Grouping for instruction in reading

Carolyn Kay Grussing

University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©1993 Carolyn Kay Grussing

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation


This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
Grouping for instruction in reading

Abstract
In 1992, Fielding stated: "One of the by-products of the movement toward increased instructional use of children's literature is that teachers are reexamining the different grouping patterns that are possible for elementary reading instruction" (p.26). Much discussion in the literature has been based on the pros and cons of placing students into groups and the criteria upon which grouping decisions should be made (Harp, 1989). Consequently, there is substantial literature that describes a variety of grouping arrangements and attempts to examine their effectiveness (Otto, Wolf, & Eldridge, 1984).
Grouping for Instruction in Reading

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Carolyn Kay Grussing
July 24, 1992
This Research Paper by: Carolyn Grussing

Entitled: Grouping for Instruction in Reading

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Education.

Date Approved
Marvin Heller

Date Approved
Graduate Faculty Adviser
Greg P. Stefanich

Date Approved
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Peggy Ishler
Grouping for Instruction in Reading

In 1992, Fielding stated: "One of the by-products of the movement toward increased instructional use of children's literature is that teachers are reexamining the different grouping patterns that are possible for elementary reading instruction" (p.26). Much discussion in the literature has been based on the pros and cons of placing students into groups and the criteria upon which grouping decisions should be made (Harp, 1989). Consequently, there is substantial literature that describes a variety of grouping arrangements and attempts to examine their effectiveness (Otto, Wolf, & Eldridge, 1984).

Student diversity has perpetually challenged educators. The most prevalent response to this diversity has been to place students into instructional subgroups (Rosenbaum, 1980). The question of how students should be grouped for instruction has been a point of sharp discussion since the turn of the century. A 1927 dissertation listed 83 "selected references" on the topic (Slavin, 1987).

Several authors suggest that ability grouping can create serious problems for students that are social in nature, but cognitive in effect (Allington, 1983; Collins, 1986; Eder, 1986; Hiebert, 1983; Shannon, 1985; & Slavin, 1987). Shannon argued that social factors frequently become the determining factor for group placement for reading instruction. Student attitude and outward behavior contribute to whether or not students gain access to quality literacy instruction. As a result, Shannon maintained, reading instruction contributed to the maintenance of present social class stratification in American Society (Shannon, 1989). As stated in
"Becoming a Nation of Readers", scholars have argued that the future attainment of the child is determined by its reading group placement rather than by the child's ability (1985).

Accepting the idea that students need material taught at their ability level does not predetermine for educators any particular form of instructional grouping. There are many alternatives to traditional methods of grouping for instruction that have greater potential of effectiveness, less likelihood of any psychological damage, and less potential for segregation than traditional reading groups (Slavin, 1987). In 1983, Hiebert stated: A complete understanding of reading development can only come about when the interaction of the reader and the text is studied within different instructional social contexts.

**Purpose**

Purpose of this study was to examine the current research and literature on ability grouping for reading instruction so that alternatives to such grouping practices might be presented and considered.

**Importance of the study**

The study is important because research has illustrated that grouping practices in reading impact the delivery of instruction. Therefore, it is important to examine critically the most prevalent practice of ability grouping for reading instruction (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Current research methods are furnishing new insights into how students are grouped, why they are grouped as they are, and the effect these decisions have on students (Jongsma, 1984). It is imperative to consider alternative instructional approaches that enhance the delivery of appropriate instruction through meeting
student needs at varying levels of achievement. Ultimately, this will lead to the goal of reading success for all students (Valdez, 1989).

**Review of the Literature**

Teachers have, historically, used instructional grouping as a prevalent context for teaching reading. Research contends that the context within which reading takes place has an impact on not only the instructional, but also the social outcomes for the learner (Abadz, 1985; Oakes, 1985).

**Homogeneous Ability Grouping**

Many school children's reading experiences occur almost exclusively within the context of homogeneous ability groups (Slavin, 1987). Studies have found that little movement occurs between groups once group membership has been determined. Placements made in elementary grades, where aptitude boundaries appear more flexible, become stronger determinants of potential placement in later schooling (Eder, 1986). This long-term ability grouping is a major concern (Hiebert & Fisher, 1990).

