INCLUDES DIGITAL CONTENT LINK

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO FLEXIBLE GROUPING AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

FORM, MANAGE, ASSESS, AND DIFFERENTIATE IN GROUPS

DINA BRULLES, PH.D. | KAREN L. BROWN, M.ED.

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Introduction

"If committed educators could be easily trained to implement a low-cost intervention that boasted consistent learning gains for all students, headlines would herald the discovery of the educational holy grail. That low-cost intervention is here and readily available. It's called ability grouping."

—Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, director, Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University

Educational trends and initiatives come and go, policies and mandates get updated, and standards and assessments are continually revised. Little stays the same in the world of education; we are constantly learning and evolving. However, for a variety of reasons, including some misperceptions, controversy over the practice of ability grouping remains prevalent throughout these changes. Much of this controversy involves broad generalizations people make about grouping students. In this book, we attempt to dispel the myths surrounding ability grouping while sharing teaching practices that are effective in a variety of grouping models.

It is important to note that we are not advocating tracking. Rather, we are providing teachers with practical methods for determining classroom compositions, forming and managing flexible learning groups, designing tiered assignments, and teaching in a variety of settings where students are purposefully grouped. In brief, this book is an educator's guide for learning how to recognize and respond to students' diverse learning needs. To this end, we share methods for grouping students for specific content and suggestions for structuring the classroom to accommodate the needs of a range of students. We also examine methods for using achievement data to inform grouping, monitor students' progress, and document achievement gains.

Equity vs. Equality

Let's begin by considering the issue of "equity" in our schools. We often hear this as the reason schools choose not to group students according to learning needs. The rationale is that all students, not just certain groups, should have equal access to resources. In this section, we will discuss how incorporating grouping practices can, in fact, ensure equitable access for all students based on learning needs.

Much confusion exists surrounding the differences between equity and equality, especially involving students of special populations. Here are some key distinctions:

Equality means the exact *same* elements exist for all students, regardless of experiences or needs: the same placement, same curriculum, same expectations, same funding, and same level of instruction.

Equity means that treatment, access, learning, and resources are considered for all students based on what students need to achieve and succeed at their own levels, which are determined by their unique experiences and needs.

We need to use an *equity* lens to make educational decisions; this practice enables us to create the necessary changes to meet our goals for every student. If we are instead seeking equality for all students, then we must ask ourselves if we are, in fact, creating barriers for some students by not providing equitable opportunities for them to achieve at their highest possible levels. Without purposefully grouping students, it is extremely difficult to provide these opportunities and make instructional decisions that meet the needs of all students.

Goals of Education Equity:[1]

- High achievement and positive outcomes for *all* students
- Equitable access and inclusion
- Equitable treatment
- Equitable resource distribution
- Equitable opportunity to learn
- Shared accountability

When schools consciously plan for equitable measures, they can more easily demonstrate students' achievement gains, since they are routinely collecting and analyzing achievement data to form flexible learning groups and document student growth in the various groups. In turn, these groups require equitable distribution of resources so that all students receive equal opportunities to learn. Ultimately, the process becomes a shared responsibility of schools and teachers that leads to equitable treatment, access, and inclusion for all.

The Objectives of This Book

Specifically, this book will guide teachers in how to implement the following twelve objectives:

1. *Develop* flexible learning groups.
2. *Use* data to form flexible groups.
3. *Plan* lessons for flexible groups in a mixed-ability classroom.
4. *Assign* purposeful and individualized classwork and homework.
5. *Know* your efforts are working.
6. *Design* a daily schedule to accommodate project-based learning.
7. *Assess* and grade collaborative work.
8. *Work* with digital natives (even if you are a digital immigrant).
9. *Match* instructional strategies to students' social and emotional characteristics and academic needs.
10. *Engage* nonperforming learners.
11. *Support* a personalized learning environment.
12. *Build* a communication network with parents.

These twelve objectives are described in detail throughout this book. We present an overview of each objective in this section. Due to the various grouping

1. IDRA. (March 31, 2006). "Six Goals of Educational Equity." idra.org/equity-assistance-center/six-goals-of-education-equity.

formats implemented in schools, you will find these objectives are applicable in several ways. Your current situation, your plans to implement change, your school's structures and initiatives, and your programming and instructional goals will determine which objectives you implement initially and which you may consider for later implementation.

Objective 1. Develop flexible learning groups. Flexible grouping means that the groups continually change depending on the lesson and the topics involved. Students can be flexibly grouped according to:

- learning objectives
- student interests
- learning preferences
- products or projects
- achievement levels
- formative assessments and pretest results

In chapter 1, we describe methods for forming flexible learning groups.

Objective 2. Use data to form flexible groups. Educators today have more access to achievement data than ever before. Schools routinely provide benchmark assessments and analyze data during professional learning communities (PLCs) and within Response to Intervention (RTI) structures. In chapter 3, you will learn methods for using the following data to form flexible groups within a grade level, across grade levels, or within a class:

- formal and informal assessments
- benchmark assessments
- PLC data
- RTI structures

Objective 3. Plan lessons for flexible groups in a mixed-ability classroom. In all school-based learning environments—including classrooms, grade levels, or schools that use "fixed" learning groups—most teachers find they have a range of abilities in their classes. Meeting the diverse needs in your classes requires you to develop tiered learning activities appropriate for your students' different learning levels. In chapter 5, we demonstrate how to create lessons tiered to knowledge levels and provide suggestions for tiering activities using student choice menus.

