

# Differentiated Instruction and the One-Dimensional Ability Fallacy

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Are you thinking, here we go again with that one-dimension thing? I am. But I need to. Discussions of differentiated instruction needs and [challenges](#) could be a transformational school system change lynchpin. I believe that by failure to sort children, through school choice, by [ability by subject](#), we create differentiated instruction needs that only super-human teachers can address. For example, consider this teacher response to *Education Week*'s second major recent [opinion piece](#), which responded to the [first piece](#) that said that adequate differentiated instruction was impossible, and thus was only rarely even attempted: "Because of my constant criticism of differentiation, the district paraded five of the best teachers to show how it is done. But we need a methodology that works for average and below average teachers, too (1/21/15 letters [p 26])." Indeed, and the rare super teachers can only succeed, partially, because of the limitations of the system and the fact that even super-human teachers still suffer time scarcity and cannot be in more than one place at a time. If we can get that to sink in, the need for transformational school system change becomes an inescapable conclusion.

Here's the frustrating one-dimensional ability fallacy stuff. One of the other reactions to the two recent *Education Week* articles said, "I agree that effective differentiation is very hard. But, I am deeply concerned about the idea of segregating students by ability. This might benefit the higher-achieving students, . . . " Can someone please comfort/educate all of the people burdened by the implicit *false* notion ("deeply concerned") that students don't have strengths or weaknesses or skill areas where they are just average; that they are just "higher achieving" or 'low achieving'. ***Recognition that ability is not typically monolithic productively changes a lot of world views.*** Our

whole economy, locally, nationally, and globally, rests on folks and industries having strengths and weaknesses. For example, while I think I'm pretty good at discerning what certain kinds of social science and schooling data mean and don't mean, I freely admit to being nearly helpless in other areas; for example, how computers work, and auto repair. Making differentiated instruction a lot less challenging does not mean generally segregating schoolchildren into 'the dummies' and 'the rocket scientists.' It means sorting children into groups according to strength/weakness/passion in different subjects. So, for example, Johnny might be among the students able to progress more quickly in math, in part because of ability, and sometimes also because it's something Johnny likes to do so he works harder at it. Yet, like the main character in the CBS TV show *NUMBERS* that excelled in math but could be easily beaten at the game Scrabble, Johnny might be just average, or slow, in reading or writing. Again, it might be partly an ability thing, and partly low interest/passion; weak focus, slow progress for lack of interest.

Another reaction to the *Education Week* coverage of the differentiated instruction challenge said, "differentiation is very difficult," but argued that we needed to still attempt it in order to narrow the range of differences between children. That statement not only strongly hints the one-dimensional ability fallacy, but, sadly, it also implies sacrificing more rapid progress by the better students to keep them from getting too far ahead of their supposedly, one-dimensionally weaker peers. I agree, we need to try. We'll have to. Even with school choice-driven ability grouping by subject, classrooms will still contain students with significant differences, especially in sparsely populated places that will have small menus of schooling options. But we can create a system in which we do differentiation under less costly (holding back investment in strengths) and less daunting (through school choice-driven ability grouping by subject) circumstances. When traditional public schools group children only by age and attendance zone, they create 'impossible dream' differentiated instruction circumstances.