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A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO **FLEXIBLE GROUPING** AND **COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

FORM, MANAGE, ASSESS, AND DIFFERENTIATE IN GROUPS

DINA BRULLES, PH.D. | KAREN L. BROWN, M.ED.

PRAISE FOR

A Teacher's Guide to Flexible Grouping and Collaborative Learning

“The authors provide the most comprehensive guide to group learning that I have seen in my quarter century of teaching and researching grouping and talent development. The introductory sections reviewing relevant research and responding to common (and misguided) criticisms and myths of grouping are excellent and easily digestible, and the countless strategies and tips will prove useful for anyone working with K-12 students or supervising educators who do. This book should be required reading in all of our teacher preparation programs!”

—**Jonathan Plucker**, Julian C. Stanley Professor of Talent Development, Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth and School of Education

“An excellent read that both demystifies and clarifies what exactly is grouping and how it can be used as an effective method for instruction and assessment in the modern mixed-ability classroom. Dina Brulles and Karen Brown explain the benefits of teaching and learning through grouping in a clear and comprehensive manner. More importantly, they provide concrete and creative examples of best practices and instructional methods educators can use to address and respond to the diverse yet individual academic and socioemotional needs of *all* students. If your goal is to develop and deliver deeper, student-centered learning experiences that prompt deeper thinking and promote talent development, then this is the book you need to read!”

—**Erik M. Francis, M.Ed., M.S.**, professional education specialist at Maverik Education LLC and author of *Now That's a Good Question!*

“*A Teacher's Guide to Flexible Grouping and Collaborative Learning* provides the compelling *why* flexible grouping is essential for achieving equity in today's diverse classrooms, as well as detailed classroom scenarios and relatable real-world examples demonstrating *how* flexible grouping has been successfully implemented in elementary and secondary classrooms to support the unique needs of *each* student. The specific teaching and learning strategies and usable tools included provide *what* teachers and students need to accomplish truly personalized learning within today's classrooms.”

—**Dr. Lauri B. Kirsch**, supervisor, K-12 gifted programs, Hillsborough County Public Schools, Tampa, FL

“One of the most challenging aspects of teaching in today’s diverse classroom is the differentiated practice of effectively using flexible grouping and collaborative learning. Teaching and learning experts Brulles and Brown have aptly addressed these practices in this remarkably well-articulated text. Everything you need to know, understand, and be able to do are spelled out in a comprehensive manner. This step-by-step text gives you all the tools, directions, and methods for making flexible grouping and collaboration work in your classroom. This ‘go-to’ resource should be on every teacher’s desk; studied, highlighted, tabbed, and applied!”

—**Richard M. Cash, Ed.D.**, author of *Advancing Differentiation: Thinking and Learning for the 21st Century*

“We know from research that collaboration can enhance learning; however, group work can be ‘messy’ at times. All too often, teachers avoid putting their students into groups because they think it wastes time or is just too difficult to manage. Brulles and Brown have written a book for teachers who are looking for more *flexibility* in how to form and manage groups for different purposes. They provide a plethora of learning activities and questioning strategies that are classroom tested and easily implemented to meet the needs of a range of learners—from ways to vary to the complexity of tasks to how to design engaging group projects. This book offers new ideas to novice and veteran teachers alike.”

—**Karin Hess, Ed.D.**, researcher and author of *A Local Assessment Toolkit to Promote Deeper Learning: Transforming Research into Practice*



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Foreword

by Karen B. Rogers

When asked to write a foreword for this book, I wondered if there was anything “new under the sun” that Dina Brulles and Karen Brown could write about grouping students to address their learning needs. Hadn’t we hashed and rehashed the multiple ways in which students can be grouped to differentiate for their needs for at least the past 100 years, dating from the work of Lewis Terman and Lulu Stedman to the research synthesis that James and Chen-Lin Kulik and I have done? The research on why we need to group, and what forms that grouping can take, is long and plentiful. But then I began reading this remarkably in-depth and teacher-centered book on flexible grouping. What immediately struck me was that this was not a rehash at all, but a powerful new guide in and of itself!

And what is it that makes this book so powerful? First, the book spends its first few chapters explaining *in classroom terms* what grouping might look like. This offers teachers who are reading the book a chance to put themselves into an effectively grouped classroom in which they have a structure and control over how learning will take place for every learner in that setting. As these chapters progress, teachers are not judged if they are not currently grouping; the research is not thrown at them to point out what students are missing. A teacher’s satisfaction in seeing students’ learning becomes the rationale for making the effort to group. Right up there in these first chapters are the ways teachers will be able to look at these changes in learning. Of all the very specific and helpful chapters, chapter 3 is my favorite in part one of the book. The many options teachers have for preassessing what students already know, for formatively assessing how students’ learning (and their instruction) is going, and for summative assessments truly open up the choices teachers have. The advice on how to manage time spent assessing and grading is golden. It is possible for teachers to enjoy providing differentiated instruction and to enjoy watching the learning that is taking place without being burdened by many more hours grading student work.

Second, the book lays out the small but important steps in creating grouping structures. Reading the frequent classroom scenarios that point out the strengths as well as the issues of various grouping strategies made me (and I hope other readers of this book) feel like I was in the classroom and could do this without creating chaos in terms of time off task and distracting noise. What became clear was that Brulles and Brown could have titled their book *Chaos in the Classroom—Not Here and Not Today!* It is helpful, too, that the authors spent much time on how teachers can make these groups work and stay on task. Behavior management is an underlying strength of the book. Again, the scenarios are detailed enough to enable the reader to see what is described as really happening in a classroom today. The writing is clear and direct in the directions it provides for teachers to make this happen in their own classrooms.

And third, the book’s final several chapters get right down to the nitty-gritty of what the teacher is to do when students have been appropriately grouped. In this latter part of the book, I kept asking myself, where was this book in my preservice teacher training in California, where, at the time, we were required to group for

specific subject instruction by reading ability and performance? My favorite chapter in part two of the book is chapter 6, with chapter 5 coming in a close second. Both chapters are chock-full of very specific activities and experiences that teachers can easily carry out. The message seems to be that the teacher will not be left without an adequate structure and plan for what to do for each of the multiple groups found in a single classroom. The strategies—some new, some relabeled—are the most complete compendium I have seen about what teachers can do. Notice, I did not say “should” do. Teachers get choices, just as they will provide choices to their students. This portion of the book empowers teachers to take a chance of changing a few years-old or age-old pedagogies for the purpose of teaching and assessing *for* learning.

In reflecting on the overall messages of this book, it seems as if Brulles and Brown have moved us away from allowing local, subject, and national curriculum standards to restrict the content teachers will choose to teach. The authors provide teachers with myriad ways to differentiate their chosen content rather than the standards themselves. I think this eases the burden for teachers and puts some joy and creativity back into their teaching. It bodes well for keeping their students motivated and engaged in their learning and ensuring that optimal learning is happening for all students in a classroom.

This book will be a gift to every school district or school in the country that is serious about professional learning for teachers. I know teachers will find this a gift, if in no other form than they will have many new and exciting ways to go about instructing and assessing their learners. It *almost* makes me want to go back into the classroom to try out every single one of these strategies. Brava!

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Introduction

“If committed educators could be easily trained to implement a low-cost intervention that boasted consistent learning gains for all students, headlines would herald the discovery of the educational holy grail. That low-cost intervention is here and readily available. It’s called ability grouping.”

—Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, director,
Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University

Educational trends and initiatives come and go, policies and mandates get updated, and standards and assessments are continually revised. Little stays the same in the world of education; we are constantly learning and evolving. However, for a variety of reasons, including some misperceptions, controversy over the practice of ability grouping remains prevalent throughout these changes. Much of this controversy involves broad generalizations people make about grouping students. In this book, we attempt to dispel the myths surrounding ability grouping while sharing teaching practices that are effective in a variety of grouping models.

It is important to note that we are not advocating tracking. Rather, we are providing teachers with practical methods for determining classroom compositions, forming and managing flexible learning groups, designing tiered assignments, and teaching in a variety of settings where students are purposefully grouped. In brief, this book is an educator’s guide for learning how to recognize and respond to students’ diverse learning needs. To this end, we share methods for grouping students for specific content and suggestions for structuring the classroom to accommodate the needs of a range of students. We also examine methods for using achievement data to inform grouping, monitor students’ progress, and document achievement gains.

Equity vs. Equality

Let’s begin by considering the issue of “equity” in our schools. We often hear this as the reason schools choose not to group students according to learning needs. The rationale is that all students, not just certain groups, should have equal access to resources. In this section, we will discuss how incorporating grouping practices can, in fact, ensure equitable access for all students based on learning needs.

Much confusion exists surrounding the differences between equity and equality, especially involving students of special populations. Here are some key distinctions:

Equality means the exact *same* elements exist for all students, regardless of experiences or needs: the same placement, same curriculum, same expectations, same funding, and same level of instruction.

Equity means that treatment, access, learning, and resources are considered for all students based on what students need to achieve and succeed at their own levels, which are determined by their unique experiences and needs.

We need to use an *equity* lens to make educational decisions; this practice enables us to create the necessary changes to meet our goals for every student. If we are instead seeking equality for all students, then we must ask ourselves if we are, in fact, creating barriers for some students by not providing equitable opportunities for them to achieve at their highest possible levels. Without purposefully grouping students, it is extremely difficult to provide these opportunities and make instructional decisions that meet the needs of all students.

Goals of Education Equity:¹

- High achievement and positive outcomes for *all* students
- Equitable access and inclusion
- Equitable treatment
- Equitable resource distribution
- Equitable opportunity to learn
- Shared accountability

When schools consciously plan for equitable measures, they can more easily demonstrate students' achievement gains, since they are routinely collecting and analyzing achievement data to form flexible learning groups and document student growth in the various groups. In turn, these groups require equitable distribution of resources so that all students receive equal opportunities to learn. Ultimately, the process becomes a shared responsibility of schools and teachers that leads to equitable treatment, access, and inclusion for all.

The Objectives of This Book

Specifically, this book will guide teachers in how to implement the following twelve objectives:

1. *Develop* flexible learning groups.
2. *Use* data to form flexible groups.
3. *Plan* lessons for flexible groups in a mixed-ability classroom.
4. *Assign* purposeful and individualized classwork and homework.
5. *Know* your efforts are working.
6. *Design* a daily schedule to accommodate project-based learning.
7. *Assess* and grade collaborative work.
8. *Work* with digital natives (even if you are a digital immigrant).
9. *Match* instructional strategies to students' social and emotional characteristics and academic needs.
10. *Engage* nonperforming learners.
11. *Support* a personalized learning environment.
12. *Build* a communication network with parents.

These twelve objectives are described in detail throughout this book. We present an overview of each objective in this section. Due to the various grouping

1. IDRA. (March 31, 2006). "Six Goals of Educational Equity." idra.org/equity-assistance-center/six-goals-of-education-equity.

formats implemented in schools, you will find these objectives are applicable in several ways. Your current situation, your plans to implement change, your school's structures and initiatives, and your programming and instructional goals will determine which objectives you implement initially and which you may consider for later implementation.

Objective 1. Develop flexible learning groups. Flexible grouping means that the groups continually change depending on the lesson and the topics involved. Students can be flexibly grouped according to:

- learning objectives
- student interests
- learning preferences
- products or projects
- achievement levels
- formative assessments and pretest results

In chapter 1, we describe methods for forming flexible learning groups.

Objective 2. Use data to form flexible groups. Educators today have more access to achievement data than ever before. Schools routinely provide benchmark assessments and analyze data during professional learning communities (PLCs) and within Response to Intervention (RTI) structures. In chapter 3, you will learn methods for using the following data to form flexible groups within a grade level, across grade levels, or within a class:

- formal and informal assessments
- benchmark assessments
- PLC data
- RTI structures

Objective 3. Plan lessons for flexible groups in a mixed-ability classroom.

In all school-based learning environments—including classrooms, grade levels, or schools that use “fixed” learning groups—most teachers find they have a range of abilities in their classes. Meeting the diverse needs in your classes requires you to develop tiered learning activities appropriate for your students' different learning levels. In chapter 5, we demonstrate how to create lessons tiered to knowledge levels and provide suggestions for tiering activities using student choice menus.

Objective 4. Assign purposeful and individualized classwork and homework.

To assign appropriately leveled learning activities to groups of students, teachers need to determine how they will assess those learning levels. They must also recognize that even with students of similar ability levels, they'll need to modify lessons for exceptional individual needs or interests. In this book, we also describe methods for designing homework that supports or extends students' differentiated group learning activities.

Objective 5. Know your efforts are working. In today's era of accountability, teachers are expected to document individual student growth. This requirement may concern you when providing opportunities for differentiated learning activities for your students. You may wonder: “How do I really know my efforts are working when