Objective 4. Assign purposeful and individualized classwork and homework. To assign appropriately leveled learning activities to groups of students, teachers need to determine how they will assess those learning levels. They must also recognize that even with students of similar ability levels, they'll need to modify lessons for exceptional individual needs or interests. In this book, we also describe methods for designing homework that supports or extends students' differentiated group learning activities.

Objective 5. Know your efforts are working. In today's era of accountability, teachers are expected to document individual student growth. This requirement may concern you when providing opportunities for differentiated learning activities for your students. You may wonder: "How do I really know my efforts are working when

students are all working on different projects?" "How can I accurately measure student achievement for the different learning groups in my class?" "How do I document progress?" and "How does this documentation inform my instruction?" We address these questions specifically in chapter 3, and throughout the book, within the frameworks of grouping compositions, instructional strategies, and progress monitoring.

Objective 6. Design a daily schedule to accommodate project-based learning. You will notice that many of the grouping strategies in this book follow a project-based learning (PBL) format. PBL is a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge. This format integrates subjects, which many students enjoy and thrive on, especially those with high ability. PBL also helps prepare students for performance-based assessments. In chapter 5, we demonstrate methods that allow teachers to incorporate PBL format needs and time requirements.

Objective 7. Assess and grade collaborative work. Twenty-first century skills rely on collaborative learning, and assessing growth and assigning grades looks different when students collaborate on projects in groups. We need to teach students how to collaborate so there is accountability for everyone. Throughout the book, you will learn methods for grading and structuring assignments that encourage student collaboration and accountability.

Objective 8. Work with digital natives (even if you are a digital immigrant). As a teacher today, you are surrounded by ubiquitous technology with endless resources at your fingertips. Technology integration can greatly ease your ability to manage varied learning groups. Numerous methods are described in chapter 7, "Differentiating Digitally in Groups." By introducing educational apps and making digital resources available to your students, you provide additional opportunities for them to become involved in directing their own learning.

Objective 9. Match instructional strategies to students' social and emotional characteristics and academic needs. When students feel understood and accepted by teachers, they are more likely to take academic risks. Learning how to align specific teaching strategies to students' learning traits can solve many learning challenges for students and instructional challenges for teachers. This alignment demonstrates respect for students' differences and sets the stage for real learning to occur.

Objective 10. Engage nonperforming learners. Teachers create lessons that engage and motivate students by building on their strengths and developing their interests. We have all witnessed underachieving and nonperforming students in our classes. The easiest way to address these learners is to ask yourself, "Why are they not achieving?" Often, the answer is an easy one: they are not engaged or motivated by the lesson or topic. This is particularly evident with high-ability students, who commonly have their own ideas they would rather pursue. Strategies described throughout this book allow students to build on their interests and develop their areas of strength through the content addressed in the lessons and standards.

Objective 11. Support a personalized learning environment. Differentiation is not about creating an individualized program for every student, but rather a

personalized learning environment. Personalized learning is everywhere in our ever-changing world of education. The potential in personalized learning is immense; educators see it as a way to address the learning needs of a student population that grows more diverse every day. In this book, we will look at the definition of personalized learning and its impact on students, particularly in groups, in today's technology-infused classrooms.

Objective 12. Build a communication network with parents. Regular parent communication is critical when using flexible grouping structures. Parents need information about how you are forming/reforming student learning groups and how curriculum and instruction differ between the groups. Building a communication network with your parents eases the practice and keeps parents informed of their children's progress, including information about advanced academic progress as well as the benefits of productive struggle.

Flexible Grouping: Confronting the Criticism and Overcoming the Obstacles

Despite ongoing educational reforms, improved standards, new testing methods, data-based decision-making in schools, and instructional innovations, the debate over ability grouping has continued over several decades. In a 1996 article, "The Elephant in the Classroom," authors Ellis Page and Timothy Keith confront the criticism that ability grouping is "harmful to minority students."[2] Opponents of purposeful ability grouping commonly cite that it has negative achievement effects for students in diverse populations and of low socioeconomic status. And yet, in studying the effects of ability grouping on low-ability black and Hispanic students, Page and Keith's research yielded data showing "no substantive positive or negative effect on achievement for these groups." In their study, homogenous grouping for these students was neither helpful nor harmful. However, homogenous groups of high-ability students clearly *did* yield positive effects on achievement.

Likewise, researchers Chen-Lin Kulik and James Kulik studied the achievement of students of different ability levels in schools that ability grouped compared with those that did not. Over the years, their research consistently documented substantive growth for students of high ability when grouped together.[3] Other researchers over the past two decades have noted moderate to significant growth for all groups of students when purposefully grouped in classrooms. According to a 2010 meta-analysis, "Students who were grouped by ability within a class for reading were able to make up to an additional half of a year's growth in reading."[4]

In short, flexible ability grouping has been proven to work when used appropriately. This is especially true now; we have infinitely more tools and resources needed to make informed decisions when grouping students.

2. Page, E., and Keith, T. (1996). "The Elephant in the Classroom: Ability Grouping and the Gifted." In *Intellectual Talent* edited by C. P. Benbow and D. J. Lubinski (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).
3. Kulik, C. C., and Kulik, J. A. (1982). "Effects of Ability Grouping on Secondary School Students: A Meta-Analysis of Evaluation Findings." *American Educational Research Journal,* 19(3), 415–428; Kulik, J. A., and Kulik, C. C. (1987). "Effects of Ability Grouping on Student Achievement." *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 23(1-2), 22–30; Kulik, J. A., and Kulik, C. C. (1992). "Meta-Analytic Findings on Grouping Programs." *Gifted Child Quarterly* 36(2), 73–77.
4. Puzio, K., and Colby, G. T. (March 2010). "The Effects of Within-Class Grouping on Reading Achievement: A MetaAnalytic Synthesis." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (SREE), Washington, DC.

