Grouping Gifted Students for Learning

When students are grouped for learning, gifted kids require different considerations than their age peers. There is much evidence that struggling students do better today, in heterogeneous classes, than they did previously, when they were "tracked" in low-ability groups. But the evidence about gifted students is just the opposite. Their long-term achievement may suffer unless they are purposefully grouped together for at least part of each school day.

The practice of grouping high-ability students has been challenged in an educational climate that opposes ability grouping in general. However, the research of James Kulik, Chen-Lin Kulik, John Feldhusen, and Marcia Gentry clearly demonstrates that gifted students consistently benefit from being with students of similar ability.

We can accomplish our goal of allowing gifted youngsters to work together through the careful use of two practices: cooperative learning and cluster grouping. This chapter describes both in detail. Although their benefits are interrelated, I have chosen to discuss them separately.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning has been suggested as one response to the challenges inherent to teaching a class with a wide range of ability. In some schools, gifted students who have already mastered grade-level curriculum are expected to become teachers for their peers who need help with the material. This is grossly unfair to the gifted students, who may be denied consistent opportunities to make forward progress in their own learning.

Cooperative learning is an educational practice that is generally accompanied by some gains in achievement and profoundly improved social interaction behaviors for boys and girls. Since the demands of the adult workplace often require all people to work in groups from time to time, cooperative learning skills are valuable for all students, including those who are gifted. Remember that on-the-job groups are rarely totally heterogeneous in nature. In most cases, team members have common training and experience.

Gifted students may have much to lose and little to gain from traditional cooperative learning practices. As you'll see, it's not difficult to create appropriate cooperative learning experiences for your gifted students.

Scenario: Kim Liu

Kim Liu was a very unhappy sixth grader. His science teacher used cooperative learning almost all of the time, and Kim Liu had exhibited some decidedly uncooperative behaviors in his group. Most often, he insisted on doing his work alone, sulked when he was forced to join the group, and refused to carry out the jobs to which he was assigned.

Sometimes, he would act as though he had decided to participate in the cooperative learning activity, but he would soon take over the group, regardless of his assigned job, and try to boss the others into doing things his way. At other times, he simply told his teammates the answers so he could get some relief for a few minutes at the end of science class. Kim Liu's teacher was using a lot of

energy trying to come up with ways to convince him to cooperate. No strategy seemed to work, and almost everyone involved was totally frustrated.

During this period, Kim Liu's teacher attended one of my workshops on teaching gifted kids. She was startled to hear me describe children whose reactions were similar to his. Using guidelines presented in the workshop and detailed in this chapter, she was able to help Kim Liu and her other gifted students develop a more positive attitude about cooperative learning, which made everyone concerned much happier.

Cooperative Learning and Gifted Kids

You may recall that earlier in this book, I suggested that you never ask anything of gifted kids that you wouldn't want someone to ask of you. Let's look at what this really means.

Imagine yourself at the first class meeting of a graduate course you need to take. Your professor is explaining how anxious she is to try out a new method she has just learned called cooperative learning. One course requirement, which will count for 51 percent of your grade, will be a group project. To save time, she has divided the class into groups alphabetically. You'll have the chance to meet with your new "friends" for 30 minutes at the end of class to plan your group project.

Visualize yourself at the first meeting of your group. Monitor your inner reflexes as you discover a slacker in your midst. If you're a student who's proud of your perfect graduate record of all A's, you know you'll do everything you can to make sure your record isn't threatened by this person, who is already enumerating the various reasons why she can't work very hard on this project.

Nod your head if you know that you're probably going to become a little bossy with these folks. Nod if you realize that you're most likely going to end up doing much more than your fair share of the work.

With cooperative learning, we often create situations in which some students have to do just what we would try to avoid. And we criticize them for responding exactly as we would respond.

Most training in cooperative learning directs teachers to set up completely heterogeneous groups. Cooperative learning trainers teach that a group of four students would ideally include one high achiever, two average achievers, and one perceived low achiever. Many experts in cooperative learning contend that all students, regardless of their ability, realize achievement gains from participating in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups. They claim that high-ability students don't suffer, and that gifted students actually understand concepts better when they explain them to other students.

