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Grouping in reading instruction to extend the whole language concept

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Grouping in reading instruction to extend the whole language concept

Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to examine ability grouping and then to offer flexible grouping as one means of extending the whole language concept into the reading instructional program of the elementary school.

Grouping in Reading Instruction
to Extend the Whole Language Concept

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
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Grouping students by ability has been practiced in American schools since the late 1800s. Since a goal of the nation's educational system is to provide an equal opportunity for all students to develop their potential, the practice of grouping students by ability for instruction is controversial. Major issues related to this type of grouping are who is placed in a particular ability group and what methods are used for selection. Other related grouping concerns are teacher expectations, student motivation, and personal self-esteem.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of the paper is to examine ability grouping and then to offer flexible grouping as one means of extending the whole language concept into the reading instructional program of the elementary school.

Ability Grouping

In this section, ability grouping will be defined, a historical perspective of ability grouping will be given, selection criteria for grouping will be presented, and the effects of grouping on students will be discussed.

Definition of Ability Grouping

Ability, or homogeneous grouping, organizes students for instruction on the basis of relative similar capabilities (Haller, 1985). Several types of ability grouping have been identified. Homogeneous grouping of children in classrooms can occur when

there is more than one section of a grade. In this organizational pattern, children are grouped into classrooms by a more narrow range of ability. Homogeneous grouping by ability can also be found in heterogeneous classrooms: Intergrade grouping (among classrooms) can be used for specific instruction (e.g., reading). Intragrade grouping can occur within a classroom for instruction (Slaven, 1988).

Historical Perspective of Ability Grouping

Ability grouping can be traced back to the St. Louis Plan, developed in the 1860s. The purpose of this plan was to advance gifted students at a more rapid rate in the elementary grades (Riccio, 1985). At the turn of the century, ability grouping was on the rise in an attempt to cope with the increasing numbers of students from diverse cultures and backgrounds (Weaver, 1990).

The Santa Barbara Concentric Plan, also developed at the turn of the century, was instrumental in renewing the trend of homogeneous grouping in classrooms by ability. Students were placed in sections, labeled A, B, and C, with different expectations for each group. Grouping in this plan took into account the skills being taught and the students' rate of learning. Many schools across the country followed this plan (Kulik & Kulik, 1982).

In the 1950s, ability grouping reappeared as a way to respond to the scientific-technological race with Russia. It was

thought that tracking high-achieving students would produce more citizens with high levels of scientific expertise (Kulik & Kulik, 1987).

In the 1960s and 1970s, ability grouping was surveyed critically: One concern was for the possible negative effects on the achievement of average, slow, and disadvantaged students (Kulik & Kulik, 1987). Another concern was for the effect on students' motivation and self-concept when they were placed in average or low ability groups (Ricchio, 1985). Apparently, this scrutiny had little effect on the view of school organization, for in 1985 approximately 77% of all American schools had some type of ability grouping (Dawson, 1987).

Assignment of Students to Ability Groups

Many reasons have been given for assigning students to ability groups. Students can be placed in groups, not just for ability, but also for disciplinary purposes, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and teaching efficiency (Pigford, 1990). The specific ability of reading seems to be the most significant achievement factor for ability grouping. These aspects of reading are frequently considered--comprehension, vocabulary, specific skills, oral reading, reading enjoyment, and present reading grade level placement (Haller, 1985).

Norm-referenced achievement test results are frequently used as a criterion to group students by ability. The results of

these standardized tests attempt to measure the students' strengths and weaknesses in specific areas of the curriculum (e.g., reading, language skills, and mathematics). These tests place minority students at a disadvantage because this type of instrument usually does not assess students' prior knowledge and culture, and the errors made because of cultural schemata are not taken into account. Achievement tests like intelligence tests tend to be kinder to advantaged students due to the lower scores of students from minority cultures and low socioeconomic backgrounds. The most frequently used means for assigning a student to an ability group for reading instruction are standardized tests results and the recommendations of teachers, though other considerations can come into the selection process (Riccio, 1985).