Given the controversy surrounding the practices of grouping students for instructional purposes, it is important to address the prevailing myths that contribute to misunderstandings of the practice.

Myth 1. Groupings are usually permanent. When used properly, ability grouping allows for flexibility, letting students move in and out of groups according to learning needs and interests. For example, some schools group for certain content areas. We suggest forming learning groups using diagnostic tests given monthly or quarterly throughout the year depending on the course content. Students are then regrouped according to the pretest (diagnostic testing) results for that specific content. Other schools group for specialized programming, such as with special education classes, English language learning (ELL) instruction, and Honors classes. These groupings usually change as students' learning needs change.

Myth 2. All grouping, including flexible grouping, is tracking. Grouping students together is different than tracking. In tracking scenarios, the groups are usually fixed, meaning they stay the same year after year. In tracking systems, curriculum is typically based on the achievement levels of the students in each track. In contrast, teachers flexibly group students to modify or extend grade-level standards according to the students' needs and abilities. The classroom compositions change frequently, sometimes for reasons not specifically related to achievement levels.

Myth 3. Groupings are based only on achievement levels. Teachers can group students within the class for various purposes, such as interests, project formats, lesson design, skills, and so on. Students can also self-select groups for certain projects. Varying the criteria for forming flexible learning groups can help engage and motivate students. They have opportunities to work with others who have similar interests, learning styles, or project goals.

Myth 4. Groupings only benefit high-ability and high-achieving students. For decades, schools have grouped students for special education services according to need. A teacher who has specialized training in an area teaches a particular group of students. In many states, a similar process is in place for teaching ELL students. Grouping these students for specific content instruction allows teachers to focus on the students' learning needs, which increases the effectiveness of teachers' instruction. These students can make greater gains academically with these systems in place. The same holds true for students of high ability or high achievement. Creating flexible groups for different purposes can address *all* students' learning needs.

Myth 5. Grouping students eliminates the need to differentiate instruction. Regardless of the way students are grouped or placed into classes, all classrooms require teachers to differentiate instruction. Even within homogenous classes of special education students, gifted students, or ELL students, there will be a wide range of learning needs. As individuals with varying experiences and strengths, all students—whether identified for a particular classification or not—need teachers who understand and respond to their learning needs. Therefore, grouping does not minimize the need for differentiated instruction.

Myth 6. Grouping discriminates against minority populations. Teachers often make assumptions about what students know and what they are capable of learning. For example, students of diversity, most commonly those who are black and

Hispanic, are widely underrepresented in programs for advanced learners. They are less likely to be identified as gifted or even nominated for testing. Yet, these students are as highly capable as any other student. When forming flexible ability groups, you analyze achievement data and determine interests within the confines of the curriculum being studied. This process requires you to know your students, their interests, what they know, and where they need help. Assumptions of what students can and cannot do are not valid reasons to restrict their growth, especially those who go largely unrecognized due to race, culture, language status, or socioeconomic status.

About This Book

In this book, we lead you through the process of teaching in flexibly grouped classrooms by first developing an understanding of grouping for effective instruction. We then discuss methods for forming and managing grouped classrooms. This leads us to instructional practices and support, lesson design, and the purpose and use of assessments in ability-grouped classes.

In our practice, we have found many teachers who want to incorporate flexible grouping practices into their routines that allow for targeted instruction. However, few teachers have the training or support to implement, manage, and document the effectiveness of groups. This book discusses best instructional practices and presents them in the context of teaching flexible learning groups within a classroom, grade level, or school. Part one of the book discusses why and how to group students in mixed-ability classrooms, and part two describes instructional methods for teaching in classes that flexibly group students.

This book is intended for teachers, school administrators, instructional coaches, and anyone involved in determining class placements or providing professional development. The purpose is twofold: The first is to guide school staff in determining appropriate classroom grouping. The second is to introduce methods for managing and effectively teaching to the needs of students with varying abilities and achievement levels, readiness, and interests.

With growing emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration, schools are seeking methods that recognize and acknowledge students' diverse learning needs. Schools must modify curriculum and instruction accordingly to ensure that all students are appropriately engaged and challenged in meaningful learning activities. Flexible grouping methods, as detailed in this book, set the framework for such activities to occur.

Throughout the book, in the Classroom Scenarios and elsewhere, you will read about actual teachers in real classrooms. These teachers face the day-to-day challenges that every teacher deals with in a mixed-ability learning environment. They share their experiences, lessons, and strategies for supporting learners in groups. We hope these scenarios will show you firsthand how flexible grouping and collaborative learning opportunities can be used effectively in today's classrooms.

Using This Book

This book can be used to guide study sessions extended over a period of time, such as in professional learning communities (PLCs), after-school workshops, full-day

in-service trainings, staff meetings, and numerous other formats. The first four chapters highlight ways to structure and manage the groups, establish routines, assess progress, communicate with parents, and create ongoing support systems. The final three chapters describe instructional strategies to use when incorporating flexible grouping. These strategies are useful for all learning groups, including those with learning struggles, advanced learners, English language learners, and so on. Readers will be guided in scaffolding instruction, incorporating depth of complexity, project-based learning, questioning strategies, and numerous other methods for meeting all students' learning needs when placed in flexible learning groups.

We recommend that you work through the book in the order the chapters are presented. This will help you develop an understanding of how to form your flexible learning groups and will increase the effectiveness of the strategies presented in part two. That said, you might wish to move back and forth through parts one and two to begin practicing and implementing the instructional strategies while you learn about the grouping structures.

