Welcome to our video for HLP #17, Use Flexible Grouping.

There are 22 High Leverage Practices for special education spread across four domains. Use flexible groups is under the instruction domain.

The source for content in this video is the HLP for special education book published by CEC and the CEEDAR center, and a chapter by Larry Maheady and his colleagues in the HLP for Inclusive Practices book published by CEC and Routledge.

This video is split into two parts. In part 1, we provide an overview of using flexible groups to support the needs of students with disabilities. In part 2, we provide examples of options for creating and using flexible groups.

**Part 1: Rationale and Definitions**

All teachers use groups as part of their instructional repertoire. Groups should be deployed with foresight and careful planning to address individual students’ needs given the complexities of the curriculum. When group size and structure are carefully planned, flexible groups will often lead to improved learning gains.

Effective teachers use flexible grouping of students intentionally to differentiate instruction, make instruction more intensive, and meet individual student needs. Groups can be flexibly used to accommodate learning needs, promote in-depth academic-related interactions, and teach students to work collaboratively through explicit instruction around development of interpersonal skills.

A hallmark for creating effective groups is teachers making the decision to change grouping patterns depending on lesson goals and objectives and may include (a) homogeneous and/or heterogeneous small groups, (b) pairs of students, (c) whole class, or (d) the need for individualized instruction as denoted by the IEP. These decisions should be driven by the intersection of data on student performance and the content the lesson being taught.

An important note about HLP 17 is the use of flexible groups is not a standalone practice. Simply using groups of various sizes and structures without regard for how instruction will be provided to the groups will not result in desired learning gains. Instead, the use of this HLP should be applied alongside other high-leverage such as #13 adapt curriculum tasks and materials, number 20, provide intensive instruction, and number 9 teach social behaviors. Specific evidence-based practices should also be used.

For example, a teacher would likely initially use explicit instruction to deliver instruction on new vocabulary during social studies to a heterogenous grouping of students within the general education classroom. However, some students also need intensive instruction that would be delivered within a smaller, homogeneous group. The special education teacher might have responsibility for leading that intensive instruction within the smaller group.

Most evidence suggests that small groups should be highly structured and include (a) specific goals and tasks, (b) clear instructional directives and expectations, and (c) explicit strategies to maximize and equalize student opportunities to respond. Students also need to be explicitly taught routines and expectations for working in groups of various sizes and purposes.

As with all instructional practices, teachers must monitor student performance, provide positive and constructive feedback, and hold students accountable for their performance when they are working in groups.

In sum for part 1, using flexible grouping is a HLP teachers can use in conjunction with other HLPs and evidence-based practices. The goal is to differentiate instruction, build students’ interpersonal skills, and address individual student needs through intensive instruction. When arranging and working with students in groups, teachers should structure their teaching around specific learning goals and tasks, use clear instructional directives and expectations, and ensure the specific teaching approach that is selected is a match for students’ needs.

**Part 2 – Key Components of Using Flexible Grouping**

In part 2 we highlight three core components of constructing and utilizing flexible groups. These components are: 1. Groups should be highly structured and include clear directives. 2. Some groups should be homogeneous and others should be heterogenous to provide relevant instruction that matches student needs and IEP goals. And 3. The use of flexible groupings does not occur in a vacuum. Teachers need to match specific HLPs and EBPs to student needs, and then determine the appropriate group size and setting.

Component 1. Groups should be highly structured and include clear directives.

We as educators should not take for granted that students know how to act and function within groups of various sizes and structures.

Therefore, regardless of whether a group comprises homogeneous or heterogeneously grouped students, effective teachers provide clear instructions, teach and review expectations and routines, and maximize time on task for learning. Using groups provides explicit and implicit opportunities for students to develop interpersonal skills.

Students with disabilities are more likely to find success with academic or other tasks when expectations are clear, and the teacher is deliberate and explicit about what the lesson is going to entail. In other words, the teacher who removes ambiguity from lessons, and guides organized movements within and between groups is setting her students up for success.

Regardless of the type of grouping, teachers should continually monitor group interactions, provide positive and corrective feedback, hold students accountable individually and collectively, and sustain group interactions through proximity and feedback.

