



It is the district expectation that all teachers will differentiate curriculum.

It is the district expectation that elementary schools will cluster group high potential, high performing students.

Spring 2003

CLUSTERING

DEFINITION OF CLUSTERING

Cluster grouping is an administrative procedure whereby identified high potential, high performing students are assigned to a classroom teacher who has both the background and willingness to provide differentiated instruction to meet their needs, as well as the needs of a variety of learners.

SUPPORT STATEMENTS FOR CLUSTERING

- ★ Clustering, alone, does not comprise a gifted and talented program. Clustering is only a small, but very significant, delivery piece of an effective gifted program.
- ★ Clustering, when used with flexible grouping, differentiated instruction and differentiated curriculum for all students, meets the instructional need levels of our changing student population.
- ★ Clustering provides a critical mass of students within a classroom for a teacher who designs and delivers appropriately differentiated curriculum and instruction, thereby allowing gifted students to interact with their intellectual peers, as well as their age peers.
- ★ Clustering narrows the instructional ranges in classrooms so that effective differentiation is more likely to happen and easier for teachers to manage.
- ★ The social and emotional needs of high potential, high performing students are addressed, in part, through cluster grouping by providing students the opportunity to be with others who perceive information, learn and process differently than other students.

CLUSTERING

DESIGNING CLUSTER CLASSROOMS

- ★ Grade level teachers, with the assistance of the Talent Development Instructional Leader, determine students who would be considered high potential and/or high performing. This target pool is approximately 8 - 13% of the students at a grade level. The target pool includes students thought of as geniuses or gifted and the highest potential, highest performing students at the grade level.
- ★ Use available data to support the selection of these students. Running records, end of unit or year tests, grades, classroom performance, teacher judgement, parent and student input, Gifted and Talented Evaluation Scales (GATES), Curriculum Based Measures, Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments and/or any recent standardized test information may be used. Make sure to include those students who do not necessarily complete all requested work but perform well on tests and/or who demonstrate high levels of abstract conceptual thinking, knowledge and/or skill development.
- ★ Group six to eight of the highest potential, highest performing students at the grade level in one classroom. Maybe this cluster will be all high readers or high math students or, depending on the students at a particular grade level, maybe the cluster will be the highest reading and math students together. Pay attention to student personalities and learning styles. Other students in the cluster classroom should be of mixed ability - but not students who would be considered the next highest performing group.
- ★ If there are more than six to eight students to cluster per grade level, the remaining high potential, high performing students should be placed, in groups of six to eight, in additional cluster classrooms, as needed.
- ★ Buildings should referent their respective building student population, identify appropriate students to cluster and then program for the number of needed cluster teachers.
- ★ The cluster classroom group of students will be fluid as teachers flexibly group students for instruction in the content areas of language arts, math, science and social studies.

CLUSTERING

IDENTIFYING CLUSTER STUDENTS

- ★ Attained a Standard Score of 100 or above on the Gifted and Talented Evaluation Scales (GATES).
- ★ Scored at or above the 90%ile on Curriculum Based Measures.
- ★ Scored at Level IV on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments.
- ★ Student performance is among the highest in the classroom or at the grade level.
- ★ Scored at or above the 95%ile on recent available standardized tests.
- ★ Teacher judgement. Use the High Potential, High Performing Learner checklist for further student selection guidelines.
- ★ Parent/guardian input.

BRIGHT STUDENT

Knows answers
Is interested
Is attentive
Has good ideas
Works hard
Commits time and effort to learning
Answers questions
Absorbs information
Copies / responds accurately
Top student
6-8 repetitions for mastery
Understands ideas
Grasps meaning
Completes assignments
Technician
Good memorizer
Is receptive
Listens with interest
Prefers sequential presentations
Is pleased with own learning

HIGH POTENTIAL, HIGH PERFORMING LEARNER

Asks the questions
Is highly curious
Is intellectually engaged
Has original ideas
Performs with ease
May need less time to excel
Responds with detail, unique perspectives
Manipulates information
Creates “new”
Beyond age peers
1-2 repetitions for mastery
Constructs abstractions
Draws inferences
Initiates projects
Innovator
Insightful, makes connections with ease
Is intense
Shows strong feelings, opinions, perspectives
Thrives on complexity
Is highly self-critical