A comprehensive study on ability grouping was done by Slavin (1989) who combined old and new research to study the effects. Slavin's research offers some direction for educators. Although the primary purpose for homogeneous grouping is to improve student learning Slavin concluded that ability grouping does not significantly enhance student achievement (Slavin, 1987).

In 1991, Allan stated: "One question not asked in the Slavin research was whether programs designed to provide differentiated education for the gifted or special education students were effective" (p.61). Allan reported those programs
were omitted from Slavin's synthesis. Therefore, decisions about gifted and special education programs using Slavin's research are not appropriate.

Achievements effects.

Students are ability grouped for reading instruction in order to provide an increase in direct teacher instruction based on the needs of the learners (Pink & Leibert, 1986). If those needs are being effectively met, opportunities should exist for students to make better use of their abilities (Sorensen & Hallinan, 1986). Critics suggest that grouping students on one characteristic gives no assurance of similarity on other characteristics and teachers may be tempted to ignore the remaining differences (Otto et al., 1984).

Kulik and Kulik (1982) did a meta-analysis to re-analyze 52 studies of homogeneous grouping arrangements. The results indicated that grouping has only a small effect on student achievement, the higher ability group benefitted more in terms of achievement gains. A growing body of research reveals that different levels of ability groups develop varying learning environments. These environments may contribute to differences in reading achievement (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986). As argued by Hiebert (1983) processes within an instructional context can influence the learning achieved. Even subtle changes in processes can produce profound effects on student achievement (Hiebert, 1983). As summarized by Grant and Rothenberg in a 1986 study, research describes how time factors, use of oral versus silent reading, pacing, interaction patterns, and discipline practices, contributed to differences in learning when students are grouped by ability. These processes, which are usually unrelated to the ability of students, provide increasing advantages to high-ability reading groups (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986). Because of
the achievement criterion for group membership, the experience of being in a high or low-ability group could be very different. These different instructional-social contexts could influence the learning outcomes of the students (Hiebert, 1983).

**Social effects.**

Intentionally, or not, reading groups based on ability create and perpetuate status distinction among students (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986). Ability grouping can have negative affective and social consequences. Children typically know the relative standing of their group in the class and may form opinions about themselves and others on group placement. Because of that, self-esteem and expectations can be lowered for children in low instructional groups (Fielding, 1992).

Marked differences in peer relationships and social status appear across reading groups. The tendency is for teachers and fellow classmates to label low reading group members. Furthermore, these low-ability readers are usually held in lower self-esteem by their peers (Hallinan, 1984).

Research dealing with the effects of ability grouping on self-concept reveal mixed results. However, the majority of studies have found students of average and low ability give lower self-evaluation when they are ability grouped than when they are not (Rosenbaum, 1980).

The climate of high ability reading groups is more conducive to developing a positive self-concept. A study by Grant and Rothenberg in 1986, showed high ability reading group students engaged in agenda setting, have more opportunities to demonstrate competence, and practice self-directed learning strategies. Because of this, high-ability reading students are more likely to feel comfortable with
themselves and their abilities (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986).

In recent years, many districts have begun to reexamine homogeneous grouping because of concern that students of low socioeconomic status, particularly minority students, are disproportionately placed in low tracks (Slavin, 1987). Rosenbaum (1980) concluded that communities that are considering a particular form of grouping must be concerned with social-separation, and the ramifications of such grouping practices (Rosenbaum, 1980).

**Reading instruction: Alternatives**

Instruction must be designed to meet a diverse student population without creating barriers exhibited through the use of ability-grouped instruction. Evidence from research continues to mount indicating that instructional environments effective with high-ability readers are also most effective for improving the skills of low-ability readers (Allington, 1983; Berghoff & Egawa, 1991). The important factor is not whether to group full-time, flexibly, within-class, or between grades, but to design instructional modifications that address the needs of all students at all reading levels (Collins, 1986; Valdez, 1989). It is necessary for teachers to develop sophisticated and varied approaches to organizing instruction (Unsworth, 1984).

Effective teaching and reading research suggests the following practices for the instruction of reading:

1. Whole-group instruction should be utilized for initial instruction or practice of a reading concept.
2. Assignment of children to groups should be assessed periodically and changed regularly.
3. Grouping according to interest in a topic rather than always by skill level is recommended.

