

Honoring All Learners: The Case for Embedded Honors in Heterogeneous English Language Arts Classrooms

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Tracking and other practices of homogeneously grouping students by so-called ability level remain a norm in American classrooms, despite decades of research highlighting how they disserve and even harm student learning. Heterogeneous grouping, by contrast, benefits struggling learners, a conclusion supported by a substantial body of research. Some of that research cautions, however, that these benefits may be perceived as coming at the expense of higher-performing classmates' learning. This article reviews the literature, contemporary case studies, and the author's personal experience to argue for, and provide specific models of, a heterogeneous English language arts (ELA) classroom. These models use deliberate practices of differentiated instruction to serve learners at all ability levels, and furthermore do so in a manner that integrates the possibility for students to earn "honors" credit. The article argues that ELA is perhaps the ideal discipline in which to enact such structural shifts, creating heterogeneous classrooms that work to the advantage of all learners.

Introduction: The Challenge of Heterogeneity

There is no such thing as a homogeneous classroom. As Piney Branch Elementary principal Bertram Generlette once put it, "One kid is a homogeneous group. As soon as you bring another student in, you have differences. The question is: how do you capitalize on the differences?" (Petrelli, 2011, p. 15). Educators who recognize the heterogeneity inherent in any classroom, no matter the discipline, grade, or how ostensibly tracked by so-called ability level, face the need to employ some form of differentiated instruction (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999a, 1999b; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). From the outset of this article, I wish to challenge the use, however prevalent, of the phrase *ability level*, with its implications, intentional or not, that different students possess different inherent capacities for learning. Modern understandings

of neuroplasticity and learning argue clearly against such determinism, except in the most extreme cases (Bernard, 2010). I prefer Carol Tomlinson's (1999b) term "readiness level," which presents a picture of students who,

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at a given moment in time, may be more or less able to succeed at a certain task than their peers, but who are nevertheless capable of eventually attaining sufficient skill or knowledge to meet whatever standard or benchmark is at issue. While the literature cited in this article may employ the rhetoric of ability, forcing me at times to adopt such terminology, I ask my reader to substitute both the word *and the concept* of

readiness whenever ability is mentioned.

The bulk of criticism of tracking (or of other, similar forms of sorting students by perceived ability) centers around its deleterious effects on students categorized at lower readiness levels. One of the chief arguments against heterogeneous grouping, however, is that it provides insufficient challenge for, or even stifles, those students determined to possess higher readiness level (often labeled as "gifted" students), even when practices labeled as differentiation are employed. At the Massachusetts high school where I teach English, an additional, more nakedly utilitarian but no less pressing concern about heterogeneous grouping's effect on high-performing students arose: that it denies the additional GPA advantage that a course designated as honors or AP often confers. Only 3.2 percent of the student body at our school, which is located in an affluent Boston suburb, is categorized as economically disadvantaged, versus the state average of 26.3 percent. We boast a 97 percent graduation rate and an 88.9 percent college attendance rate after graduation (Massachusetts DESE, 2013). As one might expect, parents here are highly concerned with their children's college admissions.

Due in no small part to parental concerns about their children potentially being disadvantaged in the college process, our school administration required, in 2009, that the theretofore non-leveled English department adopt what they called an ability-leveled model.¹ For at least two decades prior, the department had been philosophically committed to heterogeneity in grades 11 and 12 (and, for a time, grade 10 as well). In this former system, beginning in the spring semester of sophomore year, all English offerings were electives open to students of all ability levels. Many electives were heterogeneous by grade level as well, open to both juniors and seniors. To respond to the 2009 administrative mandate, the department voted to eliminate all elective classes (except for those in the second semester of senior year), replacing

them with a single class per grade, following a single curriculum that could be delivered at either the “College Prep” or more rigorous “Honors” level.

I have polled my students for the past six years since the change, and a majority consistently say they would prefer the choice of a variety of thematically based elective courses over the present configuration. But nearly universally, they also value and want the opportunity to both be challenged and to earn honors credit. They have articulated, in microcosm, some of the promise as well as the challenge of heterogeneity. A middle path or, more accurately, a synthesis of leveled and heterogeneous classes would offer a “both-and” solution: embedding the chance to earn an honors distinction within a non-leveled, heterogeneous course. Doing so has the potential to allow students entering at a lower readiness level to avoid the negative effects of tracking and to reap the benefits of studying alongside higher-performing peers, while simultaneously supporting and enabling those higher performing students to learn at the advanced levels they need and desire.

Models of such approaches in action exist. The practice of “embedding honors” is more common at the postsecondary level (for example, at the University of Portland, Texas A & M, and Ohio State University at Newark) than in high school, but Sanborn Regional High School (SRHS) in New Hampshire is one of the exceptions. In the words of SRHS principal Brian Stack, “In a traditional high school, honors course work is defined by a course you take.” Conversely, by SRHS’s definition,

honors work can best be described as a product that shows that a student delved more deeply into methodology, structure, and/or theory; addressed more sophisticated questions; and satisfied more rigorous standards. The content of an honors assignment can be one of two things. The content is either broader in scope or deeper in examination than in a comparable assignment. (CASN, 2014, p. 1)

In this article, I suggest that the English language arts (ELA) classroom is ideally suited to the embedded honors model and recommend its adoption, or at the least its exploration, by English teachers and departments. After surveying the history of the “leveling debate” and the role of differentiation in that context, I will focus mainly on examples from SRHS and from Bainbridge High School in Washington State, two schools practicing an embedded honors curriculum that effectively serves populations at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. I will also deal more briefly with Newton South High School in Newton, Massachusetts, where the outcomes of embedded honors have been more mixed. Throughout, I will supplement with examples from my own practice, all to illustrate concrete ways that embedded honors

can be implemented for students of all ability levels to be served, challenged, and honored in the same classroom.

Who Benefits, and Who Suffers, from Heterogeneity?

For the last century, tracking—the sorting of students by perceived subject-specific ability levels (Hallinan, 1994)—has been the dominant practice not only in ELA but in all major subjects at most US public schools. Sorting practices such as tracking are designed to

facilitate instruction and to increase learning. The theory of tracking argues that tracking permits teachers to tailor instruction to the ability level of their students. A good fit between a student's ability and the level of instruction is believed to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of the instructional process . . . If tracking operated according to theory, students at all ability levels and from all backgrounds would learn more in tracked classes than in untracked ones. (pp. 75, 80)

For the last half-century, a steady supply of research² has yielded evidence that such groupings not only fail to deliver on this promise for a great many students but also produce “unintended consequences that impede the attainment of its goal” (p. 80). In response to criticism, the practice of tracking, particularly in ELA, declined during the 1990s, but experienced a resurgence after 2003, likely in response to the pressures exerted by No Child Left Behind. Although 2003 is the last year NAEP collected data on tracking, other studies suggest the increase continued through the rest of the decade (Loveless, 2015).

The terms *tracking*, *grouping*, and *leveling* are not entirely synonymous. For example, in some literature, “ability grouping” at the elementary level refers exclusively to the practice of differentiated instruction within heterogeneous classrooms (Loveless, 2015). Other terms such as “streaming,” and “phasing” are also used, each with its own shades of difference (WrightPsych, 2011). In this article, whenever I use any of these phrases, I am referring to the practice of students, either by choice or by compulsion, enrolling in classes designed to be homogeneous by readiness level.³ Heck, Price, and Thomas (2004), both in their own study and in their review of the literature, argue that any grouping by perceived ability level creates stratification, which leads to “unequal distribution of resources (e.g., curriculum, materials, professional expertise) to students . . . [and] undermines efforts to achieve educational equity” (p. 348).

