Profile of a Heterogeneous Grouping Plan for Reading

Nancy Leyse Logan
Educational Opportunity Center, Syracuse, New York

Jean Dixon Rux
St. Lawrence School, Laramie, Wyoming

Edward E. Paradis
University of Wyoming

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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

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Grouping children by ability for reading instruction is common practice in many elementary schools today. By reducing heterogeneity, ability grouping presumably allows teachers to provide instruction at an appropriate level for students in a particular group. However, research has shown that grouping children by ability can have a negative impact on lower ability readers, especially when the grouping occurs over time. The authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* state "because of the serious problems inherent in ability grouping, the Commission on Reading believes that educators should explore other options for reading instruction" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985, p. 91).

Reflecting on available research on grouping will undoubtedly raise questions in the minds of teachers who use ability grouping. As we reflected, some of our questions were: If teachers choose not to group students by ability for reading, what can they do in its place? If teachers choose to group children of differing ability levels together (heterogeneous grouping) can students read successfully? If so, how might one organize and manage such groups?

With these questions in mind, we found a fifth grade classroom in which students were heterogeneously grouped for reading and observed how the teacher organized and managed this type of grouping, and its effects on students' reading. A description of the teacher's plan comprises the first part of this article. The second part of this article outlines factors contributing to the success of the plan in this classroom based on observation and student report.

Organizing heterogeneous groups

The cooperating teacher had grouped her students heterogeneously for four years prior to the semester of observation and had tailored the program over time to suit her teaching style and students' needs. Through observations and discussion with the teacher and her students, two steps were identified as key in the organization of heterogeneous groups in this classroom: 1) the all-class book and 2) group books. In addition, several management techniques such as a daily reading schedule and rotating discussion groups were considered important.

The all-class book. Reading instruction began in the fall with all the students in the class reading the same book: *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt (1975). It was chosen because the reading level could accommodate a variety of abilities while the story line was interesting to all students. Beginning with an all-class book allowed the teacher to become acquainted with students and to model activities and strategies that the students would later use. In addition, the all-class book allowed all readers their first experience of being part of a heterogeneous group rather than being separated by ability.

Among the reading strategies modeled during the all-class book were 1): mapping and categorizing, 2) written

retellings, summaries, and responses, 3) mental imagery exercises, and 4) prediction/confirmation exercises. These four strategies were stressed because of their importance to reading comprehension and because each would be used frequently throughout the school year. Working through the all-class book took approximately four to five weeks. This time period was important to enable sufficient modeling of strategies so students could later apply them individually or in small groups. Based on conversations with the teacher and supported by classroom observations, time spent on the all-class book set the stage for groups to work smoothly and efficiently throughout the semester.

Group books. Following the all-class book, students formed small groups. The teacher introduced this step by previewing a variety of books for the students in order to provide background for their selection. The books varied in reading level to accommodate all readers and were based upon a theme of early America to integrate with the social studies curriculum. From the books, individuals were asked to choose one of interest to them. Using book choice as the common element, the first set of small groups was formed on the basis of student interest. Each group included readers from a range of abilities. Although there were more than three books from which to select, the teacher kept the number of reading groups at three, based on what she considered a number for effective instructional management.

Once students made a selection, they were allowed a period of one week to switch books. Some students made initial selections based on friends' choices or other criteria. Therefore, the trial period provided a respectable means of self-selecting out of a book if a child discovered it was uninteresting or too difficult. After choices were made, the teacher read aloud to each group the first two chapters of

the book to generate immediate interest in the story. While the teacher was reading to each group, other students were involved in prereading tasks for their book or other assigned activities modeled during the all-class book.

Students were then assigned to read two to three chapters at a time, depending on length and difficulty of the book. In class, some students read aloud together, some read silently sitting in a group, and others read alone. Children who did not finish reading during "reading time" read during Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) or took their books home at night. In approximately one month, when all of the small groups were finished with their books and associated reading activities, the process of forming groups was repeated. Each time, a new selection of books was offered. (Books not chosen for group work were available as Sustained Silent Reading choices.) During the fall semester one all-class book and two small group books were completed. In addition, students completed individual books during SSR. The following semester students again read books in small groups, as a class, and with partners.

Managing heterogeneous groups

Once groups were organized, effective management became important. The teacher used the strategies that follow to teach children effectively and manage these heterogeneous groups.