Our goal is to provide you with a roadmap showing how to best challenge and engage all your students, every day, and in every subject. We describe a process and provide suggestions for how you can accomplish these goals; just remember, the process takes time. We encourage you to attempt one or two practices at a time, preferably with other interested colleagues. When you're comfortable with one strategy, identify another, and so on.

In **chapter 1,** we respond to the commonly asked question, "Why should we flexibly group students?" We describe popular models for ability grouping and discuss how these models can effectively serve all students. We discuss various methods for grouping students and creating effective classroom compositions using the cluster-grouping model as an example. We also address the controversies surrounding ability grouping from a practitioner's perspective. The chapter provides an overview of the diverse learning needs of our students; their characteristics, behavioral traits, and learning needs; and how these needs can be met using flexible ability grouping.

Chapter 2 describes methods for establishing structure in grouped classrooms and what a mixed-ability classroom looks like when students are flexibly grouped for specific learning objectives. It shows you how to structure and manage a class so that small, flexible groups can work on different but related lessons at the same time. The chapter discusses why training teachers to successfully manage student groups with multiple learning levels in one classroom is essential. The range of students' abilities demands that instruction occur at multiple challenge levels. Chapter 2 will also show you how to manage the different groups and the importance of designing differentiated lessons that follow a similar pace.

In **chapter 3**, we share information for both teachers and administrators on methods for collecting and analyzing data to gauge success in ability grouping. These methods are critical due to current changes in the ways students are assessed and teachers are evaluated. Assessment and evaluation are now based on individual student growth, which requires schools to adopt new methods for showing and documenting growth, especially when students are working below or above grade level.

While assessment is woven into every chapter pertaining to classroom instruction, chapter 3 discusses how to obtain and document ongoing achievement at all levels: in the classroom, throughout a school, and throughout the school district. We share methods for analyzing student achievement and progress daily, monthly, and

yearly using formal and informal methods, formative and summative assessments, data at the school and state levels, benchmark assessments, and more. Also included are methods for grading students who are working on accelerated and/or differentiated schoolwork and how to create forms that document progress. Finally, we recommend several parent reporting methods and forms that document academic growth. At the end of the relevant chapters throughout the book, we provide you with documentation forms you can use or modify for your purposes.

We recognize that teachers need ongoing professional development to successfully teach in a mixed-ability classroom. In **chapter 4,** we describe methods for supporting teachers in using the strategies discussed throughout the book. Whether in a district or a single school, you will gain ideas for planning teacher workshops, peer coaching, PLC meetings, and more. We also discuss methods for accessing and sharing resources. Through examples from classroom teachers, we demonstrate how you can build a digital repository of differentiated lessons, curriculum, assessment data, and training tools such as videos, presentations, blogs, and online workshops. Lastly, we offer methods that school administrators can use to provide ongoing support for teachers.

> We encourage you to attempt one or two practices at a time, preferably with other interested colleagues. When you're comfortable with one strategy, identify another, and so on.

Beginning part two, **chapter 5** addresses foundational instructional strategies. These strategies create structures for differentiated learning with an emphasis on grouping. They provide an overarching framework for addressing different groups' challenge levels. The strategies will help you extend learning for students who have mastered content prior to instruction or can master content more quickly than the rest of the class. These fundamental strategies are essential for managing flexible ability groups. You will learn how to implement the strategies so they are ongoing and can extend over a long period of time.

In **chapter 6,** we share strategies for forming flexible learning groups and creating differentiated lessons for these groups that add depth and complexity throughout the school day. The differentiation strategies in this chapter are designed for varied levels of learning groups, including groups of students struggling to master content, and can be incorporated into various subject areas. They take little preparation time and are easy to incorporate into daily instruction. These strategies provide depth and complexity, appeal to students' varying interests and learning styles, and incorporate critical thinking.

Chapter 7 provides methods for differentiating instruction digitally. Teachers today have access to a multitude of resources that open up a wealth of opportunities. In this chapter, we show teachers how to make use of digital tools and apps that engage and challenge students in learning groups. By sharing lesson samples from teachers we've worked with, we demonstrate how teachers can access these resources and incorporate them into their standard curriculum and grouping formats.

Lastly, the **digital content** accompanying this book includes:

- customizable versions of all the reproducible forms
- a PDF presentation for use in professional development

To download these materials, see page 182 for instructions.

A free downloadable **PLC/Book Study Guide** for use in PLCs and book study groups is also available at freespirit.com/PLC.

This book is designed to walk you through the process of flexibly grouping students with a clear purpose in mind. However, that is not the only goal. What occurs daily in your classroom is the critical factor in effective grouping practices. Our goal is for you to learn new methods and strategies not only for forming learning groups, but also for being a highly effective teacher to all students in those groups.

We'd love to hear how this book has helped you in your grouping and teaching endeavors. If you have stories or questions for us, you can reach us through our publisher at help4kids@freespirit.com or visit our website: giftededucationconsultants.com.

Dina Brulles and Karen Brown

PART ONE

Rationale and Methods for Grouping Students in Mixed-Ability Classrooms

CHAPTER 1
Why Flexibly Group Your Students?

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Why should we flexibly group?
- What are the various types of grouping methods and their benefits?
- What are some examples of effective ability grouping models that employ flexible learning groups?

This chapter provides an overview of flexible grouping strategies and discusses how these strategies can effectively serve all students. It also provides an overview of students' learning needs, which take into consideration their varied characteristics and behavioral traits. We demonstrate how these learning needs can be addressed using flexible grouping. We briefly describe the instructional benefits and differences within several grouping strategies, with a special focus on two models: cluster grouping and content replacement. In later chapters, we will discuss instructional strategies that align well within the various models described here.