Perhaps the most foundational challenge to homogeneous grouping was UCLA Professor Jeannie Oakes's (1985) *Keeping Track: How Schools*

Structure Inequality, her study of more than 300 leveled high school English and mathematics classes. I've summarized—and expanded on, when applicable—her key findings as follows:

1. There was little consistent evidence that the learning of high achievers benefited from a homogeneous group.
2. There was substantial evidence that the learning of students at lower readiness levels was negatively affected by homogeneous placements. Subsequent studies (e.g., Hallinan, 1994) also found that stigmatization can create a negative impact on students' academic performance in lower level classes. Gamoran (1992) found evidence that tracking can retard student learning, particularly with students at the low end of readiness level.
3. Negative socio-emotional effects were observed as well. According to survey responses, students placed in lower-level classes did not develop positive attitudes about their classmates or about their own agency in learning and school achievement, and that the grouping—coupled with teachers' and peers' attitudes—reinforced their self-perceptions as “average” or “low.” In addition, lower-tracked students tended to have lower aspirations and feel frustrated about plans for the future. Subsequent research supported this finding as well (Heck et al., 2004; Hertberg-Davis, 2009).
4. Reported behavior problems increased in low-tracked classes, even among students who were not exhibiting behavior problems in their higher or non-tracked classes in other subjects. This phenomenon was also found in both previous and subsequent research (Ball, 1981; Kellam, 1994; Schwartz, 1981; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2008; Willis, 1981).
5. Poor and minority students were largely overrepresented in low-ability tracks, and underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented. The correlation between placement, social class and ethnicity is present regardless of the basis for placement (test scores, counselor and teacher recommendations, or student and parent choice). This, too, was supported by subsequent studies (Gamoran, 1992; Hyland, 2006).⁴
6. The only consistent, statistically significant benefit of leveling Oakes found was that teachers reported enjoying teaching honors classes more than they reported enjoying teaching non-honors classes.⁵ A

follow-up study (Oakes & Lipton, 1990) found that the very label “advanced” or “remedial” affects teachers’ treatment of students as well as students’ images of themselves.

Oakes’s (1985) work, along with other studies, led the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1989 to recommend the elimination of all tracking in schools serving early adolescents. After 10 more years of research, the National Research Council, the oldest and most well-respected advisory body to the US government on academic research and one of the early advocates of No Child Left Behind, formally advised against ability grouping in general, testifying before Congress that they had found “considerable information that challenges the efficacy and fairness of placing students in typical low-track environments that are starved of intellectual or social stimulation. Hence, we conclude that [we] cannot justify these kinds of placements” (NRC, 1999, p. 1).

Fourteen years after that, “despite decades of vehement criticism and mountains of documents urging schools to abandon their use, tracking and ability grouping persist—and for the past decade or so, have thrived” (Loveless, 2013, p. 20). Beyond mere inertia, part of the reason why involves concern over the perceived shortcomings of heterogeneity, especially for some high-achieving populations of students. While acknowledging that tracking for many students yields no particular scholastic benefits, Rogers (1991) found that substantial gains were present among high-readiness students placed in specially tailored classrooms, which was later supported by subsequent research (Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002; Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2002). Argys, Rees, and Brewer (1996) found that high-readiness students actually performed more poorly when joined with students at lower levels of readiness. While they do acknowledge that “abolishing tracking in America’s schools would have a large positive impact on achievement for students currently in the lower tracks” (p. 623), they also caution that the increase in achievement would come at the expense of students in the higher tracks. The perception persists among many that “when advanced students are paired with lower-achieving students for group assignments, it’s the smart kids who do the bulk of the work” (Delisle, 2015, para. 19).

However, the National Middle School Association found that, with the use of effective heterogeneous pedagogies, not only students operating at low readiness levels but also “gifted learners can be adequately served in heterogeneous middle grades classrooms” (George, 1997, in Daniel, 2007, p. 3). A 2006 Columbia University longitudinal study found that “the performance of initial high achievers did not differ statistically in heterogeneous

classes relative to previous homogeneous grouping” except in propensity to take AP exams, meaning they were no worse off in an arrangement that had benefits for their lower-performing peers (Burriss, Heubert, & Levin, 2006). A study (Hoxby & Weingarth, 2005) of nine years’ worth of data from the Wake County, NC, Public School System yielded evidence that

people who are . . . high types appear to receive sufficient benefit from interacting with peers a bit below them that there is little reason to isolate them completely. . . . In other words, a little bit of variation is okay. [Only] when the gap is too wide—say, six grade levels in reading—nobody wins. (p. 30)

Tomlinson (2015), examining the data from Kulik’s (1992) study on gifted learners in heterogeneous classrooms who appeared to have suffered, highlights how Kulik only explored how gifted students performed in heterogeneous classes that did not specifically focus on challenging students at high readiness levels (so-called “plus-one” learning), vs. homogeneous classrooms in which “plus-one” learning was employed:

In the two decades since those studies, I’ve observed and studied . . . differentiation in mixed-ability classrooms where regular planning for a full spectrum of learners—including advanced learners—was a given. Teachers in those schools typically “teach up,” planning first for advanced learners, then scaffolding instruction to enable less advanced students to access those rich learning experiences. Further, they extend the initial learning opportunities when they are not sufficiently challenging for highly advanced learners. *In those schools, achievement for the full spectrum of learners—including advanced learners—rose markedly when compared to peer schools where this approach was not pervasive.* (para. 16–18; emphasis mine)

Not only is there ample evidence to suggest that high-performing students can be well-served in heterogeneous classes, the benefits of “honors-type” classes for high performing students are not uncontested. Oakes (1985) found that placement in classes labeled for high-ability students was not necessarily a guarantee of better learning for those labeled as gifted. Ironically, Catsambis, Mulkey, and Crain (2001) found that when students are assigned to high-ability groups, the academic self-concept of boys (although not girls) actually *diminishes*—they become less likely to take academic risks or push themselves, for fear of not living up to the label of “advanced.”⁶ This phenomenon painfully illustrates the problem William

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Deresiewicz (2008) describes: “[I]f you’re afraid to fail, you’re afraid to take risks, which begins to explain the . . . most damning disadvantage of an elite education: that it is profoundly anti-intellectual” (para. 20).⁷

It would seem, therefore, that high-readiness as well as low-readiness students may well have an interest in reforming or even removing the practice of ability-level grouping. But simply increasing heterogeneity is unlikely to improve student learning, especially if teachers do not feel confident operating in such classrooms. According to the 2008⁸ *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, 43 percent of respondents agreed, or strongly agreed, with the statement “my class/classes in my school have become so mixed in terms of students’ learning ability that I/teachers can’t teach them” (Markow & Pieters, 2012, p. 11)—and this was within ability-grouped classes! The question here is the same question I faced in my own school: How can one design heterogeneous classrooms that support students at all readiness levels, including addressing both the learning needs and the college admissions concerns of high-readiness students? Differentiated instruction can be a powerful tool toward this end.

Differentiation as a Necessary Component of Heterogeneity

Since the 1990s, one of the most well-known sets of strategies for teaching in heterogeneous classrooms has been differentiated instruction (DI) (Tomlinson, 1999). Tomlinson defines DI as the practice of, within a single classroom, “ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning” (Rock et al., 2008, p. 32).

In practice, many of us—myself included—simply “taught to the middle,” to the disadvantage of students at both poles of readiness level.

A heterogeneously grouped class is not, by definition, one where DI is practiced effectively, or practiced at all. Even as one of the fiercest opponents of our department’s move to leveling, nine years of teaching in the elective-based program had been long enough for me to recognize that our classes, while heterogeneous, had no formal, institutionalized approach for differentiating to meet the needs of all learners. In practice, many of us—myself included—simply “taught to the middle,” to the disadvantage of students at both poles of readiness level.