Author, educator, and researcher Robert E. Slavin has observed that "Gifted students working in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups are no worse off than they are in more traditional classrooms." Statements such as this imply that it's perfectly acceptable to consistently place gifted students in heterogeneous groups for learning. But consider this little-known fact about Slavin's research: It systematically excluded the top 5 percent of the student body, meaning that his studies never actually included gifted students! His data, then, is accurate for high achievers, but not for gifted kids. One must also question how much learning typically happens for gifted students in traditional classrooms. "No worse off" is not synonymous with "better off."

Furthermore, out-of-level tests are rarely (if ever) used to document cooperative learning experts' achievement claims for gifted students. When a student starts a particular course of study with a standardized test score in the 95th–99th percentile and moves up only a few percentage points, then naturally it's going to look as though the student hasn't lost any ground. At the same time, it's extremely difficult to measure whether the student has made any gains. Achievement gains for gifted students can be adequately measured only with tests normed for students at a more advanced level, where they have some growing room.

In cooperative learning studies which actually questioned gifted students about their attitudes toward cooperative learning, the majority of those interviewed agreed they did not really dislike cooperative learning per se. They just resented being taken advantage of in cooperative learning groups. Many adults can surely relate to that.

When the learning task requires lots of drill-and-practice, or when some students are having significant trouble learning new concepts, it's highly likely that gifted students in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups will spend most of their time tutoring the other students. They may actually do more teaching than learning. With the increased pressure in many states to bring the least capable students up to the levels of learning required by

state standards, the practice of using gifted kids to teach others may appear even more attractive.

The implied message gifted students receive from always being placed in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups is that once they master the grade-level content, there's nothing left for them to learn. Most teachers would not consciously choose to send such a message.

When the cooperative learning tasks are problem-centered and open-ended, and the teacher has enough training to make sure gifted kids are not being taken advantage of in any way during the cooperative group work, heterogeneous cooperative groups may be defensible for part of the learning time. However, many gifted kids don't prefer group work, so they should have the option to decline it, at least some of the time. There are many jobs in the real world where people work alone successfully.

Gifted students can benefit from learning how to work cooperatively with other students. Cooperative learning experiences can specifically teach them the important social interaction skills they frequently lack, while allowing them to enjoy the company of their age peers. The real question is not whether gifted students belong in cooperative learning groups. Rather, the question is under what conditions they can benefit from cooperative learning and learn the social skills they need to succeed later in life.

STRATEGY: PLACING GIFTED STUDENTS IN THEIR OWN COOPERATIVE LEARNING GROUPS

When gifted students are removed from heterogeneous cooperative learning groups and placed together in their own group with an appropriately challenging task, their experience with cooperative learning is much more satisfying than when they are forced to tutor and/or coach other students in heterogeneous groups. Especially for tasks that focus on drill-and-practice, it is desirable to place gifted students in separate groups to work on more difficult tasks. The rest of the class is arranged in heterogeneous groups, with the "high" in the group being a very capable student, although not necessarily gifted.

Teachers may fear that when the gifted students are working in their own groups, the other groups will lack appropriate role models. Nothing could be further from the truth. Educational researcher, author, and Purdue professor Dale H. Schunk has documented that for one person to serve as a viable role model for another, there can't be too much difference in their abilities. This concept makes sense when you compare it to almost any other learning process. For example, if you're learning to downhill ski, you're more likely to gain confidence by watching novices fall and get up unharmed than by watching hotshots fly down a Black Diamond slope.

David A. Kenny and his colleagues at the University of Connecticut in Storrs studied heterogeneous cooperative learning groups in fourth grade. Although they didn't observe any negative effects on gifted kids in these groups, their research showed that simply having gifted kids in a group doesn't lead to increased achievement by other kids in that group. Further, they found that the other students experienced lower self-esteem. Although non-gifted students may appear to rely on gifted kids for assistance, knowing that they can't do the task more independently reduces their self-confidence.

