The Flexibly Grouped Classroom

How to Organize Learning for Equity and Growth

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THE FLEXIBLY GROUPED CLASSROOM

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Introduction: How Traditional Models of Grouping Fall Short

Everyone has real-world experiences with being grouped. Sometimes we find that the group has been chosen for us, such as a table assignment at a wedding reception, a project team at work, or college roommates. Other times, we choose our group, such as when we join a book club or Facebook group, sign up for a conference session or exercise class, or go on a guided tour. How we feel about each "grouping" depends on innumerable factors, including who else is in the group, how long the group lasts, and what the group accomplishes.

For all the groups we flow into and out of over a lifetime, school might be the place where our earliest, most formative grouping memories are etched. With little effort, most of us can conjure the joys, pressures, and pains of being in—or not in—certain school-set or school-adjacent social, academic, and extracurricular groups: feeling *included* when *invited* to a lunch table or *excluded* when *relegated* to an open seat alone; being *a part* of the Blue math group working cooperatively on complex problems or sitting *apart* in the Red math group to complete another set of rote drills; having an *affiliation* with others cast in the school play or experiencing *alienation* when we do not make the cut.

Such experiences in and with various groups shape how people see themselves and their peers. This holds especially true of *instructional grouping* within classrooms; the decisions districts, schools, and teachers make about who should be learning together and why they should be learning can really affect student performance (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010, 2012; Schofield, 2010).

We know grouping matters. But how does it matter? And how much? And why? And what, exactly, does "grouping" even mean?

Classroom Portraits

The following set of classroom scenarios* will launch our exploration of these questions. These portraits illustrate how teachers tend to think about and use instructional grouping; they also reflect students' potential experiences with and feelings about the grouping approach the teacher uses. Each is followed by a few "glows" (positives to celebrate) and "grows" (areas for improvement).

Grouping Approach: Standing reading groups

Ms. Bonelli's 1st graders work in **standing reading groups** throughout the year. These groups are leveled according to diagnostic test scores and designated by colors (Blue, Green, Yellow, and Red). Although Ms. Bonellli adjusts group assignments every nine weeks to reflect the most recent diagnostic indicators of progress, many students remain with the same groupmates from the beginning of the school year until its end.

Ms. Bonelli appreciates the community students form when they work together in the same group for an extended period of time. She also values the classroom-management advantage the standing groups convey; students' color-coded groups are a shortcut for assigning other classroom activities, scheduling family presentations, coordinating field trips, and so on. At the same time, she can be frustrated by the conflicts that such familiarity breeds among students in the same group. She also wonders why more students don't make the progress they need to "move up" to a different group on a quarterly basis.

If Ms. Bonelli could see inside her students' heads, she would understand that they wish they could have more opportunities to work with classmates other than those in their standing groups. Many children have interests in common with, and prefer to learn in similar ways to, classmates who are in other groups, but the opportunities for Ms. Bonelli and her students to discover those hidden similarities are rare.

Glows: Assessment evidence is used to form and adjust groups. It is important to examine classroom data when determining appropriate instructional practices, including those around grouping.

*The teachers in these scenarios are composites. Throughout the book, I have used different naming conventions to distinguish the real teachers who have graciously shared their experience with me (identified by first and last names on first mention, and first names thereafter) from these composites (who are consistently "Ms." or "Mr.").

Grows: Students are placed in groups that reflect only a single dimension of who they are and how they learn.

Grouping Approach: Socratic seminar circles

Mr. Ross uses the **Socratic seminar** approach as the primary means of instructing his 12th grade English students. He keeps desks in a circle to facilitate these discussions, and his students (24–28 in number, depending on the section) stay in this formation during other activities, including individual work. When Mr. Ross has a substitute teacher, he allows students to work in small groups to complete the worksheets he leaves for them. The circular seating doesn't really lend itself to small-group discussion, however, so students usually end up working with a single partner—the person seated next to them. They usually work with these same partners when peer editing their writing, so it feels natural, if sometimes a little stale.

Although Mr. Ross loves Socratic seminars—he believes strongly that students should "run" class discussion—he realizes that not everyone participates equally. He uses individual writing conferences to connect with his less vocal students, but such conferences are time-consuming, and he isn't able to conduct them as often as he would like.

