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Grouping for Instruction in Literacy: What We've Learned About What Works and What Doesn't

Today's classrooms are diverse in many ways. As has always been the case, children enter classrooms with very different literacy experiences and abilities, some reading far above the grade-level criterion and others far below it. In addition, in increasing numbers, children in today's classrooms represent many languages and cultures. The National Center for Education Statistics (1999) reported that 36% of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools were considered part of a minority group in 1996, up from 24% in 1976. Further, data suggest that the issue of cultural and linguistic diversity is not of importance only to inner-city schools – 10% of students who lived in a metropolitan area outside of a central city and who attended public schools were black, up from 6 percent in 1970. Nor is this an issue of importance only to public school teachers – the percentage of black and Hispanic students enrolled in private schools also increased between 1972 to 1996, from 5 percent for both black and Hispanic students in 1982 to 9 percent for black and 8 percent for Hispanic students in 1996. Finally, in addition to changes in the diversity of languages and cultures in our classrooms, as reform efforts in special education expand and take hold, teachers find more and more children with moderate and severe special learning needs residing in regular education settings (Wang & Reynolds, 1995).

Addressing Student Diversity

At the same time that teachers find children's individual needs to be growing more diverse, they have been confronted with evidence that ability grouping, the most widely used practice for meeting students' individual needs, may have unexpected, negative consequences for the very children it is intended to help. A summary of the evidence from studies related to ability grouping across many types of schools and classrooms and across a range of grade levels leads to several important findings:

- When children are grouped according to their reading ability, low-performing students have been found consistently to maintain low levels of performance (Gamoran, 1995; Good & Marshall, 1984; Hiebert, 1994; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1987).
- Ability grouping does not affect the achievement of different levels of learners differentially. That is, despite the widely held belief that high-ability learners are more successful when they work with students like themselves, the evidence does not support the contention (Slavin, 1990). The exception to this is when high-achieving learners are provided accelerated content that essentially allows them to be instructed in the curriculum of a higher grade level and complete elementary or secondary schooling in fewer years than the average learner (Kulik & Kulik, 1984).
- Students placed in low-achieving groups often experience low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward reading and learning (Barr & Dreeben, 1988; Dweck, 1986; Eder, 1983; Swanson, 1985).
- Students who are poor and members of racial and ethnic minority groups are substantially over-represented in low-achieving groups. (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Oakes, 1985).

- The curriculum offered to students in different levels of ability groups is qualitatively different, providing high-achieving students access to more cognitively-challenging, interesting, and motivating material than that given to their lower-achieving peers (Allington 1984; Hiebert, 1983).

- Students in different levels of ability groups are provided qualitatively different teaching practices, with students in high ability groups more consistently exposed to teaching behaviors that are associated with effective instruction (Allington, 1984; Hiebert, 1983).

These negative findings led many teachers to question the practice of ability grouping and, in many cased, to abandon it. In its place, many teachers now rely on whole class instruction for teaching of reading. In these classrooms, teachers often use one text for the whole class and rely on read-alouds and assisted readings to provide struggling readers access to the concepts and ideas presented in grade-level text. Unfortunately, this practice also has the potential for serious negative consequences. Although struggling readers often develop strong oral language, comprehension, and composition strategies as a result of their exposure to high level text, they sometimes fail to receive direct and explicit instruction in word identification and reading fluency, the very strategies that will allow them to continue to acquire and develop knowledge on their own.

Although studies of whole class instruction are far fewer in number than those related to ability grouping, the available investigations indicate that it has negative findings for children who are developing as readers and writers. A meta-analysis conducted by Lou, Abrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers, and d'Apollonia (1996) found conclusive results favoring ability grouping at all, with positive findings related to achievement, attitude, and self-concept.

Alternatives to Traditional Grouping Practices

In many cases, the teachers are understandably confused and even frustrated by the seeming paradox with which they are confronted. How are we to reconcile these apparently conflicting findings? How do we avoid negative consequences of ability grouping and still meet children's individual needs?