Similarly, the substantial body of research critiquing tracking does not unilaterally endorse any and all teaching models that involve heterogeneously grouped classes of students. Rather, the research suggests that success

depends on adopting and executing deliberate and particular approaches to teaching in a heterogeneous classroom. Even when teachers consciously attempt to employ DI, not all differentiated classrooms are considered equal, especially where high readiness level students are concerned. Herbert-Davis's (2009) review of the literature concluded that, while DI held the potential for all students to achieve at high levels, "it does not seem that we are yet at a place where differentiation within the regular classroom is a particularly effective method of challenging our most able learners" (p. 252). Schmoker's (2010) observations of educators attempting differentiation specifically in ELA classrooms concluded that "it dumbed down instruction" (para. 4).

Oakes (1985) and her successors found that heterogeneous classrooms that serve learners at all readiness levels demand certain specific pedagogies. Jablon (2014) provides a highly accessible synthesis of the last 20 years' worth of research on learning theory and neurology, outlining the necessary components of classrooms for ensuring opportunities for higher-order thinking and achievement among students of all levels:

1. The ability for students to work cooperatively in groups on different tasks, as opposed to on a single, one-task-for-all class assignment is essential (Baloche, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Shindler, 2010). Students need opportunities to direct the course of what they learn and to actively learn from and teach one another. The teacher should serve more as facilitator than "source of all knowledge" (Liu & Matthews, 2005). The above set of practices has since come to be grouped under the umbrella "student-centered" or "student-responsive" pedagogy.
2. Within these groups, students need to have tasks for which they are individually accountable, differentiated by interest and learning style/preference as well as readiness level (Baloche, 1998; D. W. Johnson & Johnson, 1989; R. T. Johnson & Johnson, 1994).
3. The ability to pursue problem-based, authentic tasks with real-world connections and tangible product-based outcomes (a series of approaches often grouped under the umbrella of "project-based learning"), as opposed to paper-and-pencil assessment, is vital for fostering engagement, holistic understanding, and learning for ownership and application (Larmer, Ross, & Mergendoller, 2009; Markham, 2005).

Jablon (2014) argues that classrooms with the features and structures described above provide an effective means to engage all students in higher-

order thinking, as they “simultaneously and interrelatedly [help] students acquire and synthesize content, skills and habits of mind” (p. 41). Although Jablon seldom employs the term “differentiated instruction,” differentiation would seem to be a required part of nearly all of the “necessary components” listed above.

Despite the growing consensus about the efficacy of student-centered, differentiated learning, there remain persistent teacher concerns about “how to teach the complex higher-order thinking, reading, and writing skills the Common Core State Standards require, and also manage to teach content” (Jablon, 2014, p. 41). However, what may be holding ELA teachers back from practicing DI is less a pressure for coverage and more a lack of alternative examples to the “traditional” manner of teaching in which they themselves were taught (Jablon, 2014, p. 11). In the next section, I provide some of those examples, challenge some traditions of ELA teaching that I believe are unnecessary or even retrograde to higher-order learning, and share models that are consistent with the ability to offer not only challenging work but also the pragmatic honors credit, within the framework of a heterogeneously grouped classroom.

Models and Features of “Embedded Honors”

What follows is an attempt to synthesize, from the few existing models I could find of embedded honors in public secondary education, a series of best practices. While I explore three schools’ programs in depth, I have also drawn on the embedded honors practices of schools in Kent City, Michigan; Madison, Wisconsin; Grant Middle School in Reading, California; and Henry M. Jackson High School in Everett, Washington, as well as the universities mentioned in the introduction. Additionally, I have added descriptions of tools and approaches that I have picked up from colleagues and students whose origins I have unfortunately lost track of, but whose efficacy has earned them a consistent place in my own teaching practice.

Sanborn Regional High School (SHRS) serves Kingston, New Hampshire, a community where 44.3 percent of the population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). By contrast, Bainbridge High School and Newton South High School are located in affluent school districts that, like mine, serve a “98% achievement on test scores kind of population,” to use Bainbridge teacher Kimberly Kooistra’s description. Bainbridge sits literally on an island of the same name in Washington’s Puget Sound, in a city that CNN/Money and *Money* magazine once voted as the “second best place to live in the United States” (CNNMoney.com, 2005).

Subsequent to reading the official town and school documents for these sites, I made contact with various administrators and English department faculty members from December 2015 through March 2016, as described in Table 1.

In the case of the phone interviews, I took notes on my laptop. In addition to the text of their emails, several of the interviewees provided me with documents in the form of programs of studies, course expectations, individual assignments, internal memos and an excerpt from a teacher's National Board portfolio. Everyone gave written permission to use their real names in this article; references to these representatives are derived from these electronic and phone communications.

Honors level needs to be a distinction pertaining to individual students' work and achievement, as opposed to a label affixed to an entire course or class of students by definition of their enrollment.

Competency-Based Learning and Assessment

As SRHS's principal Brian Stack (CASN, 2014) outlined, honors level needs to be a distinction pertaining to individual students' work and achievement, as opposed to a label affixed to an entire course or class of students by definition of their enrollment, or based on the curriculum and pedagogy

Table 1. Contacts and Locations for Embedded Honors Programs

School	Interviewees	Contact Method	Dates of Contact
Sanborn Regional HS (abbreviated <i>SRHS</i> hereafter): Low to middle SES	Brian Stack, <i>Principal</i>	Email Phone	12/14/15, 1/6/16, 3/17/16 12/14/15, 1/11/16
	Julia Ryan, <i>Teacher</i>	Email	12/15/15, 1/11/16
Bainbridge HS (abbreviated <i>Bainbridge</i> hereafter): High SES	Kristen Haizlip, <i>Associate Principal</i>	Email Phone	12/14/15, 3/28/16 12/14/15
	Kirrin Coleman, <i>ELA Dept. Chair</i>	Email Phone	1/4/16 12/14/15
	Kimberly Kooistra, <i>Teacher</i>	Email	12/14/15, 12/15/15, 3/17/16, 3/28/16
	Ashley Crandell, <i>Teacher</i>	Email	12/19/15, 12/21/15
	Karen Polinsky, <i>Teacher</i>	Email	1/7/16, 1/27/16
Newton South HS (abbreviated <i>Newton South</i> hereafter): High SES	Joseph Golding, <i>Teacher & Methods Instructor</i>	Email	2/12/16, 3/17/16, 3/21/16

employed by the teacher. For Stack, the most vital element of the embedded honors approach is his schoolwide policy of competency-based grading. A competency-based grading system is one where “learners advance through content or earn credit based on demonstration of proficiency of competencies” rather than the traditional system of “seat time” adding up to promotion (Townsend, 2014, para. 8).

The central feature of competency-based grading is that students advance to higher-level work upon demonstrated mastery of standards, as opposed to moving on “whenever the unit is over.” It demands a somewhat asynchronous approach to curricula, assessment, and classroom management on the teacher’s part, because it assumes that some students will work through some standards more rapidly than others. “The unit of learning becomes modular” (para. 11) under such a system, and, ideally, “students take ownership of learning” while the teacher’s role is to “provide the appropriate supports” (para. 10). Constant formative assessments are necessary to keep track of student progress, and the need for teachers to “assess skills or concepts in multiple contexts and multiple ways [is] non-negotiable in competency-based education” (para. 19).

At SRHS, says Stack, all teachers practice a consistent set of grading expectations, which provides a common language for the rubrics in any given course’s learning contracts. Students must meet the advanced competency requirements of a certain number of assignments to earn honors credit, although the precise arrangement does vary slightly from teacher to teacher.

