ALTERNATIVES TO

ABILITY GROUPING STUDENTS

FOR READING INSTRUCTION IN THE

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

ALTERNATIVES TO ABILITY GROUPING STUDENTS FOR READING

INSTRUCTION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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How to group students effectively for reading instruction in
the elementary school is a decision every teacher or every
school district must make. The purpose of this paper was to
review literature on ability grouping elementary students for
reading instruction and to present current research on
alternatives to ability grouping. Four specific alternatives
were addressed in this paper: cooperative learning, mastery
learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping. The paper also
presented strategies for applying these alternatives in the
elementary classroom.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction

Grouping students for instruction is done for many reasons, but most grouping plans exist to deal with the fact that students differ in knowledge, skills, developmental stage, and learning rate (Slavin, 1987b). Deciding how to group students for instruction has been a controversial and long-debated issue for many decades (Slavin, 1988). The first reported practice of grouping students by intellectual ability or academic achievement began in 1867 in St. Louis, Missouri; this practice continues today (Manning & Lucking, 1990). Raze (1985) concluded that over 77% of all school districts in the United States practice grouping students by ability or achievement. He stated that grouping by ability or achievement may start as early as kindergarten and that students rarely switch groups after they reach third grade.

Grouping students for instruction by intellectual ability or academic achievement to create the greatest amount of homogeneity among learners is generally referred to as ability grouping (Slavin, 1987a). Dawson (1987) identified two common forms of ability grouping: (a) ability grouped class assignment, in which children are assigned to self-contained classes based on homogeneity of ability or achievement, and (b) within class ability grouping. Within class ability grouping is often used for reading instruction, in

this arrangement children are assigned to smaller groups within classrooms based on reading achievement.

The rationale for homogeneity in grouping is that it will decrease the differences among learners' knowledge, skills, developmental stages, and learning rates (Manning & Lucking 1990). Oakes (1985) identified four assumptions that seem to lend support to the belief that ability grouping is in the best interest of the students. The first assumption is that students learn better when grouped with students considered academically similar. A second assumption is that students will develop more positive self-concepts when not forced to compete with others who are far more capable. The third assumption is that grouping decisions are made fairly and accurately on the basis of ability or past achievement. The final assumption is that it is easier for teachers to accomodate individual differences in homogeous groups.

Evidence has been presented (Haller & Waterman, 1985; Young, 1990), that the criteria teachers use when assigning students to instructional/ability groups vary greatly. Haller and Waterman (1985) studied teachers' decisions regarding grouping for reading instruction within self-contained elementary classrooms. Their purpose was to identify what criteria teachers used when assigning pupils to homogeneous reading groups. Data was collected from sixty 4th, 5th, and 6th grade teachers and their pupils in five different districts

in the Eastern and Southern United States. Each teacher was interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes. Teachers were asked to consider each of their pupils and to recommend reading groups to next year's receiving teachers. Teachers were also asked to identify students at the margins of their groups. Teachers were then asked to compare each margin-pair, indicating what had led to each placement decision.

Haller and Waterman found that teacher's comments indicated that they considered many attributes and circumstances before arriving at a reading group placement. The results of their study suggested that perceived reading ability was the most important consideration, but was far from the only one. Other factors included pupils' general capacity to do academic work, work habits, classroom behavior, personality, and occasionally home circumstances. When a child's reading skills made placement in either of two groups reasonable, teachers tended to rely on attributes other than reading skill in reaching a decision. These results indicated that it is misleading to conceive of reading groups merely as "ability groups".

Although ability grouping remains a controversial issue, current research has presented evidence that there are many potential problems involved in ability grouping students for instruction (Manning & Lucking 1990). Some of the problems which have been identified are in the areas of academic

achievement, self-concept and attitudes, teacher behaviors, and multicultural concerns.

<u>Academic Achievement</u>

A large amount of evidence has been presented indicating that ability grouping does not enhance student achievement in the elementary school (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991; Dawson, 1987; Manning & Lucking, 1990). Some evidence exists that high-ability learners might gain from ability grouping at the expense of low achievers, but most studies do not find achievement gains even for high-ability learners (Dawson, 1987; Grant & Rothenberg, 1986; Raze, 1985; Slavin, 1988).

