

Grouping

Grouping gifted children is one of the foundations of exemplary gifted education practice. The research on the many grouping strategies available to educators of these children is long, consistent, and overwhelmingly positive (Rogers, 2006; Tieso, 2003). Nonetheless, the “press” from general educators, both teachers and administrators, has been consistently less supportive. Myths abound that grouping these children damages the self-esteem of struggling learners, creates an “elite” group who may think too highly of themselves, and is actually undemocratic and, at times, racist. None of these statements have any founding in actual research, but the arguments continue decade after decade (Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002). This position paper is intended for school board members, school administrators, teachers, parents of gifted children, and other community members with an interest in education.

Purposes of Grouping

The purposes of grouping are fourfold: (1) to ease the delivery of appropriately differentiated curriculum to learners with similar educational needs; (2) to facilitate the use of appropriately differentiated instructional strategies to learners with similar educational needs; (3) to facilitate addressing the differential affective needs of these children in the most conducive manner; and (4) to allow for learners of similar abilities or performance levels to learn from each other. In general, grouping gifted learners tends to be the “least restrictive environment” in which their learning can take place, and the most effective and efficient means for schools to provide more challenging coursework, thereby giving these children access to advanced content and providing them with a peer group (Brody, 2004).

Grouping Practices

Grouping practices fall into two general categories: those strategies that gather children of similar potential or ability together (“ability grouping options”) and those strategies that gather children of similar performance or achievement levels together (“performance grouping options”). Placement in ability grouped options is usually accomplished through the use of tests of intelligence, ability, or aptitude. Ability grouping options that are full-time include:

- *Full-time gifted program* – a program of services offered to a group of gifted children of the same or multiple grade levels, usually housed in a single school, in which all curriculum areas are appropriately challenging and complex
- *Self-contained gifted classroom* – full-time homogeneous classrooms, usually one homogeneous classroom distinct from several general classrooms at each grade level in the school in which all curriculum areas are appropriately challenging and complex
- *Special or magnet school for the gifted* – an entire building dedicated to addressing the needs of the gifted children who are housed there
- *Cluster grouping* – the top 5-8 gifted students at a grade level placed in a mixed ability classroom as a small group and are provided proportionate differentiated curriculum and instruction by a teacher with gifted training (e.g., 8 children in a class of 24 would receive 1/3rd of the teacher’s time and instruction)

All of these options involve systematic, comprehensive, and articulated differentiation in all academic domains full-time and on a daily basis. For full-time ability grouped options, the research shows substantial academic effects (anywhere from 1 1/3 to 2 years' growth per year), and small, positive gains in social maturity, social cognition, and participation in extracurricular activities; small gains are also found in self-efficacy, self-esteem, and motivation for learning when gifted children are grouped together full-time (Rogers, 2002).

Ability grouping options that are part-time include:

- *Pull-out/send-out/withdrawal/resource room enrichment groups* – gifted children are removed from their regular classrooms for a specified period of time each week to work on differentiated activities, such as critical thinking, creative problem solving, or extensions of the general curriculum for more complexity and depth
- *Like-ability cooperative groups within classrooms* – when a teacher decides to use cooperative learning groups in a mixed ability classroom, the highest ability 3-4 students are grouped together for a differentiated cooperative task or learning experience and given differentiated expectations or assessments for the experience

Small, positive academic, social, and self-esteem effects are found for the part-time ability grouped options. Academically, if the learning in these options incorporates extensions of the general curriculum in a specific area or spends the greater part of the year in critical thinking or creative production, then more than a year's growth in the focus area of the group will be accomplished (Rogers, 2002).

Performance grouping options include two daily (but subject-specific) options:

- *Cluster performance grouping* – the top performing 5-8 students in a specific core area, such as mathematics or reading/language arts are placed in an otherwise mixed ability class and are provided with differentiated curriculum and instruction in their single area of high performance
- *Regrouping for specific instruction* – the top performing students in a specific subject area, such as mathematics or English or science are placed in a high performance classroom and provided with accelerated and enriched content and skills in that area

For both of these daily performance group options, the academic effects are substantial (depending upon the actual amount of compacting and differentiation that do occur for learners), and social and self-esteem effects are small but positive. Academically, students in these classes can gain from 1 ½ years' to 1 ¾ years' growth in the subject specific area for which they are grouped (Rogers, 2002).