Daily reading schedule. To keep reading instruction moving smoothly, daily group assignments and activities were listed on the board in the order to be completed. Students' attention was drawn to these lists at the beginning of each reading period, and necessary explanations were made and questions answered. This provided an overview

of each day's agenda for those not involved in group discussion, thereby avoiding interruptions to the discussion group. Students not involved in discussion spent time reading assigned chapters or additional books or working independently on activities associated with their books such as mapping, theme boxes (Carrico, 1988), vocabulary games, writing activities, art activities, and culminating activities such as plays or creating objects described in the book. To address varying ability levels, students were provided with options for activities ranging from easier to more difficult.

Addressing individual needs. One concern of the teacher was whether she was serving the individual needs of students. Was she challenging all students without frustrating others? She addressed this issue in three ways. First, she used regular discussion groups. Discussions allowed less fluent readers the chance to clarify content and to observe the connections and conclusions made by fluent readers while still challenging the higher ability students. Second, the teacher involved students in activities that allowed them practice on skills they needed, regardless of ability (e.g., summarizing and mapping). Some of these activities were cooperative in nature, allowing less proficient students to be paired with more proficient students, while some were individualized to provide an avenue for individual student evaluation. When appropriate, individuals or groups of students with a need for specific skill instruction were engaged in minilessons. Third, many assignments were open-ended to address individual needs of readers of all abilities. Most assignments encouraged students to create original work based on their interpretation of the text.

Rotating discussion groups. Reading discussions were held with one or two groups a day, since the teacher believed it was not necessary nor even possible for every

group to meet for book discussion on a daily basis. Groups were generally led by the teacher and occasionally by an appointed student. Time was spent discussing the reading material with the students, answering questions about the book, reviewing vocabulary and drawing connections to other books and background information.

Pacing. One of the teacher's goals was to have all groups finish their books at approximately the same time to allow for the formation of the next set of groups. This involved careful consideration and some trial-and-error on the part of the teacher. Groups needed to be paced to avoid too many activities for those moving faster and to avoid neglecting important learning activities for groups moving more slowly or reading longer books. The teacher worked through the pacing dilemma by balancing the time schedule for reading, discussion groups and extension activities (see Figure 1). The teacher indicated that the solution to pacing varied throughout the year and with groups because of attention to individual needs and book choices.

Anecdotal records. During group discussions, the teacher wrote anecdotal records for two to three children so that each student was observed at least once weekly. The teacher noted which students needed more challenge and which needed more guidance. Records were reviewed later for evaluation purposes, discussed with parents at conference time, and used to justify the program to parents and administrators. Thus, anecdotal records became crucial for evaluation and accountability. In sum, organizing heterogeneous groups for reading was carried out in two steps: first the all-class book and then the small group books. Throughout both steps, management techniques were incorporated to keep groups working smoothly and effectively in order to facilitate students' reading development.

Figure 1
Sample of Teacher's Planning and Pacing for Three Books

Day	Book 1 (longest)	Book 2	Book 3
1	Teacher reads chapters 1 & 2	Preview book; record questions you would like answered.	Same as Book 2
	As a group, make some predictions on large tablet	Compare questions with group members	Same as Book 2
	SSR	Teacher reads aloud chapters 1 & 2	SSR
2	Read chapters 3, 4 & 5	As a group, make predictions on large tablet	Teacher reads aloud chapters 1 & 2
	Activity 1: Map Kit's route	Read chapters 3 & 4	Make predictions on large tablet
	SSR	SSR	SSR
7	Retell chapter 11	Retell chapter 9	Group discussion
15	Finish book	Culminating activity	Culminating activity
	Group discussion	SSR	SSR
16	Culminating activity	Culminating activity	Culminating activity
	Individual response conferences	Individual response conferences	Individual response conferences
	SSR	SSR	SSR

Book 1: *Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1958) by E. G. Speare
Book 2: *Sign of the Beaver* (1983) by E. G. Speare
Book 3: *Sing Down the Moon* (1970) by S. O'Dell

Observations of heterogeneous reading groups

During the semester of observation in this heteroge-neously-grouped classroom, it was evident that students of

differing reading levels were able to read the same books together successfully. Through observation and discussion with the teacher and her students, four factors emerged that we believe contributed to the success of heterogeneous grouping in this class: positive student perspective, student choice of reading material, group cooperation, and group discussion.