Dawson (1987) concluded that no consistent evidence of beneficial effects of ability grouping exists for any group of students; however, he stated that considerable evidence does exist that ability grouping may reduce achievement levels in average and low-ability groups. He also found that the long-term negative effects of being in low-ability classes restricted the vocational options available to students and increased the likelihood that they would drop out of school prior to graduation.

In a review of research on achievement, Slavin (1987b) found that ability grouped class assignments, including special classes for the gifted and self-contained special education classes, have not been found to be beneficial to student achievement. However, he concluded that within

class ability grouping plans, such as ability grouping for reading instruction, can be beneficial for student achievement when they include the following four characteristics: (a) heterogeneous classes most of the day, (b) reduced heterogeneity when a specific skill is being taught, (c) flexible and frequently reassessed group assignments, and (d) adaptations made in the level and pace of instruction to meet the needs of the group.

Self-Concept and Attitudes

Ability grouping plans may stigmatize low achievers and place them into classes or groups for which teachers have low expectations, or lead to the creation of academic elites (Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1987b). The self-concept of students placed in low-ability groups may be impaired, whereas the self-concept of students in high-ability groups may be artificially inflated (Grant & Rothenberg, 1988; Hiebert, 1983; Manning & Lucking, 1990; Young, 1990).

Grant and Rothenberg (1988) presented evidence that reading group assignments become a symbol of generalized academic and social competence in the eyes of teachers and peers. They also stated that labels derived from reading group assignments carry over to other learning activities and may stratify social relationships among children. Riccio (1985) concluded that ability grouping may adversely affect the attitudes, personalities, and opportunities of students

placed in low-ability groups.

Proponents of ability grouping argue that the self-concept of low-ability learners suffers when they compete in high-ability groups and that ability grouping should improve the self-concept of low-ability learners. Manning and Lucking (1990) found that research does not support this view.

Teacher Behaviors

Research shows that students in the low-ability group tend to receive a lower quantity and quality of instruction (Dawson, 1987; Raze, 1985). Dawson (1987) reviewed research and concluded evidence suggests that when a variety of instructional and classroom climate variables are considered, the quality of education in the low-ability group is significantly inferior to that in the high-ability group. Raze (1985) identified research which suggested that teachers spend less time, assign less homework, are less imaginative, and use less effective teaching methods with low-ability groups.

Young (1990) reviewed literature on ability grouping in reading. He concluded that research shows once students are placed in ability groups there is little movement from group to group. Students in the low-ability reading groups often receive instruction that focuses on decoding, oral reading of words in isolation, and lower level questions. Low reading groups also spend a great deal of time doing seatwork that

does not promote year to year reading gains.

Wuthrick (1990) examined the reading instruction children received in the classroom when placed in ability groups. She concluded that students placed in high ability groups were often met with first by the teacher, met for longer periods of time than other groups, and were taught in a warmer atmosphere. Criticism in high ability groups was more respectful, silent reading took place 70% of the time, and questions focused on the meaning of the story. She stated that low-ability groups met with the teacher for less time, reading was slow, halting and labored, and reading errors were corrected 3 to 5 times more often than in the high-ability group; silent reading took place only 30% of the time and literal level questions were generally asked.

Multicultural Concerns

Manning and Lucking (1990) concluded, following their review of literature, that ability grouping may result in a form of segregation. Several researchers have found that poor and minority students are substantially overrepresented in the lower-ability groups (Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Haller & Waterman, 1985; Manning & Lucking, 1990; Riccio, 1985). Students may be marked by these group assignments long after their school years (Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Riccio, 1985).

Goodlad and Oakes (1988) investigated the organizational

structure of schools. They found that the practice of ability grouping disproportionately represented poor and minority students in the low-ability groups. They stated that students were often placed in ability groups on the basis of home and family circumstances, especially the level of schooling attained by mothers and fathers.