CLUSTERING

CLUSTER GROUPS ARE QUALITATIVELY DIFFERENT

- ★ Cluster Students are Flexibly Grouped:
Cluster and non-cluster students fluidly move in and out of instructional groups
- ★ Presentation Pace is Accelerated
- ★ Pretesting is Used and Curriculum is Compacted
- ★ Depth and Complexity of Content is Increased
- ★ Synthesis, Analysis and Evaluative Thinking are Emphasized
- ★ More In-Depth Student Project Choices are Offered
- ★ Increased Student Motivation for Learning
- ★ Increased Student Responsibility
- ★ More Time with Intellectual Peers
- ★ Clustering Enables Students in Non-Clusters to:
Become Academic Leaders by Allowing New Talent to Emerge

BUT WHY SHOULD WE REALLY CLUSTER?

Most of us recognize the need for differentiation. If a student is struggling with addition and subtraction, we recognize that the student is not ready to learn fractions. If a student has mastered multiplication and division, we recognize that it is a mistake to provide repetitive instruction in the same multiplication and division skills already mastered. But how is it possible for teachers to meet all of the different needs of all students. We know that today's teachers are being confronted with a broader range of readiness within a single age group than ever before. How can a teacher provide specialized or differentiated instruction across this broad spectrum? There isn't enough time in the day to prepare for so many needs!

When several children are at about the same place, or have similar educational abilities, it is easier to provide a challenging curriculum targeted to the needs of those students. Experience shows that when a single student needs a special program, teachers are far less likely to provide that special program. Clustering represents a strategy for providing differentiated instruction that is feasible for teachers and which enhances the likelihood that differentiation will take place.

CLUSTERING

IS CLUSTERING TRACKING?

In a tracking system, all students are grouped by ability for much of the school day and students tend to remain in the same track throughout their school experience. Tracking isolates children from each other; it restricts children from opportunity and, at times, has been used to deny opportunity to disadvantaged students. Clustering is a flexible form of grouping. A talented student remains in a classroom with students of diverse educational abilities. But clustering assures that a sufficient nucleus of highly capable students exists to make it worthwhile for the teacher to provide for and meet their special needs.

RESEARCH BASED CLUSTER GROUPING STATEMENTS

National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, Marcia Gentry, 1999

Students in cluster schools:

- ★ Achieved higher scores on standardized tests than those in non-clustered schools, even though they began with lower scores.
- ★ In each successive year after implementing clustering, teachers selected an increased number of students for cluster groups and a decreased number of students as low achieving.

Effects for High-Potential, High-Performing Students, Patricia Schuler, 1997

- ★ More time to work with intellectual peers.
- ★ Increased motivation for learning.
- ★ Higher group expectations.
- ★ More opportunities for “above-level” instruction.
- ★ Increased student responsibility.
- ★ More in-depth projects.
- ★ More time with appropriate tasks.

Effects for Other Students:

- ★ Greater stimulation.
- ★ Higher class expectations as high potential, high performing students model for other students.
- ★ Clustering enables other students to become academic leaders and allows new talent to emerge.
- ★ Increased awareness of talents of all students.
- ★ Greater self-management and decision making skills.

Summary: How Good is Cluster Grouping?

-by Susan Winebrenner, 2001

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 ... curriculum for gifted students.
2. The students in the group enjoy ... interaction with their intellectual peers. Instead of doing differentiated activities alone, they have someone to share the experience with. This is very reassuring...
3. The cluster teacher has ... 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 not 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.

Cluster Grouping of Gifted Students: How to Provide Full-Time Services on a Part-Time Budget

-Susan Winebrenner and Barbara Devlin

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PLACE GIFTED STUDENTS IN CLUSTER GROUPS?

A group of five to eight identified gifted students . . . are “clustered” in the classroom of one teacher who has training in how to teach exceptionally capable students. The other students in that class are of mixed ability. If there are more than eight to ten gifted students, two or more clusters should be formed.

