NEPC Review: Think Again: Are Education Programs for High Achievers Inherently Inequitable? (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, October 2024)

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Summary

The Fordham Institute recently published a report analyzing several perceived threats to educational opportunities for students who score well on standardized tests and class grades. The report contends that these threats come from those who are overly concerned about "equity" and who seek to undermine programs designed for these students. The report's tone is one of deep concern for these students, agreeing that equity considerations in educational settings are important but cautioning that they must not go too far. It therefore argues for expanding targeted programs, including what it calls "readiness grouping." The report does not, however, engage with many decades of literature documenting a long history of inequitable grouping and rationing of enrichment. Similarly, the report does not consider literature supporting potential instructional practices that might counter the discrimination some students face. Instead, it dismisses research-based concerns about inequality, offering instead several strawman arguments about why educators and students' families should not question potentially discriminatory structures. The report does acknowledge that biases based on race, gender, and class may exist, but it does not adequately examine potential solutions. Ultimately, the report fails to offer any useful guidance for lawmakers or others interested in a public school system that beneficially serves all students.

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I. Introduction

In a recent Fordham Institute report, *Think Again: Are Education Programs for Achievers Inherently Inequitable?*, author Brandon Wright examines a set of arguments that he contends are raised against separate programs for students the report calls "high-achievers"—those who have scored highly on standardized tests and/or achieved high grades in school.[1] These include gifted programs, honors courses, and selective high schools. The report focuses on program elements like acceleration and what it calls "flexible readiness groupings."[2] The report suggests there are four overarching claims against these programs for high-achieving students and then offers judgments as to the accuracy of these claims. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations for schools to expand opportunities for high achievers.

Since the expansion of public school access for students of color, students with disabilities, and multilingual students, students from these groups that have been historically excluded from public school have not caught up with peers from dominant groups in terms of test scores, grades, and post-secondary school outcomes. Decades of research have explored the reasons for these gaps, and some of this research documents outside-of-school causes, linking the gaps to poverty and discrimination.[3] Other research points to inside-school policies and practices, including tracking and ability grouping systems that provide watered-down learning opportunities for those placed in lower-track classes.[4] Stakeholders have also proposed and studied many different methods for increasing student achievement, including detracking or "universal acceleration" reforms.[5]

Reading the recent Fordham report within this historical context, this review examines the strengths and weaknesses of its contentions promoting an expansion of separate programs for high achievers.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report eschews the terms "tracking" and "ability grouping," opting instead for the more obscure term, "readiness grouping." This is perhaps explained by the following statement, from early in the report: "Proponents . . . erred by viewing qualifications for these programs— 'ability' or 'giftedness,' for example—to be inherent, something a student either has or doesn't." But it's also important to note that the report is not just focused on *readiness grouping*; it equally promotes "acceleration," which is never really defined but (based on the citations to research) appears to refer to grade acceleration, or skipping a grade level. When the report discusses and advocates for education programs for high achievers, and when it presents research evidence, it often conflates these and other approaches.

The report offers four claims about such accelerated educational programs and then evaluates the truthfulness of these claims. It asserts its claims are rooted in these "four frequent arguments that opponents of advanced education programs use to advocate for their elimination."[6] Those arguments are as follows:

1. Programs for advanced students don't work, especially for marginalized students.
2. What's commonly termed "differentiated instruction," i.e., grouping all readiness levels into single classrooms, works just as well as advanced programs that group some of them separately.
3. School systems under-identify marginalized students due to biased practices.
4. Many school systems have a gatekeeping mentality, which serves to worsen segregation and inequity.

According to the report, claims one and two are false. Claim three is rated as "perhaps" true, although the report argues that the problem of under-identifying marginalized students is "deeper" and requires early intervention. Only the fourth claim is rated as completely true and necessary to address on that basis.

Given the analysis of these claims, the report then offers three recommendations for educators and policymakers:

1. Expand and augment school programs for higher achievers.
2. Screen all students for advanced program eligibility using local norms.
3. States should mandate that districts offer fully developed advanced programs and regularly audit districts for compliance.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report first focuses on a handful of high-profile large U.S. school districts that have at-

tempted to introduce equity-based reforms to programs for high-achieving students. Some of these programs have resulted in delayed opportunities for these learners, such as San Francisco moving algebra to ninth grade as opposed to eighth grade. The report then positions itself as a literature review of evidence about accelerated and equity-based programming, subsequently making its recommendations for expanding access to accelerated programs. The report's treatment of each of the four claims is summarized below.

Utility of Advanced Programs for Marginalized Students

According to the report, "interventions including acceleration and readiness grouping benefit high-achieving students from all backgrounds and don't harm their lower- and middle-achieving peers."[7] To support this claim, the report primarily cites a meta-analysis of 100 years' worth of studies about advanced course work (which I discuss below) that finds accelerated students perform moderately better than nonaccelerated students.[8] The report also offers evidence for the benefits of pre-differentiated scripted curriculum,[9] and points to a study suggesting benefits for participating marginalized students.[10]

Utility of Differentiated Instruction

The report cites several studies finding that there are wide bands of student skillsets in classrooms in the United States today. Citing several surveys of educators, it argues that these wide differences make differentiation difficult to achieve. According to the report, differentiation can be one tool meeting the needs of high-achieving students, but it cannot be the only or the main tool educators use.

Under-identification of Marginalized Students and Gatekeeping Biases

The report acknowledges the decades of research demonstrating that students of color are far less likely to be recommended for or enrolled in programs for advanced learners. It also discusses the myriad obstacles to achievement that poverty can create for students living without adequate access to "healthcare, healthy food, safe streets, [and] early childhood education"[11] among other barriers. The report points out the unsafe conditions of many schools in predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhoods. It notes that these opportunity gaps lead to under-identification of marginalized students for advanced programs. The report then argues that these opportunity gaps can also feed biases educators might have against recommending minoritized students for such programs.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report cites some useful research literature, but it also leaves out an enormous amount, thereby creating a misleading picture. A half-century of exhaustive research has created a large body of evidence, which convincingly documents the harms of tracking (also known as

ability grouping and incorporated in this report within a broad and unclear category called "readiness grouping").[12] When used in secondary schools, tracking separates students into different levels of classes, targeting different classes with curricula and instruction that is stratified in terms of academic expectations, challenge, and other factors. The harms of tracking are felt by students placed in lower-track classes, who (as the report acknowledges) are disproportionately from marginalized groups.[13] While the report focuses on literature suggesting that several equity-focused methods of expanding access to higher-level coursework do not work,[14] it omits literature that suggests the opposite.[15] The report also overlooks the empirically based conversations among educators and policymakers about differentiation, detracking, and enrichment that are robust and complicated.[16]

For instance, the report suggests that there is no literature that finds that detracking or differentiation contributes to student achievement. However, there are many decades of such research, and the report fails to cite any of this scholarship. For example, using fixed effects modeling, Rui found that students in detracked groups performed slightly better academically than their equivalent-ability peers in tracked programs, with particular benefits for students who had previously been struggling academically.[17] Welner found similar results in his study of court-ordered detracking.[18] A survey of principals in the early 2000s showed that a minority of those asked believed tracking had a positive impact on their own lives as students.[19] Additional research has demonstrated that grouping students heterogeneously in math classes, rather than homogenously as the report advocates, significantly increased the probability that students would later complete advanced math classes across racial and socioeconomic groups.[20]

The report repeatedly cites and relies on three main publications.[21] The findings of these publications and the discussion around them conflate acceleration (e.g., skipping a grade) and within-class grouping in elementary school with course-based tracking in secondary school. The overall body of research on the first two suggests that they are much less problematic than the third, but the report never explains these important differences. The report also never explains that the meta-analysis brings together a wide variety of different approaches and piggybacks on earlier, often-criticized meta-analyses from the mid-1980s while seemingly ignoring methodological issues with acceleration research that may not be able to adequately capture effect sizes.