As is often the case, the pendulum seems to have swung too far. There is something in the middle of static, ability grouping and whole class instruction that will enable children to have access to grade-appropriate concepts and ideas *and* to develop the strategies necessary to become self-sufficient and self-directing readers. The practice has been widely referred to as flexible grouping (Radencich & Mckay, 1994) and generally represents thoughtful and strategic use of a range of grouping options throughout the literacy instructional period. The full range of grouping options includes whole class instruction, generally used to introduce ideas, concepts, skills, or strategies that are new to all or almost all of the children in a classroom; teacher-led, homogeneous groups for instruction, review, or additional practice of information needed by particular students; student-led heterogeneous groups for practice and application of previously taught information; individual response, also for practice and application of previously taught information.

Effective implementation of flexible groups within a classroom is based on some basic understandings about literacy and about the teacher's role in creating conditions for children's success in literacy learning. These understandings include:

1. Becoming a successful reader and writer requires the development of multiple and different "literacies" (Cazden et al., 1996). Among these are the ability to read words quickly and fluently; the acquisition of language and concepts necessary to understand text that is read; and knowledge of comprehension strategies necessary to fully respond to text that is read.
2. Different instructional experiences and a variety of types of text support the development of multiple literacies. For example, frequent practice with easy, "readable" text supports the development of word acquisition and fluency (Juel, 1988; 1990). On the other hand, exposure to text that is rich in language and event structures support the development of vocabulary, concepts, and grammatical structures that will support children's comprehension and response (e.g., Cazden, 1992; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994).

3. Children's literacy performance is influenced by many factors. Some of these are connected to the text. For example, ease or difficulty of reading may be influenced by children's knowledge of particular words, background knowledge or interest in the topic, or previous experience with the text as a result of viewing, listening or reading. Literacy performance may also be influenced by children's awareness and understanding of the literacy task and by the amount of explicitness or structure the teacher provides. For example, to display comprehension of the selection, some children require only a verbal organizer ("Tell me what you think is important.") Other children improve their performance when they are given a visual organizer (e.g., a story map or an idea map). Yet others require a mental model or a think aloud with a teacher or a more able peer in order to display their understanding.
4. Effective teachers identify each child's "conditions for success" and create flexible groups to meet those conditions. For example, some children may need extra help reading and practicing words. They should receive daily instruction and practice in reading new words and in reading text that is easy and familiar. Other children may have difficulty comprehending longer text. They are likely to benefit from extra help developing a graphic organizer and in guided practice using it during and after reading. In classrooms where teachers successfully meet individual needs, one important question guides their instructional planning: What kind of help will each student need to successfully read and learn from the book or selection?

Although investigations related to flexible and multi-grouping practice are yet limited in number, a few researchers have systematically examined the practice of combining different grouping options to create a comprehensive instructional framework in which children can acquire and practice the multiple literacies that are necessary for successful reading and writing. Some have tried different forms of multi-ability grouping, teaching students within large or small heterogeneous groups that changed from day to day and lesson to lesson. Others have attempted to combine the different grouping options, using large groups for part of the time and smaller heterogeneous groups for part of the time and smaller homogeneous groups for a part of the time.

A review of the evidence suggests two important findings. First, when looking at studies that measured reading achievement in traditional ways, that is, through the administration of either achievement tests or informal reading inventories, the results across studies are largely consistent: when students are grouped for reading within grouping structures that abandon the traditional, static, ability grouping framework, students at all levels of ability achieve at higher levels on measures of reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and reading fluency (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1991, Hall & Cunningham, 1996; Jenkins, Jewell, Leicester, & Troutner, 1994; Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish, 1987; Stevens & Slavin, 1995). Second, when non- traditional measures of reading achievement are considered, such as the ways children demonstrate understanding through group discussions and the ways they assume leadership during the discussions, evidence again supports the effectiveness of heterogeneous groupings in the teaching of reading (Eeds & Wells, 1991; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Knoeller, 1994; Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1996; Short, 1990; Short & Pierce, 1998).