ISN'T CLUSTER GROUPING THE SAME AS TRACKING?

No. In a tracking system, all students are grouped by ability for much of the school day, and students tend to remain in the same track throughout their school experience. Gifted students benefit from learning together, and need to be placed with similar students in their areas of strength (Hoover, et al., 1993; Kulik & Kulik, 1990; Rogers, 1993). Cluster grouping of gifted students allows them to learn together, while avoiding permanent grouping arrangements for students of other ability levels.

WHY SHOULD GIFTED STUDENTS BE PLACED IN A CLUSTER GROUP INSTEAD OF BEING ASSIGNED EVENLY TO ALL CLASSES?

When teachers try to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, it becomes extremely difficult to provide adequately for everyone. Often, the highest ability students are expected to “make it on their own.” When a teacher has several gifted students, taking the time to make appropriate provisions for them seems more realistic. Furthermore, gifted students can better understand and accept their learning differences if there are others just like them in the class . . .

WHAT ARE THE LEARNING NEEDS OF GIFTED STUDENTS?

Since these students have previously mastered many of the concepts they are expected to “learn” in a given class, a huge part of their school time may be wasted. They need exactly what all other students need: consistent opportunity to learn new material and to develop the behaviors that allow them to cope with the challenge and struggle of new learning. It is very difficult for such students to have those needs met in heterogeneous classes.

ISN'T GIFTED EDUCATION ELITIST?

Gifted students need consistent opportunities to learn at their challenge level - just as all students do. It is inequitable to prevent gifted students from being challenged by trying to apply one level of difficulty for all students in mixed-ability classes. When teachers can provide opportunities for all students, including those who are gifted, to be challenged by rigorous curriculum, there is nothing elitist about the situation.

DON'T WE NEED GIFTED STUDENTS IN ALL CLASSES SO THEY CAN HELP OTHERS LEARN THROUGH COOPERATIVE LEARNING, PEER TUTORING AND OTHER COLLABORATIVE MODELS?

When gifted students are placed in mixed-ability groups for cooperative learning, they frequently become tutors. Other students in these groups may rely on the gifted to do most of the work and may actually learn less than when the gifted students are not in their groups. When gifted students work in their own cooperative learning groups from time to time on appropriately challenging tasks, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes about cooperative learning. At the same time, other students learn to become more active learners because they are not able to rely so heavily on the gifted students. When the learning task focuses on content some students already know, those students should be learning how to cooperate in their own groups on extension tasks that are difficult enough to require cooperation. When the cooperative task is open-ended and requires critical or divergent thinking, it is acceptable to include the gifted students in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups.

IF GIFTED STUDENTS ARE NOT PLACED IN SOME CLASSES, WON'T THOSE CLASSES LACK POSITIVE ROLE MODELS FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL LEADERSHIP?

Research on role modeling (Schunk, 1987) indicates that to be effective, role models cannot be drastically discrepant in ability from those who would be motivated by them. Teachers overwhelmingly report that new leadership "rises to the top" in the non-cluster classes. There are many students, other than identified gifted students, who welcome opportunities to become the new leaders in groups that no longer include the top . . . grade level group . . . As classes are formed, be sure the classes without clusters of gifted students include several highly capable students.

HOW DOES THE CLUSTER GROUPING CONCEPT FIT IN WITH THE INCLUSION MODELS THAT INTEGRATE STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS INTO REGULAR CLASSES?

The inclusion model, in which students with exceptional learning needs are integrated into regular classrooms, is compatible with the concept of cluster grouping of gifted students, since both groups have exceptional educational needs. The practice of cluster grouping allows educators to come much closer to providing better educational services for groups of students with similar exceptional learning needs. In non-cluster classrooms, teachers report they are able to pay more attention to the special learning needs of those for whom learning may be more difficult. Some schools choose to avoid placing students with significant learning difficulties in the same class that has the cluster group of gifted students. A particular class may have a cluster of gifted students and a cluster of special education students as long as more than one adult is sharing the teaching responsibilities.

HOW SHOULD STUDENTS BE IDENTIFIED FOR THE CLUSTER GROUP?

