

FLEXIBLE GROUPING

INCLUSION FOR ALL STUDENTS





Definitions to Know

Before You Get Started...

If you have not completed **Module 3 - Session 4**, we recommend that you do so before engaging in this session.

In that session, we explain the origins and value of high-leverage practices (HLPs) in special education.

Flexible grouping is one of 22 HLPs.

Ableism

Ableism is defined by the Center for Disability Rights as “a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or the other.”

Cogenerative Dialogue

Cogenerative dialogue is defined by the New York City Department of Education as “conversations in which educators and students come together to discuss the classroom experience. These conversations turn up some profound insights into the nature of the classroom because students and the teacher discuss what they see in the classroom, and the personal experiences of participants (things often left unsaid or ignored) are brought to the forefront.”

Tracking

Tracking is defined by the National Association of Secondary School Principals as “a method used by many secondary schools to group students according to their perceived ability, IQ, or achievement levels. Students are placed in high, middle, or low tracks in an effort to provide them with a level of curriculum and instruction that is appropriate to their needs. The practice of tracking began in the 1930s and has been the subject of intense controversy in the past 20 years.”

Ability Grouping

Ability grouping is defined by the United States Department of Education as “the assignment of students to classes or instructional groups based upon the students’ level of ability or achievement.”

Stigma, Tracking, and Special Education

In a 2014 publication on “Urban special education policy and the lived experience of stigma in a high school science classroom,” researcher Chris Hale critiqued federal, state, and local policies around special education that, in his analysis, supported ableism and resulted in negative self-perceptions among students receiving special education services. He begins the publication by sharing excerpts from a cogenerative dialogue that four 9th-grade science students attending a New York high school and their science teacher. The dialogue was recorded on camera with the permission of the students and their guardians.

In one part of the dialogue, two students in the group “discover” that they are in a “special education class” when other students explain that “Miss G” – a teacher who is frequently in the classroom working with students – is a special education teacher.

Shana:
[Speaking
somewhat urgently]

"Oh, God. That
means we're
special ed. "

[Smiles nervously,
casting a quick glance in the
direction of the camera]

Anna:
[Intake
of breath]

"We're
special ed."

[Shaking head, eyes
dropping, an expression
of apparent resignation]

Shana:
[To the teacher]

"That doesn't
mean...So, does
that mean we're
special ed?"

Jabbar (student):
[Looking down
at the table]

"No. You're
special ed."



Hale then explains that neither Shana nor Anna were classified as students with disabilities and therefore eligible to receive special education services. But their honest responses to learning that their science class was a special education class illustrate the stigma associated with being “special ed.” Hale states, “Special education represents the attachment of disability to children’s identities.”

Without further context, what we can interpret from the data that Hale presents is that the 9th-grade class was designed to be inclusive. The students, however, perceived their grouping as based on the practice of tracking students. The practice, which began in the 1930s, is described by the National Association of Secondary School Principals as a method that “groups students according to perceived ability, IQ, or achievement levels.”

Flexible Grouping

Based on this negative form of grouping students – tracking – it would seem odd that one of the high-leverage practices (HLPs) recommended for supporting special education students currently is flexible grouping. Indeed, the term has turned off many teachers and advocates out of concern that it is simply the latest form of tracking. So let's begin by unpacking what flexible grouping is and is not, how it can be properly and effectively implemented, and how it can benefit every student in an inclusive classroom, regardless of ability.

Advocacy organization Understood.org describes flexible grouping as using “a mix of heterogeneous groups (made up of students with varying skill levels) and homogeneous groups (made up of students with similar skill levels) to help students achieve a learning goal.” One of the things that makes flexible grouping significantly different from tracking is the purpose and length of time the grouping is used: “Students work together...only for the length of time necessary for them to develop an identified skill or to complete a learning activity.” While the group of students is working towards a common learning goal, learner variability is accounted for and supported by teachers.

