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Ability grouping in the elementary school

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Abstract

Ability grouping has been used in schools for many years in an attempt to meet children's instructional needs. Is this type of grouping nurturing for children? The purpose of this paper is to examine ability grouping and then to offer the alternative of flexible grouping to extend the instructional program at the elementary level. Flexible grouping allows students to more readily pursue meaningful learning, thus extending their abilities.

An issue in education that has caused concern is the ability grouping of students. Many types of ability grouping have been identified. Usually ability grouping means the homogeneous grouping of students for instruction by intelligence or achievement thus reducing their heterogeneity (Slavin, 1987b). According to Gallagher (1993), ability grouping can be described as the separation of same-grade school children into groups within a classroom or across classes, according to estimated school aptitude or past performance.

Pros and Cons of Ability Grouping

Proponents of ability grouping suggest that homogeneous grouping allows students of common ability to learn from each other, making it easier for teachers and students to reach their goals (Gallagher, 1993). Teachers can increase the pace and level of instruction for high achievers and provide more individual attention, repetition, and review for low achievers. As a result, the academic achievement of students is raised beyond what it would be in mixed-ability class (Slavin, 1987a).

Proponents also say that ability grouping helps students feel better about school and themselves as learners and allows students to progress with others having similar abilities. According to Segro (1986), some students learn better in ability groups. Students grouped with the same academic needs and capabilities learn more effectively. For example, low-ability

children do not have to compete with brighter peers, which saves them from continual academic failure, frustration, and loss of self-esteem. On the other hand, high-ability students find greater meaning in schoolwork, are motivated, put forth greater effort, and hold higher expectations for themselves.

Opponents of ability grouping suggest that many problems arise from this organization of students. It can have a negative impact on the achievement of students in the low groups, thus creating low achievers within a classroom. These students are deprived of the stimulation provided by higher achievers. Being assigned to a class of low achievers causes low expectations for the students and teachers. The lower achieving students have no challenge to improve or work harder (Segro, 1986).

The lower-tracked classrooms in an interclass organization may lack mobility if they receive this assignment based on test scores, not on learning styles or emotional needs. In some schools, the students in the lower tracks are offered poor instruction: These classrooms are often assigned to the least experienced teacher even though the students may have the greatest needs and therefore are the most challenging to teach. Also, teachers of low-ability classes spend more time on behavior management and less time on instruction (Braddock & McPartland, 1990).

When districts try to eliminate tracking, the parents of the highest achieving students and senior teachers are the most outspoken opponents of doing away with it (Braddock & McPartland, 1990). Slavin (1988) believes the most compelling argument against ability grouping has little to do with its effects on achievement. Ability grouping goes against democratic ideals by creating academic elites. All students need the opportunity to interact with a wide range of peers. Ability grouping often parallels social class and ethnic grouping, disproportionately placing students of low socio-economic status and from minority groups in low tracks; therefore, the use of ability grouping may serve to increase divisions along class, race, and ethnic group lines.

Flexible Grouping Patterns

After reviewing the studies concerning the negative effects of ability grouping, alternatives need to be examined in order to develop a learning environment that will meet the instructional needs of the children in a classroom. Flexible grouping patterns within an intraclass organization can extend students' knowledge and abilities in all the curricular areas. Grouping patterns that can be included in an instructional program are students working *individually, in cooperative pairs or small groups, and as a* whole class and can be either heterogeneous or homogeneous. The type of grouping pattern will vary according to the instructional

needs of the children and will be determined by the teacher and the students. Several aspects of the instructional program need to be considered in implementing a flexible intraclass grouping plan, such as interests, prior knowledge of content, problem-solving strategies, work habits, skill development, and difficulty of task (Flood, Lapp, Flood, Nagel, 1992). These types of grouping that can nurture children's abilities can be considered.

Teacher-Led Group

Whole group. The whole group approach, a heterogeneous grouping, involves the teacher leading the entire class. The webbing for a unit can be developed as a class. A large group can listen to a story or view a film together. Students can use a whole group audience to share pair and small group study and their individual work, such as their writing in the author's chair.

Small groups. Small groups can range from four to eight members. A small group can facilitate teacher-student and student-student interaction. Such a pattern can be used by the teacher for the instruction of particular tasks and guidance and assessment of peer group activity.

Student-Led Groups

Individual. Individual work allows children to explore their individual interests and work at their own pace.