If there will be one cluster, its highly capable students should be those who have demonstrated that they will need curriculum that exceeds grade level parameters. Traditional measures, such as standardized tests may also be used, but not as the sole criteria. If there will be more than one cluster, those highly capable in specific subjects might be grouped together in separate clusters. Profoundly gifted students should always be grouped together, since there will rarely be more than two such students in any grade level. Identification should be conducted each spring with the help of someone with training in gifted education.

WHAT SPECIFIC SKILLS ARE NEEDED BY CLUSTER TEACHERS?

Since gifted students are as far removed from the “norm” as are students with significant learning difficulties, it is necessary for teachers to have special training in how to teach children of exceptionally high ability. Cluster teachers should know how to:

- recognize and nurture behaviors usually demonstrated by gifted students;
- create conditions in which all students will be stretched to learn;
- allow students to demonstrate and get credit for previous mastery of concepts;
- provide opportunities for faster pacing of new material;
- incorporate students’ passionate interests into their independent studies;
- facilitate sophisticated research investigations;
- provide flexible grouping opportunities for the entire class . . .

IS CLUSTERING FEASIBLE ONLY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS?

No. Cluster grouping may be used at all grade levels and in all subject areas. Gifted students may be clustered in one section of any heterogeneous class, especially when there are not enough students to form an advanced section for a particular subject. Cluster grouping is also a welcome option in rural settings, or wherever small numbers of gifted students make appropriate accommodations difficult. Keep in mind, however, if your school has enough gifted students for separate sections in which curriculum is accelerated, such sections should be maintained. Many middle schools have quietly returned to the practice of offering such sections. Placement in cluster groups is gained by demonstrating that one needs a differentiated curriculum - not by proving one is “gifted.”

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF CLUSTER GROUPING?

Gifted students feel more comfortable when there are other students just like them in the class. They are more likely to choose more challenging tasks when other students will also be eligible. Teachers no longer have to deal with the strain of trying to meet the needs of just one precocious student in a class. The school is able to provide a full-time, cost-effective program for gifted students, since their learning needs are being met every day.

WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES OF CLUSTER GROUPING?

There may be pressure from parents to have their children placed in a cluster classroom, even if they are not in the actual cluster group. Gifted students may move into the district during the school year and not be able to be placed in the cluster classroom. These situations may be handled by:

- providing training for all staff in compacting and differentiation so parents can expect those opportunities in all classes;
- requiring parents to provide written documentation of their child’s need for curriculum differentiation instead of requesting the placement by phone;
- rotating the cluster teacher assignment every two years among teachers who have had appropriate training so parents understand that many teachers are capable of teaching gifted students;
- rotating other students into cluster classrooms over several years.

Another disadvantage might arise if the cluster teachers are not expected to consistently compact and differentiate the curriculum. Their supervisor must expect them to maintain the integrity of the program, and must provide the needed support by facilitating regular meetings of cluster teachers, and by providing time for the enrichment specialist to assist the cluster teachers.

CONCLUSION

There is an alarming trend in many places to eliminate gifted education programs in the mistaken belief that all students are best served in heterogeneous learning environments. Educators have been bombarded with research that makes it appear that there is no benefit to ability grouping for any students. The work of Allan (1991), Feldhusen (1989), Fiedler (1993), Kulik and Kulik (1990), Rogers (1993) and others clearly documents the benefits of keeping gifted students together in their areas of greatest strength for at least part of the school day. It appears that average and below average students have much to gain from heterogeneous grouping, but we must not sacrifice gifted students' needs in our attempts to find the best grouping practices for all students.

If we do not allow cluster groups to be formed, gifted students may find their achievement and learning motivation waning in a relatively short period of time. Parents of gifted students may choose to enroll their children in alternative programs, such as home schooling or charter schools. The practice of cluster grouping represents a mindful way to make sure gifted students continue to receive a quality education at the same time as schools work to improve learning opportunities for all students.

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Cluster Grouping Coast to Coast

-Patricia A. Schuler, University of Connecticut; Storrs, CT

Cluster grouping is an administrative procedure in which identified gifted students at a grade level are assigned to one classroom with a teacher who has special training in how to teach gifted students. The other students in their assigned class are of mixed ability. Differentiated instructional opportunities allow gifted students to interact with their intellectual as well as their age peers. Through cluster grouping the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of the gifted students can be addressed.