Honors Label Attached to Type, Not Quantity, of Work

If “honors” is to be a label applied to coursework, and not to students or classes themselves, then Stack cautions that

simply increasing the quantity of work or the hours spent on work does not constitute an honors option. Honors work should incorporate all regular course content with added emphasis on student involvement in learning and demonstrating higher levels of intellectual skills . . . [honors level] work requires understanding and analysis rather than simple memorization or restatement of material. Students’ learning outcomes demonstrate that they have had to analyze problems, evaluate possible decisions or actions, and draw reasonable conclusions or generate unique solutions. (CASN, 2014, p. 1)

A pitfall for English classes implementing embedded honors is to make extra reading the sole or main determinant of that distinction. As an example, Newton South offers a humanities course with embedded honors

options where, according to teacher Joseph Golding, “English does supplemental reading for honors—[the teacher] require[s] specific titles for outside reading, and then [students seeking honors credit] write in-class essays.”

The mechanisms in SRHS’s Global Studies (ELA) class are different: according to the course expectations document, they reinforce that “the intention of the Honors coursework is not to pile students with extra reading, but to encourage and support them in making connections between texts and the world.” In SRHS’s model, a student must complete a certain number of assignments at the honors level to earn the honors distinction (and thus, the extra GPA points) on their term grade. Many programs included some manner of “tracking sheets” or “contracts” to help students and teachers monitor attempted honors work.⁹ Students in the Global Studies class at SRHS must declare their intention to pursue honors-level assignments before the end of September, which include taking “an active leadership role in the classroom” via “leading class discussions [and] small group activities,” taking more “self-directed” approaches to assignments, and metacognitively charting their growth. Students need to complete all honors assignments to receive honors credit; missing even one potentially constitutes a “release of contract,” as does failure to meet deadlines or “negative classroom behavior.”¹⁰

At Bainbridge, students also contract for honors, but do not have to complete every assignment at the honors level; rather, they must complete at least three or four (depending on the course). If students apply for an honors designation on an assignment and don’t receive one, they are allowed to revise and resubmit. Honors work is described as that which “exceed[s] and demonstrate[s] the standard on idea development, style and required writing. Students need to show a ready willingness to grow as a writer [and] take an active role in targeting and monitoring skills that need to be improved upon,” according to a document describing the English Honors Option for the 10th grade.

SRHS uses Norman Webb’s Depth of Knowledge (Mississippi State University Research and Curriculum Unit, 2009), or DOK, levels as a means of distinguishing what constitutes honors-level work. DOK is a four-level hierarchical taxonomy that runs from “lower cognitive load” work like memorization and recall to “strategic thinking” (assessment, logical argument, application of skills to non-routine problems) and finally to “extended thinking” (synthesis and creation of new original products that apply or prove understandings). In my own classes, I have until now differentiated tasks using Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), but after speaking with Stack I plan to shift to Karin Hess’s (2009) Cognitive Rigor Matrix, which provides a synthesis of Webb’s and Bloom’s work.

Importantly, in SRHS's model DOK level does not necessarily equate with a higher grade. In other words, it is not that a student completing tasks at DOK level 4 earns an A while her classmate completing tasks at DOK level 3 earns a B. Rather, each student, upon demonstrating highly successful completion of the tasks at their chosen DOK level, earns an A. However, the student who does so at DOK level 4 (and who does so routinely, with every assignment) will be earning honors credit on her transcript, while her classmate will not.

Means and Methods of Differentiation for Honors

For teachers to accommodate these multiple levels of tasks within one classroom, they must open up multiple routes of differentiation. These differentiation strategies, in the context of embedding honors credit, could include varying text and product complexity as well as the amount of instructional scaffolding students receive.

Honors Determined by Text Complexity

If one's goal for a given lesson or assignment is to teach compositional skills, then on some level it truly does not matter if students are writing about Shakespeare or *The Hunger Games*, or even about the sandwich they ate for lunch that day. Differentiating by the interest or expertise levels of students can afford everyone a plug-in or place for engagement. Then, the choice of more sophisticated texts (and/or of more sophisticated compositional skills, such as working on voice and tone as opposed to just syntax and spelling) could be the mark of honors work.

Of course, assessing complexity and relative literary merit can be an emotionally and politically charged process. Nevertheless, I imagine that even the fiercely divergent thinkers that constitute most English departments could come to some agreement here (Virginia Woolf, no matter how you cut it, writes with greater sophistication and more challenging diction than does Stephenie Meyer). For an extended examination of evaluating text complexity and comparable literary merit, please see Miller (2014).

But more difficult than determining relative rigor of texts may be the idea of breaking with tradition, specifically that an English class necessarily consists of all the students simultaneously reading and discussing the same text, or even reading texts in their entirety. English teachers often expend much of their curriculum design time and energy in selecting the most appropriate text for their class's expected readiness level, and then back-fill to determine what standards or goals the text might meet. However, teachers

would be well-advised to reverse this process: Determine the goals first, and then choose a text—or better yet, multiple texts—and other resources that could help students reach the goals.

In other words, *in the service of what student learning goals* are teachers employing the texts they are choosing? Perhaps they want their students to examine and understand character development, or to evaluate the role that setting plays in the plot or theme of the story, or to identify metaphors and figurative language. Isn't literature replete with hundreds if not thousands of possible texts that could potentially lend themselves to each of those goals? Why can't students attempting to earn honors credit pursue these goals with *Sense and Sensibility* while some of their classmates do so by reading *Divergent*?

The teacher candidates with whom I work frequently report that they cannot be this flexible with text selection, saying something along the lines of “my chair/principal says we all have to teach *The Great Gatsby*.” Teaching *The Great Gatsby*, however, is not a goal in and of itself, except in the sense that the teacher's goal is to not get fired. Often, even experienced ELA teachers begin lesson planning by looking in the bookroom to see what texts are available, then building goals around that book, as opposed to starting with the goals and choosing texts—or portions of texts—that would help students meet those goals. Both methods can lead to student learning, but the second approach opens up more possibilities for differentiation to reach all learners.

Even if employing certain texts is required of a teacher, it does not necessarily mean all students have to be reading the books in their entirety, or simultaneously. Perhaps some students are ready for *Hamlet* in September, and some won't be until April. Perhaps only reading selected excerpts of *Pride and Prejudice*, scaffolded by some plot summary if necessary, can give students the material they need to understand irony or subtext. Honors level work, again, could then involve students reading particularly challenging texts, or texts in their entirety.

For example, Ashley Crandell at Bainbridge developed a summative writing assessment for her Southern Gothic Literature unit: students could choose to read either *To Kill a Mockingbird* (standard) or *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (honors). “This is a fantastic pairing,” she wrote,

as it allows the instructor to deliver whole-class direct instruction on common themes and settings, while challenging students who are better served by a more rigorous text. I have four students this semester who elected to read both books because they were swayed by my opening remarks about how these novels go hand-in-hand.

In Crandell's class all students are scored using the same rubric, which examines students' development of analysis, use of evidence, command of mechanics, etc., "but the students choosing an Honors prompt will be under higher cognitive load since they will also be analyzing Southern Gothic elements and how they contribute to the overall theme of the novel."

Joseph Golding, who teaches the Newton South humanities class that offers embedded honors options, cautions that "differentiating the reading of the main texts in class," in his experience, can "corrode community The English teachers in [our] program all feel that what makes it 'English' class is when we are all discussing one character, one passage, one choice."