Appropriate activities for individuals are journaling, pastime reading, writing projects, and learning center activity.

Pairs. In such a grouping, each member in a pair has more time to respond than in a group of four or more. Pairs can usually work faster than small groups. Pair grouping can be used for peer tutoring, interviewing, finding topics for writing, and trouble-shooting throughout a process, proofreading compositions, and sharing reading experiences and related expressive activities (Temple & Gillet, 1984).

Small peer groups. Four to six students can be assigned to a small group on a permanent or temporary basis depending on the task. The selection of students can be based on one or more of these factors: adaptability, range of ability, and instructional needs. Small peer groups can be involved with activities in learning centers.

Flexible Grouping and a Rich Learning Environment

A rich learning environment based on literature from the different genres and a whole array of options for expressive activities is enhanced by flexible grouping patterns as described in the previous section. Literature-based themes and units in the different areas of the curriculum can offer teacher-directed and student-directed activities. A science unit on the forest for grade four is presented as an example.

Teacher-Directed Activity

Webbing is a teacher-directed activity carried out in this unit. After discussing the upcoming unit on forests, the students supported by teacher can provide these general categories and related concepts for study. Examples are given below:

Forests

- Trees
  - Oak
  - Maple
- Other Plants
  - Ferns
  - Flowers
- Animals
  - Bears
  - Birds

The teacher can conduct whole group sharing times for the students to share their individual, pair and small group activities and to extend the concepts of the web. Also, the planning session for the overnight stay in the rainforest at a zoo will be conducted by the teacher. This whole group activity will be the final activity for the unit on the forest. The students will experience both daytime and nighttime in a rainforest. A night walk will be taken and then another walk will be taken in the early morning to observe different animals.

Student-Directed Activities

Student-directed activities consist of individuals, pairs, and small groups. These groups can be composed of permanently assigned members or can be a temporary membership involved in a specific activity. When students are in these types of groups, they are able to support one another and investigate ideas on their own. As individuals work on their own, they can complete the given task at their own pace.

Centers can provide students with options for learning experiences--individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Students can record what they have learned in journals. During whole class discussions, the results of center activities can be shared. The activities in learning centers can be part of sustaining centers or those specific to a theme or topic.

Sustaining centers. Sustaining centers remain constant throughout the year with their content changing as themes and units are introduced. These centers can include reading/listening, poetry, author, interesting object, and bookmaking (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

- Reading/Listening Center

This center is filled with literature works representative of all genres, both picture books and full length volumes. Picture books can be accompanied by audio tapes which allow

students to listen to the melodious quality of the English language or to be prompted in reading the text.

The listening center in the forest unit will deal with plants and animals. These are examples of picture books that can be presented:

Plants

Bunting, E. (1993). Someday a tree. R. Himler, (Il.), New York: Clarion.

Picture Book: Realistic Fiction

A young girl and her family and neighbors try in vain to save a poisoned oak tree. The girl finds hope in the midst of this tragedy by planting the acorns from the tree, thus looking forward to oak seedling.

Ehlert, L. (1991). Red leaf, yellow leaf. San Diego: Harcourt.

Picture Book: Information

A life span of a maple tree is described.

Hayes, M. (1991). Hello, tree! (Il.), New York: Lodestar.

Picture Book: Realistic/Poetry

A young girl experiences many ways that a tree can be a special friend.

Lynne, C. (1990). The great kapok: A tale of the Amazon Rain Forest. San Diego: Harcourt.

Picture Book: Modern Fantasy

After a man is ordered to cut down a tree in the rainforest, he falls asleep and hears the animal residents of the tree encouraging him to leave their home intact.

Seuss, Dr. (1971). Lorax. New York: Random House.

Picture Book: Modern Fantasy

The Once-lers continue cutting down trees even though the Lorax has given them warnings.

Animals

Kesey, K. (1990). Little tricker the squirrel meets big double the bear. B. Moser, (Il.), New York: Viking.

Picture Book: Modern Fantasy (Personified Animal)

Little Tricker, the squirrel, gets revenge on Big Double, the vicious bear, after he terrorizes the animals of the forest.

Rosen, M. (1989). We're going on a bear hunt. H. Oxenbury, (Il.), New York: McElderry.

Picture Book: Fantasy (Nursery Rhyme)

A family encounters many obstacles on a bear hunt.

Ryder, J. (1990). Under your feet. D. Nolan, (Il.), New York: Four Winds.

Picture Book: Realistic Fiction

The lives of creatures living underground are explored throughout the year.

Ryder, J. (1991). When the woods hum. C. Stock, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Picture Book: Realistic Fiction

An intergenerational story of appreciating the seventeen-year life cycle of the cicadas is told.

Stelluna, J. (1993). Stelluna. San Diego: Harcourt.

Picture Book: Modern Fantasy (Personified Animal)

As Stelluna, a baby bat, is carried through the air by her mother, they are attacked by an owl. Stelluna falls into a bird's nest and is raised as one of them until she is reunited with her mother.

- Poetry Center

In this center, poems with animal images in the forest are presented. The different sensory imagery found in the forest is represented in the poems. Forms for writing poems are compiled in a small booklet that is available in the center. These volumes are examples of poetry that can be presented to extend the unit:

Kuskin, K. (1980). Dogs & dragons, trees & dreams. New York: Harper & Row.

Livingston, M. C. (1989). Monkey puzzle and other poems. A. Frasconi, (Il.), New York: McElderry.

Moore, L. (1982). Something new begins. M. J. Dunton, (Il.), New York: Atheneum.

Worth, V. (1994). All the small poems and fourteen more. N. Babbitt, (Il.), New York: Farrar.

- Interesting Objects Center

This center will present the different senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste) that can be experienced in the forest. The children can explore items in this center and also can bring examples from home.

- Bookmaking Center

In this center, directions and materials for making books will be presented. The students can make a book about some aspect of the forest.

Centers specific to unit. These centers with literature experiences and related expressive activities focus on the forest unit.

- Author Center

This center will focus on Joanne Ryder's books that are related to the forest unit. Also, a biographical sketch about her life experiences that influences her work will be included. These are examples of her works: Under your feet (1987). D. Nolan, (Il.), New York: Four Winds; Step into night (1988). D. Nolan, (Il.), New York: Four Winds; and Inside turtle shell (1985). S. Bonners, (Il.), New York: Macmillan; and Just for a Day Series.

Centers specific to the unit. These literature-based centers with related expressive activity particularly facilitate on this unit.

- Point of View Center

Literature Experience

In Joanne Ryder's Just for a Day Series, people are transformed into animals and see the world from animals' points of view.

Ryder, J. (1989). Catching the wind. M. Rothman, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Ryder, J. (1996). Jaguar in the rainforest. M. Rothman, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Ryder, J. (1990). Lizard in the sun. M. Rothman, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Ryder, J. (1993). Sea elf. M. Rothman, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Ryder, J. (1989). White bear, ice bear. M. Rothman, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Ryder, J. (1991). Winter whale. M. Rothman, (Il.), New York: Morrow.

Expressive Activity

Choose an animal in the forest to view from its perspective.

- Dioramas

  Literature Experience

  Listen to/read

  Baylor, B. (1979). Your own best secret place. P. Parnall, (Il.), New York: Scribner.

  Picture Book: Poetry

  Expressive Activity

  Build a diorama of your special place in the forest.

- Mural & Small Poetry Books

  Literature Experience & Expressive Activity

From listening to/reading books on the forest throughout the centers, choose one animal or plant from the literature experiences and create a mural and an accompanying short story or poem that can be affixed near the image on the mural. Suggested poetry forms are cinquain and haiku. The forms are given below:

Cinquain

Form:

Line 1	1 word - the concept
Line 2	2 words - a description
Line 3	3 words - a description
Line 4	4 words - a description
Line 5	1 word - synonym of topic

Example:

Trees

Brightly colored

Autumn brings leaves

Swaying in the wind

Plant

Haiku

Form:

Line 1 5 syllables

Line 2 7 syllables

Line 3 5 syllables

Example:

Beautiful images

Many plants and animals

Are in the forest.

- Collage Realia

Literature Experience

Ehlert, L. (1991). Red leaf, yellow leaf. San Diego: Harcourt.

Expressive Activity

Collect real materials that grow in the forest to make a collage.

Conclusion

Flexible grouping allows children with different abilities, interests, and instructional needs to grow intellectually and personally-socially. The focus is on learning--content and skills--and building self-esteem through working with different students in heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings as their needs dictate.

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