

CLUSTER GROUPING

I realize how often you have asked yourself these questions while reading this book:

- How am I ever going to find the time to implement these strategies?
- Is it fair to put myself out for just one or two students who need this kind of attention when their grades seem to indicate that they're doing just fine in school?
- Isn't it better to spend my time with the kids who really need me?

In most schools, when teachers and principals meet to set up classes for the following year, the gifted students are separated from each other so all classes can have one or two of the "best kids." This practice creates the "just one or two students" dilemma that troubles many teachers.

You know how hard it is for gifted students to be true to their abilities when they're a minority of one in a heterogeneous classroom. They will often pretend to be less capable than they really are just to fit in with the other kids. A method that addresses this situation is sorely needed. The one I strongly support is to group the identified gifted kids at a grade level into a cluster of learners with similar abilities and needs, and to place them together in the classroom of a teacher who has had some training in compacting and differentiation and is comfortable using those strategies. All of the arguments used earlier about cooperative learning apply to the logic of purposefully clustering gifted kids together.

Another issue makes cluster grouping increasingly imperative. During the 1990s, education focused primarily on the learning needs of students who could not meet state standards. Pressure on individual classroom teachers and school administrators was intense and will likely continue until all students can demonstrate mastery of at least minimum standards.

With so much attention aimed at students with learning difficulties, much less attention has been paid to students who have already demonstrated mastery. The attitude among some teachers has been to not worry about high-achieving students at all and to spend the bulk of their time with "the kids who really need me." For many gifted students, being in a heterogeneous classroom has been an excruciating experience.

As an educator, I fail to understand why American education has to choose between meeting the

needs of one group while sacrificing the needs of another. School and district mission statements don't claim to serve only certain groups of students. The promises of a good education are made to all. Yet, in daily practice, gifted kids get less teacher attention and less opportunity to work on personally challenging curriculum than anyone else in the class. We must find and use ways that will eliminate the short-shrifting of public education for gifted students.

There is a way to have it all: to continue grouping gifted students together (because they learn better in homogeneous groups) while simultaneously grouping the rest of the students in heterogeneous groups (because that seems best for them). The structure that provides optimum grouping practices for all students is cluster grouping. It provides a sensible alternative to the stampede to eliminate ability grouping for everyone and replaces it with the notion that grouping by achievement for gifted students is defensible and can be accomplished without a return to "tracking" as we used to know it.

Scenario: Third Grade at "Adams School"

Six children at "Adams School" had been identified as gifted at the end of second grade. As the teachers and principal met to set up the classes for the three third-grade sections, they considered how to group the gifted students. The traditional method called for them to divide the six gifted students evenly, placing two in each of the three classes so all teachers would have their fair share of the brightest students. Under this system, all three teachers would have to develop appropriate compacting and differentiation opportunities for the gifted students. Furthermore, the gifted students would be in the minority in all three classes.

The teachers and principal knew that there might be times when these students felt isolated and uncomfortably different from their classmates. So they decided to try something else. Instead of separating the gifted students, they formed a cluster group of all six and placed them in the otherwise heterogeneous class of one teacher who had some training in how to teach the gifted. Knowing that at least six students would benefit from any compacting and differentiating opportunities she created, the teacher felt justified in taking the time to develop them.

When the gifted kids found themselves in a group of others with similar abilities and interests, they started taking risks to experience learning activities that were different from what the rest of the class was doing. They were also more willing to take advantage of the differentiation opportunities because they would have learning companions for those tasks.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT CLUSTER GROUPING

Most educators have many questions about clustering—so many, in fact, that the rest of this chapter is devoted to answering the ones I most frequently hear. If you like the clustering concept, and if you think it might benefit your students, you may decide to share this information with your principal, who in turn may decide to share it with other administrators or school board members.

Schools that cluster-group gifted students are on their way to providing something that sounds almost impossible to achieve in our current educational climate: a full-time gifted education program that requires only minimal funds to support it. The program is full-time because gifted kids are having their learning needs met every day in every subject area. It requires only minimal funds because it's part of the regular classroom program and utilizes many of the same materials purchased for other learners at that grade level. Best of all, it prevents gifted kids from becoming the group which benefits least from heterogeneous grouping.

IMPORTANT: It's not enough to simply cluster gifted kids together. It's essential that the program be carefully monitored by a principal or gifted program coordinator to ensure that consistent compacting and differentiation are taking place.

"How does cluster grouping work?"

Using a combination of local and standardized identification criteria, gifted students are identified in the spring at every grade level. Sometimes the identifying group is comprised of the gifted education specialist and a screening committee; sometimes it includes the building principal and the

teachers of the grade level the students are leaving and the one they are about to enter. In most schools, the identified group represents no more than about the top 5 percent of the grade level.