Indeed, in any embedded honors model where different students are reading different texts at different times, whole-class instruction may not be a feasible strategy, but I would argue that "community" can take many forms. The use of literature circles (Noe, 2013), Socratic circles (Copeland, 2005), or other structures where students separate into groups creates smaller "communities of learners" (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209) that can potentially afford students more time for in-depth interaction and deep learning than a whole-class discussion or lecture could. In these communities, sometimes students reading the same text will work together. At other times a lesson might be better served by students "jigsawing" (Adlit.org, 2015), forming groups where everyone has read a different text, but must collectively examine a common theme that reinforces the universality of a certain concept or human experience. English departments that practice embedded honors don't solely rely on these structures—whole-class instruction can and does happen—but it is invariably coupled with these smaller community learning formations.

Honors Determined by Amount of Scaffolding

If a teacher's goal is to have students analyze the plot of *Macbeth*, then why not use SparkNotes or *No Fear Shakespeare* as scaffolds to remove the simultaneous challenge of decoding Shakespearian language? On the other hand, if teaching the decoding of Shakespearian language is the goal for a lesson, then an in-class guided examination of a short, discrete passage is a good strategy, as opposed to overwhelming students with entire scenes all at once, and have them struggle with keeping track of plot and characters as well as language. In this way, students who struggle can still learn the skills and concepts required of them, while students seeking to gain honors credit can distinguish themselves by effectively accomplishing multiple tasks at once, or accomplishing them without the scaffolding, or even by successfully *creating* scaffolding for classmates who need it.

Even though my own school’s English department does not employ an embedded honors model, I have used these adaptations with students simply as a means of compliance with IEPs and 504 plans, or to challenge students at advanced readiness levels; they could just as easily be used to determine honors credit. To adapt another model I have employed: Demonstrating comprehension and analysis of a given scene could be the goal for all students, while going further by writing an additional scene, as a supplement or alternate storyline, could be honors work. The above examples could be considered as a variation on what Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) call “tiered instruction,” where the teacher,

by keeping the focus of the activity the same, but providing routes of access at varying degrees of difficulty . . . maximizes the likelihood that each student comes away with pivotal skills and understandings [and that] each student is appropriately challenged. (Tomlinson, as cited in Preszler, 2006, p. 8)

Using that model, honors credit would be assigned to students who successfully take on the most challenging tiers.

To be clear: I am in no way advocating that students who present with less readiness be left at the highly scaffolded levels, any more than I would want any student to stay within the confines of *Harry Potter* in terms of text complexity. The teacher’s goal should be to move students to the point where, by the end of the year, they *can* tackle more than one skill at once, and they *can* perform more complex tasks that require higher-order thinking.¹¹ It is therefore possible that a student might not earn honors credit for the first three quarters, but could do so by quarter four. The challenge of representing this all on a transcript is a separate, non-pedagogical concern.

Honors Determined by Complexity of Student Products

Differentiation by product provides additional opportunities for embedding honors. In an adaptation of Nunley’s (2006) model of “layering,” beyond simply “writing more essays,” the *expectations* of an essay can be adjusted for challenge. In my own ninth-grade English class, where the entire class has read (simultaneously, or by a certain juncture in the year) *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a first-tier essay assignment requires students to create a thesis and support it with evidence from the text. For my students at lower readiness levels, I sometimes provide the thesis. For my highest performing students (and this would be the honors-level option in an embedded scenario), I assign the task of integrating relevant evidence from/responding to additional related texts—for example, a Richard Wright or Toni Morrison novel. Similarly,

Julia Ryan, a ninth-grade teacher at SRHS, tasks students seeking honors credit with comparing *Mockingbird* with Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*.

Ashley Crandell's ninth-grade ELA class at Bainbridge provides another such a model used for embedded honors: in a unit anchored by *Romeo and Juliet*, her students' summative assignment is to produce a work of written analysis. Those who contract for "regular" coursework are asked to compose essays that stay entirely within the text, responding to potential prompts such as "who bears the most responsibility for the tragedy: the adults, or Romeo and Juliet?" or explaining how the theme of "revolt against authority" works in the play. These are described in her assignment sheet as DOK3 tasks. Students contracting for honors pursue tasks labeled as DOK4 level, which require making connections outside the text, either to *Silas Marner* (which the class had read earlier in the year) or to a contemporary American issue like gang warfare or teenage suicide.

A staple of the differentiation-by-product methodology is the "menu" (Wormelli, 2006), where students choose from fundamentally different products, perhaps even using different media—an essay for some, a video for others, a visual project for still others. While menu choices can be used to determine honors (i.e., an essay aims for honors, a visual collage aims for standard), a more sophisticated approach that truly accesses what Tomlinson would call the "preferred mode of learning" (in Rock et al., 2008, p. 32)¹² would involve all potential products being assessed by the same rubric, for the same understandings. To qualify for honors using this model, a student might need to earn all marks in the "excellent" column, or perhaps, as in previous examples, include an additional layer of analysis, such as comparing and contrasting the book with another literary work, or with current events, or engage in a metacognitive reflection. These expectations would hold true regardless of the medium through which students communicated their learning.

With my 11th graders, I have created and employ a still-higher tier for analytic essays: to read, apply, and respond to the writings of literary critics. When my students read *Things Fall Apart*, most pursue within-the-text arguments; some challenge themselves to compare and contrast Achebe's presentation of African characters with Joseph Conrad's in *Heart of Darkness*; and I direct my highest readiness level students to Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhaba, and other postcolonial critics, and ask them how these writers would read certain events in Achebe's novel. These levels could easily be mapped to a multileveled system of conferring credit, similar to an assignment based on *Things Fall Apart* from a Bainbridge 10th-grade class: students are enjoined to do research on the author, or on aspects of his native country, Nigeria.

Honors papers need to have 4–6 academic sources (versus 3 for standard level) and must include “an extra half a page of metacognition discussing the correlation between the research topic and the unit.”

Another honors-level assessment task could be to take responsibility for teaching the material to someone else, which is an element of SRHS’s honors contract. Julia Ryan describes her implementation of this element in her ninth-grade classes:

I see our honors students taking the lead in the classroom, not just when it comes to their own work, but also when it comes to their classmates. I have honors students who will finish their work in their regular English class, and will immediately ask who they can help. I know that I can count on these students to help their classmates with skills that they themselves are still learning, because they are already figuring out how to be leaders in their environment.

Alternatively and in addition, students can take part in a (documented) discussion with peers also doing honors-level work, giving and receiving criticism, a mechanism I employ informally with some of my highest readiness level students in all my classes. Ryan has also adopted Google’s (now-defunct) “20% project,” credited with leading to the development of Gmail and Google News (Mims, 2015), which Ryan says “operates on the belief that if you allow students to spend 20% of their time working on something they are truly passionate about, you will see that reflected in their regular work, and they might just come up with an incredible product in the meantime.” Ryan describes how,

whenever an honors student finishes an assignment early, or is ready to move on before the rest of the class, they have a built-in enrichment opportunity—they can work on their 20% project. Students use that extra time, when they have it, to conduct additional research, focus their driving questions, and work on other project-related assignments.

Anecdotally, she says, “this project has been awesome for our honors students because it is self-driven, fueled by student interest, and also allows us as teachers the opportunity to help students hone their skills in regard to the creative process. We are also seeing the benefits of this option and this project in our regular classes.”

Conditions for Success of an Embedded Honors Program

Some trends emerged regarding the outcomes of the various embedded honors programs I researched, which I attempt to synthesize next as three

necessary conditions for success: transparent expectations, teacher training, and collaboration between teachers and administration.