Of critical importance in understanding and making use of these findings, however, is the comprehensive, varied, and flexible nature of the instructional framework within each of the examined studies. In addition to varying the grouping practices used in the classroom, each of the cited studies provided students intensive instruction in word study, many opportunities to read and reread text individually and with others, many opportunities to write both in response to text and in contexts unrelated to their reading texts, and many opportunities to engage in oral discussions with their peers.

Further, the nature of the various instructional opportunities is important. In none of the cited studies, for example, were children who were struggling readers expected to contend with difficult text on their own. Instead, each of the studies utilized a variety of strategies to help children negotiate difficult text. Included were teacher read-alouds, opportunities for individual and paired rereadings, intensive instruction and practice in word study, and practice reading easy text. In addition, in some of the classrooms, students who were struggling were provided pull-out instruction in direct support of the classroom activities and in some cases they were provided in-class

support directly related to regular education tasks. In some studies, children who were advanced readers were provided daily opportunities to read text at more challenging levels and, in some cases, opportunities to serve as peer or cross-age tutors. In short, in no case did the instructional model represent a "one-size-fits-all" framework.

From Research to Practice: A Typical Day in a Flexibly-Grouped Classroom

How can teachers make sense of this information in the context of their own classrooms? What might a typical day in a flexibly-grouped classroom look like? The section that follows represents my attempt to combine what we've learned about effective literacy instruction with what we've learned about sound grouping practices. The flexible grouping model is framed by three daily literacy events: Community Reading, Just Right Reading, and On Your Own Reading. (Figure 1). Each is described in a separate section.

Community Reading

Community Reading is the time each day when children read or listen and respond to text that will support the development of language and concepts appropriate at their grade level. Community Reading is intended to achieve two major purposes. The first is to provide every child access to grade-appropriate curriculum, and by so doing, to provide opportunities for every child to acquire grade-appropriate vocabulary, concepts, and language structures. The second purpose is to create contexts that support the development of the classroom as a learning community, when a focus on the same text or topic by children of different ability levels enables all children to interact and provides an opportunity for them to learn from one another. In classrooms where teachers use a basal reading program, children may read a selection from the anthology during the Community Reading time period. In classrooms where tradebooks frame the reading program, children generally read a teacher-selected tradebook or collection of thematically related tradebooks during the Community Reading time period. Since during this particular time period all children read the same text or a collection of texts about the same topic or theme, these lessons during which children prepare for reading by making predictions, reviewing key vocabulary and concepts, and posing questions. During the period when children read the text, small groups are often formed so that the teacher may assist struggling readers through strategies such as read alouds, specific vocabulary instruction, choral or echo readings, or by assigning buddy reading. After the children have read the text, they generally reconvene as a whole class or as small, heterogeneous groups to share what they've read or learned that day. In many classrooms, this is the time when literature circles (Short & Pierce, 1998; or book clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1997) occur. Although time allocations differ in every classroom, on average, teachers allocate about 45 to 60 minutes to the Community Reading component of the literacy program. Figure 2 provides a graphic representation of the Community Reading segment of daily literacy instruction.

Just Right Reading

Just Right Reading is the time of day when small groups are formed to provide children instruction in text that is "just right" for them, that is, text that they can read with 90% accuracy, a level that is widely believed to be optimal for acquiring word knowledge (Clay, 1979; Juel, 1988, 1990). Just Right Reading groups are usually small (3-4 children) and typically last for approximately 30 minutes. For struggling readers, instructional models such as those developed by Taylor el al (1994), Hiebert (1994), and Jackson, Paratore, Chard, & Garnick (1999) are especially appropriate for use during the Just Right Reading segment of the literacy program. Each of these models is group-based, allowing the teacher to work with more than one child at a time. In addition, each model includes three important tasks in each lesson: reading a focal book, engaging in systematic and explicit word study, and rereading familiar books. For able and advanced readers, Just Right Reading incorporates opportunities for students to either return to the text used during Community Reading for explicit instruction in word level or comprehension strategies or, when appropriate, for them to read beyond the grade level text and receive instruction that will challenge them cognitively, linguistically, and motivationally. Figure 3 presents a graphic

representation of Just Right Reading.

