

Play up!

Using common-sense sports analogies to encourage support for high ability learners

Iowa Talented and Gifted Association (ITAG) Past President Diane Pratt has a quote from Professor Miraca Gross that has been embedded in her email signature for some time. *“In performance areas, it is generally accepted that you put high performers together. Not one country sent a mixed ability team to the Olympics.”* I’ve often borrowed this quote when discussing grouping practices with my colleagues because they understand sports. I understand sports, parents understand sports, and school administrators understand sports. I hope the following analogies are useful as you work to encourage support for your high-ability students.

Acceleration

Acceleration is simple placement according to competence, a principle that goes unquestioned in athletics and the arts. – Camilla Benbow

You have a fifth grade son with exceptional basketball talent. For years he has shined on the court, and he has the potential to play Division 1 basketball someday. Your community has a solid parks and rec basketball program, where your son would be placed randomly on a team with age-peers. He’ll be with his friends, with a caring coach, and he’ll most likely be the MVP of every game. But because his ability is well-above that of his age peers, his practices will be meaningless to him. He won’t learn anything new. He won’t improve. He won’t grow.

Your son also has the opportunity to “play up”, to play in a league with sixth and seventh graders. He’ll be more likely to learn new techniques and skills at faster-paced practices, and more effort will be required in order to compete on the same level as his older teammates. During games, he will likely still stand out as one of the best players due to his exceptional ability. However, at season’s end, you know that he will have learned new skills, accepted and overcome challenge, and improved as a player.

In this scenario, the choice seems obvious. Play up. When a freshman pitcher has the potential to lead the varsity softball team, we don’t blink twice before putting her on the mound. When forming the varsity sprint medley relay team, we don’t disregard the fastest runner because she’s an underclassman.

Just as in athletics, data should drive our decisions, and the whole child must be considered as academic accelerative options are explored. But when deemed appropriate by education professionals, don’t let fear and logistical roadblocks get in a student’s way of a research-based option that benefits many highly capable individuals by better motivating them toward schooling, enhancing their involvement with extracurricular activities, promoting more challenging options in the middle school and high school

years, and preparing them to begin contributing to society at an earlier age. (NAGC, 2004)

Grouping

You are a high school track coach. You spend several practice sessions working with your athletes on passing the relay baton. It doesn't take long for you to realize that you have four runners who are exceptionally good at their passes. You find yourself with three options.

- a. Allow these four runners to form a team, and send them to work with an assistant coach on something different yet equally important, such as their starting technique.
- b. Allow these four runners to form a team, and have them continue to work on their baton passing, but with a specialist that you bring in from a local college who can help them to get even better.
- c. Split these four runners up onto four different relay teams, so all four teams perform equally in the upcoming meet, and your expert baton passers can serve as role models for their teammates.

Choice "c" seems silly right?

Or how about this idea? We do away with the 9th grade baseball team, the 10th grade team, the JV team, and the Varsity team, and we just have all the high school players play on mixed-ability teams. The better players can help the struggling players, serving as mentors.

Sound familiar?

Have you ever watched a football team prepare for a game? There are times when the whole team is doing the same thing. All players need to stretch, so when stretching they can be grouped heterogeneously. They all listen to the same pregame speech, so it doesn't matter how they are seated in the locker room. But conversely, there are times when the kicker needs to work with the other kickers in an area of strength. The receivers practice running routes and catching passes (their strength area), and the linemen practice technique with other linemen.

Different grouping practices are appropriate for different tasks, and I'd encourage you to read the research around grouping that is summarized by NAGC's position statement on the issue at <http://nagc.org/index.aspx?id=4450>

But I'd also encourage you to follow the coach's lead, and stop using the words "role models, mentors, and self-esteem" as rationale for your grouping practices. Myths abound that grouping gifted children damages the self-esteem of struggling learners, creates an "elite" group who may think too highly of themselves, and is actually undemocratic and, at times, racist. None of these papers have any founding in actual

research but the arguments continue decade after decade (Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002).

Instead, grouping is a vehicle educators can use to allow gifted children access to learning at the level and complexity they need (Loveless, 1998; Rogers, 2006; Tieso, 2003). More importantly, it allows gifted children to learn with and make social connections with same aged peers who think and learn in the same ways they do. Grouping can also help to simplify already overburdened teachers' lives by allowing them to focus more on the specific talent development needs they encounter in this potentially more homogeneous clustering. What educators must keep in mind, however, is that what these children will do once they are grouped is probably more important than which form of grouping has been selected (Kulik, 1992).

Early Childhood Programming

You have always been an avid tennis player, so your daughter has grown up around the sport. At age 5, she actually has become quite proficient at the game, and can defeat your friends' children that are several years older. She excitedly attends her first tennis camp, ready to play against children of the same ability.

But instead she is told that although she is quite talented, it is only because her mom has worked with her. It'll take a few years at tennis camp to know whether she really needs anything different. So in the meantime, she is to spend the entire summer grouped with age-peers, learning the lessons that had been previously prepared by the instructors for typical 5 year old players. After three years, they'll decide if she has a gift that needs nurtured through appropriate programming, or if instead everyone else catches up.

What a heartbreaking scenario this is, yet this is the reality that many of our young gifted children and their families face when they arrive at kindergarten. I have news for you. If by third grade the other students have "caught up", it often means we have failed her as a learner. Just like a tennis coach should meet the young athlete where she's at and move her forward, we should do the same for each of our kindergarten readers, and young gifted mathematicians.

Research indicates that an interactive and responsive environment in early childhood supports both cognitive and affective growth and establishes a pattern of successful learning that can continue throughout children's lives (Clark, 2002; Smutny, 1998). As such, the creation of rich and engaging learning environments in schools, homes, and communities during early childhood can enhance educational opportunities for learners and help put children on the path to academic achievement.

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