It is often true that high-ability kids make much more patient coaches than highly gifted students. When gifted students in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups try to explain something to the others, it's as if they are speaking a foreign language. Their listeners may nod their heads in agreement, but they may also feel intimidated, and they won't ask questions for fear of looking foolish or dumb. Meanwhile, the gifted students feel increasingly frustrated about how long it takes the others to understand an idea they grasped at once. Since the gifted students have probably not had instruction in how to teach, they may resort to just giving the answers. Since the other kids may feel daunted in the presence of gifted kids, they may rely on the gifted students to simply tell them the answers. No one benefits from this experience.

You may have seen ample evidence in your own classroom that cooperative learning can be problematic for gifted students. They are the students who are most likely to complain about having to do cooperative learning. It is their parents who tend to be most negative about cooperative learning, because they worry that their children's own learning time will be severely limited.

After one second-grade teacher placed her gifted students in their own cooperative learning group, it took her class almost a full school week to adjust. One group approached her and declared they couldn't do any work today because "we need

Josephine!" Finally, the teacher's firmness paid off. As the students realized they were not going to be "saved" by the return of the most capable students, all of the groups got to work, completed their tasks, and began cooperating to learn, instead of counting on the gifted students to lead them to success.

Most teachers who have removed gifted students from heterogeneous groups report that they are very pleased with the results. They observe their gifted students moving quite happily through the more difficult material, learning to cooperate on tasks few can do alone. Teachers are especially thrilled when they see new academic leadership emerging in the other groups.

Several books on cooperative learning have included the refreshing notion that it might be all right to allow certain students who feel passionate about not working in groups to work alone, at least for part of the time. Elizabeth Cohen in *Designing Groupwork,* and James Bellanca and Robin Fogarty in *Blueprints for Thinking in the Cooperative Classroom,* have all concluded that it's reasonable to expect that we will encounter students who truly hate working in groups, and it's okay to let them work alone at certain times. Roger and David Johnson, co-directors of the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota, have written, "There are times when gifted students should work in cooperative learning groups, there are times when they should work with each other, and there are times when they should work alone."

When you think about it, most people seek out cooperation only when they need assistance. We prefer to work alone on tasks we can do easily without help from others. If we want gifted students to learn how to cooperate, we must make sure they are working on tasks difficult enough to create a need for cooperation. The kids themselves must perceive that cooperation is necessary. Difficult tasks can inspire such a perception.

SUMMARY: COOPERATIVE LEARNING OR HETEROGENEOUS GROUPS?

How can you decide when it's best to place your gifted students in their own cooperative learning groups, and when heterogeneous groups would probably be better for everyone? Here are two approaches you might try.

1. Assess the type of cooperative learning task that has been assigned.

When the task is drill-and-practice (math computation, studying for a recall-type test, answering comprehension questions about a story or novel the class is reading), and you have evidence that some students have mastered that material, place those kids together in their own group and assign them a more complex task. *Examples:* They might read an advanced novel, work on advanced problem-solving techniques in math, write story problems for the rest of the class, or work on resident expert projects in small groups.

For tasks that focus on critical thinking, the development of concepts and generalizations, or problem-based learning, placing gifted students in heterogeneous groups may be perfectly appropriate. Such experiences may be richer when a variety of viewpoints is represented. Any open-ended activity with many possible answers or solutions lends itself to heterogeneous grouping. So does any subject in which the content is new for everyone, including the gifted students. Hands-on science experiments and current events discussions are other good choices for cooperative learning experiences with heterogeneous groups.

2. Ask yourself three key questions.

- Does the task require input from different types of learning styles and different perspectives?
- Is the subject matter new for all students?
- Is it likely that the gifted students will be engaged in real learning rather than continuous tutoring?

If you can answer yes to all three questions, then heterogeneous cooperative learning groups are probably appropriate. If you answer no to one or more of the questions, then it may be better to place the gifted students in a separate group to work on the same kind of content from a more challenging perspective. All other students would work in heterogeneous groups comprised of one of the strongest remaining students, one student who may find the task difficult, and one or two students of average ability. As you circulate among the cooperative groups at work, let your observational skills tell you whether your gifted students have been placed where they belong.