Academic achievement, self-concept and attitudes, teacher behaviors, and multicultural concerns represent some of the areas researchers have identified as posing potential problems for students placed in ability groups. Ability grouping does not appear to enhance student achievement, even for those students placed in high-ability groups. However, evidence had been presented that ability grouping may reduce achievement levels in average- and low-ability groups. The self-concept of students placed in low-ability groups may be impaired and the development of social relationships among children may be negatively affected. Researchers have presented evidence that teachers may provide different instruction to students based on their ability group placement. Concerns have been made that poor and minority students seem to be overrepresented in lower-ability groups.

Researchers have stated that the inequities created by ability grouping have led to a rethinking of school organization. Berghoff & Egawa (1991) stated that literacy is

a life-long learning process in which children are engaged regardless of their varying abilities or backgrounds. Dawson (1987) recognized that children live in a heterogeneous society, one which professes to value individual differences and must value those differences in order to survive. He stated that tolerance for individual differences is one of the most important values schools can hope to teach. Dawson held that if children are separated by ability, schools miss a tremendous opportunity to teach a lesson in the value of diversity.

Researchers have presented many instructional alternatives to the traditional practices of ability grouping students for reading (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991; Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986; Harp, 1989; Hiebert, 1983; Manning & Lucking, 1990; Slavin, 1987b; Slavin, 1988; Young, 1990). Eldredge and Butterfield (1986) designed an experimental research project to test whether children could be taught to read effectively without using ability grouping. Five alternative approaches to traditional reading instruction were used in four Utah school districts. The alternative approaches used daily were as follows: (a) Basals with traditional homogeneous grouping and 10-15 minutes of the special decoding program, (b) basals with heterogeneous grouping, (c) basals with heterogeneous grouping and 10-15 minutes of the special decoding program, (d) a literature

program, and (e) a literature program and the 10-15 minute special decoding program. Twenty-six classrooms were used to test the effectiveness of the five alternating approaches and 24 classrooms in the same schools were used as controls. The control classrooms continued to use the traditional basal programs adopted by their school districts. Teachers in the experimental classrooms received four months of training in the use of the specific strategies prior to implementation in the classroom. A special decoding strategy developed by Eldredge (1984) was used in some of the experimental classrooms. The results indicated that the literature program using the special decoding program, the literature program not using the special decoding program, and the traditional basal group using the special decoding program produced significant gains over the traditional basal programs.

Berghoff and Egawa (1991) suggested four alternatives to ability grouping, which would help in balancing the opportunities for all children. They were whole group learning, small group work, working in pairs, and independent learning. The interests and needs of the students would be used to shape the group membership, size, and purpose. They contended that whole group learning provides a time to share experiences that provide common language and an opportunity to construct meaning together. Small group work involves the power of student controlled learning. Pairs may work

11

together because they have a common interest or one has a valuable expertise. The authors stated that individuals also need time to work independently to record and reflect on events along with opportunities to choose and immerse themselves in the experiences books can provide.

Harp (1989) presented two alternatives to ability grouping. The first alternative he described was flexible grouping, in which children are placed in temporary groups on the basis of various criteria, such as, level of independence as learners, interests, learning styles, and social needs. A second alternative the author presented was cooperative learning. He described cooperative learning as a grouping style which includes the development of interpersonal and small group skills, the development of positive interdependence, skill in face to face interaction, and individual accountability.

Young (1990) reviewed literature and found that just as the problems associated with ability grouping in reading are many, so are the alternatives. He suggested that alternatives, such as, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, flexible grouping, needs grouping, and interest grouping may facilitate improved reading achievement and self-esteem.

Alternatives reviewed by Manning and Lucking (1990) included individualized instruction, mastery learning, and cooperative learning. Similarly, Slavin (1988) discussed

mastery learning and cooperative learning as alternatives to traditional ability grouping.

There are many potential problems associated with grouping students for reading instruction which have been documented by current researchers. There are also many alternatives to teaching reading without grouping students by ability. The alternatives available include: whole group learning, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, flexible grouping, mastery learning, literature based heterogeneous programs, and independent learning.