The use of intelligence test scores for grouping is often debated for several reasons: They tend to render invalid results when testing students who are above or below the mean. Children from low socioeconomic levels, deprived homes, and neglected cultures score lower than those from more affluent and mainstream upbringings because standardized intelligence tests tend to measure present rather than potential ability. Also, the environment in which the students are tested can influence the outcome of the score (Riccio, 1985).

Even though teacher recommendations frequently are an important factor in assigning students to ability groups, their judgments can be highly subjective. In many cases, they make the selections after the students have only been in the classroom a few days (Riccio, 1985). A study carried out by Haller (1985) found that teachers use varied criteria for placing students in ability groups. Behavior and personality were the major factors considered when grouping students as well as maturity, motivation, respectfulness, and leadership qualities. A child's work habits, on-task behavior, independence, neatness, contribution to discussions, and responsibility toward work also affected the placement in an ability group.

General academic competence is another factor that influences grouping for reading instruction. Doing well in other subjects such as mathematics, repeating a grade, or being labeled a slow learner are taken into account (Haller, 1985).

Children's home background can influence placement in reading ability groups. Parents' concern for their children's schooling, older siblings' success in school, stability of the home, parents' educational status as well as race and socioeconomic level can also be factors entering into the selection process (Haller, 1985).

Because lower ability groups often have a high representation of minority students, a study was made by Haller

and Waterman (1985) to investigate the effect of racial bias upon students' placement in slower-paced reading groups. The samples for the study were from regions in the Northeast, Appalachia, and the Deep South. Teacher comments were noted as they were questioned about the placement of students, using the criteria of reading ability, work habits, behavior, creativity, and home background. The results of the study failed to show that teachers used conscious bias when placing students. It concluded that teachers often did not understand the relationship of culture and emerging literacy. The study did indicate that teachers need a better understanding of minority cultures and of instructional programs that nurture these students' abilities (Haller & Waterman, 1985).

Effects of Ability Grouping

Achievement and educational opportunity. That ability grouping can impose on children's school experiences through its effect on achievement is controversial. Slavin's review of studies on ability grouping (1987a) found many arguments against using ability grouping for average and low achieving students. Homogeneous tracking of these students by ability in classes does not enhance their achievement and can have a negative social and psychological impact (Pigford, 1990). Interaction among peers with a wide range of abilities is beneficial to their educational development; hence, placing students in tracked, homogeneous

classrooms hinders this interaction. A larger percentage of low socioeconomic and minority students are placed in the slower-paced groups that tend to establish stratification. Growth though does take place when gifted students are placed in a homogeneous classroom with an enriched curriculum (Slaven, 1987a).

Growth is made by some students in heterogeneous classes in which children are grouped within the class for reading. Fast-paced students, again, made more academic growth if given an enriched instruction; however, average and slow did not make significant academic growth (Kulik & Kulik, 1987). The practice of placing students in instructional groups by ability creates groups of lower achievers and therefore encourages low expectations in students. These low expectations are especially fostered when homogeneous grouping is inflexible. When there is little or no movement between groups, there is less opportunity to overcome labeling (Slaven, 1987a). Also, the gap between groups may widen so much that movement cannot take place (Corno & Snow, 1986). As a result, a profound effect on students' motivation and aspirations for further education can occur (Winn & Wilson, 1983).

Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) recommend that if grouping does take place in classrooms for reading instruction, the grouping plan should be flexible so changes can be made by

teachers after the initial placement is made. The pace should be varied to meet the learning rates of the students. Flexible grouping can be created to teach specific skills.

Slaven (1987b) does not recommend ability grouping of students into homogeneous classrooms but encourages interclass grouping such as the Joplin Plan. Such plans instruct students across grade levels, thus, eliminating labeling of students, increasing achievement, and adding more flexibility when teaching specific skills.

The belief that high ability groups are treated differently than low ability groups abounds especially in the area of quality instruction. Gamoran (1987) concluded that lower ability students are presented the curriculum at a slower pace than higher ability groups. The instruction tends to be less interesting and challenging. Goodman (1986) related that this type of instruction was not only uninteresting, but irrelevant and difficult because it did not take into consideration how children think and feel.