Finally, breaking students into groups without intentionality regarding how the group size and structure will lead to improved learning gains can lead to a false understanding that specially designed instruction is being provided.

In the following clip Ms. Bree Barns provides an explicit advance organizer to her students prior to breaking into groupings. She reviews expectations for each setting, and ensures students understand what she wants them to do.

Component 2. Some groups should be homogeneous and others should be heterogenous to provide an appropriate setting for the goals of the lesson.

Homogeneous groups are used to provide focused, intensive instruction for students with common instructional strengths and needs. When planning for instructing students in homogeneous settings, teachers should configure instruction to meet students’ IEP goals and objectives.

To configure homogeneous groups, teachers first identify a limited number of high priority skills and concepts (i.e., big ideas) and form small groups of students with similar academic needs. Which students are selected should be guided by student performance on progress monitoring measures, student IEPs, and other indicators of learning and skill.

Teachers then provide explicit instruction and other evidence-based practices to maximize student response opportunities, increase instructional feedback, and monitor student progress.

To maximize instructional intensity, teachers should use smaller group sizes, and/or allocate additional time to ensure student mastery. Groups of 1 to 3 students have been shown to be most effective for delivering intensive instruction.

Heterogeneous groups include students of varied knowledge and skill levels and can serve multiple instructional purposes. These kinds of instructional groups are sometimes called mixed-ability groups. Teachers use small heterogeneous groups to engage all students in grade level content-related conversations, facilitate student thinking and communication skills, and improve interpersonal relationships among students with and without disabilities.

To use heterogeneous groups effectively, teachers configure small or large groups who differ on demographic (i.e., gender, race, socioeconomic or disability status) and/or academic-related (i.e., high, average, low achieving) variables. They then select tasks and materials that require collaboration, provide directives and clear expectations to promote productive and autonomous interactions, and embed strategies to maximize and equalize student response opportunities. For example, students in heterogeneous groups should have structured and reciprocal student roles.

Throughout the time allotted for mathematics, Ms. Barns cycles through each of her carefully constructed groups, providing different supports as relevant to students’ specific needs. Students in groupings have varying responsibilities, but are always accountable, and under the watchful eye of the teacher.

**Component 3:** Use of flexible groups does not occur in a vacuum. Therefore, teachers need to match specific HLPs and evidence-based practices to student needs, and then determine the appropriate group size and setting.

The HLPs are intended to be used in combinations with one another, and also in conjunction with evidence-based practices. In fact, many HLPs are foundational to the implementation of evidence-based practices. HLP 17, use flexible groups, is a prime example. For example, when using an evidence-based, scripted program for phonics instruction as part of a data-based individualized process, the teacher would conduct the instruction in a carefully constructed group of students with similar needs. A second example is teachers utilizing HLPs 11-13 to create short- and long-term goals, systematically design instruction towards those goals, and identify and implement adaptations to help support students in learning these standards or curriculum. At each decision point, the special educator and colleagues consider various instructional settings and group sizes that are appropriate for delivering specially-designed instruction. In sum, teachers make decisions to use flexible groups is made at macro and micro levels.

In this final clip, Ms. Barnes welcomes a group with a fast review of expectations, and then begins an explicit review of word problems for an upcoming assessment. The clip demonstrates her seamless use of multiple HLPs and evidence-based practices all occurring within an appropriate setting for individuals with disabilities and others who are struggling.

**Conclusion**

In sum,

teachers can use flexible grouping to differentiate instruction, build students’ interpersonal skills, and address individual student needs through intensive instruction. Homogeneous grouping allows teachers to intensify instruction in targeted ways for students with similar academic needs. Heterogeneous grouping provides opportunities for students to collaborate and learn together while developing interpersonal skills. When working with students in any type of group, teachers should address specific learning goals, provide clear instructional directives and expectations, and use strategies that will both hold students accountable and maximize their opportunities to respond and receive feedback.

More information about using flexible grouping and its role in supporting the needs of students with and without disabilities can be found at highleveragepractices.org.

Thanks for watching, and please continue using resources from this series on high leverage practices for special education.