine years and then becomes unexpectedly very hard. While we prepare many students for college who will never enjoy reading or understand algebra, we bore the socks off our brightest students and never give them a chance to learn to their capacity or prepare for the intellectual labor for which they were designed.

If all students could move at their own pace, they could be grouped and regrouped to work with students of different abilities and backgrounds, depending upon the subject. Continuous progress and ability grouping moves *all* students to where they need to be.

How would these changes encourage the most talented among us? Bright students would experience challenging and stimulating learning from the time they start school. They’d learn what they’re capable of doing—with true peers—people they’ll eventually work and compete

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with—instead of wasting time. They’d start advanced training understanding who they are and what the world is really like. Each child would have the tools that realistically fit him or her. We are not all the same, and we never will be, but that’s okay and something we should celebrate. Let’s support realistic expectations and goals for all American students. When we do that, our very brightest will also become the best they can be.

Deborah L. Ruf is founder of Educational Options and TalentIgniter in Minneapolis, where she works with families of highly gifted children nationally.