Dawson (1987) also found that teachers treated low achievers differently. They called on these students less often, gave them less wait time to answer and less positive feedback, and had lower expectations for their achievement. Negative expectations can be communicated by withholding opportunities to engage in decision-making, teaching fragmented lessons, pointing

out errors, and providing meaningless tasks. By communicating that learning is difficult, children perceive it as a reason not to try (Cambourne, 1988).

Smith (1988) has stated that children learn to read by reading. However, students that are placed in average to low reading groups tend to do more fragmented phonics and vocabulary drill exercises and less reading during the school day. Wuthrick (1990) and Harp (1989a) found that during reading instruction, the low ability groups were often asked to do more oral reading. During the instructional day, they read about three times less than the high ability groups. The low ability groups were asked more literal questions, not just to develop comprehension ability, but to check if they were attending to the task. Riccio (1985) and Rogers (1988) concluded from their studies that students in low achieving groups are taught the basic skills from less interesting and challenging material that actually discourages these students from achieving.

Personal and social development. Placing students in low ability groups year after year has negative effects on their self-esteem. In contrast, gifted students in high ability groups receive an ego boosting effect (Winn & Wilson, 1983).

Lower achieving groups of children develop their own value system that affects their behavior, attitude, and motivation in school (Winn & Wilson, 1983). Their approach to learning in the

school setting is influenced by several factors: Students may have poor role models with whom to relate (Weaver, 1990).

Because peers have a great influence on student behavior, the lack of good role models within the ability group can affect the motivation and attitude of the students (Rowan & Miracle, 1983).

Teachers tend to spend more time with the high achieving students and relate to them on a more personal basis. Students that attempted to chat in low-ranking groups were often cut off so the planned agenda could be finished (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986).

Finally, teachers unconsciously use negative gestures such as frowns, shaking of the head, pointing of fingers, and rigid postures more frequently with low achievers. The teacher's body language can send a message to students that they are not as well liked or accepted in the classroom (Wuthrick, 1990). Cambourne (1988) states that children will not learn unless they are convinced that teachers like them. When children know they are valued, engagement and learning takes place. Students placed in low ability groups feel stigmatized. When teachers have high expectations for all students and when less able readers realize that their ideas are accepted in the class, their self-esteem is boosted and positive growth takes place (Goodman, 1986).

Alternatives to Ability Grouping

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 diverse reading instructional needs of children in a classroom. Flexible grouping patterns will extend the whole language concept. This instructional concept focuses on a learning environment in which children can successfully create meaning while engaged in the language processes, therefore extending their thinking-language abilities. Such a classroom environment supports students' decision-making and ownership of their involvement in the language processes and encourages collaboration between students and the teacher so engagement takes place and a feeling of acceptance and self-worth is perpetuated (Cambourne, 1988). Grouping patterns that can be considered are students working in cooperative pairs or small groups, individually, and in whole class instruction. The type of grouping patterns will vary according to the needs of the children and will be determined by the teacher after analyzing the strengths and needs of the class (Flood, Lapp, Flood, Nagel, 1992). Several criteria need to be considered in implementing a flexible classroom grouping plan, such as reading abilities, similar interests, work habits, difficulty of tasks, prior knowledge of content, and strategies for solving problems. Students' social abilities and their

choice of literature experiences and related expressive activities can also be criteria for placing students in groups. Many types of grouping can nurture children's emerging literacy.

Teacher-Led Groups

Whole group. The whole group approach, or heterogeneous grouping, involves the teacher leading the entire class in a similar task. Pardo and Raphael (1991) relate that the purposes of whole class discussion can include introducing new strategies and concepts, sharing personal experiences or background knowledge, reviewing previous material, introducing or attempting difficult tasks, and presenting enrichment activities. Berghoff and Egawa (1991) use the whole group approach to capitalize on the social nature of learning by bringing together the diverse knowledge and cultures of the class members. Children with different abilities can share ideas that nurture literacy. Through sharing their varied background of knowledge, they can be exposed to diverse opinions and cultural experiences. The whole group approach can also include activities involving the teacher reading aloud, choral readings, group story reading, sharing of students' stories, and group literature expressive activities.