Cluster grouping has become increasingly popular as a programming option to meet the needs of gifted students in heterogeneous classroom settings (Gentry, 1996; Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993). In 1993 current cluster grouping practices were examined in a nationwide survey. The purpose of the Cluster Grouping Survey was to determine how schools were implementing this programming practice.

Selection Process of Cluster Students

Methods for identifying students for cluster groups varied greatly from district to district. The methods listed were those used by many districts nationwide to identify students for other types of gifted and talented programming. Testing included use of the *Stanford Achievement Test (SAT)*, *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R)*, *California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)*, other IQ achievement tests, and placement tests. Teacher input was sought using behavioral observation forms and recommendations. Parent input was gathered through recommendations and informational forms. Grades and writing skills were included in academic performance, while other considerations examined motivation and student awards.

Special Populations

Responding schools were also asked about the special populations participating in their cluster grouping programs. The following shows the percentage of schools indicating the special populations served:

- Native-American - 38%
- African-American - 52%
- Hispanic-American - 52%
- Asian-American - 52%
- Pacific Islander - 17%
- Economically Disadvantaged - 82%
- Limited English Proficient - 30%
- Learning Disabled - 65%
- Physically Disabled - 35%
- Underachievers - 65%
- Emotionally Disturbed - 35%

Selection and Training of Cluster Teachers

Principal discretion was the method noted 40% of the time in the selection of the cluster classroom teachers. Other selection methods included: rotation of regular staff, volunteers (based on interest and willingness), selection after training, former gifted and talented teachers, and peer panel

selection. Of the respondents, 22% indicated that teachers need to be willing to receive training in order to be a cluster teacher. Responses varied from state mandated teacher training to none. Training included district sponsored inservice, ranging from extensive (after school workshops, one week workshops, 1-3 days for beginning cluster teachers) to one day presentations. Additional methods of training cluster teachers included: attending state conferences and/or University of Connecticut - Confratute, graduate courses, reading articles, using gifted and talented consultants, and visiting other schools. Although several respondents ($n = 4$) indicated no ongoing inservice training, a majority (60%) of the districts offered some type of training. These included: monthly meetings, a quarterly study group and team meeting, gifted/talented inservices, cluster network/in-service days, and four follow-up training sessions per year. Occasional workshops and seminars, and attendance at state conferences were also noted. The districts with the most inservice support reported the greatest satisfaction with cluster grouping and the most positive reactions from teachers, administrators, parents and students.

Differences Between Cluster and Non-Cluster Classrooms

All of the schools indicated that the major difference between the cluster and non-cluster classroom was in the greater “qualitatively different” instruction that was occurring. This included the accelerated presentation pace, the increased depth of enrichment activities and presentation of issues, and a compacted core curriculum.

Program Options Used

Content differentiation, thinking skills, and content enrichment were the most widely noted options used in the responding school districts’ cluster grouping programs. Almost all (99%) of the respondents indicated using content enrichment, 91% used thinking skills, and 74% used content differentiation in the cluster classrooms. A variety of content differentiation methods were listed: more acceleration, compacting the core curriculum, more indepth enrichment, and more complex content. Also mentioned were acceleration of presentation pace, a greater focus on higher level thinking and reasoning skills, more pretesting of materials, and extensions of all lessons using higher order thinking activities. One district stated that the level of awareness of individual needs was greater, that collaborative teaching (cluster teacher and gifted and talented teacher) was stressed, and that whole class enrichment of all K-12 classes was ongoing.

Reaction to Cluster Grouping

Although all of the responding school districts indicated positive reactions of most teachers, administrators, parents, and students to cluster grouping, 30% also noted some mixed reactions. While one respondent said that “...by recognizing that high ability students have educational needs that must be addressed daily, teachers were given permission by the ‘system’ to utilize effective strategies and techniques every day with those students in their classrooms,” another said some teachers were philosophically opposed to gifted programs in their district. One respondent noted, “Teachers continue to express concern about the difficulty they experience in providing differentiation within a classroom with a wide range of possibilities.” This was less of a problem in schools that limited this range in the cluster classroom.

