Heterogeneous Grouping

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Rationale: Students need to be able to successfully interact with an increasingly heterogeneous society. Since heterogeneous grouping is a mix of various abilities and traits, middle school students will have opportunities to work with students of various emotional, intellectual, and physical developments, which is quite apparent in students age ten to fourteen. Heterogeneous grouping allows students to socialize with, model, and adjust to a variety of peer influences (Spear, 1992).

Benefits of Heterogeneous Grouping

- Heterogeneous grouping is more accepting of all students and avoids the hierarchical system of homogenous grouping---

 "To call some students ‘academic’ and others ‘nonacademic’ has a devastating impact on how teachers think about students and how students think about themselves. The message to some is: you are the intellectual leaders; you will go on to further education. To others it is: you are not academic; you are not smart enough to do this work. Students are thus divided between those who think and those who work, when, in fact, life for all of us is a blend of both." From An Imperiled Generation, the Carnegie Foundation for the advancement of Teaching (1988).

- Heterogeneous classrooms provide greater learning opportunities for low-ability students, without being detrimental to high-ability students. It is a way to maximize student potential and environments found in the enrichment programs four upper level students available to all students. In a 1992 study, Braddock and Slavin compared eighth graders that attended ability tracked schools with eighth graders that attended schools where students were not ability grouped. Test scores showed the negative effects of tracking, low-track students showed lower self-esteem than did untracked low achievers, and they had markedly less positive perceptions of intergroup school relationships.

- Spear (1992, pp. 256-265), asserts that the use of ability grouping is not appropriate in meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents and gives examples of the benefits of mixed ability groups. Spear advocates grouping practices that allow for "varied, broad peer interactions to allow students to socialize with, model, and adjust to a variety of peer influences" (p. 257). Other benefits according to Spear are:

- Opposite sex interactions are increased; low ability groups ten to be more male, while higher ability groups tend to be more female; mixed ability groups allow for more balance in male/female students.

- Students in top ability groups feel the pressure to move faster, cover more material, and to grow up more quickly; middle grades curriculum needs to be uncovered and discovered, not covered rapidly.

- Low ability classrooms are often characterized by rote learning and organization, while higher ability classrooms are often characterized by creativity and independent thought. All students need both types of atmosphere. According to VanHosse and Strahan (1980, p. 30),..."young adolescents are in between
childhood and late adolescence; they vacillate in their behaviors from being childlike to being more adult...They shift in a heart beat from independence and dependence.

- Emotional development also benefits from students being placed in mixed ability groups: students’ self concept increases; peer influence on self control is important and tends to be exhibited more in higher ability groups and less in lower ability groups, so mixed ability groups is better; competence is achieved more easily when students are in environments where all can experience success.
- Intellectual development is important, as students tend to be more able to reason abstractly. Students are moving from concrete to formal reasoning, are very imaginative, and need to be engaged in creative problem solving. This is usually found in high ability classes, not low ability level classes.
- "Common sense dictates that effective grouping practices should be centered around the notion of flexibility" (Spear, p. 263). Furthermore,... "it is vitally important that we do not continue to separate, but that we bring together-into one community- individual strengths to ensure that our schools function at their highest level" (p. 272).

Disadvantages of Ability Grouping

- Students placed in low level tend to fall farther behind (George, 1993, p. 18).
- With limited numbers of teachers and limited resources, administrators tend to place good teachers in the higher level classrooms. In fact, only 3% of teachers indicate a desire to teach low level students (George, p.22).
- "When advanced students are grouped together for acceleration, and provided with the best teachers, the best classroom learning climate, the most enriched curriculum, state of the art instruction and learning resources (e.g., computers), they learn more than they otherwise would. Who would not? (George, pp. 19-20).
- Tracking and ability groups do not accommodate the diversity of this population (This We Believe, 1992).
- Braddock & Slavin (1992) found significantly negative effects for low achievers, with no corresponding significant advantage for high achievers when students were grouped by ability.
- The major proponents for ability grouping are the parents of academically gifted students. They contend that their children need to be in ability groups in order to maximize their potential. The research done by Slavin (1992), George (1988), and Oakes(1992) show this is a false perception. High achieving students do not show higher levels of achievement in ability grouped classrooms. They also show no negative effects from being in a heterogeneous classroom. Oakes (1995) found that the level and pace of instruction provided to heterogeneous middle school classes was very much like that given to the higher ability groups.

Selections from Research Reports

" The practice of grouping by ability for instructional purposes is not supported by research. Even though a majority of teachers believe that ability grouping improves the effectiveness of schooling, the studies reviewed suggest that the practice has deleterious effects on teacher expectations and instructional practices (especially for lower ability grouped students), student perceptions of self and others, and academic performance of lower ability students. It interferes with the opportunities for students to learn from and accept - peers of different socioeconomic backgrounds and may perpetuate notions of superior and inferior classes of citizens. The practice is especially antithetical to the goals and objectives of the middle school" (Johnston & Markle, 1986).

- Trimble and Sinclair (1987), found, in their study, that low ability grouped students benefited from ability grouping. In fact they stated, "Only when schools stop sorting youth for learning by placing them into ability groups will it be possible to provide more equitable access to quality education for all students (p. 20)."
Other researchers found no benefit in tracking by ability groups. Higher achieving students do not do better when grouped together, and lower achieving students have been shown to do worse when grouped together; homogeneous low ability grouped students showed lower self esteem than do heterogeneously grouped low ability students (Braddock and Slavin, 1992). Students in low achieving groups were exposed to less material and to lower quality instruction than the students in the upper groups (Braddock & McPartland, 1990; Oakes, 1992).

The power that ability grouping appears to have is a political one (Oakes, 1992). It is often part of the power struggle for school resources, opportunities, and credentials.

More commonly, it is the parents of the higher achieving students who are more articulate with more time, more money and resources with which they can lobby their cause.

Teachers, themselves, are often a factor in perpetuating ability grouping. Teachers face incredible challenges in middle schools. Lack of tracking is likely to raise their level of difficulty and frustration (George, 1988).

Selected References:


