Flexible grouping as a means of nurturing children's language abilities

Brenda M. Clark

University of Northern Iowa
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Abstract
This paper will review the professional literature on ability grouping patterns in traditional reading instruction and their effects on learners. Then elements of flexible grouping will be proposed for implementation into a reading program that nurtures children's language abilities.
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Brenda M. Clark
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Jeanne McLain Harms

Date Approved: 6/25/93

Director of Research Paper

Jeanne McLain Harms

Date Approved: 6/25/93

Graduate Faculty Adviser

Constance J. Ulmer

Date Approved: 7/1/93

Graduate Faculty Reader

Peggy Ishler

Date Approved: 7/8/93

Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Children in school programs that have a strong emphasis on skills have frequently been grouped by ability for instruction. Educators implementing the whole language concept into the instructional programs are reflecting on the nature of language and how literacy emerges. Such programs encourage children to create their own meaning through the language process facilitating their emerging literacy. As a result of this instructional development activity, school organization based on ability is again being questioned.

Purpose

This paper will review the professional literature on ability grouping patterns in traditional reading instruction and their effects on learners. Then elements of flexible grouping will be proposed for implementation into a reading program that nurtures children's language abilities.

Ability Grouping

This section will describe different types of ability grouping and the effects on children.

Types of Ability Grouping

Slavin (1987) has described different forms of ability grouping for reading instruction. They are ability-grouped class assignments, interclass grouping, and intraclass grouping.

Ability-grouped classes. In this form of grouping, students are usually assigned to self-contained classes based on
their achievement level and/or intelligence test results. This grouping plan is also known as tracking. The rationale for tracking is that students' instructional needs can be better met in a homogeneous class of children. By narrowing the range of achievement, pace and content can be adapted more easily to the instructional level of the students (Slavin, 1987).

**Interclass class grouping.** This type of grouping places students in heterogeneous classes for part of the day and then regroups them homogeneously for reading instruction in classes within their grade level. Low-achieving children have opportunities to spend some time during the school day with higher-achieving classmates (Slavin, 1987). The Joplin Plan introduced in the mid 1950s was a much publicized form of interclass grouping although it placed students across grade levels—a nongraded form of regrouping (Floyd, 1954).

**Intraclass grouping.** This grouping plan assigns students to heterogeneous classrooms and then organizes them by ability in small groups within the room for reading instruction. Students can identify more easily with a class that varies in ability but then can receive skill instruction in smaller homogeneous groups (Slavin, 1987). The difference between interclass and intraclass grouping is that one teacher may have from one to five groups of students of varying abilities in intraclass grouping and would
have less time for direct instruction (Slavin, 1987; Sorensen & Hallinan, 1986).

**Effects of Ability Grouping**

Ability grouping assignments cannot only thwart achievement in reading but can widen the gap in the achievement of low and high ability students. Good and poor readers may differ in their reading ability as much because of differences in instruction as variations in individual learning styles or aptitudes (Allington, 1983).

Students are not always placed in homogeneous ability groups, or tracks, based on their reading aptitude. For example, Eder (1983) found that half the students in one first grade would have had different initial group placements had reading readiness scores been the only criterion. The teachers' perceptions of the students' maturity and attention spans were taken into account for the initial placement. Grant and Rothenberg (1986) also found that immature students and students with short attention spans frequently were placed in lower ability groups than their abilities merited.

Teachers are more likely to interrupt students in low ranking groups and tracks. In top groups, prompts by other students are strongly discouraged while in lower groups, such responses were encouraged to sustain the pace of the group and to
keep students' interest (Eder, 1982). Members of lower groups are also allowed less time to answer questions than their higher-achieving counterparts (Hiebert, 1983).

Students in higher ranking ability groups spend more time on meaning related activities while students in lower ability groups spend much more time on decoding tasks. Good readers are more likely to be judged on the basis of their answers to postreading questions while poor readers are judged on their oral decoding. Good readers spend much more time reading silently while poor readers spend more time reading orally. Good readers read about three times as many words per day in their reading group as poor readers (Allington, 1983).

In regard to interclass and intraclass grouping, the most prevalent of the ability grouping schemes, students in higher ranking groups tend to be treated more favorably during instruction than students in lower ability groups. Good performance is more likely to be rewarded in higher level groups (Hiebert, 1983). Teachers spend more instructional time and interact more with students in higher level groups (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986). Teachers spend more time on behavior management with low ability groups. Time spent on behavior management is negatively correlated with learning (Brophy, 1979).
Sometimes in classrooms with intraclass ability grouping, certain resources were known to be for the exclusive use of high ranking ability groups (Grant & Rothenberg, 1981).

Teachers have lower expectations for students in low ability groups. One study of an intraclass grouping assignment found that even on tasks that were supposedly equivalent for high and low ranking groups, the groups were treated much differently. The top ranking group was encouraged to work autonomously with the teacher trusting that they would complete the work successfully. The lower ranking group was carefully monitored, and members were reprimanded for showing autonomy. The teacher also showed skepticism that they could complete the task without assistance (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986).