These students are placed in a cluster of four to six students and assigned to a teacher who has had some special training in the teaching of the gifted. The rest of the students in that class are heterogeneously mixed. The other teachers also have heterogeneous mixes of students, but they don't have any of the identified gifted students.

What if there are more than six identified students at a grade level? Larger clusters may be allowed, or two clusters could be formed. In middle or junior high schools, where there are not enough qualified gifted students to form a separate class for them in the areas of their strength, students may be clustered in one specific class period, along with a heterogeneous mix of others.

NOTE: The concept of "enrichment clusters" developed by Dr. Joseph Renzulli is not the same as the cluster grouping concept described in this chapter. Enrichment clusters are designed to bring enrichment experiences to all students in a school every now and then. Clustering gifted children means they are grouped together full-time and placed in otherwise heterogeneous groups for the entire school year.

"How should students be identified for cluster groups?"

The most important criteria is that students should have demonstrated ability in reading and/or math which exceeds grade level expectations by one full year or more. Schools should use whatever methods they wish to identify such students. For example, they might give potential candidates next year's end-of-the-year tests in reading and math during the spring or summer. For students from kindergarten through grade 2, the *Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Essential Skills* can determine the instructional level in most subject areas.

Standardized, norm-referenced tests should be used for inclusion purposes only and to identify the percentage of students who need the cluster grouping option. If a student performs well on local tests but not so well on standardized tests, she should not be excluded based on the standardized test data alone.

If a student can demonstrate more than 70 percent competency on advanced content from higher-level curricula, that evidence should supersede any standardized test data. Gifted students often score much lower on group tests of ability or IQ than they would on an individual intelligence test administered by a trained tester. One reason is they take too much time with each item, considering its many facets and ramifications, and losing precious minutes in the process.

If 9 percent of the students at a particular grade level score above the 95th percentile on standardized tests in reading and math, you would cluster 9 percent of the kids at that grade level, not the arbitrary 5 percent often cited on national identification guidelines.

If a student scores high on standardized tests but gets poor grades because he “doesn’t complete his work,” the test results would be more important than his classroom work or his grades.

Teachers’ and parents’ observations of precocious behaviors may also be used as identification tools. Be careful that students who don’t complete their work aren’t automatically disqualified. You learned in Chapter 1 that there are many reasons for this beyond the assumption that the child doesn’t know how to do the work. These reasons include perfectionism, frustration, and being twice exceptional.

In summary, always give more weight to the data that points toward inclusion in the cluster group, whether that data includes demonstrated mastery, observations, or standardized tests.

“How should all students at a grade level be assigned to classes if the school clusters gifted students?”

If you’re worried that classes without gifted kids will suffer, please don’t. A three-year study of cluster grouping at the elementary level by Marcia Gentry* documented improved achievement at all grade levels in which clustering was done, including classes where there were no gifted clusters. One factor that accounted for that improvement was the unique way in which students were grouped into classes. In the spring, when class placements were made, students were sorted into the following five groups:

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| I. Gifted | IV. Below Average |
| II. Above Average | V. Significantly Below |
| III. Average | Grade Level |

Classroom A, taught by a teacher with some training in gifted education, was assigned the cluster group of gifted students and some students from groups II–IV. All other classes got a range of students from groups II–V.

This grouping method reduced the range of achievement in each classroom. It freed the cluster teacher to spend more time with the cluster kids, instead of being pulled away by the needs of those students who were significantly below grade level.

Tip: For this method to achieve the desirable outcomes, be absolutely certain that there are enough students from group II in each non-cluster class, even if it means putting no group II students in the gifted cluster.

“What if we have ten to twelve gifted students at a grade level?”

Some advocates of cluster grouping believe that there’s nothing wrong with larger clusters. My experience indicates that each cluster should have no more than four to six students in a class of 25–30 kids. If you have 10–12 gifted students, I recommend creating two clusters for two classrooms. You might group kids who are very advanced in math in one cluster, and those whose exceptionality is more related to reading in the other.

“What about gifted students who move into the district during the school year? Should they be placed in the cluster group?”

First, you need to be sure that they meet the same criteria used to select kids for the existing cluster group. If they do, and if their placement in the cluster class won’t disrupt the balance in enrollment between all classes at that grade level, go ahead with the placement. If that’s not possible, try to place these students with a teacher who has had some training in basic compacting and differentiation strategies and is willing to use them. This ensures that the special learning needs of these students will be met, even though they aren’t yet in the cluster group.