Mr. Ross's less vocal students look forward to individual conferencing as much as he does. They feel frozen on the large stage of the whole-class group, hesitant to share their ideas. Even students who would share ideas don't always get to do so, especially if it takes them longer to process these thoughts; someone else always seems to "jump in" before they can speak. They may be sitting in the big circle, but a lot of the time, they don't feel like a part of it.

Glows: Mr. Ross's use of Socratic seminars provides an avenue for inquiry-based learning and encourages higher-order thinking in those who participate. Further, his use of writing conferences presents him the opportunity to offer students tailored feedback.

Grows: Unless the Socratic seminar strategy is combined with additional structures and scaffolds, it can become a conversation among a small number of students—typically, those who are confident and comfortable with verbal processing (in English). In addition, the infrequency of writing conferences means Mr. Ross's students receive targeted feedback for only a small number of assignments.

Grouping Approach: Project-based learning groups

Mr. Driver's 4th grade class embraces **project-based learning** (PBL); accordingly, his students work in project groups for extended periods of time. While Mr. Driver forms these groups primarily based on students' interests or choice of project focus, he also takes each student's past academic success into consideration, being sure that each group includes students at a variety of these "levels."

While this approach lends itself to efficiency (the higher-performing students are often elected as "project managers" and take charge of project completion), it also fosters inequities in how valued students feel and in the amount of work each group member does. Further, Mr. Driver's efforts to scaffold the groups' success are complicated by the different kinds of support or challenge each group member needs; the time he spends with project groups feels inefficient.

When his students are not working in project-based groups, Mr. Driver lets them choose their own partners to complete collaborative tasks. When this occurs, some students end up working alone; frequently, it's the same students every time. Some solo workers lean into this as a release from the pressure of collaborating, but for others, working individually isn't a choice; they were edged out, perhaps because their classmates view them as being too "needy." These students wish their teacher knew that such rejection makes the crowded classroom feel like a lonely place.

Glows: Project-based learning is an approach that has been shown to be effective for students "across grade levels and racial and socioeconomic groups" (Terada, 2021). Additionally, Mr. Driver finds a way to conduct small-group instruction within this larger learning schema.

Grows: Consistent use of heterogeneous groups highlights students' status differences (academic, social, and so on), hindering collaboration both within groups and in the class as a whole. Mr. Driver misses opportunities to use small groups strategically to target students' diverse learning needs.

Grouping Approach: Cooperative learning

Ms. Williams also places her middle school pre-algebra students into heterogenous configurations for **cooperative learning**, typically using her gradebook to form quads made up of one high achiever, one low achiever, and two students

who fall somewhere in the middle. She likes that the high-achieving student in each group can serve as a peer tutor. When peer tutoring isn't enough to support learning, she pulls a group of struggling students and offers reteaching.

These middle schoolers are very aware of who consistently gets more help from their peers and from their teacher, and this is embarrassing for many of them. Ms. Williams senses this, but she reassures herself that it's "worth it"; her students' pass rate for the standardized test is almost always acceptable. What she doesn't know is that many of the students she considers to be "high achievers" grow weary of shouldering the responsibility of supporting the rest of their groupmates. These same students often feel like they can't ask questions of Ms. Williams because they are expected to know the answers. Many of them wish that they could meet more often with Ms. Williams to ask the questions they have, learn more, and go deeper. Other students in the classroom, recognizing that they are considered to be "in need of extra help" or "just average," hesitate to offer their insights and feel that if they did speak up, their voices would be ignored.

Glows: Ms. Williams's consistent use of small-group work for processing fosters opportunities for student discourse and the expectation of collaboration.

Grows: The perception of students as "high achieving," "low achieving," or "average" is inaccurate and flattens students into one-dimensional identities. No student has every answer every day; likewise, no student needs help to solve every problem. Recognizing and responding to the truth that each student possesses both areas of strength and areas for growth is an important first step to moving everyone forward in their learning—and doing so in a respectful way.

Grouping Approach: Whole-group instruction and discussion

Mr. Pfeiffer doesn't do much small-group work with his 10th grade history students. He loves history and plans his lectures fastidiously. He relies on **whole-class instruction** and **whole-class discussion** to explore any questions that arise. Mr. Pfeiffer is grateful for the students who regularly contribute to these conversations, and he reasons that their questions and responses represent what the rest of the class is thinking, feeling, and wondering.