All of the school districts reported positive reactions by parents to cluster grouping, while only 1% also notes some negative reactions. Parents frequently commented on the positive reaction to the accelerated pace and instruction in the classroom. They believe that cluster grouping was successful in meeting their children’s academic needs. Parents preferred cluster grouping to total heterogeneous classrooms and saw the need for grouping to ensure provisions for high ability

students were available. One respondent stated that parents of less able students in the cluster classroom had commented on the improved attitude of their children toward school, while another indicated that parents of non-identified students often requested their children be placed in a cluster classroom. Negative reactions included remarks that some parents didn't see anything different happening; some parents of non-identified, high-achieving students didn't like it; and some parents preferred homogeneous grouping in specific content areas.

The reaction of administrators to cluster grouping was mixed, but most (69%) of the respondents gave positive reports. "Supportive," "favorable," "helpful to everyone," "proponents" were remarks noted. One respondent stated, "The administrators have led the way in allowing us to do whatever is best and works to benefit the students." Most respondents, however, gave a variety of administrative reactions including: active support, supportive if good things are happening for kids, and ignoring policy. One respondent stated, "Those with sufficient understanding of the needs of the g/t students support the grouping. Other responses vary dependent on personal beliefs and experiences." While administrative support was seen by several districts as critical to the success of cluster grouping, 13% reported negative responses by administrators. Administrator resentment of a special group, scheduling difficulties, and strong biases against programming for gifted and talented kids were comments given.

Nearly all (90%) of the respondents indicated gifted students were very positive about being in a cluster classroom. Comments such as "excitement with moving through material without having to wait for others to catch up," "enjoying their intellectual peers," and being "very eager to be challenged" were related. Only two negative remarks were given. One indicated a few students developing a "superior" attitude, and the other was a student's social separation from friends.

Academic and Social/Affective Effects

Cluster grouping may have a positive effect on the achievement of all students (Gentry, 1996). This was the case in the Cluster Grouping Survey. Three categories of responses developed from the question, "What academic effects of cluster grouping have you observed?" For identified highly gifted students, the academic effects were all positive. Respondents listed positive effects for this group of students, including: more time to work together on appropriate tasks; higher class expectations; more in-depth and quality products; increased motivation and learning; more opportunities for above level instruction; increased student responsibility and level of change, and finally, more time to work with intellectual peers. Positive effects were also noted for the whole class. Remarks included: "...others in class are stimulated," "class expectations are higher, raises everyone's level of achievement," and "everyone benefits." Teachers also recognized the positive impacts. A typical teacher response stated "cluster grouping gives them [teachers] an opportunity to pace the curriculum faster, that training has helped instruction, and there is a better understanding of the learning process and how to challenge kids." Another response indicated cluster grouping "compels the teaching staff to do more formal differentiation of the curriculum," thereby increasing the academic levels of all. In a major city, achievement gains continued to occur in schools with cluster grouping programs that had clearly stated goals and objectives, ongoing staff development, curriculum differentiation, school-wide enrichment for all students, and parental involvement (Duncan, 1989). These findings concur with those in Qualitative Extension of the Learning Outcomes Study (Delcourt & Evans, 1994). Students in this grouping arrangement (Within Class) as well as Pull-Out programs "felt more capable in their academics, preferred more challenges in the classroom, and were more likely to want to work independently than their peers in Separate Class programs" (p. 4).

Except for two responses that indicated negative effects of cluster grouping (possible development of cliques and some “elitist” tendencies in cooperative learning groups), all the responses to the social and affective effects of cluster grouping were positive. These included: a focus on self-management and decision-making skills fostering a climate of caring and cooperativeness; a support system among peers; a productive, helpful environment that promoted an understanding that the world has many “different” people who can all get along; a better acceptance of being gifted, better self-esteem and friendships; an increased awareness of the talents of all students; an acceptance of students who are not age-peers (cross-grade clustering); and a recognition of students’ self-confidence and self-reliance. One school district reported better support for academically talented students, both from their peers and the entire staff since implementing cluster grouping.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The Cluster Grouping Survey also asked the Collaborative School Districts about the advantages and disadvantages of cluster grouping in their school districts. The responses were many and varied. From cost effectiveness (students staying in neighborhood schools, better use of limited resources and time) to viewing the classroom as a “laboratory” for staff development and instructional practices, cluster grouping was seen by 100% of the respondents as an organizational option that offered improvement in many ways.

