Alternatives to Ability Grouping in Reading

Terrell A. Young[*]

[*]University of Texas at Arlington

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Abstract

Ability grouping, which has long been a controversial subject in American education (Slavin, 1987a), is commonly used for reading instruction in American schools (Au and Mason, 1985; Hiebert, 1983). Classroom teachers often discuss the topic of ability grouping, and at times, the conversations become arguments. There are often three positions taken in these discussions.

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Ability grouping, which has long been a controversial subject in American education (Slavin, 1987a), is commonly used for reading instruction in American schools (Au and Mason, 1985; Hiebert, 1983). Classroom teachers often discuss the topic of ability grouping, and at times, the conversations become arguments. There are often three positions taken in these discussions.

Position one: "I prefer interclass grouping since it is easier to meet the needs of students when all of the students are of similar ability. Teachers can address the individual needs of their students by dividing the students into high, average, and low groups for the entire grade level. Then the teachers can do a better job since they have only one group to prepare for. Furthermore, the children don't have to spend so much time doing seatwork while the teacher works with other students."

Position two: "I can better meet the needs of my students in intraclass reading groups. It is easier to get to know the children and know what to expect from them. Besides, the students have good role models in the stronger readers, and this won't occur with interclass grouping. I can make sure that my students don't 'fall through the cracks.' Too much time is lost when children go from teacher to teacher. I like my students to see themselves as a group working together."

Position three: "Whole class instruction works best for me. Since I teach fifth grade, all of my students should be exposed to fifth grade reading material. It doesn't hurt the bright students to review and students who have difficulty in reading need the opportunity to see what they should be doing."

While teachers may hold one of the positions as the ideal, they don't always have a choice. Many teachers teach in schools where instructional patterns are firmly established. Each position has advantages and disadvantages for teachers and students.

It seems logical that ability grouping should make it possible for teachers to meet the needs of individual students more successfully. However, the research has not been conclusive in the findings related to ability grouping. For example, Slavin (1987a, 1987b, 1988) found that assigning students to a classroom by ability was ineffective, regrouping by ability for reading and math may be effective, and grouping across grade levels (as in the Joplin Plan) for reading was effective. Kulik and Kulik (1987) question Slavin's findings and conclude that ability grouping is most effective only for high ability students. Likewise, Hiebert (1987) challenges Slavin's findings and states the findings are inadequate for guiding future research, policy, or practice. Further analysis of issues relating to grouping for instruction is needed.

The purposes of this article are to discuss problems associated with ability grouping in reading, including issues relating to group placement, inequality of instruction and treatment, and classroom management; to consider the affective consequences of grouping; and to suggest alternatives to ability grouping in reading.

Group placement and movement between groups

When students are placed in a reading group, there is very little movement from group to group after the first month of school (Hiebert, 1983; Shannon, 1985). In fact, in some schools, children stay in the same groups from year to year (Eldredge and Butterfield, 1986). Teachers often group children for reading only on the basis of the basal that was last completed. Thus the phrase "once a bluebird, always a bluebird" is more accurate than one would wish (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985).

Inequality of instruction

Inequality in the quantity and quality of instruction provided to poor readers presents another problem. Students placed in low groups often receive "second-class" instruction (Slavin, 1988). They spend less time learning, are taught lower level skills, and are exposed to fewer types of instructional materials (Au and Mason, 1985; Durkin, 1989; Trimble and Sinclair, 1987).

These readers spend most of their time reading orally while their counterparts in the "high" group spend most of their time reading silently. Time spent in oral reading is negatively correlated with achievement, while time spent reading silently is the most potent predictor of school reading achievement (Allington, 1983; Hiebert, 1983). During oral reading there is often only one child actively engaged while the others are passive listeners. Because children get tired of listening, they often misbehave, and therefore the teacher must spend instructional time managing the group (Hiebert, 1983). In contrast, during silent reading all of the children take an active role. Silent reading enables good readers to read substantially more text per day than the readers assigned to groups which concentrate on oral reading (Allington, 1983).

While the good readers are reading silently, the emphasis of their instruction is on meaning; they are reading words in a meaningful context. On the other hand, students assigned to low reading groups are often reading isolated word lists (Allington, 1983; Gambrell, Wilson and Gantt, 1981; Shannon, 1985). As teachers listen to their students read, they are more apt to interrupt (or allow another student to interrupt) a poor reader than a good reader. The teacher encourages good readers to finish the sentence to figure out the pronunciation of the word. Yet the poor reader is either told to "sound out" the word or is given the word by the teacher (Allington, 1983).