He does pride himself on his use of the **jigsaw** strategy, which he finds to be a handy tool for breaking down long readings into more palatable chunks. It's routine for him to divide textbook chapters, primary source documents, and articles

into three parts and alphabetically assign students a portion of the whole, which they later share and discuss in trios. Most students are happy to avoid reading the entire chapter, document, or article, and many find the regular opportunity to discuss complicated and complex material rewarding. But the segmented reading approach and reliance on groupmates to see the big picture limit others' understanding. Students for whom reading is a struggle often miss the important points they should share with their trios; this tends to breed misunderstanding for the other group members. Faster readers recognize this phenomenon, so they usually end up reading the whole piece themselves, anyway. They find that the repeated use of jigsaw slows them down and grow to resent their classmates who need more time to process the reading.

Glows: Use of discussion breaks up lectures and improves attention; use of jigsaw fosters collaboration.

Grows: Mr. Pfeiffer's assumption that the handful of student-questioners speaks for the full group is an inaccurate one. If he could see inside his students' heads, he would realize their responses to his lectures include confusion and boredom as well as keen interest. His use of the jigsaw strategy to engage students with readings has problematic facets, as jigsaw is best used with content and skills that represent different perspectives or facets rather than with readings or processes that are sequential in nature.

Grouping Approach: Whole-group instruction and lab partners

Down the hall, Ms. Young relies on **lab partners** as her primary means of grouping her advanced placement (AP) Biology students. She reasons that because the AP exam is an individual pursuit, her means of preparation should mirror the means of assessment. Ms. Young does enjoy circulating throughout the classroom and talking with student pairs during their lab work. Occasionally she wonders if she could replicate that phenomenon in other areas of instruction, which is typically whole-class.

And yet, the pressure of preparing for the AP exam always leads Ms. Young back to what she knows and feels comfortable with: whole-class instruction accompanied by individual practice and application. Her students are motivated and achievement driven, and so, for the most part, they comply and do well. Labs

are by far their favorite part of the class, though; students feel like actual scientists during lab work—not only because of the inquiry and physical activity, but because of the opportunity it gives them to talk through their ideas and talk about scientific principles with their classmates. They wish they could do that more often.

Glows: Lab work is an authentic form of collaboration in the sciences.

Grows: Careers in science increasingly require collaboration (Bennett & Gadlin, 2012)—more collaboration than Ms. Young's students are getting. Further, research shows that students who pursue project-based learning in AP classes have a higher pass rate on AP exams than those who receive more traditional, test-prep instruction (Terada, 2021).

In each of these scenarios, teachers are using *grouping* in some fashion; however, none of these teachers uses *flexible grouping*. Because they do not group flexibly, issues such as a lack of motivation, stymied growth, and concerns about status inevitably surface—sometimes for all students in the class but almost always for certain subgroups. Holding on to what works (the "glows") and changing what does not work (the "grows") in each grouping scenario above would go a long way toward helping each individual student make substantial strides in the social, emotional, and intellectual realms of their being. This, in turn, would foster a healthier sense of community and collaboration.

About This Book

This book explores how teachers can capitalize on the possibilities that flexible grouping affords us and our students. In the coming chapters, you'll find guidance, examples, and tools that will help you

- Better understand the purpose and benefits of flexible grouping.
- Plan for more effective flexible grouping.
- Implement a progression of flexible grouping.
- Acquire a variety of practical procedures for flexible grouping.
- Address potential pitfalls of flexible grouping.
- Embrace the full promise of flexible grouping.

This book also includes a set of Appendixes with a planning template, two sample grouping plans (one for the elementary grades and one for middle or high school), and a list of online resources (links to videos, blogs, articles, etc.) to help clarify how the informed use of flexible grouping can positively transform classroom practice.

As you reflect on the guidance in this book, I hope you will see that the success of flexible grouping depends in large part on the successful combination of many little tweaks to familiar community-building and instructional routines. Such transformation may take a semester or a year to implement, but the time invested is worth it. When a teacher and students work together as a team to embrace flexible grouping, the gains in equity and in intellectual, social, and emotional development can be significant and exhilarating. As the African proverb advises, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

Let's spend some time examining how to go far together.

1

The Purpose of Flexible Grouping

Flexibly grouped classrooms are necessary both because the world is changing and because it has not changed enough.