On Your Own Reading

On Your Own Reading (Figure 4) encompasses activities more widely known as Sustained Silent Reading (McCracken & McCracken, 1978) or Drop Everything and Read (Ziegler, 1993). It is the time of day when children choose to read any book or text of interest to them, and if they wish, to share their responses with the teacher and their peers. On average, teachers allocate about 15 minutes each day to student-selected reading of this type.

In summary, Community Reading might be considered the part of literacy instruction which is driven by the grade-level curriculum–the time when the focal text is important not only for the reading lessons that accompany it, but also for the language, concepts, and content lessons embedded within it. It is participation in Community Reading that protects lower-performing readers from being trapped in low-level reading materials that have historically denied them access to language, concepts, and vocabulary necessary for success at their grade level. Just Right Reading represents that part of literacy instruction that is driven by the teacher and his or her expert knowledge of each individual's reading needs. Consistent with the Vygotskian (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development, the teacher chooses text that is within each child's reach when working with a teacher or more expert other, that is, text that the child can read with effective and appropriate instruction and scaffolding. On Your Own Reading represents the part of the literacy program that is driven by the child and responds to evidence that motivation for reading and self-directedness comes, at least partially, from having the opportunity to make choices along the way (Guthrie, Alvermann, & Au, 1998; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999).

Managing a Flexibly-Grouped Literacy Classroom

As with any successful instructional practice, effective implementation of a flexibly-grouped reading program requires a knowledgeable and well prepared classroom teacher who (a) establishes reliable and consistent daily routines, (b) provides explicit instruction in strategies children will be expected to use alone or with a partner, (c) creates centers where students can work productively when assignments are completed, and (d) closely monitors children's performance.

Consistent Daily Routines

In classrooms where flexible grouping is effective, day-to-day activities are highly structured and consistent, and children can largely predict what will happen each day. Children know, for example, that each day they will engage in reading and rereading of text, and if the tasks involve reading with a partner, they also have been told explicitly what is expected of them during this activity. While there are a number of ways to implement what has become widely known as buddy or partner reading, in many classrooms, children alternate pages and understand that while their partner is reading, they must follow along so that they can assist with unknown words. In addition, having learned from an expert first-grade teacher, I teach children to use their "three-step voice," a voice that I am unable to hear if I take three small steps away from them. This strategy has been effective in helping even very young children to lower their voices as they read aloud.

Similarly, children know that each day they will engage in written response to what they've read. They have reading journals readily accessible to them in their desks, and they know the routines for completing and submitting their work. In addition, they are fully aware of how to seek help from the teacher or a peer when they are unclear or confused about an assignment. And finally, children know what to do when they finish their work–how to check it, where to put it, and what to do next.

Explicit Instruction

In a flexibly grouped classroom, children routinely spend some period of time working alone or in peer-led groups. In classrooms where children do so successfully, they are familiar with the strategies they have been asked to implement during these times. Typically, the teacher has systematically and explicitly taught the focal strategy, and used a gradual release model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), providing demonstration, guided practice, and independent application in

previous teacher-led, lessons. So, for example, if children are expected to meet with a group to compose a story summary, the teacher might have spent time with the whole group completing a story map on a shared story and using the story map to compose a group summary. Then, the teacher might have asked children to use the strategy on their own, and carefully monitored their products to ascertain their understanding and facility with the strategy. Having done so, the teacher can safely conclude that the children can apply the strategy on their own or within a student-led, group setting.

Monitoring Children's Performance

Effective implementation of flexible grouping requires that teachers engage in daily "kidwatching" (Goodman, 1982), observing children during all phases of the literacy program to make certain they are both supported and challenged. Monitoring strategies might include frequent running records (Clay, 1979) taken while reading with children individually or "behind their back" as they are partner reading. Retellings provide information about children's comprehension of the text, their ability to organize their recall, their oral language, and their ability to elaborate and clarify. Listening to children during book talks can also provide information about children's comprehension and oral language. In addition, eavesdropping on these conversations can provide teachers valuable information about children's group participation styles: how they get the floor, how they agree or disagree with their peers, how they justify their point of view, how they clarify confusion. Finally, children's written response to reading may provide information about phonemic awareness, spelling, comprehension of text, and grammatical understanding.