A study done by Luchins and Luchins (1948) on intraclass grouping concluded that students in low reading groups wished to be placed in higher groups but no higher-grouped students aspired to be placed any lower. Mann (1960) found that fifth-grade students in the highest of four intraclass groups provided positive reasons for their placement while members of low-ability groups provided negative reasons for their placement. Rosenbaum (1980) related that in most cases average and low ability students give lower self-evaluations if they are in any form of ability groups than if they are not.
In Levenson's study (1972) of an intraclass grouping assignment, sixth-grade students placed in low and high ability groups agreed upon several perspectives related to ability grouping: They could read more books if they were not in reading groups. They wanted to read more books on their own. They would rather read silently rather than orally. They preferred choosing books themselves rather than receiving books as a group.

Flexible Approach to Grouping

Teachers in their attempts to implement the whole language concept into the instructional program are aware of the inadequacies of traditional ability-grouped reading instruction. They are also concerned about meeting the varying needs of their students. Flexible groups can be an effective alternative to ability grouping because a variety of grouping patterns is employed to enhance student learning (Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992). The four basic organizational formats for flexible groups proposed by Berghoff and Egawa (1991) are whole group, small group, pairs, and individuals.

Whole Group

This type of grouping focuses on the learning community and provides opportunities for sharing. Students can build on common experiences. Through a whole group experience, new strategies and concepts can be introduced and activities to be developed in small groups can be modeled. After students have worked in small
groups, they can assemble to connect ideas gathered from their activity (Pardo & Raphael, 1991).

**Small Group**

This grouping can be used to provide peer support and language opportunities that extend the reading experience. Small groups can also emerge from students' shared interests, providing opportunities to plan, think, and work collaboratively toward a common goal (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991).

**Pair**

This grouping arrangement can be pupil-chosen or teacher-arranged to form an intimate group in which students can pursue a common goal or interest. Also, students can build on each other's strengths. For example, a skilled writer can pair with a capable illustrator, a fluent reader can pair with a creative actor, or an able reader can pair with a less able reader (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991).

**Individual**

This arrangement allows time for sustained reading and writing and for personal reflection (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991). Students can apply and practice strategies they have learned in small or whole groups and set individual goals during this time (Pardo & Raphael, 1991).
Implementation of Flexible Grouping Patterns

In implementing a flexible grouping plan into a heterogeneous fourth-grade classroom, every student is believed to be capable of bringing a unique and equally valuable contribution to the learning community. Quality literature experiences can be the base of instruction accompanied by provisions for meaningful extensions of the children's reading experiences.

Several themes and units in the content areas can be developed through literary selections from a variety of genres and reading levels. Example topics that can be included are the elderly, changing families, the weather, and a study of the African-American culture. A flexible grouping approach that can be implemented in an African-American unit can demonstrate how groups are formed or emerge from the reading experience and how student needs can be met through this approach.

Whole Group

Building background experiences. In the whole group, students can locate Africa on a map and discuss information about the continent. Vocabulary can be discussed, and students' prior knowledge of the African-American culture can be shared. These questions can be posed: Why is it important to study another culture? How can this study facilitate awareness of one's own
heritage? What can be learned from studying the African-American culture in particular?

**Sharing time.** In the whole group, poetry by Langston Hughes, Eloise Greenfield, Nikki Giovanni, and others can be shared. *Nettie's Trip South*, a picture book, by Ann Turner, and short fiction, by Mildred Taylor, can be read aloud. Students can have the opportunity to share personal experiences and to discuss prejudice.

**Connecting ideas.** The reading instructional time does not always have to begin with students in a whole group. Sometimes, small groups can gather to continue peer group work. The whole group can meet following the small group sessions to connect ideas gleaned from peer interactions.

**Small Group**

Small heterogeneous groups can either emerge through children's choices or can be designated by the teacher, based on how students interact socially. An example of small group activity is one that focuses on African folktales. Each small group can choose a folktale to read and to retell. This activity can extend the reading selection and can enhance the students' enjoyment of the book.

Another small group activity can involve several works with a common theme, such as slavery in the United States. After
reading one or more selections, the students can compare and contrast the elements of the works.

**Individual**

Throughout the unit, individual students can be encouraged to read or listen to picture books, biographies, and poetry on display. For example, each student can select a biography of an African American to read and then design a way to share the information with the class.

**Conclusions**

From studies of grouping patterns, students grouped by ability have not shown significant gains in achievement. Those in lower ability groups receive less meaningful instruction and have poorer self-esteem. In heterogeneous grouping arrangements, students have the opportunity to work cooperatively in making decisions, responding to literature, and engaging in related expressive activities. Through the support of one another of differing abilities, higher achievement gains for all students can be obtained.

A flexible grouping approach is a means of implementing the whole language concept which is concerned with children creating their own meaning through the language process. In such a grouping arrangement, individual needs can be recognized and addressed, and each student can be viewed as a reader or writer who has something to contribute to the learning experience.
Bibliography


