From the Editors

When sj Miller approached us with the idea for this special issue, we didn’t hesitate; the complications and consequences of tracking and ability grouping have captivated us throughout our careers. On one hand, it is essential to meet students where they are and ensure that they have the supports necessary to reach their academic potential. On the other hand, structures meant to be supportive can also act as barriers. And these barriers are not just academic; they influence identity construction, social development, and access to opportunities beyond our classrooms.

As a school administrator in the mid-1990s, I (David) oversaw an investigation that revealed that tracking practices were an obstacle that impeded students’ life chances after graduation. The public high school offered two tracks, and students in the lower track completed basic mathematic courses, such as “consumer math” and “business math,” rather than algebra, geometry, and trigonometry. A transition study showed that a high percentage of lower-tracked graduates who enrolled in the local community college were prevented from completing their degrees because they lacked the mathematical prerequisites that were not part of their high school curriculum. Specifically, they could not pass a basic Math 100 course because they had never been exposed to algebra. These students were failed by the educational system that created a structure that blocked access to crucial content; they were denied academic opportunities, and it is likely that many of them blamed themselves as deficient, rather than recognizing the systemic inequities that contributed to their postsecondary difficulties. Fortunately, I was in a position to effect change, and I worked with wise colleagues and concerned parents to eliminate the lower track, affording all students with opportunities to engage with challenging coursework. Classroom teachers must negotiate similar systemic inequities while advocating for learners and seeking to meet their needs—fostering opportunity without perpetuating the potential injuries of classification.

Similarly, I (Julie) often recall a troubling personal experience with the influence of expectations on achievement and opportunity. As the daughter and granddaughter of teachers, I was blessed with close cultural correspondence between home and school. In addition, I loved reading and found math and science fascinating and easy to grasp. Unsurprisingly, I excelled in the classroom and, at the end of eighth grade, had earned the highest grade point average in my class. When I met with my counselor to plan my high school schedule, I expressed a desire to advance in science, taking biology as a ninth grader, rather than in my tenth-grade year. This was typical for students in honors and advanced classes, so I was stunned when my counselor discouraged me. She suggested that it might be too difficult and recommended that I stick with the general science track. Luckily, my academic and cultural capital gave me the confidence to ignore her advice, which only made sense in hindsight, when I realized that all the rest of the ninth graders in the biology class were male. Clearly, the salient characteristic involved in determining a student’s qualification for advanced science was something other than grades. I had never imagined my gender as an academic liability,
but my eighth-grade identity is never far from my heart, and the judgments associated with it persist.

In this issue, educators share how their own experiences—as teachers and learners—have shaped their perspectives about themselves and their students. Powerful narratives, such as those recounted by guest editor sj Miller, consider the challenges of balancing the identification of student needs with the possible creation of powerful and enduring limitations. They explore the causes and implications of categorizing learners and consider how schools, as social systems designed to prepare students to live in the existing world, can also serve as institutions that can transform opportunities for all of us who desire a more fair, just, and decent world. As humans, we embody a range of strengths and weaknesses. Together, as educators, we must seek to foster a world in which we are defined by our talents even as we are encouraged to both forgive and fortify our frailties.

Julie Gorlewski’s most recent book is Pedagogies of Kindness and Respect: On the Lives and Education of Children (Peter Lang, 2014), coedited with P. L. Thomas, Paul Carr, and Brad Porfilio. David Gorlewski is chair and assistant professor of educational administration at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Both former English teachers, they are members of NCTE, Julie since 2004, and David since 2001.

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In Memoriam

Kent D. Williamson, 1957–2015