The purpose of this paper was to review literature that presented and assessed the effects of programs that employ alternatives to traditional ability grouping for reading instruction in the elementary school. Specifically the paper addressed the following four alternatives: cooperative learning, mastery learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping. The paper also presented strategies for applying these alternatives in the elementary classroom.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Researchers have identified many possible alternatives to the traditional ability grouping of students for reading instruction in the elementary school. The following four alternatives were reviewed in this chapter: cooperative learning, mastery learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning can be used to teach a wide variety of curriculum areas. Many researchers have supported the use of cooperative learning as an alternative to ability grouping for reading instruction (Coe, 1992; Madden, 1988; Uttero, 1988; Young, 1990).

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1990) defined cooperative learning as the instructional use of small groups in which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. However, simply placing students in small groups and telling them to work together does not mean that cooperative learning will take place. The authors have identified the following five essential components that must be included for small group learning to be truly cooperative: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability/personal responsibility, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing.

Positive interdependence. Students must perceive that they are linked with other group members in such a way that they cannot succeed without each other and that they must coordinate their efforts to complete a task. Positive interdependence exists when members indicate that they will sink or swim together.

Face-to-face promotive interaction. Johnson et al. (1990) stated that to obtain meaningful face-to-face interaction, cooperative learning groups need to remain relatively small, ranging from two to six members. Face-to-face interaction is essential in cooperative learning groups. Students must also promote each other's learning and success. This may be accomplished through students helping, assisting, supporting, encouraging, and praising each other's efforts to learn.

Individual accountability/personal responsibility. The performance of each individual student's work must be assessed and the results given back to the group and the individual. The authors identified the following four teacher components necessary to ensure that each student is individually accountable to do his or her fair share of the group's work: (a) Assess how much effort each member is contributing, (b) provide feedback to groups and individual students, (c) help groups avoid redundant efforts, and (d) ensure that every member is responsible for the final product.

Johnson et al. (1990) identified several common ways in which teachers may structure individual accountability. These included giving individual tests, randomly selecting one student's product to represent the group's, having students teach what they have learned to someone else, and having students explain what they know to the group.

Interpersonal and small group skills. Students must be taught the appropriate social skills needed to work effectively in cooperative learning groups. Groups will not be productive if they do not have the necessary social skills. Some of the social skills which may need to be taught include, communication skills, acceptance of individual differences, and conflict resolution.

Group processing. Group processing is the fifth essential component of cooperative learning. It exists when group members are able to identify how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Group processing includes describing what members actions were helpful and unhelpful, and making decisions about what actions to continue or change.

Johnson et al. (1990) concluded that effective cooperative learning occurs when each of these five essential components are structured within each cooperative lesson. In addition to these five essentials, cooperative learning groups must be heterogeneous, including students of low, high, and

average ability, and they should include both male and female students.

Research on cooperative learning has shown that student achievement in the elementary school is consistently increased when group rewards are given based on individual learning (Manning & Lucking, 1990; Slavin, 1987; Slavin, 1990). Slavin (1990) summarized the main areas of consensus and controversy in research on cooperative learning. He found consensus in the following areas:

1. Cooperative learning methods usually have a positive effect on student achievement. This achievement appears to be dependent on the inclusion of group goals and individual accountability.

2. When students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds work together toward a common goal, they gain respect for one another.

3. Cooperative learning improves the social acceptance of mainstreamed students who are labeled academically handicapped.

4. Cooperative learning has shown gains in self-esteem, liking of school and of the subject being taught, time-on-task, and attendance for students.

There is a high degree of consensus among researchers in cooperative learning. However, there are several areas in which researchers have not reached a consensus:

17

1. There is disagreement as to the specific conditions under which positive effects in achievement will be found.

2. Whether cooperative learning is effective at all grade levels presents some controversy. Although, there is an ample amount of consensus that cooperative learning methods are effective in grades two-nine.

3. The appropriateness of cooperative learning for higher-order conceptual learning is another area of debate.

Slavin concluded that researchers must continue to test the limits of cooperative learning, to better understand how and why cooperative learning produces its various effects. However, he stated that there is more than enough evidence to justify the use of cooperative learning in instruction.