4. Incorporation of peer tutoring as an alternative to the exclusive use of teacher-led instruction.

5. Providing rich lessons for all groups is essential, regardless of reading level (Anderson et al., 1985).

Alternates to ability-based grouping should allow success for all readers and build a pleasurable experience for reading itself. Alternatives should not stress how well a student is doing compared to other students (Winograd & Paris, 1989).

**Whole-Group instruction/flexible small groups.**

The following plan is a summarization of "Flexible Grouping" presented by Educational Consultant, Sheryl Proctor. This plan uses whole-group instruction for reading as a strategy by using heterogeneous groups of students to provide on-level reading instruction. Grouping is used only as needed and is flexible. There is a balanced mix of whole-group and small group instruction. This strategy keeps all students actively involved in the learning process, therefore maximizing the amount of instruction for all students. Self-esteem of low readers increases as students interact and learn from each other. Student needs can be met without labeling. This method requires interactive teaching, or the teacher will not have the necessary information to form small groups based on immediate student needs.

The accelerated reader needs lateral enrichment of the literature. Possible long-term projects appropriate for the accelerated reader could include: read the full-length novel if an excerpt has been presented to the whole group; research background on the author or other works by that author; read similar stories/themes...
in trade books; work in small groups to study a related theme and report to the class; tape-record a story from the text for other students to use; apply skills introduced to the whole group at higher levels of thinking.

The needs of the less-able reader can be met through a variety of means. Pre-reading the story prior to the whole-group reading can be done to gain enjoyment of the literature and to gain a sense of the whole story. An assistant or teacher's aid could be used for the pre-reading activity. Choral reading, take-turn paragraphs, and echo reading could also be used.

Cassette tapes of the stories should be available for reading along to develop fluency. Daily supplemental reading should be required to provide all students with as much reading experience as possible. Many books at different independent reading levels are an important component in this approach.

Encourage partner work as guided practice and a confidence builder for the less-able reader. The teacher should select and assign pairs in order to maximize opportunities. A heterogeneous mix is best with pairs changed frequently.

When using small flexible grouping, avoid grouping only on skill reinforcement; interest groups or activity groups should also be used. Grouping students for enrichment and remediation in an accepting environment that treats all students as valuable members is an important part of this instruction strategy.

Flexible within-class grouping.

In 1984, Unsworth presented an alternative method for classroom organization of reading instruction. The composition of groups in this flexible-grouping is based on the following principles:

1. No groups are permanent.
2. Groups are created, changed, and modified according to needs and purposes.

3. At times the whole class works together.

4. Groups vary in size depending upon purpose.

Group management is determined by the nature of the task. Clear strategies must be used to supervise task performance. Students must be able to evaluate and recognize their progress and the teacher's assessment of that progress.

Unsworth's flexible grouping plan is meant to ensure that all students participate effectively regardless of the difference among them as learners, keeping in mind that students vary in their independence and dependence as learners, according to the task. Therefore, Unsworth classified learners for various tasks into four groups: independent learner, average learner, just-below-average-learner, and highly dependent learner (Unsworth, 1984).

Cooperative/collaborative learning models.

In the book, "Cooperation in the Classroom" (1991), Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec reported that research indicates achievement areas as well as attitudes toward learning can be improved when students are placed in an organizational plan in which students must help one another toward reaching a common goal. When poor readers find success in cooperative learning positive attitudes about reading are the result (Madden, 1988).

There are several different cooperative learning models that can be utilized as alternatives to ability grouping for reading instruction. Learning methods in cooperative learning models vary according to the task to be completed. Jigsaw and Group Investigation can be used to assign students specific tasks within a larger
group. At other times students work together to reach a common goal, such as completing a group worksheet. Another category uses methods in which students study together and are rewarded on the basis of the achievement of the group members (Slavin, 1987).

Student Team Learning is one strategy developed at John Hopkins University. These techniques required that students learn something as a team member rather than do something. Central to Student Team Learning are team rewards, individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success (Slavin, 1991).

All the Student Team Learning techniques contain a common cycle of activities. The cycle begins with teacher instruction, followed by team practice, individual assessment, and team recognition (Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish, 1987).

There are four variations to Student Team Learning. One is Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) which is appropriate for teaching well defined objectives with single right answers. Reading skills involving phonetic analysis, study skills, or language usage and mechanics, would be examples (Slavin, 1991).

