

An Interview with Dr. Miraca Gross  
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Dr. Miraca Gross, director of the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Center (GERRIC ) at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, gave a presentation to students, staff, and faculty of the College of William and Mary School of Education on Friday, August 29, 2003. During this presentation, Dr. Gross shared her research findings concerning ability grouping and gifted children. In her presentation, "To Group or Not to Group: Is That the Question?," Dr. Gross advocated ability grouping, the placement of students of high intellectual potential together in a learning environment, to aid their academic achievement, self-concept, and overall attitude toward school and other academic pursuits. Her presentation was based on research from the forthcoming new edition of her book, *Exceptionally Gifted Children* (2004). This text is based on a two-decade longitudinal study of 60 students with IQ's of 160 and above.

According to Dr. Gross, mental age is by far the most important factor in grouping. "Mental age affects the way they learn and socialize far more than chronological age. A child who is nine with a mental age of twelve is not nine in the way that he understands the world. There are different expectations and conceptions of friendship. Twelve-year-old students with a mental age of nine naturally gravitate towards students with a similar mental age. Water finds its own level, and so do students," Dr. Gross stated.

Once students are grouped according to their intellectual capacity, she advocates a full-time ability-grouped program for gifted students by content area. "There is a term used in Australian educational policy – 'the least restrictive environment.' Putting children in the learning environment they would actually choose for themselves is beneficial. An environment where the child is learning full-time with similar children is the environment that least restricts him from fulfilling his potential."

Dr. Gross responds to many of the arguments against ability grouping. One such argument is that gifted students in ability-grouped classes suffer a decrease in self-esteem. Based on her research, she has concluded that there is a momentary dip in the child's self-esteem, but it subsequently rises with continued interaction in the program. She also cited the research of Delcourt et al. (1994) which concluded that students' attitudes towards learning improved as they were more specifically grouped by ability. According to the study, similarly gifted children in mixed-ability settings had an inflated idea of their own ability, while those in full time ability grouping settings were more realistic about their talents. She also refutes reasoning which claims that top students should be left in mixed-ability classes as models for less able students. "Students tend to model themselves on individuals with similar ability levels who can master the tasks assigned." Dr. Gross also stresses that because students of high ability and students of average

ability understand and learn concepts in completely different ways, the highly gifted often prove to be unsuccessful mentors.

Finally, Dr. Gross highlighted the conflicting use of ability grouping in most schools. “In performance areas, it is generally accepted that you put high performers together,” she stated, citing the examples of music and sports. “Not one team sent a mixed ability team to the Olympics.” She asserts that the educational community needs to treat intellectual ability the same way that musical and athletic ability are treated in our society – by placing the top students together to do advanced work.

Dr. Gross is hopeful that her work will have positive effects, but continues to emphasize the importance of the teacher’s role. “We need to talk to teachers about these issues in a language they can understand. Explain the research. That is the only way to effect a change in the system.” Dr. Gross’s presentation provided a forum for members of the William and Mary community to reflect upon the research behind ability grouping as a strategy to meet the needs of gifted learners.

Delcourt, M. A. B., Loyd, B. H., Cornell, D. G., & Goldberg, M. D. (1994). *Evaluation of the effects of programming arrangements on student learning outcomes*. Research Monograph 94108. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Gross, M. (2004). *Exceptionally gifted children*, 2nd ed. London: RoutledgeFalmer