Clear, Consistent, and Well-Publicized Expectations

Regardless of the specific practice and standards one employs for determining honors credit (and for more suggestions, see King-Shaver & Hunter, 2005; Winebrenner, 1992), students need to know unequivocally, from well before the time they actually begin an assignment, what the specific guidelines are for honors vs. standard work. They—and their parents—must know from the first day of the course how many honors-level assignments they need to complete, per quarter, semester, or year, to earn extra GPA points at marking period time. Administrators at Madison West High School experienced years of opposition from parents when those standards were not made crystal-clear or were not consistent from teacher to teacher (Beck, 2013; Welch, 2011).

Schools should also engage in information campaigns, both external and internal. In the case of Newton South, Joseph Golding recalls how

kids [had] the very clear impression that embedded honors is the “easy” path and there was a big expose in the student paper comparing the number of A’s in “regular” vs. “embedded.” We [had to write] an op-ed response explaining the flaws in their analysis of the data . . . [still], some teachers actively advise stronger students to avoid our program.

SRHS produced a brochure, posted to the school website and handed out at parents’ night, Brian Stack says, “specifically because we had parents questioning what honors looked like, or who heard rumors we didn’t have honors at all. [The brochure] told them, ‘yes, we do, we have lots of opportunities for students who are ready for that—here’s our courses, here’s how our contracts work, extended learning opportunities.’ We tried to capture everything we do across the spectrum.”

During Bainbridge’s transition to embedded honors, the school formed a special panel that included parents. “We sought their feedback,” recalls Associate Principal Kristen Haizlip, which included comments such as “my kid did embedded honors in American Studies and it was just more work, not higher level, I feel frustrated.” Haizlip says that listening to parent and student feedback let teachers and administrators know they needed both “better PR” and better standardization. Haizlip characterizes past experiments with embedded honors as “teacher dependent, they all did it differently, and how it played out was very different.” She describes the new program as “really intentional in response . . . the teachers are all in right now.”

Teachers Must Be Trained

As has been made evident, planning for and facilitating a heterogeneous classroom that uses differentiation to embed honors demands that a teacher transform herself, to use a well-worn but no less meaningful phrase, from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side.” In a well-functioning differentiated classroom, a large portion of class time consists of students working in groups, or independently, on a variety of different projects. The teacher, instead of lecturing from the front of the room, moves throughout the class, checking in with each group and student “where they are.” The successful differentiated classroom is not a quiet one, but full of student (on-task) talk. This classroom structure requires particular management techniques, including lengthy portions of the beginning of the year being devoted to setting norms for, and consequences for violating, appropriate behavior in group work (for more specifics, see Baloché, 1998; Jablon, 2014; Lieber, 2009; Shindler, 2010, especially Chapter 12). Veteran teachers who have mastered an authoritarian style of classroom management that “works” for them may well be loath to abandon it, and new teachers, inexperienced with *any* kind of classroom, may abandon a differentiated approach too early.

Bainbridge teacher Kimberly Kooistra says that district-provided professional development was key for overcoming such challenges. “We had a workshop on differentiation,” she recalls, “what it meant and what it could mean . . . we had more conversations every week . . . slowly each of us came to the side of [adopting embedded honors].”

Bainbridge started small, de-tracking just ninth-grade English. They committed to having a core team of dedicated ninth-grade teachers pilot the embedded model; the administration worked with them to keep the class sizes below 24, and the guidance department made sure that the students involved stayed with their English teachers the entire year. Concurrently, as Haizlip explained, the administration formed a “highly capable committee” that coordinated clustered training of teachers, two at a time, in “highly capable education” practices.

In short, moving to embedded honors at Bainbridge took a whole-school cooperative effort. Three years later, following a 10th-grade teacher’s successful pilot of embedded honors, the sophomores joined the program. As of 2014, embedded honors became the system for 9th through 11th grade. “Even with the seniors,” says Kooistra, “we’ve been moving toward greater differentiation *within* classes. We’re encouraging students to reflect on their learning and set personal goals. Honors is part of that process.”

According to Stack, SRHS provided “a lot of professional development connected to all the different aspects of competency based work,” including trainings in Professional Learning Communities and Quality Performance Assessment. The administration hired consultants from Boston-based Center for Collaborative Education and the Center for Assessment in Dover, New Hampshire, which then spawned sustained in-house professional development: “We brought in training team professionals who ‘trained the trainers,’ and then we could offer [PD] right here.”

The absence of that sustained and formalized training at Newton South may well have played a part in the frustrations that Golding described earlier. The amount of formal training the school devoted to embedded honors practices, Golding describes, was

not much. . . . We got very little PD in terms of bringing professionals and experts in, but we had ample time to work together to develop our own thinking, read some, and develop units, and even visit some other schools . . . the release time we had was largely spent on other issues, though we also worked to iron out how the multilevel aspect of the course would work.

Embedded honors models require that a school or district make a sustained investment in training—training both in the pedagogy, and also in the ability to collaborate with colleagues in the process. “Many of the people we hired [as teachers] from the outside,” said Stack, “we hired because we said, ‘we want middle school experience.’” He actively wanted to infuse SRHS’s faculty, subject to the characteristic departmental balkanization of high school design, with elements of the interdisciplinary design of middle school instructional teams. As for teachers “who didn’t feel it was a good fit,” he said, “we [reassigned] them to the 11th and 12th grades.” For the embedded 9th and 10th years, he said, “we kept those [faculty who were] interested, and hired new people especially qualified” to make the embedded honors structure work.

Teachers and Administrators Must Collaborate

“In any English department,” says Kooistra, even those not engaged in the practice of embedded honors, “consensus doesn’t easily happen.” According to her English department chair, Kirrin Coleman, however, in some ways it was that lack of consensus about the basis for being enrolled in traditional honors classes (test scores, writing samples, teacher recommendations, and parent advocacy were all considered and debated) that created the need at Bainbridge for a completely different approach to honors credit.

Prior to 2005, says Coleman, Bainbridge “had a pretty traditional tracked system” in the 9th- and 10th-grade years, but also fielded an experimental interdisciplinary ELA/social studies course called American Studies in the 11th grade. Students could earn honors credit within American Studies through “a type of embedded honors, but not the same type we now have”—in large part they were simply considered for honors based on whether their grade in class was an 87 percent or above.

Kooistra describes the leveling distribution at Bainbridge, prior to the advent of embedded honors, as suffering from the “Lake Woebegone effect, with a 60/40% distribution of students in honors.”¹⁵ At the high school, says Kooistra, “students in regular classes didn’t feel that they should or could do high level work . . . it was often like, ‘you’re in honors or nothing.’” Furthermore, she reported that student readiness levels did not fall neatly into just one leveled category: “you would have students who were strong in reading but not writing, or vice versa. The standard for honors just about became, ‘you turned your homework in on time’ . . . meanwhile, we had kids with great critical thinking skills but less work completion skills” who were “stuck” in the lower-level classes.

What prompted the Bainbridge English department to break from that pattern, according to Haizlip, was the 2010 passing of a state law, RCW28a, that mandated “the instructional program of basic education provided by each school district . . . include . . . programs for highly capable students” (Washington State Legislature, 2010). All public schools, with the aid of additional state funds, were to provide services specially targeted to the highest-achieving students.

It was left to school districts, individual schools, and in some cases individual academic departments to determine how best to fulfill this mandate. This was the opportunity that some in the department had been waiting for, says Coleman, to move in a different direction. Meeting notes from the time reflect the department’s shared goals, to “build community and a sense of connection for [ninth grade] students; to avoid entry-level labeling and give opportunity for excellence to all; to make future academic choices better informed; to make challenging/suitable curriculum for the greatest number of students.”

Coleman describes the move to embedding honors as “highly contentious . . . some students and some in the community had been very invested in the honors label and this was a major shake-up.” Kooistra credits the implementation of the program, in large part, to a visionary principal “who tended to think big picture and who was close to retirement,” was willing

to “put it on the line” and push and defend the idea of embedded honors, “which was not a popular idea at the time with the school board.” Being close to retirement, says Kooistra, emboldened him to take a stand and make the change happen.