“Where should we place students who are gifted in one subject area but very average in other subject areas?”

Place them in the same classroom as the cluster group, but without designating them cluster members. Then, when you offer the same options to the whole class that you offer to the gifted cluster,

* Gentry, Marcia L. “Promoting Student Achievement and Exemplary Classroom Practices Through Cluster Grouping: A Research-Based Alternative to Heterogeneous Elementary Classrooms.” Research Monograph 99138. Storrs, CT: NRC/GT, University of Connecticut, 1999.

group any students who demonstrate eligibility for differentiating opportunities with the other eligible students.

"Isn't cluster grouping the same as tracking?"

No, they are different. In a tracking system, all students are grouped by ability for much or all of the school day, and students tend to remain in the same track throughout their years in school. In cluster grouping, only gifted students are grouped together in their areas of strength because they learn better that way. Students of all other ability levels are grouped heterogeneously because research indicates that this may be the best arrangement for them. Cluster grouping allows gifted kids to learn together while avoiding permanent grouping arrangements for students of other ability levels.

"Isn't it elitist to provide programming for gifted students?"

No, it is not. Elitism means giving special treatment to one group of students while withholding similar services from other students. Gifted education has been accused of being elitist because often children from minority groups are inadequately represented in gifted programs. When teachers learn how to provide opportunities for all students (including gifted students) to be challenged by rigorous and interesting curriculum, elitism doesn't occur. In fact, the more gifted education strategies regular classroom teachers learn, the likelier it becomes that more students, not just those identified as gifted, will reap the benefits of a challenging curriculum.

Related concerns about equity are also misleading. Equity doesn't mean that all students should have the same learning experiences. It means that all students should have an equal opportunity to make progress in their own learning. Reverse discrimination can occur when gifted students are always placed in heterogeneous groups, where it's unlikely that their learning experiences will be consistently challenging. It's not equity when all students in a mixed-abilities classroom are presented with the same level of difficulty.

Finally, elitism is alive and well in American education. Gifted athletes always receive special treatment as a privileged group in their school. I'm not promoting elitism or condemning athletics. I simply would like critics of gifted education to acknowledge that athletics is a gifted program. If our culture can openly support giftedness in bodily-

kinesthetic abilities, we ought to be able to offer similar support in other categories of learning in which some youngsters clearly excel.

"Won't the creation of the cluster group rob the other classes of academic leadership?"

This issue has been of serious concern to classroom teachers for at least the 10 years I have been supporting this practice. Interviews with cluster teachers reveal some very interesting evidence which can help to allay this concern. The reality is that "new cream rises to the top" in classrooms which don't have a cluster of gifted students. New academic leadership emerges. Students who have never been classroom stars now find that role possible, comfortable, available, and challenging.

This result was documented most recently in the Gentry study (see page 177 and the References and Resources at the end of this chapter). The numbers of students nominated for cluster groups increased each year as teachers recognized new leaders in their classrooms. Furthermore, there were measurable achievement gains across the board at the grade levels that were studied. The data suggest that cluster grouping gifted students may actually lead to higher test scores for other kids as well.

The only conditions under which this concern about equal achievement in all sections of a grade level may become relevant is if schools ever have to report achievement data by individual classrooms, or if teachers' pay is tied to the scores their students make on high-stakes tests. If and when these conditions occur, the practice of clustering gifted kids will be moot.

When the people in charge of setting up class groups remember that the second-highest group of students should not be grouped in the same class as the gifted cluster, there should be many kids in other classes who can act as positive role models and get good scores on important tests.

"Won't the presence of the cluster group in one teacher's class intimidate the other students in that class? Won't it have a negative effect on their achievement?"

No to both questions. When the cluster group is kept to a manageable size, the general achievement level improves for all students in the cluster-group classroom. This suggests the exciting possibility that when teachers learn how to provide what gifted students need, they also offer many of the same opportunities to the entire class, thus raising the level of learning for all students.

The positive effects of cluster grouping may be shared with all students over several years by rotating the cluster teacher assignment among staff who have had the necessary training in compacting and differentiating the curriculum for high-ability students. Computerized scheduling programs can ensure that all students are in a cluster-group classroom at least once during their elementary school experience.

“Won’t the cluster teacher have a range of ability in his or her classroom that’s too wide to teach?”

No, not if the class sections are set up carefully. If there are more than two sections of classes at a grade level, the teacher who takes the cluster group of gifted students does not also receive the neediest learners. That group of students is usually distributed among all other sections of the grade level.

In some districts where special education teachers work daily to co-teach with regular classroom teachers, students with special education needs are purposefully clustered. Under these circumstances, it may be acceptable to place gifted and special needs kids in the same classroom. Because the special education teacher is also available, the regular teacher may be able to spend more time with the kids in the gifted cluster.

