



Research Link

Grouping Gifted Students

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Can gifted students receive effective instruction in the regular classroom? Lisa Benson (2002), a classroom teacher, observes that in her experience, gifted students quickly become frustrated in mixed-ability classes, especially those gifted students who exhibit a high degree of creativity. Further, she believes that the typical large classroom lacks the necessary resources to serve all students well.

Do most researchers agree with this practitioner's assessment?

Homogeneous Versus Heterogeneous Grouping

Renzulli (cited in Knobel & Shaughnessy, 2002) believes that gifted students can be served in regular classrooms containing students of varying ability. He suggests, however, that these regular classroom teachers need either special training in teaching gifted students or access to specialists who can come into the classroom to provide assistance.

Melser's (1999) research indicates that gifted students' reading achievement improves at about the same rate whether those students are in a heterogeneous or a homogeneous class; however, she found that gifted students in heterogeneous classes often had better self-esteem. She concluded that gifted students in homogeneous classes had lower self-esteem because they had to compete with students of equal or superior ability.

Even when schools officially espouse the goal of grouping students of differing abilities together, their efforts to accomplish this goal sometimes run up against practical realities. For example,

Schools have many options for meeting the needs of gifted students in both homogeneous and mixed-ability grouping arrangements.

Burns and Mason (2002) found that elementary school principals in their study, when creating supposedly heterogeneous class groupings, tended to avoid assigning low-performing students and high-ability students to the same classes because the principals assumed that teachers would gear the instructional pace to the lower portion of the class. Burns and Mason also found that students in the high-ability classes received better instruction, had more motivated or better qualified teachers, and benefited from high-ability classmates who contributed to an improved academic climate.

Rogers (2002) analyzed the research on various grouping options for gifted learners and found that full-time gifted programs demonstrate the strongest benefits, followed by cluster grouping within heterogeneous classes (an arrangement in which the top five to eight gifted learners at a grade level are placed in one classroom with a classroom teacher who has special training in gifted education); acceleration of the curriculum through such methods as grade telescoping (time compression of the junior or senior high school curriculum); regrouping for enriched learning in specific subjects; cross-grade grouping or nongraded classrooms;

enrichment pullout programs; and within-class ability grouping. Rogers also found that cooperative grouping, which has demonstrated benefits for most learners, has not been shown to enhance learning for gifted learners. On the basis of her research review, Rogers concluded that gifted students need some form of grouping by ability so that their curriculum may be appropriately broadened and extended.

Shields (2002) supports Rogers's findings. Her research found that homogeneous grouping generally had a significant, positive effect on gifted students' academic achievement, attitudes concerning themselves as learners, and school experiences. But what about the students who were not identified as gifted and who were left behind in the regular classes? According to Shields, students placed appropriately in regular classes did not suffer socially or emotionally when students identified as academically talented or gifted were served in separate, homogeneous classes.

A study by Gentry, Rizza, and Owen (2002) examined gifted students' perceptions of the amount of challenge and the amount of choice that various academic programs offered them. The study found that elementary-level gifted students perceived no difference in how much they were challenged academically, whether they attended magnet schools for gifted children, gifted classes within regular schools, or regular classes. At the middle school level, however, students in the gifted magnet schools reported significantly more challenging work than did students in gifted or regular classes within regular schools. No meaningful difference existed among the groups in the amount of academic choice that they experienced at either the elemen-

tary or middle school levels. These researchers expressed concern, however, that little differentiation occurs for gifted students in regular elementary classrooms.

Mixed-Ability Grouping Options

To overcome the concerns of Gentry, Rizza, and Owen and to better accommodate the needs of gifted students, Tomlinson (2001) stresses that a differentiated classroom *can* meet the uncommon needs of these learners. She suggests that teachers can differentiate instruction for advanced learners in many ways, such as giving them more advanced reading or research material, calling on them to think at a deeper level of complexity, and asking them to use more advanced skills. Tomlinson suggests, however, that even though regular classrooms that employ differentiated instruction can accommodate many needs of gifted students, most schools will need to provide a variety of services and learning options for the full range of learners.

Lloyd (1999), in his review of the research on multi-age classrooms, concludes that this grouping arrangement has positive and often significant effects on both the academic and the social-emotional learning of high-ability students. He observes that teachers in multi-age classrooms are more likely to focus on the individual characteristics of their students, whereas teachers in single-grade classes are more likely to approach students as members of a particular grade and to expect similarities rather than differences. He suggests that multi-age classes provide a positive alternative to self-contained classes or pullout programs for gifted students.

Serving All Students

Sternberg, interviewed by Shaughnessy (2002), outlines three overarching issues that schools must address in the

education of gifted children. First, students are not simply gifted or nongifted; rather, there are various types of gifts and many ways to capitalize on strengths and to correct and compensate for weaknesses of all students. Therefore, schools need to do a better job of identifying giftedness in all its forms. Second, giftedness is not just a state but also a process: Given the right opportunities, many students who now perform only adequately could

become expert learners if their teachers understood how to develop competencies within students. Third, schools need to look past students' unconventional backgrounds when identifying students as gifted. Sternberg posits that our conventional measures favor cultural majority-group children and not those, for instance, who live in homes where English is not spoken.

The research summarized here demonstrates that schools have many

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options for meeting the needs of gifted students in both homogeneous and mixed-ability grouping arrangements. Each school must decide on the best arrangements for its high-ability students on the basis of its own student population, organizational structure, staff expertise, and school culture. ■

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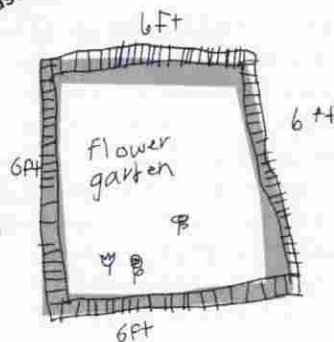


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