At SRHS, Principal Brian Stack faced a catalyst from the other end of the readiness spectrum. “It started out of necessity . . . our failure rate was very high with 9th graders,” he recalls, “with over 30% failing one or more classes . . . [and we had] other data saying we weren’t meeting kids at all kinds of levels.” Of the classes labeled as honors, Stack recalls, “a lot [of students] were being put in there just because they exhibited certain behavior—they participated, asked a lot of questions, were ‘go-getters’ . . . or maybe just because their parents pushed for it.”

Much like the case at Bainbridge, the move to heterogeneous classes with embedded honors came about from a fusion of teacher initiative and strong administrative leadership. “I started the process,” said Stack, then “charged a group of people to start thinking about it,” and together they built the new system. Stack distributed leadership with one of his assistant principals, who wound up writing her master’s thesis about the experience.

Because the situation was so dire, Stack said, the consensus among faculty and administrators was, “let’s assume out of the gate that just because we’ve done something before, it doesn’t mean it works well—let’s not be bound by that—we have a chance to build from ground zero the school we want to have. Interestingly enough, no one ever felt out of the gate that we *needed* to separate honors students or that [leveled classes] was a non-negotiable.”

In Newton South’s case, says Golding, embedded honors was never actually a goal in and of itself. “[We won] a federal grant to build smaller learning communities,” he explained. “We needed to create cohorts of kids who would stay in classes together over multiple years.” In short, the creation of Golding’s class “did *not* happen out of support for an embedded honors program. That was required in order to get the grant money.”

Another theme that seems to emerge here is that schools successfully employing embedded honors do so across an entire department, or even across the entire school, instead of as was the case with Newton South, offering only one or two classes that do so. Stack describes how SRHS always had “pockets” of classes that experimented with embedding honors, but usually just in one section, and never for required core courses. Evolving from these pioneer models, the team was able to transform first the ninth grade, then the tenth-grade ELA offerings. The move happened concurrent with the aforementioned adoption of the competency-based grading system.

“Those two movements began to work in tandem,” says Stack. “It all just sort of naturally worked out, philosophically.”

One of the greatest advantages to dismantling leveled classes, Stack recalls, was that “the schedule was no longer a barrier.” Any student could now be placed in any ELA class, and be confident of experiencing instruction tailored to her readiness level.

“I think it’s scary,” says Stack, “when you’re a school leader, to take a jump like this . . . to take a leap and not know how it’s going to pan out. I couldn’t have done it without a group of teachers working together for a common goal.”

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Worth the Challenge: Evidence of Success

SRHS and Bainbridge transformed their ELA classes using embedded honors in response to two seemingly different charges. In the case of the former, the mandate was to better serve students at a low SES level who were failing to acquire necessary basic skills; in the case of the latter, it was to better serve the highest achieving students in an affluent community. In truth, however, their goal was precisely the same—to design a single classroom capable of meeting the learning needs of *all* students within it.

According to an internal report composed and shared with me by Bainbridge ELA teacher Karen Polinsky, after implementing embedded honors for their ninth graders, scores on the WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning) and SAT tests increased by an average of about 10 percent at all readiness levels. Despite adding more students to the ranks of those encouraged to take the AP English Literature exam, Bainbridge’s AP pass rate did not decrease, but increased from 80 percent to 85 percent. “It’s impossible to isolate which factor had the most impact,” Polinsky wrote. “Heterogeneous grouping, teacher training, increased collaboration by teachers, or smaller class size. Probably all of these.”

Stack recalls that “there was definitely some pushback” when SRHS installed embedded honors, particularly from parents who, “even before they were parents here, heard [about our model] and thought we’re not challenging the top kids with what they call a ‘true honors experience.’” He says that every year, such pushback has lessened, as more students and parents go through the system and “can speak to the fact that it is rigorous.” Most powerful, says Stack, is the evidence of improvement he can point to: in the last five years since implementing the new system, the ninth-grade

failure rates that had exceeded 50 percent dropped to less than 5 percent.

Even at Newton South, where a less comprehensive approach to installing embedded honors may have created a more problematic implementation, Golding provided anecdotal evidence that “the program has been great for [students at a low readiness level] who are maybe ready to move up but need some extra time to figure out how. Similarly, [students at higher readiness levels] get a chance to test out how they feel about honors work, and that’s a good thing. Lastly, my colleague always uses a tennis metaphor about playing up: you improve most when you can play someone who is more advanced, and our program means that the room has more space for people to grow and ‘play up.’”

It is important to note that both SRHS and Bainbridge, despite their socioeconomic differences, serve a nearly entirely white student population, as does Newton South. However, Piney Branch in Montgomery County, Maryland, serves a “majority minority” population with over 1/3 of its students on free and reduced-price lunch (State of Maryland Report Card, 2015). In the first five years after Principal Bertram Generlette implemented embedded honors in their middle school,

the percentage of African American 5th graders passing the state reading test is way up, from 55 to 91 percent. For Hispanic children, it’s up from 46 to 74 percent. It’s true that scores statewide have also risen, but not nearly to the same degree. And there’s no evidence that white students have done any worse over this time. In fact, they are performing better than ever . . . Piney Branch white students outscore the white kids at virtually every other Montgomery County school. (Petrelli, 2011, p. 53)

With evidence like this, Generlette felt confident in refuting “parents [who] felt that the only way to get kids to read at a high level was to have other kids around them who read at a high level.”

Teachers as well as students can learn and grow more effectively through the process of development and implementation of this model. “Helping to usher in this controversial programmatic change has helped me become a better teacher,” writes Bainbridge’s Polinsky. She continued,

I have systematically studied best practice. I have learned how grouping students can affect their learning. I also have become a better collaborator. I like to experiment and can become impatient with those who prefer “the tried and true” . . . I also grew from listening to many, many kids but especially the ones that most cherished their honors experience. They described an inspiring classroom atmosphere in which all students passionately expressed original ideas . . . it would be wrong to sacrifice this . . . I realized if I hoped to cultivate this same level of enthusiasm in a

heterogeneous class, I would have to come up with more effective teaching methods. Now I create more open-ended questions, ones that can engage all students on all levels from the concrete to the most abstract The goal of my teaching these days: To meet each kid at his or her ability level every day. I have not achieved this goal, but I feel I'm getting closer.

These examples attest that heterogeneous classrooms can, when differentiated properly, meet each student at his or her ability level, every day. They can be more effective, with learners of all ability levels, than homogeneous ones. As discussed, this does not mean the solution is an easy one. "DI is difficult—even Carol Tomlinson admits that. Excellent teaching leading to significant learning of all students is very challenging" (McTighe, 2015, p. 11). Successful implementation, as with any initiative, usually requires more than just the efforts of individual teachers, as the contrast between SRHS/Bainbridge and Newton South demonstrates. In McTighe's (2015) words,

It is not unfair . . . to say that differentiation places the greatest burden concerning student diversity on individual teachers, while the larger system questions related to staffing, curriculum, and supervision are downplayed in most schools. (p. 12)

However, even administrators sympathetic to these classroom models may well feel themselves hamstrung by state accountability mechanisms that focus near-exclusively on standardized tests. Their jobs may largely depend on students making annual yearly progress as measured by those particular metrics. Frustratingly, it may not matter if stakeholders buy in to heterogeneous classrooms if adopting them doesn't result in higher scores on such tests.