Researchers who have immersed themselves in understanding tracking know that the details—washed away by this conflating and aggregating—matter enormously. As just one example, some older studies show a tracking benefit for high achievers but never disentangle the effects of between-class grouping from the stronger curriculum and other factors associated with high-track classes, such as more qualified and experienced teachers. Even the meta-analysis referenced in this study finds that the small positive affect of grouping does not improve student outcomes relative to older, nonaccelerated students.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report does not directly explain its methods for arriving at its conclusions. There is no explanation of how the author sought out or analyzed the literature referenced above, which helps to explain why some important studies that challenge the report's thesis seem to be missing. There are also no sources for the four claims to which the report is implicitly responding. Further, the vague term, "programs for high achievers," feels both over-inclusive and under-inclusive. Readers will hopefully agree that high achievers (however defined) should be challenged and supported, but which programs best do so? This lack of any clear or stated methods makes it difficult to evaluate the claims of the report, although a reading of additional literature suggests some important oversights.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

By not engaging in a thorough and systematic literature review, the report overlooks important empirical contributions to our understanding of how to best support all students, including marginalized students, with accelerated instruction. Given the lack of engagement with this literature, the report's conclusions are not helpful in terms of creating programs that serve all students well while ensuring that classrooms do not become racially and socioeconomically segregated. The report also does not offer a source for any of the claims it evaluates as true or false before offering its own recommendations.

Utility of Advanced Programs for Marginalized Students

A wide body of literature addresses the alienation that many marginalized students, particularly Black and Hispanic students, feel in advanced programs. One such study found that Black students specifically felt racially isolated in advanced courses due to being a small racial minority in the classroom.[22] Multiple studies have also found that students of color were often silenced in honors-class discussions.[23] These studies suggest that advanced programs without appropriate supports for marginalized students are not an unalloyed good, but the report never touches on these feelings of alienation and how they might later impact students' well-being and achievement.

Utility of Differentiated Instruction

The report also does not engage with several studies that suggest differentiated instruction can, in fact, work in terms of supporting student achievement. These studies have found differentiated instruction can positively impact students' test scores while allowing for more integrated classrooms.[24] While there is a need to continue to study differentiation and how teachers can implement it most effectively, the report is incorrect when it says it cannot work at all.

Under-identification of Marginalized Students and Gatekeeping Biases

The report does grapple with the under-representation of marginalized students in advanced courses in the last two claims it addresses. According to the report, however, these gatekeeping biases are not built into the programs themselves; instead, it presents these biases as idiosyncrasies to tweak. Given the historic discrimination of such programs,[25] small measures and additional unfunded mandates are unlikely to solve widescale discrimination against students. Long-standing literature demonstrates the societal inequalities often inherent in decisions about who can access advanced coursework.[26] There is evidence that expanding programs to include nearly everyone at a school can contribute to student achievement,[27] and the report should have grappled with that evidence in addition to evidence that supports the accelerated programs that it favors.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Researchers, educators, and policymakers continue to debate vigorously the best way to place students in classrooms and programs, as many sorting schemes can be both inaccurate and discriminatory.[28] This report does not add to that debate in any meaningful way, since it does not engage with literature that is inconvenient for its argument. That argument favors keeping accelerated programming looking largely as it does today, with a few more students from marginalized groups sprinkled in to assuage minor concerns.

In doing so, it does not address the deep-seated discriminatory nature of these programs from their inception or the structural and political forces keeping that discrimination in place. Although the report does clearly acknowledge that many marginalized students are wrongly excluded from accelerated programming, it does not grapple with the history of the introduction of these programs and other evidence indicating that this exclusion is baked into the structure of such programs.[29] Addressing this historic and ongoing exclusion will take more than recreating the programs of the past that supported such exclusion. Students, particularly marginalized students, need policymakers to engage with educators and design bold new systems that are not based on segregation but rather on helping all students uncover and nurture their own unique gifts and talents.

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