Purposeful grouping enables all students at all instructional levels to be challenged and to advance academically. Grouping methods foster supportive school environments characterized by respect for what each student brings to our classes. In flexible grouping models, students work with peers who learn at similar rates, have similar interests, or share similar strengths and/or areas of concern.

The three main questions teachers ask when considering grouping students are:

1. How do we form groups?
2. What do we do once students are grouped?
3. How do we know the groups are working?

These three questions will be introduced in this chapter and addressed extensively throughout the book.

Flexible Grouping

"Groupings allow students to engage and work with both similar and dissimilar peers depending on the project and the purpose of the lesson."—*NAGC position paper, 2015*

Flexible grouping promotes high levels of achievement for all students and teachers use ongoing assessments to identify their students' challenge levels. Understanding and addressing students' challenge levels helps students achieve at high levels, which can result in shrinking excellence gaps.[1]

1. Plucker, J. A., and Peters, S. J. (2016). *Excellence Gaps in Education: Expanding Opportunities for Talented Students.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Dr. Karen Rogers identifies two broad categories of grouping students: small groups and whole class. She describes small groups as including dyads (two students), clusters (five to eight students within a class), enrichment groups (eight to twelve students in a pullout class), and regroupings of students based on performance in specific subject areas.[2] Modifying and expanding upon Dr. Rogers's work, the following represents several grouping methods and structures.

SMALL-GROUP METHODS: FLEXIBLE GROUPS

Note: While most small groups are flexible groups, not all are. This list is simply a way to think about grouping, knowing there are exceptions.

- Pullout groups, often used for content replacement
- Within-class groups based on ability and/or achievement
- Regrouping for specific subjects based on ability and/or achievement
- Cooperative learning groups
- Cross-grade grouping by achievement levels

The students served within these small groups are typically homogeneous and have similar levels of intellect. However, achievement and/or ability levels are not the only criteria used to form small groups. Students' interests and learning styles, and the type of project can also determine the formation of these small groups. "Flexible ability grouping allows schools to match a student's readiness with instruction, delivering the right content to the right student at the right pace and at the right time."[3]

WHOLE-CLASS GROUPING METHODS: FIXED GROUPS

Note: While the following methods represent fixed grouping, all of them (except for tracking) also include opportunities for flexible grouping *within* the fixed-group placements.

- Tracking
- Like-ability cooperative grouping
- Special schools for students with special needs
- Self-contained programs
- School-within-a-school
- Cluster grouping
- Untracked whole-class instruction

These whole-group methods are typically formed based on achievement or ability testing data. While the groups typically remain the same for the entire school year (hence, "fixed"), most of these methods allow for the regrouping of students each year to reflect students' needs.

Of the fixed groups listed above, the first five represent *homogenous* groupings: tracking, like-ability cooperative groupings, special schools for students with special

2. Rogers, K. B. (2002). *Re-Forming Gifted Education: Matching the Program to the Child*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
3. Rogers (2002).

needs,[4] self-contained programs, and a school-within-a-school. This means that the students have been placed in the classes based on specific criteria, most commonly achievement and/or ability levels. Cluster grouping and untracked whole-class instruction represent *heterogeneous* groupings. Unlike with the first group noted on the list, classroom compositions for these latter two grouping methods change each year.

TWO MAIN VARIATIONS OF FLEXIBLE GROUPS

As we just discussed, two main flexible small grouping variations include *regrouping for specific instruction* and *within-class groupings*. Some teachers rely solely on regrouping for specific instruction and some incorporate both grouping methods for more targeted instruction.

Regrouping for Specific Instruction

When regrouping for a particular subject, all teachers in the grade level must teach the same subject at the same time. Teachers use formative and summative achievement data to assign students to daily flexible learning groups for a specific subject area, usually math and/or reading. Typically, a teacher experienced in working with advanced students takes the highest group, a teacher with training in special education may take struggling learners, and a teacher experienced with ELL students may take that group. Some teachers using this practice reassess and regroup periodically, for instance, monthly or quarterly according to the content being taught and the needs of the students.

Within-Class Groupings

This method is the most common grouping method in most classes. Within-class groupings can (and should) occur in *both* small-group and whole-class grouping methods. The teacher creates flexible learning groups within the class based on readiness, interests, learning preferences, and so on. Data from preassessments, students' interests and goals, and lesson objectives can help determine the groupings. The teacher then differentiates the learning activities according to these groups' needs.

The reproducible chart on pages 27–28 provides a quick reference of many of the grouping terms and formats just discussed.

REQUIREMENTS AND BENEFITS OF ALL FLEXIBLE GROUPING MODELS

Regardless of the grouping structure in place, all students have the right to appropriately challenging curriculum and an environment that encourages divergent thinking and learning time with peers. For this to occur, certain elements must be in place: *continual assessment, targeted instruction, focus on specific learning objectives, learner confidence,* and *differentiated instruction*.

Following are more details on each of the five beneficial required elements for effective flexible grouping.

Ongoing formative assessment. Continual assessment is required to form flexible groups. Data collected to form the flexible groups provides documentation of

4. For the purpose of this book, "students with special needs" refers to students who are identified as either qualifying for special education or gifted education, are ELL, are former ELL, are culturally diverse, or are living in poverty.

progress, which is especially useful for gifted students working beyond grade level. Continual assessment relies on both formal and informal assessment data to form and reform flexible learning groups according to what students already know about the content that is to be taught. When teachers use different methods for ongoing assessment, they are constantly monitoring student achievement and identifying areas that need additional support or intervention.