Young (1990) concluded that a solution to the negative effects of ability grouping may involve the use of cooperative learning teams. In this model, the teacher begins by instructing the entire class on a particular skill or concept. When the students have some understanding of the concept being taught, they work in their cooperative groups to practice the skill, study together, or complete some activity or project. The students are then rewarded for both individual and group effort. The author stated that students placed in the cooperative learning teams, including those who have difficulty in reading learn more, develop improved self-esteem, show increased positive attitudes towards learning,

and develop better intergroup relationship skills.

Slavin (1991a) reviewed research on the effects of cooperative learning for high achievers. He concluded that if group goals and individual accountability are provided, high achievers as well as all students can benefit from cooperative learning groups. One reason high achievers gain is because their peers encourage them to learn. They also gain through the process of describing their thoughts to others. The author stated that concerns have been expressed about the effectiveness of cooperative learning groups for high achievers. He determined that these concerns were based either on misconceptions or on experiences with inappropriate forms of cooperative learning. He recommended that educators of the gifted insist on the use of cooperative learning strategies.

Coe (1992) conducted a study to determine whether cooperative learning groups had a positive effect on students' attitudes toward reading. This research was done for a thesis. A normal elementary classroom of 25 students was used to conduct the study. The five essentials of cooperative learning groups outlined by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1990) were followed. In this model students read a book of their choice, recorded their reactions in a journal, and shared their reactions with their cooperative learning groups. Data was collected through the use of an attitude scale, a self-

reporting reading scale, observation by the researcher, reader reaction journals, autobiographical sketches, an interest survey, and informal interviews. The author concluded that using cooperative learning strategies to teach reading can have positive effects on students' attitudes toward reading. Some of the specific positive effects included an increase in the length of books children chose to read, the value of finishing a book, and the appreciation of free reading time.

Madden (1988) reviewed literature which related to the improvement in reading attitudes of poor readers who work in cooperative reading teams. He defined cooperative reading teams as heterogeneous groups in which students vary in ability and need. He stated several special considerations that should be addressed when poor readers work in cooperative reading teams. First, all group members must be directed and encouraged to learn and complete their assignments. He found that one way this could be done is by asking each group to produce a single product and rewarding them for successful completion of the task. A second consideration recommended by this author was that until poor readers learn to operate comfortably in cooperative teams that the reading tasks be limited to those skills which they have already mastered.

Madden found that through cooperative reading teams poor readers' attitudes may improve in a variety of ways.

Poor readers begin to have positive feelings about reading and about themselves. Students recognize that continuing to increase their reading skills holds potential for reaching their basic needs to achieve academically and gain importance. Students become more internally motivated to increase their reading skills. They realize that growth in academic areas can be achieved. They also experience the fun of reading in a group setting where they can make substantial input and are valued by their peers.

Stevens, Madden, Slavin, and Farnish (1987) conducted two field experiments to evaluate a comprehensive cooperative learning approach to elementary reading and writing instruction. The model implemented with third- and fourth-grade students was labeled Cooperative Integrated Reading and Comprehension (CIRC). The CIRC model integrated the following cycle of cooperative learning activities: teacher instruction, team practice, individual assessments, and team recognition. The major focuses of the reading component of the CIRC program were: (a) to make effective use of reading follow-up time by having students work within cooperative teams on activities which coordinated with reading group instruction, (b) to increase students' opportunities to read aloud by having them read to teammates and training students in how to respond to one anothers reading, and (c) to use cooperative teams to help students

learn reading comprehension strategies.

The first field study included 461 third- and fourth-grade students in 21 classes in a suburban Maryland school district. There were 11 experimental classes and 10 control classes. The study took place over a 12-week time period. The control classes continued using their traditional method and curriculum materials. The experimental teachers received training in the CIRC program, which consisted of two 3-hour sessions. Standardized pretests and posttests were given.

