1

Moving from Deficiencies to Possibilities: Some Thoughts on Differentiation in the Mathematics Classroom

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What the learners conflict with in the mathematics classroom may not only be the mathematical meaning of a particular piece of content or a particular strategy, but the whole act of being taught through processes that ignore, reject or make invisible some students, processes destined to select a few and fail the rest.

—*Núria Gorgorió and Núria Planas*

KATHLEEN Collins's (2003) eighteen-month case study of Jay, a fifth-grade African American student, documents in detail the ways in which those in authority in his school "pathologized Jay's family structure, his cultural way of being" (p. 194) such that he was labeled as having low ability and was held to lower expectations by his teacher. Even after Collins shared samples of his work that clearly exhibited cognitive strengths, Jay's teacher "still responded to Jay as though he were less than capable" (p. xiii). The teacher's beliefs about Jay's abilities and, consequently, his academic needs were premised on a deficit model and reinforced by labels applied to him by the schooling process, leading her to discount evidence of his achievements as somehow immaterial. Although perhaps unintentional, the actions of his teacher served to limit the possibilities for Jay's success.

A practice exists in the United States of using school as a location in which to label students according to some perceived "ability" and separate them into different levels of coursework rather than see the potential for success that lies in every student (Oakes 2005). As this article's opening quote describes, this approach has led to practices in the mathematics classroom that often keep students from the mathematics rather than get them into it (Ellis 2007). Efforts to reform our teaching of mathematics such that a broader range of students have access to high standards and are supported in reaching those standards are often at odds with this practice or habit of mind. When thinking about the idea of differentiation in the mathematics classroom, how it is undertaken must be carefully considered—what are the assumptions and beliefs from which teachers work to differentiate instruction? This article is intended to stimulate readers to examine the positions from which their own efforts at differentiation are

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