A primary positive outcome of flexible grouping is that we can reduce the impact of stigma related to other forms of grouping, such as tracking. Understood.org explains that “Students who struggle don't feel singled out or embarrassed. Because groups change frequently and aren't based on ability level alone, all students have the chance to get to know and work with each other.” Furthermore, flexible grouping can increase student cohesion, expose students to new and divergent perspectives, and increase learning outcomes for all students.

The caveat to these claims about the effectiveness of flexible grouping is this: it is only a positive high-leverage practice when practiced effectively.



The CEEDAR publication *[High-Leverage Practices in Special Education](#)* (2017) defines flexible grouping (HLP #17) as a practice in which teachers do the following:

- ✓ Assign students to homogeneous and heterogeneous groups based on explicit learning goals
- ✓ Monitor peer interactions
- ✓ Provide positive and corrective feedback to support productive learning
- ✓ Use small learning groups to accommodate learning differences
- ✓ Promote in-depth, academic-related interactions
- ✓ Teach students to work collaboratively
- ✓ Choose tasks that require collaboration
- ✓ Issue directives that promote productive and autonomous group interactions
- ✓ Embed strategies that maximize learning opportunities and equalize participation
- ✓ Promote simultaneous interactions
- ✓ Use procedures to hold students accountable for collective and individual learning
- ✓ Monitor and sustain group performance through proximity and positive feedback

How to Make Flexible Grouping an HLP

Flexible grouping requires effective planning. Teachers can embed this in their overall planning processes by unit, lesson, activity, etc. The important note here is that the groupings should change throughout the school year. The guidepost for forming groups begins with a clear understanding of what you want your students to learn. **(For more on planning and related strategies such as backward design and essential questions, jump to Module 1, Session 5.)**

PLAN FOR FLEXIBLE GROUPING

WHAT?

What is the purpose of this group activity? What do you want the group to do and learn?

WHEN?

How long is this group going to work together? Sometimes a quick activity needs 15-20 minutes of work time, whereas larger projects or investigations can take weeks. (This goes back to determining the WHAT of your student learning.)

WHO?

Which students, with which characteristics, will make the grouping a success? How many will be the best fit for the activity? A lab activity may be best suited with four students in a group, whereas a long project with many different parts may need six students or more.

WHY?

Group formation should match your purpose (WHAT). Do you want your groups to be homogeneous (students with the same characteristics), or do you want the groups to be heterogeneous (all bringing something different to the table)?

HOW?

When putting the groups together, are you making the groups, or are you letting your students make their groups? If you want students to self-select, setting some parameters on how students make that choice can avoid any conflicts or hurt feelings.

WHERE?

Will the students work together in the physical classroom or online or a blend of both?

When these parameters are set, it becomes a much more fluid practice. Students will get used to working with an elbow partner during a mini-lesson or look forward to joining a group of their choice based on their subject-area interests. The flexibility inherent in these groupings provides students with much-needed motivation to learn and supports their social emotional health while doing so.



DO YOU USE THE WORKSHOP MODEL?

If so, a huge component is student grouping. Can you use flexible grouping to enhance the benefits of the workshop model? For example, many use the model to achieve gradual release of responsibility (GRR), in which “cognitive work should shift slowly and intentionally from teacher modeling, to joint responsibility between teachers and students, to independent practice and application by the learner.”

As you design groups to support that shift towards independence, flexible grouping will allow you to monitor student progress and change groupings to help scaffold their evolving skills and cognition. For example, if a handful of students are struggling with a particular concept, consider spreading them out across heterogeneous groups. “Heterogenous” should be defined by both various levels of proficiency and learner variability. A student who is struggling in one group may quickly learn a skill or concept when working with students who can share their learning experience in different modalities (e.g. visual, auditory, physically, etc.).

Leveraging Flexible Grouping Across Learning Environments

Let's focus on the "leverage" part of the term "high-leverage practice" for a moment. As a verb – something teachers can DO – leverage means to "use (something) to maximum advantage." In terms of teaching across learning environments, we want to leverage flexible grouping in at least two ways: portable practices and integrative practices.