An increase in intellectual stimulation, challenge, and level of expectations for students were advantages listed. Students were also allowed to move rapidly through the curriculum and work in their interest area. In addition, positive consequences for teachers were noted, including teachers taking more responsibility for the needs of gifted kids and allowing them to group students by need. Administratively, cluster grouping was seen as easier to observe and to guarantee differentiation. It was a more efficient delivery of services; all students at all grade levels could be served.

Advantages of cluster grouping could also be found in the affective domain. A better understanding of the gifted and talented student was found, as well as being able to offer a more challenging curriculum. Better opportunities to address the psychological needs and concerns of high ability students were noted. More and improved exposure to instruction and activity encouraged and fostered the abilities of all students. Many districts stated that expectations were higher for the whole class.

When they were asked about the disadvantages of cluster grouping, only two districts stated that they had not experienced any problems or disadvantages in their districts. Almost all (91%) of the respondents indicated difficulty in the implementation process. Several noted that it was difficult for traditionally trained teachers to change their methods of teaching. A lack of teacher training and funds for inservice were also mentioned... Resentment toward cluster teachers and gifted students was also seen as a disadvantage. Less than 1% of the respondents expressed concerns over cluster grouping leading to tracking and slighting students in non-clustered classrooms. One respondent stated that “theory was still better than practice in some schools.”

Recommendations

The Cluster Grouping Survey found that many districts around the country are using cluster grouping in various ways and obtaining positive results. Districts exploring the cluster grouping option need guidance in planning an effective program, however. Kaplan (1974) developed a list of items that need to be addressed in planning a cluster group:

1. Develop criteria for selecting students.
2. Define the qualifications of, and the selection process for, the teachers.
3. Plan the differentiated experiences for the cluster of gifted students.
4. Plan for support services and special resources.

From the responses to the Cluster Grouping Survey, it is recommended that a school district adopt a formal policy on cluster grouping for gifted students before selecting students. Coleman (1995) also suggest schools examine the attributes of true cluster grouping during the planning process.

As Kaplan indicated, the selection of cluster teachers is very important. Weber and Battaglia (1982) list qualities a cluster teacher should have, including a willingness to: understand the unique attributes and needs of talented students; be intellectually alive; be creatively productive; be flexible and willing to find appropriate outlets for student products; be attuned to the process of teaching, not just the content; be a role model for students; and be able to foster positive feelings among students and faculty toward the gifted and talented program. Rogers (1991) adds that the cluster teacher must also be sufficiently trained to work with high ability students, and be given an adequate amount of preparation time. The cluster teacher should also be willing “to devote a proportionate amount of classroom time to the direct provision of learning experiences for the cluster group” (p. 4).

In planning and providing for the experiences of gifted students in the cluster group, Coleman (1995) suggest that cluster teachers use the following strategies: curriculum compacting, acceleration of content, enrichment with the curriculum areas, interest-based learning, and opportunities to work with other high ability learners across grade levels. Delcourt and Evans (1994) state that “curricular and instructional provisions for the gifted must be carefully maintained lest they disintegrate into a no-program format” (p. 9).

Support and special services are essential components for cluster grouping to be effective. Responses from the Cluster Grouping Survey indicate the need for these services. Coleman (1992) states that a cluster teacher should have access to a consultative/collaborative teacher who is a specialist in meeting the needs of high ability students. Access to counseling services is also necessary to meet the social and emotional needs of the cluster students.

The results of the Cluster Grouping Survey support research studies (Gentry, 1996; Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993) that gifted students do benefit from this program approach. Planning and delivery of the services need to be carefully considered, however, if cluster grouping is to be successful in meeting the needs of high ability students in regular classrooms.

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