If there are only two sections of a grade level, the teacher who has the gifted cluster is also assigned some of the neediest learners. Keep in mind that under all conditions, with or without using cluster grouping, teachers will have a range of ability in their classrooms. So we may as well provide the gifted kids with the comfort and challenge of each other’s company, since this offers clear benefits for them.

“What special skills or training do cluster teachers need?”

Since gifted students are as far removed from the norm as students with significant learning difficulties, teachers need special training in how to teach children with exceptionally high ability. The strategies described in this book can actually provide training for cluster teachers. All teachers of gifted children should know how to do the following:

- Recognize and nurture behaviors usually demonstrated by gifted students of various cultures and backgrounds.
- Facilitate a classroom climate in which individual differences are valued and accepted.
- Create conditions in which all students will be stretched to learn.

- Allow students to demonstrate and get full credit for previously mastered material.
- Provide opportunities for faster pacing of new material
- Plan differentiated learning tasks for all who need them.
- Incorporate students’ passionate interests into their independent studies.
- Facilitate sophisticated research studies by students.
- Provide flexible grouping opportunities so students are sometimes working with the entire class and sometimes in small groups or independently.
- Accept the fact that students are at different levels in their learning and need constant opportunities to work at those various levels.
- Be flexible in their teaching style and comfortable allowing kids more flexibility in their learning behaviors.
- Always let their sense of humor be a guiding force in their classroom.

“How can teachers make sure that gifted kids don’t dominate class discussions or activities?”

Use the Name Card method described on pages 11–13. This will not only alleviate that potential problem, it will also dramatically improve the quality of classroom discussions and increase the level of participation for all students. Even the most capable students prefer this method to traditional hand-raising because they get to share their answers to all the questions with their partner, who is also a highly capable learner. Teachers love it because it eliminates forever the physical gyrations gifted kids exhibit as they try to get in their two cents’ worth for every question, and it significantly reduces blurting behaviors.

Also keep in mind that when the most capable learners are working with each other in their own small groups, or even independently, they are physically removed from some of the large-group activities. This provides more opportunities for other students to shine in class activities and discussions.

“Are cluster students automatically eligible for all compacting and differentiation opportunities offered by the teacher? Can other students ever participate in these activities?”

No student is ever automatically eligible or ineligible for compacting or differentiation opportunities.

All students in the class have a chance to qualify for differentiation unit by unit.

“Won’t other teachers be resentful if they aren’t the cluster teacher?”

Not if they know their chance is coming. All teachers who wish to be cluster teachers should be given their turn on a rotating basis, with each turn lasting two years. During the first year, teachers work very hard to implement the newly-learned strategies; they should have at least one more year to enjoy the fruits of their labors. Meanwhile, other teachers can receive the necessary training. After two years, the cluster group is assigned to another trained teacher. Eventually, every teacher who wants to be a cluster teacher has the opportunity to do so.

“How are records kept of the progress made by students in cluster groups?”

Differentiated Learning Plans (see pages 186–187 and 188) and Cumulative Record Forms (pages 187 and 190) should be kept for all cluster students. The information on these forms should be shared with parents at conferences.

“Won’t parents be unhappy if their child isn’t in the same class with the clustered gifted students?”

Most school districts that use cluster grouping keep a low profile about it. Administrators simply regard it as one more criteria to consider when deciding how to set up classes for instruction. However, this doesn’t mean that parents will remain unaware that cluster grouping is going on. There are three ways to calm their fears on this score.

1. Remind parents that there will still be plenty of positive role models in all classrooms, because the other groups will be totally heterogeneous. For parents who insist that their children be placed in the same classroom with the cluster, explain that their kids might actually be better off as the newly-emerging leaders in one of the other classes. You might provide supporting facts and findings from the Gentry study. See References and Resources at the end of this chapter.
2. Communicate that the district is providing adequate staff development for all teachers. Emphasize that everyone is learning strategies designed to improve the educational experience for gifted kids. This lets parents know that they have the right to request—and expect—appropriate opportunities for their children regardless of the teachers they are assigned to.

3. Be sure to rotate the cluster teacher assignment every two years or so. This sends parents the clear message that there are many teachers in a school who can and do teach gifted students.

“What evidence is available from schools that already use cluster grouping for gifted students?”

If you or your administrator would like to communicate with other schools who are using cluster grouping successfully, contact me to request a document called the “Cluster Network,” a list of names and telephone numbers. You may reach me through my Website (www.susanwinebrenner.com).

