

EAST MEETS WEST

“An Examination of the Big-Fish-Little-Pond
Effect in Western and Non-Western Countries”

By

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One of the questions that has bothered educators over the years has been whether highly intelligent students with IQs in the top 2% benefit more from being enrolled in programs with other highly gifted children or enrolled in programs with a normal distribution of intelligence levels.

The authors observed that irrespective of their cultural background and their academic achievements, many students attending a school for academically talented did not think of themselves as intelligent at all. They spent so much time with other intelligent students that often they did not perform at the top of their grade so perceived themselves as having only average intelligence. This reinforced the authors' belief that a positive self-concept is vital and has a causal impact on desirable performance and education outcomes

A review of the research found that when students are educated in academically selective schools, they will have lower academic self-concepts than their equally able counterparts who are educated in nonselective environments. Students in these selective schools were found to have lower self-concepts, lower grade-point averages, and lower educational and occupational aspirations. This seems to prevent many high-ability students from reaching their true potential. This is known as the “big-fish-little-pond effect.”

To test out the universality of this effect, the authors conducted research in 26 diverse countries including the United States, Australia, and Western Europe, Eastern Europe, South America, and Asia. They found that this “big-fish-little-pond-effect” was in evidence in virtually every country.

They concluded that for many high-ability students academic segregation may not provide optimal environments for them to achieve their full potential. They advocate that improved self-concepts will lead to better performance, and improved performance will lead to better self-concepts. However, if practitioners improve performance without also fostering participants' self-beliefs in their capabilities, then the performance gains are unlikely to be long-lasting. Hence, it is recommended that practitioners strive to improve both self-concept and performance simultaneously.

Taken from Marsh, Herbert W., Craven, Rhonda G., Self-Processes, Learning, and Enabling Human Potential: Dynamic New Approaches. Information Age Publishing, Conn.