Targeted instruction. Assessment results provide evidence of mastery and needs, informing teachers what students already know and what they need to know. When students are flexibly grouped based on achievement data, teachers can more purposefully target their instruction to the specific needs of the group.

Focus on specific learning objectives. Continual assessment and targeted instruction keeps our focus on the specific objectives of the lesson. Even though all students in the class are learning the same topics, the flexible groups may have different objectives. The objectives created for each group depend on the specific needs of each group.

Learner confidence. When students are flexibly grouped with like peers, the level of academic risk-taking increases significantly. The group becomes a safe place to "push the learning envelope." Confidence levels build when students work on challenging learning goals. The data collected helps direct teachers in designing learning opportunities that build on students' readiness levels and interests.

Differentiated curriculum and instruction. When students are purposely grouped according to a targeted need, teachers can more readily structure their curriculum and instruction across a grade level or within a class. Having this documentation justifies the need for differentiated instruction based on the students' needs.

The benefits of grouping strategies vary depending on the methods employed given the needs of the situation. Clearly, the skill and training of the teachers greatly impacts the benefits, as is the case with all instruction. For this reason, we strongly advocate for ongoing training, such as that described in chapter 4.

Understanding Learning Behaviors

Though ability levels manifest differently in children, some students do share common behavioral traits, such as tendencies toward intensities, perfectionism, and hypersensitivity. Some children overachieve, some may underachieve, and some may be unmotivated or disengaged from classroom instruction. Idiosyncrasies typical of different populations can interfere with learning and academic achievement if teachers are unaware of the source. Thus, it is critical that teachers with students with special needs participate in ongoing training to understand their students' behaviors and learning needs, so they can group and instruct students effectively.

All students are more likely to seek challenging work and take academic risks when they feel accepted by peers and understood by their teachers. Learning alongside students who share similar affective concerns and academic abilities provides the setting many students need to challenge themselves. Teachers who understand these learning behaviors can better create the environment and flexible learning groups their students need to thrive.

Many students think and learn differently from their chronological age-mates. Students tend to understand, accept, and use their learning differences as assets when they are grouped together. When provided with consistent appropriate academic challenge, these students tend to be more comfortable with themselves (and with others).

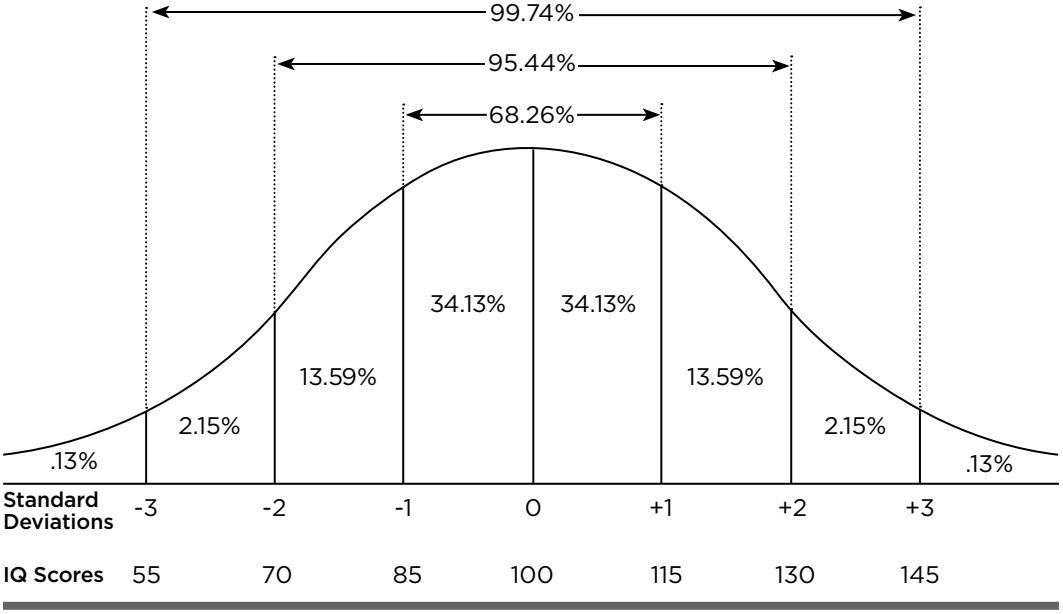
As an example, consider the range of students who qualify for special education services. These students require teachers who have specialized training in understanding and responding to their learning needs. We would not expect all students with IEPs to receive the same interventions. Likewise, we cannot expect all students identified as gifted or as ELL students to have the same learning needs. All students have strengths and experiences that influence where they are in any curriculum and their ability to move through content that is new to them.

While students may share some traits and learning needs, in some classes, there are fewer "typical" than "atypical" learners. Gifted students who are highly and profoundly gifted, twice-exceptional, culturally and linguistically diverse, highly creative, or underachieving all learn in vastly different ways. Teachers with personal experience and/or formal training in one of these areas learn how to build on the students' strengths while addressing areas of need.

The bell curve in **figure 1.1** depicts the range of abilities found in any given classroom where purposeful student grouping, including cluster grouping, is not considered. It is exceedingly difficult for most teachers to adequately engage and challenge students within this wide spectrum. Flexibly grouping students according to specific learning objectives helps make this feat manageable for teachers.