In the table below, we walk through planning elements for flexible grouping and provide some considerations on **how to make practices portable and integrative.**

Portable Practice

How can flexible grouping be made portable across learning environments (i.e., shifting from in-person to remote, remote to hybrid, etc.)?

Integrative Practice

How can flexible grouping help us integrate the assets of different learning environments (modalities) in order to supercharge our teaching?

PLANNING ELEMENT

PORTABLE PRACTICE

INTEGRATIVE PRACTICE

WHAT - What is the purpose of this group activity? What do you want the group to do and learn? This must be answered first and remain the constant guidepost for planning.

WHEN

How long is this group going to work together?

Consider how to measure the length of an activity based on modality. For example, live collaboration on Zoom may require you to add a few minutes at the start for students to assemble in breakout groups. Alternatively, asynchronous collaboration may be measured by start and end times/dates with interactive deadlines.

Consider allowing groups to select their preferred modalities (in-person, remote synchronous, remote asynchronous), including working together across multiple modalities (some use Google Docs, others post videos, all share on a common learning management system such as Google Classroom).

PLANNING ELEMENT

PORTABLE PRACTICE

INTEGRATIVE PRACTICE

WHO

Which students, with which characteristics, will make the grouping a success? How many will be the best fit for the activity?

What changes in group size do you need to make for students to effectively collaborate across learning environments? Does a group of six students working together around a table need to be pared back to three students working together through a shared document (e.g., Google Docs)?

Can digital and web tools increase inclusion for groups? For example, can a home-bound student join a group through live streamed video or asynchronous collaboration?

WHY

Do you want your groups to be homogeneous (students with the same characteristics), or do you want the groups to be heterogeneous (all bringing something different to the table)?

When thinking about heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings, consider students' preferences and expertise with particular learning tools and platforms. Can you use heterogeneous grouping as an opportunity for students to "level up" on their use of digital tools?

Can digital tools from remote learning open up opportunities for different kinds of groupings? For example, can you group students with and without hearing-impairments by using assistive technologies and/or providing students with choice in terms of the "end product" that results from their collaboration?

PLANNING ELEMENT

PORTABLE PRACTICE

INTEGRATIVE PRACTICE

HOW

Are you making the groups, or are you letting your students make their groups?

Consider allowing students to self-select based on options within a modality. For example, in remote learning, students can choose a group based on a shared interest in an app. Can you set up “room topics” for breakout groups in Zoom, set a maximum enrollment per breakout room, give students time to consider their preferences, and then open up the rooms for them to join?

Can you use tools to guide self-selection processes so that they are fair and equitable? For example, you can use Nearpod to set up a series of polling questions that allow students to self-assess their readiness for an activity, interest in different aspects of the activity, and preferred modality. Display the data anonymously (without student names) and allow students to form heterogeneous or homogeneous groups based on the data.

WHERE

Will the students work together in the physical classroom or online or a blend of both?

If your students will be moving across learning environments (from in-person to remote or vice versa), ask students to give their groups a name. Designate specific locations in the classroom (e.g., table) where they regularly convene. When you shift to remote live, use those location names for the breakout rooms in Zoom, designate areas within a [Bitmoji classroom](#), or identify in which shared document they will be working. For asynchronous remote, use the group names to establish collaborative tools, such as discussion board threads.

Consider allowing students to be “together” across learning environments. This can mean live streaming a home-bound student, as mentioned above, or it can mean allowing a student who is nonverbal to use assistive technologies and/or digital tools to express themselves and contribute during in-person instruction. Being “there” may look different for different students and allow them to tap into their individual assets.

Now It's Your Turn!

Knowing what you now know about flexible grouping, let's practice!

In your workbook, you will rewrite a classroom scenario to reflect your current understanding of learner variability and flexible grouping.

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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