Models like SRHS and Bainbridge can give such administrators courage. In addition, there is a small but growing collection of studies highlighting students in classrooms that employ the student-centered pedagogies upon which an embedded honors class would be based demonstrating improved, or at least, no worse, performance on standardized tests, vis-à-vis their more traditionally educated counterparts (Boaler, 2002; Geier et al., 2008; Needham, 2010; Nurenberg, 2010; Summers & Dickinson, 2012; Thomas, 2000). Hopefully such findings can serve to bolster the confidence of school leaders, because without administrative support, initiative, resource management, and courage, models such as those at Bainbridge or SRHS could not have happened. If school leaders are serious about their mission to educate all students, then they will need to take some political risks.

The first step toward that mission, as outlined at the beginning of this article, is to challenge the entire notion of labeling an individual student as having high or low ability in a given subject area. Substituting the term

“readiness” for “ability” is no mere matter of euphemism; as George Orwell (1946) famously cautioned, “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought” (p. 6). Adopting the rhetoric of ability opens the door to a presumption, even an unconscious one, that human intelligence and capability is fixed. It feeds the crippling, deterministic canard, espoused less these days by educators but still too often by parents and students themselves, that academic achievement relies on an external locus of control; that somehow genetic predisposition or socioeconomic/cultural heritage governs whether or not one is an “ELA person,” a “math person,” etc. But as Sir Kenneth Robinson (2011) relates,

[Some] kids are much better than other kids the same age in different disciplines, or at different times of the day, or better in smaller groups, or large groups, or sometimes they want to be on their own . . . if you're interested in a model of learning, you don't start from [a] production line mentality.

Furthermore, the rhetoric of ability assumes that only one particular ability, or set of abilities, is needed for the academic tasks at hand. A student who, for example, lacks the facility at present to successfully navigate Dickensian prose may in fact have more relevant life experience to bring to bear on the socioeconomic class conflicts in *Great Expectations* or *Hard Times* than a peer for whom Victorian diction poses no challenge, but who may nevertheless have no schema for understanding economic hardship.¹⁴ Recall also the danger that separating entire classes by readiness level often leads to racially segregated classrooms. In my own school, the near-erasure of African American students from my new “honors” classes fundamentally changed, for the worse, the ways in which the class discussed not only the works of authors of color such as Toni Morrison or Richard Wright, but all of our texts.

Many ELA teachers, myself included, know more than a few students who can make deeper and more incisive statements through a piece of performance art than some of their classmates who can write in perfectly metrical sonnet form, but with little to actually say. Life experience is at least as crucial in understanding, responding to, and composing great literature as command of certain specific forms, devices, and modes of diction. Purporting to group adolescents by ability elides the fact that, sometimes, “the ‘best’ are the brightest only in one narrow sense” (Deresiewicz, 2008, para. 6).

Robinson (2011) decries the divisions schools (and by extension, the teachers who work in them) draw between “academic and non-academic” as a “myth,” perpetuated by “habits of institution and the habitats they occupy” as opposed to an actual assessment of human potential. He attacks

the narrow measures by which schools too often gauge capability. Any of us who has spent time with students know that they frequently surprise us, forcing us to reassess our initial judgments of them.

Changing the ways in which schools group students, and the mechanisms by which teachers expect students to demonstrate learning, yields a great many benefits, particularly to students who struggle in their schooling—but also, when constructed carefully and deliberately, to students who perform at the highest readiness levels. Classes with embedded honors might even provide the *only* option for challenging high-readiness students at schools too small to support full sections of tracked classes. At any school, allowing every teacher access to working with students presenting with a wide range of readiness levels, instead of assigning some teachers the “good” classes and some the “tough” ones, could make for a dramatic improvement in teacher retention.

That larger structures like the college admissions process and standardized testing present certain obstacles is no excuse to shirk the responsibility to use the most effective possible pedagogies, for, as I hope I have shown, there are ways to maintain the benefits of heterogeneous classes within a traditional honors vs. standard ranking system. There are existing, successful course configurations and teaching methods that make it possible for students at substantially different readiness levels to learn alongside one another. Although my own school has not yet chosen to adopt an embedded honors system, a few of us teachers have been slowly threading these practices into our classrooms, building evidence that the diversity that exists even within a leveled class can be better served through a differentiated model.

We are discovering that conceptualizing certain *tasks*, and not certain *students*, as simple, moderate, or advanced enables students to view learning as something one achieves, as opposed to an inherent quality of intelligence that one either possesses or lacks. This view not only opens the doors to a stimulating ELA class for all students, providing them with more opportunities to acquire the skills and content that teachers (and the standards) ask of them, it also reveals, at a time when the challenges of the world demand innovation, a much wider and more promising view of human capacity.

Notes

1. My department’s leveling system, like most of its contemporary counterparts, has students recommended to, but not required to, enroll in a certain level of class. However, in practice requests for overrides of teacher recommendations are rare. In addition, unlike the case in our school’s math department, no test is administered to determine ELA placement.

2. Alexander (2005) claims that, with more than 500 studies, homogeneous vs. heterogeneous grouping “has been the subject of more research . . . than almost any other educational practice” (p. 414).

5. The inconsistency throughout the article is usually the product of my attempt to use whatever terminology was employed in a given text from which I am citing.

4. My own school was sadly no exception: our non-Asian students of color, most of whom are bused in from Boston via the voluntary METCO program, constitute 9.5 percent of the school population (Massachusetts DESE, 2015), yet in the six years since our ELA courses were leveled, it is rare to have one of these students, let alone more than one, per honors classroom.

5. That teachers tend to prefer having honors or AP classes only serves to compound the deleterious effects of such labels, as it can lead well-meaning administrators to reward their best and most capable teachers with honors classes, and in doing so, deprive the students who need those teachers the most.

6. I can produce a host of anecdotal evidence to support this phenomenon at work, every day, in the honors classes I teach. I am far more likely to find more ambitious and innovative ideas (albeit less skill and motivation to fully articulate, develop, and defend them) among students in my lower level classes.

7. To my dismay, my honors students often seem to exemplify Andrasick’s (1990) lament that “Dissonance terrifies most students. They yearn for certainty. Instead of struggling to articulate their unknowns, they fear their questions, misreading them as signs of stupidity or ignorance rather than as directional guides for critical thinking” (p. 54). Much of the work I do with them throughout the year involves attempts to relieve them of this terror.

8. This was the last year in which the MetLife survey asked this particular question.

9. I did not include some of the schools I researched in this article precisely because their standard of “embedded honors” appeared to simply be whether students completed additional readings or writing assignments.

10. It is interesting and perhaps not surprising to note that classroom behavior is considered as a factor for evaluating honors at SRHS, but not at the higher SES-level Bainbridge.

11. This is, in fact, the specific aim of tiered instruction’s use with ELL students; see Moss, Lapp, and O’Shea (2011).

12. Although Gardner’s (1985/2011) strict formulation of multiple intelligences has been largely refuted—see Willingham (2004) and Geake (2008) as prominent examples—Willingham (n.d.) does acknowledge teacher experience that some students *are more comfortable* with certain modes of presenting their ideas than with others. “Ability is *that* you can do something. Style is *how* you do it. Thus, one would always be happy to have more ability, but different styles should be equally desirable. . . . Two basketball players may be of equal ability, but have different styles on the court” (para. 5). “Once you know that some people are visualizers and some are verbalizers, you can use that information to inform instruction, in addition to using your experience and judgment” (para. 15), he says, so long as one acknowledges that this is not a bona fide “theory of how the mind works” (para. 15).

13. The distribution at my own school is even more pronounced; for example, in the fall of 2015 we fielded 10 sections of sophomore honors English and only four sections of “college prep” (lower level) classes.

14. See Nurenberg, 2010 for more details.

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