Adapting to the Modern Workplace

As dependence on technology grows, more and more routine jobs (such as factory work) have become automated. Remaining and emerging occupations require employees to have social and collaborative skills that cannot be replicated by technology (Deming, 2017; National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2018).

Collaborative group work has indeed become ubiquitous in the modern workplace, both in face-to-face and online environments. In fact, "the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by 50 percent or more" since the mid-1990s (Cross et al., 2016, p. 74). This changing world of work is driven in part by studies showing that "groups tend to innovate faster, see mistakes more quickly and find better solutions to problems" than individuals do (Duhigg, 2016, para. 12).

Recognizing this increase in collaboration, Google (2016) conducted an internal study to determine the defining qualities of an ideal team—one whose members planned, made decisions, and reviewed progress in a highly collaborative, interdependent manner. Codenamed "Project Aristotle," the study concluded that successful teams share the following characteristics:

1. *Psychological safety.* Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of one another.
2. *Dependability.* Team members get things done on time and meet a high bar for excellence.
3. *Structure and clarity.* Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.

4. *Meaning.* Team members find the work they are doing personally meaningful.
5. *Impact.* Team members think the work they are doing matters and creates change.

Note that these characteristics reflect *principles* rather than *logistics*. In other words, they reflect the *health of team relationships* and the *nature of the team's work*—not the traits of individual team members.

Other studies of the emerging workplace reinforce the value of employees being socially nimble—that is, being able to effectively communicate and collaborate with a variety of people (NACE, 2018). Deming (2017) notes that "the fastest growing cognitive occupations—managers, teachers, nurses and therapists, physicians, lawyers, even economists—all require significant interpersonal interaction" with a diverse range of individuals (p. 1595).

If school is to meet the changing demands of the workplace, it must help students learn to effectively exercise social skills and to grow in their collaborative capacities. Fortunately, such a shift aligns with what we know about how people learn. Echoing Project Aristotle's findings, educational research reveals that student growth depends in large part on two principles: (1) *a healthy classroom environment* (Hattie, 2012; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018), and (2) *meaningful, relevant, and engaging curriculum and instruction* (McTighe & Willis, 2019; NASEM, 2018). Research also affirms the belief that students should have the opportunity to interact with a wide range of classmates in both low- and high-stakes settings. Fluid movement in and out of instructional groups provides this opportunity and helps to build "intellectual camaraderie," a hallmark of a healthy classroom community (Bransford et al., 2000; NASEM, 2018).

Opposing a Stagnant System

While the world of work has changed before our eyes, within schools, there are many deep-seated systems reinforcing division and inequity that have not changed nearly enough. Instructional grouping is one of those systems.

Instructional grouping can refer to everything from how students are assigned to classrooms, specialized services and programs, and leveled (tracked) courses to how teachers organize students for instruction within the classroom. I am a staunch advocate for dismantling tracking at the district and school levels, as

research from all parts of the world confirms that tracking hinders the growth of the vast majority of students (see OECD, 2012). However, tackling such a large-level change lies beyond the scope of this book. What this book can and will address is reforming the kind of instructional grouping that occurs at the classroom level.

Teachers make decisions every day about how to use groups in their classrooms, even if they choose to rely solely on whole-group instruction or individual work. While studies have shown that group work in general has a positive effect on student achievement (see Lou et al., 1996), not all group work has the same impact. When decisions about instructional grouping are based on a single factor and remain static, group work tends to hinder student growth, erode classroom community, exacerbate status differences, and reinforce the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic inequities present in our larger society (Batruch et al., 2019; Hattie, 2009; OECD, 2012). On the other hand, when decisions about instructional grouping are based on a variety of student learning needs and ensure that students change groups frequently and purposefully, group work can foster growth, provide access to equitable learning experiences, strengthen student capacity for collaboration, combat status differences, and build empathy. This dynamic approach to grouping at the classroom level is called *flexible grouping*.

What Is Flexible Grouping?

Essentially, flexible grouping is a system of organizing students intentionally and fluidly for different learning experiences within a classroom over a relatively short period of time. The groupings are *flexible* because they align with specific, changing goals, and because decisions about group size, membership, and longevity are guided by recent classroom assessment results or other student or class characteristics that are relevant to a specific instructional purpose.

Flexible grouping is not a formula or a set of steps, but there are several "hallmarks" of flexibly grouped classrooms. These are principles that, when applied together, make and keep flexible grouping "flexible."