Performance grouping options also include options that do not meet daily:

- *Within-class/flexible grouping* – a teacher of a mixed ability class subdivides the class into groups according to their "readiness" for the curriculum to be taught
- *Like-performing cooperative learning* – when a teacher decides to use cooperative learning groups, the highest performing 3-4 students are placed in their own group and provided with a cooperative task or assignment and assessments of performance are differentiated
- *Performance-based pull-out/send-out/withdrawal/resource room enrichment classes* – the top performing students at a grade level in a specific subject are removed from their regular class for a determined number of hours per week to work on more challenging and complex content and skills in that high performance area (e.g., a Writer's Workshop, Junior Great Books, etc.)

For these options the academic effects are small to moderate (ranging from 1¼ to 1 2/5's years' growth, depending upon the subject area (mathematics and science produce higher effects than do other subject areas), while the social and self-esteem effects are small but positive.

Recommendations

Grouping options should be available at each stage of development in a gifted child's school program, from primary through secondary. It is important for schools to select those grouping options that will be most successful considering the school context (its teachers, community values, special needs of the school population, etc.). In general, the more full-time options (full-time ability grouping, regrouping for specific instruction, cluster grouping) require little more than additional professional development, differentiated curriculum materials, and a reorganization of teacher responsibilities in order to be implemented appropriately. The part-time options vary in their cost efficiency and effectiveness. Varieties of the pull-out program may cost more in the employment of a specialized teacher to provide direct instruction to the gifted children involved, while within-class grouping and cooperative grouping involve additional planning and materials development by individual teachers who may also receive special training to prepare them for this development.

Grouping is a vehicle educators can use to allow gifted children access to learning at the level and complexity they need (Lawless, 1998; Rogers, 2006; Tieso, 2003). More importantly, it allows gifted children to learn with and make social connections with same aged peers who think and learn in the same ways they do. Grouping can also help to simplify already overburdened teachers' lives by allowing them to focus more on the specific talent development needs they encounter in this potentially more homogeneous clustering. What educators must keep in mind, however, is that what these children will do once they are grouped is probably more important than which form of grouping has been selected (Kulik, 1992).

Selected References

Brody, L. E. (ed.). (2004). Grouping and acceleration practices in gifted education. In S. M. Reis (Series Ed.), *Essential readings in gifted education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

This article, among many in this book of articles on grouping and acceleration from previous *Gifted Child Quarterly* journals over 25 years, takes a solid, well supported look at grouping options and the role these play in the full education of gifted and talented learners.

Fiedler, E. D., Lange, R. E., & Winebrenner, S. (2002). In search of reality: Unraveling the myths about tracking, ability grouping, and the gifted. *Roeper Review*, 24, 108-111.

The authors discuss the realities of six myths about ability grouping, citing appropriate research to support their arguments, and using illustrative words from researchers and from students to make their points.

Kulik, J. A. (1992). An analysis of the research on ability grouping: Historical and contemporary perspectives (RBDM 9204). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.

This article provides one of the well-reasoned set of arguments in support of ability and performance grouping for gifted learners. While reporting the actual academic, social, and psychological effect sizes of various grouping options, it also makes the point that how grouped students are taught and what they are taught while grouped may be of even greater import than the act of grouping alone.

Loveless, T. (1998). *The tracking and ability grouping debate*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

The Fordham Foundation commissioned Professor Loveless to study the diverse opinions of various groups for and against ability grouping. In this very reasoned synopsis of what he found, Loveless argues that there are benefits to grouping for all ability levels when teacher quality and curriculum are taken into account, with the greatest gains being made for high ability learners.

Rogers, K. B. (2006). *A menu of options for grouping gifted students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

As part of Karnes and Stephens' *Practical strategies series in gifted education*, this book outlines the research support or the variety of ability and performance groups schools can implement and helps readers determine how to select the best options when teacher roles, administrator stance, and curriculum demands are part of the decision making process.

Rogers, K. B. (2002). *Re-forming gifted education: Matching the program to the child*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

This book is intended for both educators and parents and guides them through a process of analyzing individual gifted student's learning needs, strengths, and styles so as to develop a personalized learning plan for them using research based, best practices in gifted education. The author presents the components, steps and structure of the plan as well as the research on various fundamental educational practices, including grouping and acceleration.

Tieso, C. (2003). Ability grouping is not just tracking anymore. *Roeper Review*, 26, 29-36.

This article is a clearly written summary of the many forms both full-time and part-time grouping options can take. More importantly, the author makes clear the important role curriculum differentiation must have in evaluating the impact of grouping high ability learners in school.

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The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of parents, teachers, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

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