Differences in questioning

A further difference exists in the questions that are posed to students of differing abilities (Young, 1988). Teachers ask students with higher abilities more questions (Cornbleth, David, and Button, 1974; Rosenthal, 1973) and more higher level questions than their peers with less ability (Anderson, et al., 1985; Brown, Palincsar, and Armbruster, 1984; Guszak, 1983; Hiebert, 1983; Meyer, 1984; Morrison, 1987; Pearson, 1983; Shake, 1988; Shake and Allington, 1985). Not only do teachers pose more questions and more higher level questions for students whom they expect to achieve, but they also give them more time to answer, more prompts and clues, and thereby communicate the belief that they can answer the questions (Brophy and Good, 1970, 1986; Cooper and Good, 1983; Good and Weinstein, 1986; Rosenthal, 1973).

Seatwork

Seatwork creates another problem that seems to be inherent with intra-class reading groups. Unfortunately, many students spend up to 70% of their instructional time doing seatwork (Anderson et al., 1985). The seatwork that students

do while the teacher is working with another group often consists of fill-in-the-blank worksheets or workbook pages. Such seatwork activity is a type of indirect reading that does not facilitate reading achievement (Allington, 1983; Anderson et al., 1985; Hiebert, 1983). Furthermore, seatwork is expensive financially. Jachym, Allington, and Broikou (1989) found that the average annual expense for seatwork, per second grader in their study, was $59.98, with a range from $29.09 to $101.84 (in U.S. dollars).

Affective consequences

Finally, ability grouping has negative affective consequences. Students of average and low ability tend to have a lower self-concept when they are in ability groups (Eder, 1983; Hiebert, 1983; Trimble and Sinclair, 1987). Children who are regularly placed in low groups may be discouraged about their progress and their capabilities and therefore less motivated to learn. These affective consequences alone are sufficient reasons for abandoning or at least modifying the use of ability groups.

Although there are many problems associated with ability groups in reading, some form of ability grouping may be needed. If all children receive the same instruction the poorer readers will never be given a chance to catch up (Bloom, 1976). The poor readers need more instruction and reading opportunity than the good readers (Allington, 1983). Yet there are many ways to avoid or at least lessen the problems of ability grouping in reading.

Alternatives to ability grouping

Just as the problems associated with ability grouping in reading are many, so are the alternatives. Among them are unlocking group membership; using whole class instruction;

offering additional instruction for poorer readers; modifying seatwork; and using needs grouping, interest grouping, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, or flexible grouping.

Unlocking group membership

A solution to the problem of children being locked in a reading group is provided by periodic diagnosis and observation. When children are progressing and can successfully work at a higher level, then they should be given the chance, and moved to a higher group even if they haven't read all of the book or completed all of the workbook assignments (Anderson et al., 1985). On the other hand, children who are not succeeding in a group should be given a chance to work in a group in which they can find success. Teachers need to make it clear to children that grouping is for the purpose of providing instruction and group membership will change during the instructional process (Devine, 1989).

Whole class instruction

Also, whole-class instruction when teaching to meet the needs common to all members of the class can provide a positive alternative to ability grouping (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1986a, 1986b; Oliver, 1970; Robinson and Good, 1987). Phonics, comprehension, and vocabulary building exercises can be appropriate for whole-group instruction (Anderson et al., 1985). Moreover, teacher directed activities tend to promote on-task behavior, and the most effective teachers use a combination of whole-group and small-group instruction (Rosenshine and Stevens, 1984). Mason and Au (1986) present additional advantages of whole group instruction: one can have longer lessons, only one lesson and set of materials is needed, supervision is for one group, private help can be provided to individuals while students are working, and children who need extra time to learn do not lose self-

respect by being identified as lower ability learners.

Additional instruction for poor readers

Teachers often say, with some justification, that poor readers need help with developing decoding skills. Since these students need to develop decoding skills and need the opportunities for silent reading with emphasis on meaning, Allington (1980) suggests that poor readers meet with the teacher twice daily rather than once. Students can spend one period with instruction based on meaningful silent reading and the other on decoding activity. Teachers often have time at the end of the day that might be used more productively in reading time than in other activities.

Seatwork modification

The seatwork problem can be solved, in part, by giving students opportunity for reading in place of all but the most useful worksheets and workbook pages (Allington, 1977; Jachym, et al., 1989). Increased contextual reading, as opposed to work on isolated skills, can produce significant gains in reading achievement (Allington, 1983). This contextual reading should be relatively easy, in order to develop fluency and maintain on-task behavior.

Furthermore, writing is a form of seatwork that affects reading in positive ways (Anderson, et al., 1985). Students can respond to their reading in writing or write about some other topic. Kirby and Liner (1981) recommend getting students' reactions to their readings through writing reactions to stories, letters to authors, advertisements for the book, a continuation of the story, newspaper interviews with characters in the story, letters to a character in the story or letters from one character to another, or a brief version of the story from another character's point of view. Moreover, integrating

reading and writing instruction helps students understand the structure of text material and how to use that structure in their own writing (Cunningham and Cunningham, 1987; Raphael, Englert, and Kirschner, 1989).