The second study's subjects consisted of 450 third- and fourth-grade students in 22 classes in a suburban Maryland school district. There was an attempt in the second study to control for ethnic and socioeconomic background. There were nine experimental classrooms and 13 control classes. The duration of the study was 24 weeks. The control teachers continued with their traditional methods of teaching, and the experimental teachers received training in the CIRC program. Standardized pretests and posttests were given.

Stevens et al. (1987) stated that the results of the two field experiments supported the effectiveness of the CIRC program in producing significantly better reading achievement for third- and fourth-grade students. The results suggested that students performed better on two major reading skills, decoding and comprehension. The authors concluded that if

state-of-the-art principles of classroom organization, motivation, and instruction are used in the context of a cooperative learning program, student achievement in reading can be increased.

Slavin (1990) concluded that the CIRC program can be used in heterogeneous classes to reduce the need for special education and ability grouping. He stated that this cooperative learning design could be used consistently in the classroom. It can be used to teach strategies which apply to reading in a variety of contexts.

Uttero (1988) developed a model that enhances reading comprehension in the content areas through cooperative learning. She described three phases of the teaching model: (a) connection, (b) guided independent reading, and (c) follow up. Connection involves relating activities to what the student already knows. The author suggested students work cooperatively in small groups to activate and extend their background knowledge. Brainstorming, categorization, and comparing and contrasting are possible strategies to use in implementing the connecting phase of this model. The second phase is guided independent reading in which students focus their attention on the text. The author stated that in this phase students work together to achieve a common goal. The strategies students use may include, answering questions, outlining, and paraphrasing. Follow up is the final stage in

which students work cooperatively to summarize the main content from the text and apply it to new contexts.

Uttero concluded that this cooperative learning design enables students to assume responsibility for their own learning and to develop confidence in their ability to plan and execute tasks. The learning design appears to enhance comprehension in the content areas. Formal evaluation of this particular cooperative learning model was not available. Maring, Furman, and Blum-Anderson (1985) also concluded that cooperative learning techniques can be used effectively in content area classes. These authors stated that cooperative learning can be used successfully with all students including those who are mainstreamed in to content area classes.

In a review of research on cooperative learning, Slavin (1991b) stated that there are many different forms of cooperative learning. Though the various forms of cooperative learning differ, all of them involve having students work in small groups or teams to help one another learn academic material. Slavin stated that cooperative learning programs encourage students to discuss, debate, disagree, and ultimately to teach one another.

Research has shown that cooperative learning can be an effective alternative to the traditional practices of ability grouping students for reading instruction. Cooperative

learning can enhance students' academic achievement,
intergroup relations, and self-esteem. Smith (1989)
concluded that cooperative learning gives students an
opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for
their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers.

Mastery Learning

Mastery learning offers an alternative to ability
grouping. In organizing a classroom for mastery learning,
teachers may have to rethink their role in the classroom.
Through a mastery learning model, teachers are provided with
an opportunity to identify the individual needs of students and
teach students as individuals rather than as a group.

Bloom (cited in Berliner, 1985) concluded that most
students can master what teachers have to teach them, and
that it is the task of instruction to find ways for students to
achieve mastery. Bloom stated that if students are to attain
mastery, major changes must take place in: (a) the attitudes
of school personnel, (b) the teaching strategies developed, and
(c) the role of evaluation.

Based on the work of Carroll (1963), Bloom identified
five variables that influence learning. They are: (a) aptitude
for particular kinds of learning, (b) quality of instruction, (c)
ablility to understand instruction, (d) perseverance, and (e)
time allowed for learning.

Aptitude for particular kinds of learning. Mastery

learning should take place in an environment in which
students are normally distributed with respect to aptitude,
but the type and quality of instruction are made appropriate
for each student's needs. Bloom estimated that perhaps over
95% of the students can attain mastery in any given content
area. He argued that less than 5% of the population has
special disabilities which would prohibit them from attaining
mastery in a particular content area. However, there may be
some cases where the time invested in reaching a mastery
level makes attaining mastery questionable.

Quality of instruction. Bloom contended that the quality
of instruction is of great significance. The quality of
instruction should be considered in terms of its effect on
individual learners rather than on random groups of learners.