Hallmark 1: Groupings change based on goals and student characteristics that matter for the task

When grouping is flexible, the teacher employs a range of grouping configurations that depend on and change with instructional goals and tasks. Too often, when a teacher claims to use flexible grouping, it means that groups change only

if and when the teacher sees a need for change. In practice, this might mean students need to "prove themselves" to the teacher in order to be "released" from a static grouping, or that the teacher is letting intuition and personal comfort—or even the manageability of group size—guide the decision to change a grouping (Jean, 2016).

Flexible grouping assumes that groupings *will* and *must* change, because students' readiness needs, motivations, and learning preferences routinely change.

Hallmark 2: Groupings vary in composition, duration, and size

Just as a hand mixer won't fry an egg and a pair of tongs can't ladle soup, no single grouping system can meet all instructional needs. The Introduction's example scenarios included several established grouping configurations, including standing reading groups, project-based learning, cooperative learning, lab partners, whole-group instruction, and Socratic seminar circles. While there is a time and a place for each of these approaches, none of them can serve every instructional purpose.

There are times when groups of three or four work best (e.g., to facilitate creative brainstorming) and other times when partner work is more efficient (e.g., to provide direct one-on-one feedback). Heterogeneous groups may be optimal for test preparation, but homogeneous groups are preferable for targeted instruction, especially when they are composed based on recent classroom-level assessment evidence. Project-based learning groups may engage in sustained inquiry together, but teachers can form smaller, more temporary groups of students (pulled from each project group) to "catch up" students who have been absent, to coach individuals to be technology "experts," or to peer edit and rehearse interview questions.

Hallmark 3: Students consistently work with a range of peers

Grouping isn't flexible if students make sense of ideas, discuss content, practice skills, or create products with the same classmates, day in and day out. While group work isn't the only setting in which students develop relationships with one another at school, it is a chief mechanism for bringing them together in the classroom. There is no hard and fast rule for how often group composition must change, but over the course of a few weeks, students should have opportunities to interact with most, if not all, of their classmates in the service of purposeful discussion or tasks. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2005) put it this way: "After a month's

time, every student should have had the opportunity to both *be challenged* and to *be the challenger*." A good "test" for whether students are consistently working with a range of peers is to periodically ask them to make a list of their classmates' first and last names and provide facts about each (an interest, a favorite musical artist, a hobby). The results are a fairly dependable barometer for how flexible the groupings in the class really are.

It's important to note that flexible grouping is a means to an end, rather than the end itself. The act of forming or being in *any* kind of a group won't "save" poorly designed instruction. Although peer collaboration can provide opportunities to facilitate growth (see Vygotsky, 1978), poorly designed collaborations can *deny* students that access just as easily as grant it (Jean, 2016; Lou et al., 1996). In other words, both groups and group tasks need to be carefully and strategically planned in order for students to benefit from group work.

How Does Flexible Grouping Intersect with Differentiation?

Flexible grouping is a hallmark of a differentiated classroom. In Tomlinson's model of differentiation, flexible grouping refers to the practice of planning "a consistent flow of varied student groupings within a unit of study based on the nature of the work and the individual needs of students" (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 90). Many grouping configurations (e.g., like-interest, like-readiness) can function as delivery systems for differentiated tasks. It's important to note, however, that groups can also be a means of increasing instructional efficiency, building community, resetting attention, increasing motivation, and so on. Said differently, flexible grouping *facilitates differentiation*, but it serves other purposes as well. We will examine the relationship between flexible grouping and differentiation more closely at the end of this book.

Why Group Flexibly?

Flexible grouping combats the power of school to establish, reinforce, and justify stereotypes by granting learning privileges to some and denying them to others. Such inequities flow from various school structures, most notably tracking—the practice of sorting students into levels that they stay in throughout much of their school experience.

Tracking remains a prominent structure in today's schools, despite both decades-old and more recent evidence outlining the dangerous inequities it promotes (Batruch et al., 2018; OECD, 2012). In tracked (or "leveled" or "streamed") systems, students are sorted into different "ability pathways" for their schooling, with some students pursuing "advanced" levels and others remaining in "general" or even "remedial" classes. Decisions about which track students will be assigned to are usually based on standardized test scores that reflect a student's status at one moment in time and ignore the influences of social, cultural, emotional, economic, and experiential (e.g., trauma) factors on learning. They reflect blanket assumptions about the potential of students based on limited evidence and "condemn" students with "less ability" to coursework that is less rigorous, less relevant, less authentic, and less engaging, often for the remainder of their school career.