Positive student perspective. With the exception of one child, students' comments reflected a positive perception of the grouping plan. To explain how heterogeneous grouping worked in the classroom, one average reader said, "Readers who want to get to be better watch what the better readers do." A middle-to-low reader commented, "In past years when we were grouped by ability, most of the people in our group didn't understand [the selection]." This student's comment shows a contrast between her perceptions of ability grouping and heterogeneous grouping. Further, it reveals one possible result of grouping children by "like" ability. Even in this heterogeneously-grouped classroom, children were aware of and able to identify better and poorer readers. However, children did not see themselves as members of an ability group but associated themselves with a particular book. Thus, labels were not contrived and the group name was not a disguise for a reading level. In the words of a student who was new to the school, "That's what I like here because they mix readers up so those that can't read that well can learn from those who can."

Choice of reading material. "If you're grouped by ability and if the book is boring you can't change it ...so you don't pay attention to it," remarked an average reader in this classroom. While the impact of choosing one's reading materials is unlikely to be exclusively linked to heterogeneous

reading groups, book choice was the basis on which individuals were grouped in this room. In this way, student choice was linked to heterogeneous grouping. Comments from children indicated that interest was a major factor in their motivation to read. Discussion with the students revealed that they had different strategies for reading what did and did not interest them. They reported that they read better with material they were allowed to choose. One high-ability reader said, "If you choose the book you like and then if it's really good ...you can read faster." One middle-to-low ability student also reported, "If you like books you'll read better. If you don't like it you read slow or skip around." A lower ability student remarked that if he could not have switched books to read the one he wanted, "I probably wouldn't have worked my hardest." Asked when he did work his hardest, a high-ability reader answered, "If you have a real good book that you like." In essence, in the words of one student, "If you have a book that you don't like you're not going to work as hard."

Group cooperation. While good readers helped the less able readers, the latter also contributed to the group. Rather than being separated from readers of differing abilities as in ability grouping, children in this class learned from each other. Within groups, most children saw other students as reliable and willing sources of information even though they were aware of ability differences. Some students, especially girls, read together in close proximity. When asked why, one group agreed that if they had a question, help was immediately available. Another group said they read together to help each other and to discuss the book. A very good reader reported that students in her group helped each other. She stated she had not understood part of a story but two group members (less able readers) had explained it to her. Further evidence for group

members having an effect on peers came from an assign-
ment apart from reading. Students were asked to write
names of people who had taught them something special.
One middle-to-low reader wrote the names of three read-
ing group members and added, "My friends showed me
how to read better."

Group discussion. Group discussion helped to fill in
any gaps in understanding for students of all abilities and
was important for their reading comprehension for two rea-
sons. First, group discussion made students accountable
for their reading. Second, groups were a place for the
teacher and the children to share both their knowledge of
the book and their enthusiasm. In discussions, children re-
ceived guidance from the teacher, insights from other
readers and established direction for future reading. While
children were also accountable to the teacher for individual
written and verbal response, group work allowed readers of
all abilities to pool and expand their knowledge. Observa-
tions revealed that students were active and generally equal
participants in these groups. When asked how group dis-
cussions helped their reading, some students commented
that the teacher told them about words and things they did
not understand, that they got parts of the story cleared up,
and that questions were answered. In essence, discussions
were the glue that held readers together as groups and en-
hanced reading comprehension.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we return to the questions posed initially.
First, the question concerning how one could set up and
manage heterogeneous groups was addressed in the
explanation of this teacher's use of whole class and group
books as well as her specific instructional techniques. Just
as this teacher continuously refines her grouping plan to

keep up with new insights and information and to meet the needs of her students, teachers who draw from her ideas will necessarily make their own adaptations. Second, can students read successfully in heterogeneous reading groups? Observations of readers and discussions with both the students and their teacher indicated students in this classroom, though of varying reading levels, were able to read and comprehend the same material. Finally, if teachers choose not to ability group students for reading, what can they do? There is no definitive answer and more research is needed on various alternatives to ability grouping. Heterogeneous grouping as described here is one option available to teachers. In this classroom, the teacher and students made the option of heterogeneous grouping work successfully for them.

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Nancy Leyse Logan is with the Educational Opportunity Center in Syracuse New York; when this research was conducted she was at The University of Wyoming. Jean Dixon Rux is a fifth-grade teacher at St. Laurence School in Laramie Wyoming. Edward E. Paradis is a faculty member in the Department of Elementary Education at The University of Wyoming, Laramie Wyoming.