Many students in the -2 to -3 stanines of the bell curve receive special education services. These students have special learning needs that require trained teachers with expertise in the specific needs and challenges these students may have. The same is seen in how schools group and serve their ELL students. Schools structure their schedules with these students in mind. Gifted students need the same attention. Some

Figure 1.1 The Normal Distribution of IQ Scores[5]



5. Sattler, J. M. (1992). *Assessment of Children: WISC-III and WPPSI-R Supplement*. La Mesa, CA: Jerome M. Sattler, Publisher, Inc.

of the students in the two aforementioned groups also qualify as gifted students, though many go unidentified. Special education students who are also gifted are often referred to as twice-, multi-exceptional, or 2E learners. When we can identify giftedness in these subpopulations, we can more appropriately address all gifted students' instruction.

Regrettably, most states and the federal government fail to provide additional funding for students who qualify as gifted. This lack of funding and legislation makes it incumbent upon the schools to allocate their existing funds to ensure they are meeting the learning needs of all their students, including those with higher than average ability. Purposeful grouping with all our students can help achieve this goal, as we will discuss in the following section on cluster grouping.

The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model: One Example of Ability Grouping

The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model (SCGM) is an inclusion model in which gifted students are integrated in fixed groups into mixed-ability classes with teachers trained to provide appropriate differentiation opportunities for all students using various flexible grouping strategies. In this way, SCGM is both a fixed *and* a flexible grouping model. This specific model for providing gifted education services—when implemented with fidelity—has the potential to raise achievement for all students without requiring additional funding for the schools. In this model, *all* students in the school are strategically placed into classrooms based on their abilities, potential, or achievement with the goal of narrowing the learning range in each classroom. We chose to place special focus on the SCGM here as an example of ability grouping, since no other formal model is supported by solid research. Also, many schools implement aspects of the SCGM, if not the whole model. (**Note:** We focus on a second ability-grouping model—content replacement—in the section following this one.)

The SCGM creates a balance of ability and achievement across each grade level and yields desirable outcomes for all students. Cluster grouping can enfranchise many gifted students who previously have been left out of gifted programs, including gifted children in the primary grades, twice-exceptional students, gifted culturally and/or linguistically diverse (CLD) students, gifted students who are nonproductive or uncooperative, and students with high ability who may lack background knowledge and experiences due to poverty.[6]

Cluster grouping provides positive outcomes for schools, as it:

- Embraces diversity
- Increases achievement
- Expands gifted services
- Raises expectations for all
- Attracts and retains smart students
- Costs nothing to implement

6. Winebrenner, S., and Brulles, D. (2008). *The Cluster Grouping Handbook: A Schoolwide Model: How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Advantages of cluster grouping include:

- A narrowed range of abilities in the classrooms, which allows for more focused instruction
- Strategies used for advanced ability learners can be used for *all* students
- Ongoing assessment of students' strengths and needs ensures continual progress
- The ease of providing specific instructional interventions to flexible learning groups
- Gifted students are more likely to receive advanced instruction and extended learning opportunities
- Not all students are working on the same material at the same time
- Higher expectations for all students

Though little experimental or causal research on the achievement impact of cluster grouping is available, that which does exist documents equal levels of growth for all students whether or not they are identified as gifted.[7] Most other research is observational or correlational, which cannot be empirically evaluated, resulting in significant methodological limitations.

COMPOSING CLUSTER CLASSROOMS STRATEGICALLY

Classroom compositions are carefully structured with two main goals: to ensure that there is a balance of achievement and ability throughout the grade level, and to reduce the learning range found in any given classroom. This system provides opportunities for teachers to more readily respond to the needs of all their students.

The student identification categories in **figure 1.2** provide guidance for the fixed grouping of all students into classrooms. Grouping categories consist of:

Group 1—Gifted: All gifted-identified students, including those who are not fluent in English, not productive in school, and twice-exceptional gifted students.

Group 2—High Average: Highly competent and productive students who achieve well in school.

Group 3—Average: Students achieving in the average range of grade-level standards.

Group 4—Low Average: Average students who are able to achieve at grade level with support.

Group 5—Far Below Average: Students who struggle in several subject areas and score significantly below proficiency levels on academic measures.

After designating the appropriate grouping category for each student, the placement team assigns students to classrooms. The process starts by clustering all gifted-identified students into designated gifted-cluster classrooms. Next, high-average students are placed into classrooms that have not been assigned the gifted cluster. Average students are then placed evenly in all classrooms, and low-average students

7. Brulles, D., and Winebrenner, S. (January 2011). "Maximizing Gifted Students' Potential in the 21st Century." American Association of School Administrators, aasa.org; Brulles, D., Saunders, R., and Cohn, S. J. (2010). "Improving Performance for Gifted Students in a Cluster Grouping Model." *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 34(2), 327–350; Gentry, M. (1999). "Promoting Student Achievement and Exemplary Classroom Practices Through Cluster Grouping: A Research-Based Alternative to Heterogeneous Elementary Classrooms." Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.

Figure 1.2 Recommended SCGM Classroom Composition for a Single Grade Level[8]

CLASSROOM	GIFTED STUDENTS	HIGH-AVERAGE STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS	LOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS	FAR-BELOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS
A	6	0	12	12	0
B	0	6	12	6	6
C	0	6	12	6	6

Note: Classes A, B, and C designate three sections in one grade level. The numbers of students in each table vary.

are placed in all classrooms according to the charts. Far-below-average students are grouped in the classes that do not have the gifted cluster.

GROUPING VARIATIONS IN THE CLUSTER MODEL

Establishing the number of gifted-cluster classes at a grade level and then placing students into the various classes involves weighing and balancing various criteria. The number of gifted-identified students is the primary factor determining the number of gifted-cluster classes needed in each grade. Because these numbers change yearly, the number of gifted-cluster classes in a specific grade level may also change from one year to the next.

The text and tables that follow show examples of ways to place students in these scenarios.