Teachers in tracked classrooms sometimes internalize and reinforce the stereotypes dictated by designated levels (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012), *but this does not have to be the case*. Even in leveled classrooms, teachers who incorporate flexible grouping can shake up both their own expectations of students and their students' expectations for themselves and their peers by consistently changing the lens through which they view student performance. When students flow in and out of groups based on like interest, like need, and preferred ways of taking in or demonstrating knowledge, student affinities for the curriculum—and for one another—bubble to the surface. Flexible grouping can, among other things, showcase students' learning *strengths* rather than deficits, and it can do so regardless of students' perceived "levels" at initial placement.

Thankfully, some schools and districts have heeded the warnings about tracking and have begun to move from tracked classes at the middle and secondary levels (see Burris & Welner, 2005; Tomlinson et al., 2008). These districts and schools may collapse three or four levels of some subjects into two levels or even one. But shifting students into more heterogeneous settings is just that—changing their setting. Providing students with "new geography" is not enough to advance equity. Gallagher (1997) reminds us that the real work is attending to what is happening to students in their changed setting. Teachers not trained for this newfound diversity may gravitate to systems that functionally *hide* student diversity (e.g., whole-class instruction), *exploit* it (e.g., cooperative learning), or *fixate* on it (e.g., ability grouping or creating smaller "tracks" within a classroom). No matter the grade level, none of these fixed structures actually *harnesses* the power of diversity. That is what flexible grouping can do.

Flexible grouping capitalizes on the rich tapestry of talents present in any classroom, giving students equal access to important learning experiences and, in turn, cultivating growth, building classroom camaraderie, strengthening students' collaborative capacity, combating status differences, increasing exposure to diverse perspectives, and fostering empathy. Let's take a closer look at each of those benefits.

Benefit 1: Flexible grouping grants access to equitable learning opportunities

In a flexibly grouped classroom, students work with a variety of their peers in different configurations to achieve multiple purposes. In classes with static groupings (e.g., Ms. Bonelli's 1st grade class from the Introduction), students are often "retracked" within the class by perceived ability, most often for reading instruction. When this kind of grouping structure is the only one used, some students consistently receive remediation and lower-level tasks (Sparks, 2018). If, however, a variety of groups are used—groups based on interests, learning preferences, and other factors as well as on academic readiness—these same students have the opportunity to shine in other areas.

In one study of emergent talent at the primary level, students remained in their established reading groups but were "regrouped" for other subjects (including math) based on the results of frequently administered classroom assessments. "Wendall," a student in the lowest reading group, surprised his teacher when formative assessment data indicated he should be in the most advanced group for certain measurement tasks. His teacher reflected, "Wendall kind of surprised me when we were reading the book *How Big Is a Foot?* because he's not the one to participate as often as the others, but he was the first one to come out with the response we were looking for. Wendall was up with the high group, which he usually is not" (Brighton, 2007). Not only did the use of flexible grouping grant Wendall access to the more challenging task, but it also provided him a setting in which he could thrive. This helped him grow in both his competence and confidence. This is the promise of a flexibly grouped classroom.

Benefit 2: Flexible grouping cultivates growth

As illustrated in Hallmark 2's "kitchen tools" metaphor, in no single grouping structure cultivates growth in every scenario. Elizabeth Cohen's (1998) work

on complex instruction advocates for the creation of groups made up of *students with different talents*, all of which are needed to complete a complex task. This model holds promise for project-based learning; if the project is complex enough, multiple skills will be needed to achieve success. Determining the diverse skills necessary for task completion can lead to the formation of groups wherein every student can play to his or her strengths (McTighe, 2020).

On the other hand, some learning goals are best met with students working in *like-readiness groups,* because this setting is an efficient way to for provide proper tools and tasks to students in small-group settings (Hattie, 2012). Gifted students, in particular, seem to benefit from such opportunities to work with likeable peers (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016). At other times, it makes the most sense for students to work in *like-interest groups,* because motivation in shared interests drives investment, persistence, and, in turn, increased learning (Dabrowski & Marshall, 2018). Finally, temporary groups made up of students who have *chosen the same way to complete a task* (e.g., analytical, creative, or practical) can facilitate the efficient processing of information (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2007). In a flexibly grouped classroom, students are afforded each of these opportunities, with different groupings used for different purposes, all with the goal of fostering growth in each student.