Heterogeneous small group. This type of grouping accommodates children with the diverse interests, learning rates, and learning styles in the classroom. The size of a heterogeneous group ranges from 3 to 10. The membership of the

group can change readily according to the need and purpose of the task (Harp, 1989b).

Homogeneous small group. This type of grouping is formed to accommodate students who need to gain more independence in a specific reading task. Such a group is small in number and includes students who need more practice on a reading task that was introduced during a heterogeneous whole group or small group activity. Another possible need for a homogeneous small group is additional sessions for children who are progressing slowly in developing reading ability (Allington, 1983).

Student-Led Groups

Small peer group. This grouping involves assigning children to groups of four to six students, using the criteria of interest, social relationships, or needed language support. The students are put in control of their own learning. By collaborating with other peers to reach goals for learning, each child's literacy is extended (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991). The personal reactions during literature study discussions can be recorded by one of the peers in a reading log (Keegan & Shrake, 1991).

Small peer groups may be involved with activities in learning centers, both sustaining and those specific to a theme or topic. Sustaining centers remain constant throughout the year with their content changing as themes and units are introduced.

These centers can include a listening/reading center, a poetry center, an author/illustrator center, an interesting objects center, a museum center, and a reference center (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Reading buddies program. This program brings older and younger children together for reading activities. Older students can support younger students' emerging literacy. Also, this approach can foster social and emotional growth both in the older and younger students (Morrice & Simmons, 1991).

Reading pairs. This grouping approach is much like the reading buddies program but involves peers within the classroom. The pairing of readers encourages the exchange of knowledge and develops language abilities. The peers usually choose their partners based on a common interest or valuable attribute (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991). Topping (1989) relates that reading pairs is a way for the less able reader to select and read books of a more difficult nature. The more able reader then supports his less able partner by reading the work aloud or supporting the peer as he/she reads the selection.

Peer tutoring. This approach involves a more able child working with a less able student. An ideal relationship between the tutor and the tutee is a range of approximately two years of reading ability. Studies have shown that both the tutee and tutor grow academically from this experience, as well as in

self-concept, social relationships, self-motivation, and attitudes (Topping, 1989).

Conclusion

As educators implement the whole language concept into the instructional program, one aspect that needs attention is the learning environment. It should offer flexible grouping characterized by many ways to study in a classroom, such as with oneself, with others of similar needs and interests, or with others of dissimilar abilities. Such flexibility in grouping facilitates a child-centered school that nurtures children's potential. With so many of today's children coming from dysfunctional families, it is very important that the school establishes a warm, safe environment for them. The students' "school family" should be affirming and make each child feel special and worthwhile.

Because ability grouping has been practiced for so many years, organizational changes to accommodate flexibility need to be explained to colleagues, administrators, and parents of students. As the writer has moved to more flexibility grouping arrangements in her classroom, her students have been energized by the opportunities to be successful. It has relieved the teacher of telling parents during conferences that their child is working in a low ability reading group. The parents have welcomed the idea that their children are being encouraged to use

their potential in a community of learners and that their responses are being accepted and encouraged. Parents, who have had a less than positive experience in school themselves, now can expect their children to have a different educational experience.

The stigma of ability grouping lasts far beyond the school experience. Recently a college-educated adult with a responsible position in business shared negative memories of ability grouping from her childhood. She related that she never felt "smart" because she was not one of the few that go to do reading and math on the chalkboard designated for the high achieving children. She still wished she could have been one of the children who were given the opportunity to write on the "good kids" chalkboard.

Educators today must look at the research on ability grouping, develop alternatives, and create a classroom environment that is nurturing to all children. By fostering a community of learners, all children can have an equal opportunity to learn to their full potential.

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