Learning Center Activities

Good teachers have long created learning centers where children work independently and with peers in cross-curricular projects. In flexibly grouped classrooms some children may finish particular assignments ahead of their peers, and in these cases, learning center activities provide interpeting and productive work for them.

Resources and Materials to Support Flexible Grouping

In classrooms where teachers are successful in the implementation of flexible groups, they have three important resources. The first resource teachers have is books—a substantial collection diverse in genre, in cultural representation, in topic, and in level of difficulty. Of particular importance is the availability of a large number of books that represent easy reading for children who are struggling. In addition to the size of the collection of books, the ways books are organized and displayed are also important. In many flexibly grouped classrooms, teachers arrange books by topic and level of difficulty and display them in strategically placed baskets, bins, and bookshelves. In the case of beginning readers, children keep several familiar and easy-to-read books in their desks, so that they can readily access them for reading and rereading at the teacher's suggestion or on their own initiative.

A second resource teachers have is time to teach reading. In classrooms where flexible grouping is effective, teachers allocate substantial instructional time to the teaching of reading. Most primary grade teachers report that a two-hour block of time is required for effective implementation of each of the elements of an effective literacy program.

The third resource teachers have is time to continue to learn about the teaching of reading. While we know a good deal about how children learn to read and write, on-going research and theory enable us to advance our understanding even further. In order for teachers to offer children the finest learning opportunities, they need many opportunities to extend their own knowledge about how children learn to read and write. In classrooms where flexible grouping is effectively implemented, teachers have the opportunity to learn and study together, to problem solve, and to share new ideas.

Conclusion

It has now been over ten years since I started my work in flexible grouping, working mostly in urban schools where the very large majority of children are both culturally and linguistically diverse. I began this work because my review of the existing literature

convinced me that the practice of ability grouping was not providing our neediest children with the best opportunities to learn. My work has taught me that over time, the changes teachers have made have led to notable and important improvements in children's achievement in reading and writing–documented by increases in standardized test scores, in performance assessments, in daily classroom work, in children's attitudes toward literacy and learning, and in teachers' attitudes toward teaching (Paratore & Indrisano, 1994; Jackson et al., 1999). I continue this work because, although the evidence is positive, we are far from achieving our goal of literacy for every child. There is yet much to learn. Even as we make change, we must remain committed to keeping our eyes and minds open to a better way so that truly every child who walks through our classroom doors wanting to become a reader/writer walks out having become one.

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Figure 1

A Typical Day in a Flexibly Grouped Classroom

- Community Reading
  - Time each day when children read (or listen to) grade-appropriate text
- Just Right Reading
  - Time each day when children receive instruction in text that will support the development of particular word level and comprehension strategies
- On Your Own Reading
  - Time each day when children read anything of their own choosing

Figure 2

Community Reading

- Story Introduction (Whole Class)
  - Preview text, develop background knowledge, make predictions
- Reading the Selection (Needs-Based Groups)

	With Help (Teacher-led Group)
– No Help	
– Silent reading	- Read aloud by teacher
– Partner rereading	- Rereading with teacher or partner
– Partner response	- Group Response (oral)
– Individual response	- Individual Response (Written)

Responding to the Selection (Heterogeneous Groups)

- Book Club (Raphael & McMahon, 1997)

Figure 3

Just Right Reading

- Supporting Struggling Readers
  - Instruction in word level strategies using easy text
  - Reading and rereading of easy books
- Supporting Average and Above Average Readers
  - Instruction in word level and comprehension strategies using Community Reading Text
  - Reading beyond Community Reading Text
  - Serving as peer or cross-age tutor

Figure 4

On Your Own Reading

- Children read a book or text of their own choosing
- Children may read individually or in pairs
- Teacher may interview if child consistently or repeatesly chooses books too easy or too difficult