Benefit 3: Flexible grouping builds classroom camaraderie

"Simply put, emotion drives attention, and attention drives learning," asserts neuroscientist David Sousa (Ferlazzo, 2017, para. 13). He also cautions that classroom environments are not neutral; students feel either positively or negatively about being there (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

To be sure, students have good and bad experiences in a class for many reasons that are beyond the teacher's control. But much of what happens in the classroom *is* within the teacher's power to shape or influence, including building a sense of community among students. Students may or may not sit together at lunch, connect on the playground, or follow one another on social media, but inside the four walls where they learn math or history, they share more than just oxygen. When teachers (1) establish safety and norms, (2) build trust with students, and (3) facilitate the positive interactions among a variety of classmates, they build a classroom camaraderie that fuels positive emotions and sets the stage for powerful learning experiences (Bransford et al., 2000; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

Benefit 4: Flexible grouping strengthens capacity for collaboration

The camaraderie just described does more than facilitate learning in the classroom; it prepares students for the highly collaborative world of work they will someday enter. Recall the discussion of the increasing demand for a socially skilled workforce at the beginning of this chapter. When students become accustomed to working with a variety of classmates toward shared goals in an atmosphere of safety and productivity, they are more likely to successfully replicate those conditions in other situations, be it next year's classroom or a future workplace. In other words, flexible grouping doesn't just prepare students for the collaborative future; it also prepares them to be *leaders* in that future.

Benefit 5: Flexible grouping combats status differences

Teachers' grouping decisions send powerful messages to students about their roles in and value to the classroom community. When they are put into a group, most students "size up" the learning situation, thinking, *Who's in my group? Who's in that group? What are we doing? What are they doing?* In essence, they are conducting a kind of "status check," trying to detect clues about what the teacher believes about their abilities.

Flexible grouping fights the development of classroom hierarchies and makes it difficult for students to pigeonhole one another or themselves. Although groups are sometimes based on students' readiness or skill level, these are interspersed with groupings based on interest, learning preference, experience, and other factors. In classrooms where flexible grouping is a way of life, students stop fixating about who is in each group and what that means, because they know that groups will change soon.

Benefit 6: Flexible grouping exposes students to varied and divergent perspectives

Children are no different from adults in the way that they gravitate toward people who share their points of view, have similar experiences and interests, and seem to value the same things. Wanting to stick with friends or familiar classmates is normal and sometimes helpful. But students can also get too comfortable or stuck in a rut when they work with the same peers, day in and day out.

Flexible grouping pushes students out of their comfort zones and into interactions with peers they might not otherwise choose or get a chance to learn from. These interactions very often lead them to discover shared experiences and interests. Perhaps more significant, they lead to a better understanding of appreciation for what makes each classmate unique. Flexible grouping gives students the chance to see the world through more of their peers' eyes, affording them a view they might not otherwise gain and wider perspective on life.

Benefit 7: Flexible grouping fosters empathy

Martin Luther King Jr. (1956) taught us that to live in this new world, "we must rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns, with a broader concern for all humanity." That kind of living starts in the classroom. It is never too early for students to begin reaching beyond their own feelings to try to understand the feelings of others—in other words, to strive for empathy. This means not only seeing things from another's perspective but also, as Brené Brown explains, being willing to jump into the pit with them, if necessary (RSA, 2013). Such understanding, love, and compassion are needed in our world now more than ever before.

In the chapters ahead, we will examine practical strategies for both planning and implementing flexible grouping, and discuss how to anticipate and avoid potential grouping pitfalls. We will also explore frequently asked questions about flexible grouping and return to the classroom scenarios from the Introduction to see how "upgraded" grouping practices play out in a variety of grade levels and subject areas.

A final note of emphasis: While flexible grouping is ideal for highly diverse classrooms, it can be used in *any* classroom to accomplish the aims described in this chapter. Even in classes where it seems that all students are the same due to ascribed level, shared linguistic needs, advanced placement, or choice of elective, differences do exist. Flexible grouping makes it possible to capitalize on the excitement of diversity that occurs in *any* setting where more than one person is present.

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