“Should cluster grouping practices replace our district’s current program components in gifted education?”

No. Cluster grouping should supplement existing program components. The complaint many teachers (and parents) have about most gifted programs is that they comprise only a small percentage of the student’s learning time. Adding cluster grouping to a comprehensive program already in place is a beneficial, cost-effective option.

If your school must choose between resource-room programs or cluster grouping, my recommendation is to go with the cluster groups. This greatly improves the chances that gifted students will receive appropriate learning opportunities on a daily basis. Unless your district has a gifted education specialist, however, cluster teachers may not get the coaching and assistance they need to provide the best possible classroom program for their gifted kids.

“Isn’t it better for gifted kids to be grouped together in self-contained classes for the entire school year?”

Yes, that is the best arrangement for gifted kids, provided the district is large enough to get political support for such a practice. Gifted students in self-contained classes are more likely to “stay gifted” and remain true to their ability. Gifted kids have characteristics and needs, such as competitiveness, that are often not facilitated in mixed-abilities classes. However, when self-contained classes are not going to happen, cluster grouping is the next best thing, in my opinion.

“What are the disadvantages of cluster grouping?”

There may be pressure from parents who want their children placed in a cluster classroom, even if they aren’t eligible for the cluster group. Parents who move into the district during the school year

and learn that their gifted children can't be placed in the cluster classroom might be unhappy. To address these situations and others that may arise, administrators should:

- Provide training for all staff in compacting and differentiation so parents can expect those opportunities to be available in all classes.
- Require parents to provide written documentation of their child's exceptional learning abilities and their need for curriculum differentiation instead of simply requesting the placement by phone.
- Rotate the cluster teacher assignment every two years among trained teachers so parents understand that many teachers are capable of teaching gifted students.
- Rotate all students into cluster classrooms over a period of several years.
- Reference the Gentry study, which documents the benefits of placing high achievers in non-cluster classrooms. See References and Resources at the end of this chapter.

SUMMARY: HOW GOOD IS CLUSTER GROUPING?

In 1999, the Gentry study reported measurable positive outcomes of clustering gifted students. Other studies continue to document the benefits of grouping gifted kids together in their areas of strength for at least part of each school day. They include:

1. The cluster group is taught by a teacher who has been trained to differentiate the curriculum for gifted students.
2. The students in the group enjoy consistent interaction with their intellectual peers. Instead of doing differentiated activities alone, they have someone to share the experience with. This is very reassuring. It also teaches them that they are not the smartest thing since sliced bread and there are still some things left to learn.
3. The cluster teacher has several identified gifted students to differentiate for, rather than just one or two. This is much more efficient in terms of teacher time and effort.
4. New academic leaders emerge among the students who are not in the cluster classroom. Positive role modeling is still very much in evidence.

Nobody suffers because the gifted students are somewhere else.

5. Achievement can improve for all kids in the grade levels that use cluster grouping, not just in the classroom with the cluster students.
6. The district has a totally cost-effective way to meet the needs of gifted students. No additional funds are required except for teacher training.
7. Perhaps the most exciting benefit is that all staff receives excellent staff development. Specialists in gifted education have known for years that the strategies designed for gifted students benefit many other students as well. Since trained cluster teachers are free to use the strategies they learn with all students, a district's entire program reaps the rewards.
8. Cluster grouping provides gifted students with something their parents have always been told the district could never afford: a full-time gifted program. Every day—not once or twice a week for an hour or two—these students are in a situation where a trained teacher is compacting the curriculum and providing challenging learning experiences. This becomes a regular occurrence instead of a rare opportunity.

It appears that there are no significant disadvantages to clustering gifted students, and more advantages than we could ever hope to buy with the amount of money generally designated for gifted education. The only caution to keep in mind is that simply placing gifted students in cluster groups won't make appropriate education happen for them. Purposeful staff development is essential. The teachers who receive the cluster groups must be trained to teach them the way they need to be taught. Furthermore, the cluster program must be supervised by the gifted education coordinator or administrators to ensure that consistent differentiation is available.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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Cooperative Learning Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, (612) 624-7031 (www.cooplearn.org). This research and training center has been part of the University of Minnesota's College of Education for over 20 years. Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson are the co-directors. The Web site includes a Cooperative Learning Q&A, essays, newsletters, and more.

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Research and Practice on Ways to Group Gifted Learners Together

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Brigance Diagnostic Inventory of Basic Skills. Use this tool with students in the primary grades to document their advanced learning ability in order to place them in cluster groups and to know the level at which they need to be taught in almost all subject areas. Available from Curriculum Associates, North Billerica, MA, (800) 225-0248 (www.curriculumassociates.com).

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