

Instructional Grouping Strategies

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Ability and Mixed-Ability Groups

In researching grouping methods for instruction (heterogeneous, homogeneous, and flexible) I found *Influences on Ability and Mixed-Ability Groups in a Qualitative Descriptive Study*, a dissertation by Katia Raouf Cheetany that collected research “from 15 elementary schools in the southern region of Nevada with 13 teachers participating in interviews and 41 anonymously submitted questionnaires,” discussing the advantages and disadvantages of ability and mixed ability groups (or homogenous and heterogeneous groups) and how ZPD affected learning. According to this study, the debate between the two types of grouping has been going on since the 1920s over which group was more beneficial to students (with no mention of flexible grouping). Some scholars believe that ability grouping is essential for teaching precisely at ability levels, and accommodating for students who might be behind. Others argued that meeting students’ comfort level was not challenging them to grow. The need in particular for this study arose from educational reform policies regarding ability grouping, and as typical elementary school classrooms automatically have many diverse learners with different abilities, teachers are always tasked with making decisions on how to best help them. Since the turn from teacher-directed instruction to cooperative learning in the classroom, teachers have had to start grouping their students to accommodate. Because no prior experience existed, studies and research are still being conducted to find how best to do this, and continuously are resulting in contradictory data. Before Cheetany’s dissertation, most of the studies focused on quantitative data, and so this research chose to focus on qualitative data from the teachers’ perspectives, as they are the main decision makers in the room and saw the most influence on the students. Overall, through the pandemic and a very long project, Cheetany found that ability groups were

useful for teaching and enforcing basic skills, especially because they provided socialization outlets for the learning students. They felt on-par with their peers and had no hesitations to speak with them, and they were able to motivate each other through challenges. A downfall and a positive is that students were performing at their ability, but were not being challenged. The mixed ability groups also had positive effects, under the singular condition that an adult or teacher was able to manage structured expectations. With that guidance, mixed groups were able to excel.

Flexible Groups

Beyond the discourse of ability or mixed ability groupings, there is a third option called flexible grouping. The Flexibly Grouped Classroom: How to Organize Learning for Equity and Growth by Kristina J. Doubet serves as an introductory handbook to how and why. The book begins by explaining how groups are always happening to us as a social species, and we sometimes have them chosen for us, and sometimes are able to choose, but increasingly as technology advances and manual labor is relegated to machinery and automation, groups and social jobs are becoming more and more popular. However, it is incredibly important to understand that while groups as a whole work better than the individual – creating solutions faster, innovating new ideas more quickly, and seeing more mistakes that can then be fixed – it is crucial to consider the type of group. Doubet puts forth that stagnant, unchanging groups, regardless of if they are homogeneous or heterogeneous, are not only outshone by constantly changing groups but also detrimental to people in the world – and especially to students in a classroom. When groupings are based on a single factor and do not change, the work hinders growth, erodes classroom community, and exaggerates status differences by reinforcing the

racial, cultural, and socioeconomic inequities present in our larger society. Doubet encourages educators to instead base grouping on the specific task at hand, and introduces three types of groups: like-readiness, like-interest, and process of completing a task. The first of these is similar to homogenous grouping, which is helpful for targeted instruction; the second encourages socialization between students; and the last deals with student decision making. In lieu of flexible grouping for equity, Doubet speaks about how classmates should optimally speak with every classmate in the room, in order to access new learning opportunities, and have a chance to both be challenged and be the challenger. Flexible grouping fights stereotyping by showing students they do not always have to fit in a specific box to complete a task, and that they can be seen with other circles in different circumstances and work in different ways.

Tor's Opinion

I find it incredibly difficult to look at both sets of data and not prefer flexible grouping. From the first set of data, we see that there has been contradictory evidence because both groups have their merits. In fact, the first dissertation can be said to support the claims of flexible grouping. Cheetany found that students performed best when placed in homogeneous groups to learn skills, and then heterogeneous groups after to build on them.

Furthermore, I'm compelled by Doubet's argument for equity and restorative justice. Even just on the surface level, rotating groups so classmates meet every single one of their classmates to build camaraderie is obviously and apparently beneficial to both their social and academic growth. Then the further proof that shifting groups dismantles stereotypes, and teaching students that groups can be made with common goals are both ideas that cater to my personal teaching philosophy. The only hesitation I might have about flexible grouping at all is that in switching so much, students may not bond as deeply as they would otherwise, especially

considering the length of the year compared to how many group projects are done. The which, I might understand that students who connected would have enough initiative to meet outside of class and bond there.

Perhaps my largest question with flexible grouping is timing and frequency. I would be interested to see different researches and studies that vary in both regards, and which saw the most success with students.

Even as a student teacher now, I find myself increasingly grateful to be placed into new groups with my current cohort. For me, and other anxious students, it is easy to fall into groups that one does not necessarily wish to be in, but has trouble navigating the social consequences or repercussions of leaving a group and joining a new one. When the teacher focuses the group-making on goals, providing that structure and prompt encourages agency, self assessment, and self reflection in the types of people one surrounds themselves with.

Any human being that acknowledges humanity as a social species, and history as chronically changing would have to concede that flexible grouping must be developed and used by educators who wish to grow their students into adaptable human beings. As time marches on, we learn more about what students need to excel because we learn more about ourselves and how humans develop, and it's our responsibility to keep up with things. It was interesting to hear that grouping strategies have very little research due to the newness of its validity, and it's heartening to hear the rise in popularity as we as society move away from teachers as omniscient authority. I think to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and the attitudes and practices of a banking concept of education, which he says mirrors oppressive society as a whole, and how we continue to grow out and away from them. Flexible grouping arms us against oppressive philosophies "the teacher teaches and the students are taught," because the students are able to teach each other; "the

teacher knows everything and the students know nothing,” because the students are learning from each other; “the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly,” because ideally, the teacher is doing much less talking than the students; “the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply,” because the students are choosing who they wish to work with. This is just the beginning of our work as educators, and it’s up to us to continue the path forward and bring our students along with us.

References

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