Reading Horizons

Volume 32
Issue 5 *May/June 1992*

Article 1

6-1-1992

A Prologue: What Happens Before Alternative Groupings

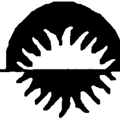
Mary E. Hauser
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Hauser, M. E. (1992). A Prologue: What Happens Before Alternative Groupings. *Reading Horizons, 32* (5). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol32/iss5/1

This Editor's Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



A Prologue: What Happens Before Alternative Groupings

Mary E. Hauser

The articles in this special issue of *Reading Horizons* present a variety of perspectives and strategies for teachers to consider when they are thinking about their reading/literacy/language arts programs. Why use all three of these words? Aren't they basically synonymous? While the purpose of this prologue is not to define the terms, it is important to point out that how teachers define these concepts determines how they organize their instruction. Their definitions may be implicit or explicit — but they do exist and shape the work that goes on in classrooms. In this introduction I wish to stimulate you to raise questions that will help you to think about what your personal definitions of reading/literacy/language arts are and then to use this knowledge as a background for interpreting and applying the information presented in the articles in this special issue. It is only by regularly questioning the assumptions upon which we base our teaching that we can be responsive to the changes in our student populations, the materials we use and the demands of our society for which schools function. How else will we get beyond the "bluebirds," "robins," and "cardinals" (and their variations)?

How do children learn reading/literacy/language arts? Who are the children that we are teaching? The better we can answer these questions, the more prepared we will be to help children construct the knowledge they need. In con-

trast to the behaviorist paradigm that has dominated our thinking about learning and teaching for many years, the theoretical frameworks of Piaget and Vygotsky are now important in shaping our views that children learn through an active process of constructing their knowledge and that the process of construction occurs within a social context. These theorists are not part of the constant pendulum swing of pedagogical practice that seems to be endemic to education. While the notion that children construct their knowledge allows for a variety of interpretations, we have solid evidence of the efficacy of this approach. Articles in this special issue are all compatible with the ideas of children constructing their knowledge within a social context. They do not allow us to think of reading simply as a process of decoding, or of writing and spelling as disconnected skills taught during different times of the day. Instead, they enable us to consider how literacy can be approached as a developmental process of making meaning of the symbols of our language.

As we examine our assumptions about what goes on in classrooms, and begin to see the classroom as a place where a child constructs knowledge about the world, what effect does this have on the roles we as teachers play in the classroom? The direct instruction that now comprises the majority of a teaching day can be de-emphasized as we create an environment for children to be active processors of information. Classrooms will become more child-focused and we will be facilitators of the constructive process, helping to foster ownership for learning in every member of this learning community.

Such revisions in the way we think about classrooms also raise questions about the organization of class time. Activities that integrate what formerly was taught separately as spelling and writing, for example, demand larger blocks

of time and lend themselves to collaboration among students rather than independent work. Our plan books, with the little boxes previously labeled so neatly as *reading, writing, vocabulary, spelling,* constrain the planning process and need to be replaced by a large block labeled *literacy.* This may seem like an unnecessary observation — just reorganizing plan books isn't really a very significant part of dealing with this rethinking that we are doing. However, the structure of the book can provide a hidden constraint. How many teachers have you heard say things like, "I just have to fill in my writing section and I am finished with my plans for next week!" (Of course, *I* never did that, nor did you.) Just as we work to enable students to build mental structures or schemata to accommodate the information they are learning, we, too must develop new schemata to accommodate the ideas about literacy. We cannot fit them into our old structures. We have to build new ones — mental structures in our heads, and physical structures in our plan books. What may seem to be a small constraint — a plan book with boxes — may be more powerful than expected. Opening the structure of a plan book can help to enable teachers to implement thematic units. Planned and carried out collaboratively with students, units can help to create the community of learners that the articles issue emphasize.

As we rethink our views of the development of literacy and create environments in which children can construct knowledge about print through both shared and independent experiences, a community of learners can take shape. These articles provide some strategies for developing such communities.