Few Students for One Gifted-Cluster Classroom

Variations on the suggested model are necessary when grade levels contain few gifted-identified students. When zero to three gifted students are in a grade level, include some high-average students along with the gifted students in the gifted-cluster classroom, as seen in **figure 1.3**. The purpose is to create a balance of ability and achievement levels in all classes in the grade.

Figure 1.3 Recommended Cluster Grouping for Grades with Few Gifted Students[9]

CLASSROOMS	GIFTED STUDENTS	HIGH-AVERAGE STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS	LOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS	FAR-BELOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS
A	1	7	13	9	0
B	0	10	12	5	3

Too Many Gifted Students for One Gifted-Cluster Classroom

High numbers of gifted students in one class sometimes represents a challenge for the gifted-cluster teacher. Grade levels with more than ten gifted students may want to divide the gifted students into two gifted-cluster classrooms. When there are enough gifted students to form two gifted-cluster classes, there are usually two

8. Adapted from *The Cluster Grouping Handbook: A Schoolwide Model: How to Challenge Gifted Students and Improve Achievement for All* by Susan Winebrenner and Dina Brulles (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, 2008). Used with permission.
9. Adapted from Dina Brulles and Susan Winebrenner. "The Schoolwide Cluster Grouping Model Restructuring Gifted Education Services for the 21st Century," *Gifted Child Today, 34(4),* 35–46 (October 2011). Used with permission.

or more other section(s) in the grade level into which high-achieving students are grouped. This careful placement ensures a balance of ability and achievement levels across the grade.

When dividing gifted students into two cluster classrooms, the gifted students can be placed into the cluster classes based on their learning strengths in math or reading, as seen in **figure 1.4**. In classroom A, gifted students who are strong in math are placed with a teacher who specializes in math. In classroom B, the gifted students who are strong in language arts are grouped together. Similarly, in classrooms C and D, the students who are far below average are placed according to resource assistance provided based on the students' needs.

Figure 1.4 Recommended Cluster Grouping for Grades with Many Gifted Students[10]

CLASSROOMS	GIFTED STUDENTS	HIGH-AVERAGE STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS	LOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS	FAR-BELOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS
A	10	0	12	12	0
B	12	0	12	10	0
C	0	16	8	4	6
D	0	16	8	4	6

Combination/Multiage Classes

Combination classes, also known as multiage, or multigrade classes, provide an ideal placement for gifted students. In multiage classes, all students work at varying challenge levels within the same content areas. In this setting, the teacher provides ongoing, formative assessment for all students to create flexible learning groups. This routine practice of preassessing students' entry levels in the content areas is ideal for the gifted students in the class.

Figure 1.5 demonstrates how a small school with one and a half sections of both second grade and third grade provides services for their gifted students using the SCGM. The school created a multigrade class as the second and third grades gifted-cluster class. High-achieving students were placed in the other classrooms in each respective grade. A similar situation was employed for fourth and fifth grades in this small school. The classes maintained the same balance as previously described.

Figure 1.5 Recommended Cluster Grouping for Multiage Classes and Related-Grade-Level Classes[11]

CLASSROOMS	GIFTED STUDENTS	HIGH-AVERAGE STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS	LOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS	FAR-BELOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS
Grades 2–3, Multiage	3 to 5	0	5 to 6	4 to 5	0
Grade 2	0	10	9	3	6
Grade 3	0	10	9	3	6

Note: This school has 1.5 sections in grades 2 and 3.

10. Brulles and Winebrenner. (October 2011). Used with permission.
11. Brulles and Winebrenner. (October 2011). Used with permission.

Large Numbers of Both Gifted and Far-Below-Average Students in a Grade

Occasionally, grade levels have very large numbers of gifted students and far-below-average students. This scenario creates the need to place some of the far-below-average students into a gifted-cluster class. Assistance from a resource teacher helps the gifted-cluster teacher who is working with the full range of abilities in her classroom. Principals and teachers find that the cluster-grouping model facilitates the scheduling of resource teachers because the students receiving resource assistance are also clustered.

Figure 1.6 shows how one school handled this scenario. The principal separated the students in the gifted and far-below-average groups according to the students' area(s) of strength or need: in this case, mathematics. She then placed the groups with a teacher (in classroom B) who enjoyed using flexible groups to differentiate in math.

Figure 1.6 Recommended Cluster Grouping for a Grade with Many Gifted and Far-Below-Average Students[12]

CLASSROOMS	GIFTED STUDENTS	HIGH-AVERAGE STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS	LOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS	FAR-BELOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS
A	8	0	10	9	0
B	6	6	10	0	5
C	0	12	6	2	7

Note: When it is necessary to combine gifted and far-below-average students in the same class, group students according to areas of need, such as mathematics.

Middle Schools That Departmentalize

Middle schools can incorporate the SCGM in several ways. The subject areas that cluster group are commonly determined by the school schedule. Some middle schools find it practical to cluster group for specific subjects, such as language arts and social studies. They then form homogenous learning groups typically based on math achievement levels and have heterogeneous classes for science and electives (see **figure 1.7**).

Figure 1.7 Recommended Cluster Grouping for Middle Schools[13]

CLASSROOMS	GIFTED STUDENTS	HIGH-AVERAGE STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS	LOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS	FAR-BELOW-AVERAGE STUDENTS
A	6	0	12	12	0
B	6	0	12	12	0
C	0	6	12	6	6
D	0	6	12	6	6
E	0	6	12	6	6
F	0	6	12	6	6

12. Adapted from Brulles and Winebrenner. (October 2011). Used with permission.
13. Adapted from Winebrenner and Brulles. (2008). Used with permission.