Needs grouping

Another alternative to ability grouping is needs or skills grouping. Students are placed by ability for reading groups, but they only meet in those groups two or three days a week. Since children of differing abilities may have the same skill needs, the teacher also assigns students to needs groups (Devine, 1989). A skills management system may be utilized in determining the skills to be taught (Otto, Wolf, and Eldridge, 1984). Students are given diagnostic pretests to determine which skills and strategies they should be taught. Children who have common needs are grouped together. As children demonstrate mastery of the skill, they are dropped from the group and placed in a new group according to their needs.

Interest grouping

Grouping by interest provides children of differing ability with an opportunity to work together. In this method, children who have common interests share reading materials and cooperate on reading-related projects. Children can often leap ability hurdles when sufficient interest and motivation exist (Anderson et al., 1985). Allowing children to read material that interests them leads to a better attitude towards school and reading (Vaughan and Estes, 1986). Interest grouping also provides an opportunity for functional reading where students are able to apply what they are learning (Leu and Kinzer, 1987).

To change the pace, the teacher might announce the titles or topics of the stories or books to be read in the reading

groups and allow the children to sign up for the story or book that appeals most to them. Or children may collect and read information to use in a group report to the class or making a bulletin board display. Devine (1989) has suggested that children can create anthologies, book reviews, or newsletters to share with their classmates.

With interest grouping, the number of groups and number of students in groups is not as important as in skills groups (Leu and Kinzer, 1987). One reason for this is the teacher's role. Rather than providing direct instruction, the teacher serves more as a guide and a resource.

Peer tutoring

Peer tutoring provides yet another alternative to grouping by ability. Studies of peer tutoring have found positive achievement and affective gains for both the tutor and the tutee (Anderson et al., 1985). Since there are often thirty students for every teacher in the classroom, the reading program can be multiplied many times over if the teacher includes peer directed activities. Hiebert (1980) suggests three ways in which to implement peer tutoring in the reading program: 1) pair activities in which children work together to read stories or review vocabulary words; 2) parallel activities where children work on comparable tasks independently at a common location; and 3) use of resource people (students) who can help children having problems while the teacher is working with other students.

Cooperative learning teams

Another solution might involve the use of cooperative learning teams (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, and Roy, 1984; Madden, 1988; Slavin, 1982, 1984, 1988; Stevens, Madden, Slavin, and Farnish, 1987). In these teams, the teacher

teaches a skill or a concept to the entire class. When the children have some understanding of the concept, they then work in heterogeneous groups or teams of three to five to practice the skill, study together, complete some activity or project. The children not only practice together but they are also rewarded together. Cooperative learning activities offer incentives for group effort and not just to the individual. Students, including those who are having difficulty in reading, not only learn more in cooperative teams (Slavin, 1982, 1984; Slavin, Madden and Stevens, 1989-90; Stevens et al., 1987), but they also develop improved self-esteem, better inter-group relationships, and better attitudes towards learning (Slavin et al., 1989-90; Madden, 1988).

Stevens et al. (1987) suggest activities that students can do cooperatively. The recommended activities are based upon reading and writing, and include partner reading, story retelling, story related writing, spelling, and collaborative writing.

Flexible grouping

A final alternative to ability grouping is flexible grouping. With flexible grouping, groups are formed for different purposes and exist only until that purpose is achieved (Ransom, Lamb, and Arnold, 1988; Veatch, 1978). Varying the types of reading groups adds variety and interest (Ransom, Lamb, and Arnold, 1988).

A teacher may have students work in basal groups two or three times each week. In the basal groups, children would be taught only the strategies necessary for successful reading of the stories. On the other days, the students meet in research groups, interest groups, needs groups, project groups, friendship groups, or visiting groups (Young, 1986).

The interaction would provide struggling readers with stimulation and good academic and behavior models that may not exist in low reading groups (Unsworth, 1984).

Summary

A variety of problems are associated with ability grouping in reading. Students are often placed in ability groups on the basis of criteria other than ability. Once students are placed in ability groups there is little movement from group to group. Students in low groups often receive instruction that focuses on decoding, oral reading of words in isolation, and lower level questions. Meanwhile, the students placed in high groups receive instruction that focuses on comprehension, silent reading of contextual text, and higher level questions; teachers communicate their expectations that these students can answer the more challenging questions. Students assigned to low reading groups often spend a great deal of their time doing seatwork that doesn't promote year to year reading gains. These factors contribute to lack of reading achievement and to low self-esteem.

There are many alternatives to ability grouping in reading that may facilitate improved reading achievement and self-esteem. Needs grouping can be used to help children with similar strategy and skill needs. Interest grouping utilizes students' personal and group interest as a motivational tool. Peer tutoring and cooperative learning teams benefit both the students being helped and the students who are helping, and these collaborative techniques have many positive affective outcomes. Flexible grouping strategies can add both variety and interest to reading instruction.

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tion, Brigham Young University.

*Terrell A. Young is a faculty member at the University of Texas
at Arlington, where he teaches courses in Reading and Language
Arts.*

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