Overview of the issue

Well known for his work on the impact of ability grouping on literacy learning, Allington, in his article, "Reconsidering Instructional Groupings," contributes necessary

historical and social context to this issue. He highlights the assumptions that influenced the thinking of educators which lead to the establishment of the *bluebirds*, *robins*, and *cardinals* as the primary delivery system of reading instruction. Assumptions, such as the belief that only some children can acquire full literacy, take on a different perspective in light of what we now know about the development of literacy.

"Including All Students in a Community of Learners" by Dudley-Marling and Stires contributes the framework for the notion of a community of learners that is developed through the articles in this special issue. They suggest a perspective that is based on respect and recognition for children and the concomitant freedom of students to take responsibility for their own learning and to share the responsibility for the learning of other members of the community. They see collaboration not as a formal structure but as a way of being. The authors advocate getting away from the rigid inflexible structures of the educational system and propose changes based on creating a sense of community. The way that is implemented depends on the members of the community. The authors are commended for not proposing another rigid set of guidelines in their place, but building effectively, with vignettes of classroom activities, a sense of the important components of the community of learners.

The idea of a community of learners is expanded by Danielson in "Literature Groups and Literature Logs: Responding to Literature in a Community of Readers." She grounds her work in collaborative social context informed by the research of Vygotsky. The literature logs and literature discussion groups on which they are based provide another example of how students can have an active role in their learning. The author has found that literature logs allow for students to react to literature in a way that enhances the

meaning for them and therefore enhances and enriches the act of reading.

"What's Going On Here?" by Stice and Bertrand provides a description of a classroom in which the teacher has developed a sense of community through her emphasis on whole language instruction. The benefit of this grouping was demonstrated in larger gains than expected for the at risk population served by the school. The practices described by these authors validate the ideas advanced in the article by Dudley-Marling and Stires. Everyone is a contributor in this classroom. Collaboration and student choice were documented and described by the authors.

Young and McCullough, in "Looking Out for Low Achieving Readers," also focus on improving instruction for readers who could be considered at risk for school success. They make the point that low achieving readers receive instruction that is inferior to more competent readers. Their suggestions for change are based on a definition of reading as an active process of constructing meaning from text. They provide examples of ways to foster collaboration and give students choices in reading and writing materials, activities that can result in improved student performance and certainly promote a sense of shared learning.

In "Cooperative Grouping in Literacy Instruction" Wiesendanger and Bader describe ways cooperative or collaborative grouping can be implemented in classroom literacy instruction. Wiesendanger and Bader see collaborative learning as a vehicle to student ownership of learning, and to developing an environment that de-emphasizes competition and authoritarian control. Classrooms that function in this way allow for an atmosphere of community to develop. The suggestions the authors make are valuable for teachers who want to change their grouping practices.

"Creating a Disabled Reader" by Phillips presents a parent's perspective on the outcome of tracking in his documentation of how a child with an appropriate introduction to literacy ends up as a disabled reader. The article points out how grouping and tracking systematically destroyed the child's ability to read. It is a strong message to consider: while prereading activities must be carried on, it is not enough to assume that because a child has appropriate prereading experiences that child will be successful all the way through school. The kernel of those early experiences — relevance, ownership and context — needs to continue in classrooms. The article highlights the discrepancy between learning and teaching that exists in our classrooms.

The final article, "The Non-Traditional Student," a sensitive essay by Wickey, also presents a personal perspective on the outcome of tracking, this time from the point of view of the student herself. The essay speaks powerfully to each teacher and administrator concerned with the development of their students' potential.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue make a strong statement for the necessity of broadening our concept of reading instruction to that of literacy instruction. Each article provides practical ways to implement that concept with the underlying idea of the importance of collaboration. As the variety of strategies presented demonstrates, collaboration is a way of being and working in the classroom. As teachers make their classrooms places that are congenial to the linguistic, cultural, social and intellectual backgrounds students bring to school, a true community of learners can be developed.