Teams-Games-Tournament (TGT) is another type of Student Team Learning that uses weekly tournaments to achieve objectives. The same types of objectives appropriate for STAD are also appropriate for Teams-Games-Tournament (Slavin, 1991).

Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) is a comprehensive cooperative learning program for teaching reading and writing to intermediate-grade students. CIRC integrates the use of homogeneous reading groups with teacher-led instruction in reading and comprehension, and heterogeneous cooperative learning groups for reading practice, reading-related composition, and other activities. The
major focus of CIRC is to make effective use of the follow-up time for students who are working independently while the teacher is occupied with another reading group. Teams receive points based on tests, compositions, and book reviews (Stevens et al., 1987).

Jigsaw learning was developed by Eliot Anderson and colleagues in 1978. Students are assigned to six-member teams to work on academic material that has been broken down into sections. Each team member reads a different section. Members of different teams who read the same sections meet to discuss their section in order to become "experts". Students return to their teams and take turns teaching their team members about their sections (Johnson et al., 1991).

Learning Together models of cooperative learning were developed by David Johnson and Roger Johnson at the University of Minnesota. Students work together on assigned sheets in heterogeneous groups. The groups hand in a single completed sheet, and each student receives the group score obtained on the sheet (Johnson et al., 1991).

Shlomo Sharan and Yael Sharan at the University of Tel Aviv developed the Group Investigation model of cooperative learning. Students decide what they want to learn about a broad topic suggested by the teacher, and then divide into small groups. Each group pursues their subtopic in depth. The group members divide further to specialize both between and within learning teams. Group reports or projects are prepared and presented to the entire class. This enables students to gain more in-depth knowledge about a topic than they could on their own (Slavin, 1991).

Madden (1988) suggests reading experiences incorporating collaborative
learning techniques. Assign students to pairs and give each pair a current reading vocabulary word from the basal text. The pairs must locate the word in the dictionary and then dramatize the meaning and its opposite. The students in other dyads are then directed to guess the word and its nature (Madden, 1988).

Stevens et al. (1987) have offered another collaborative reading technique. Assign groups of two or three students. Introduce the story and ask groups to read the story until they encounter a problem which the character must resolve. Instruct the groups to discuss the story structure (character descriptions, setting, and plot) and identify the problem. Groups should predict how the problem will be resolved, and continue reading to see if it is resolved as the group predicted. If the story ends differently than predicted, instruct them as a group to write their ending (Stevens et al., 1987).

The reading experiences described above may be done as homogeneous or heterogeneous collaborative groups, depending on the organizational structure of the classroom for reading instruction. Johnson et al. (1991) stated that there are times when cooperative groups, homogeneous in ability are appropriate to master specific skills or achieve certain instructional objectives. The use of cooperative reading groups is another pedagogical strategy in helping readers find success in school. It is not offered to substitute for existing strategies but to supplement those already being used (Madden, 1988).

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to review current research on ability grouping for reading instruction and present alternatives to such grouping practices. The underlying reason for this review is the assumption that grouping schemes in the
classroom directly affect student outcomes.

Historically, ability grouping research was being conducted as early as the 1920s. These research findings questioned the appropriateness of ability grouping as a means of improving achievement and the methods for making grouping decisions.

The principal rationale for ability grouping is to deal with one central fact of education—students differ in knowledge, skills, developmental stages, and learning rates. The use of grouping is predicated on an assumption that student needs can be better served by being grouped with students who are similar in performance.

A number of factors are impacted by ability grouping in reading instruction. Research studies have shown that the use of ability grouping for reading instruction affects growth and achievement, instructional strategies, teacher behaviors, and student self-concept. Furthermore, current research has established a probable connection between the maintenance and/or reproduction of social status and the use of ability grouping for reading instruction.

Although it is necessary to accommodate for individual differences of reading ability when teaching children to read, research has indicated a variety of alternatives other than ability grouping offer effective approaches to reading instruction. The most appropriate grouping pattern for instruction can be determined by analyzing student strengths and needs and matching this information with the choices available to the teacher and student (Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992).

Because the use of alternative grouping patterns in reading instruction is relatively new, more research will need to be conducted to clarify their relative
strengths and weaknesses. It is evident that alternative grouping holds promise for the future in classrooms that will more effectively serve widely diverse student needs.
References


Yale University.