Ability to understand instruction. The classroom teacher
must recognize that it is the learning which is essential and
that many instructional alternatives are available. Some of
the available alternatives include: group study, tutorial help,
specialized textbooks, workbooks, programmed instructional
units, audiovisual methods, and academic games.

Perseverance. Students should be given tasks in which
they are able to persevere to a mastery level. Perseverance is
defined as the time the learner is willing to spend in learning
Carroll (1963). Bloom stated that students approach different
learning tasks with varying amounts of perseverance.

Time allowed for learning. A final consideration Bloom identified is that each student be allowed the time he/she needs to learn a concept. A fixed instructional time is likely to be too much for some students and not enough for other students.

Bloom (cited in Berliner, 1985) concluded that mastery learning can assist students in developing a lifelong interest in learning. He contended this continual learning should be the major goal of the educational system.

Slavin (1987b) identified three principal forms of mastery learning. They are: group-based, individualized, and continuous-progress. In group-based mastery learning, students receive instruction as a whole class and then take a formative test. Those whose scores exceed a preset criterion begin enrichment activities and those who do not achieve this criterion receive corrective instruction. Group-based mastery learning is the most commonly used form in the elementary school setting. The author stated that in either the individualized or continuous-progress forms students progress at their own rate taking as much time as they need to master the content being taught.

Slavin (1987c) determined, after a series of studies of at least four weeks in duration, that group-based mastery learning had no significant effect on standardized achievement testing and only moderate effects on

experimenter-made measures. However, there is evidence of successful continuous-progress forms of mastery learning in which students proceed through a hierarchy of skills at their own rate (Slavin 1987d).

Shannon (1984) concluded that schools cannot meet the basic components of a mastery learning program. The basic components of mastery learning identified by Shannon were: (a) Reading is segmented into separate skills which are arranged hierarchically according to difficulty, (b) teachers engage in a teach/test/reteach/retest instructional cycle, and (c) students are given unlimited time to learn one skill before progressing to the next skill in the hierarchy.

After looking at mastery learning programs in two school districts which he identified as models for other school districts considering mastery learning, Shannon identified three reasons that schools cannot meet the basic components of mastery learning. The reasons were: (a) Mastery learning is adopted in an attempt to legitimize reading programs to the public, (b) schools cannot meet the assumption of unlimited time to read, and (c) teachers are reduced to managers of materials during mastery learning reading instruction. Shannon contended that under a mastery learning model teachers become managers of materials rather than teachers of reading.

Manning and Lucking (1990) stated that mastery learning

can be an effective alternative to homogeneous ability grouping. They concluded that whether a group-based or a continuous-progress approach is used, mastery learning reduces the stigma placed on students who are grouped with a cluster of all low-ability students.

Bloom (1988) created a model involving five critical steps for students' success in learning, especially learning to read. One of the steps is mastery learning. He suggested that a simple approach to mastery learning be implemented. This simple approach would involve giving each student two chances to succeed, with additional teaching strategies applied between the two chances. He stated that as students begin to have greater success, their interest in learning and their self-concept will become more positive.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring can provide students with individualized instruction which may otherwise be unavailable. Both the tutor and the tutee may potentially benefit from peer tutoring. Peer tutoring offers teachers and students an effective alternative to ability grouping for reading instruction.

Ehly and Larsen (1980) defined peer tutoring as children teaching other children, usually on a one-to-one basis. Peer tutoring may employ students of varying ages, grade levels, sexes, academic and intellectual potentials, and ethnic

backgrounds. The authors stated that peer tutoring is not a new concept. When children were sent to one-room schoolhouses to receive instruction, older students were often responsible for teaching younger students. Ehly and Larsen identified the following four key considerations to be used when setting up a peer tutoring program: (a) setting up the goals of the peer tutoring program, (b) selection of the most appropriate tutees, (c) selection and training of the tutors, and (d) the criteria to be used when pairing the tutors and tutees.

Jenkins and Jenkins (1981) stated that the teacher plays an active role in implementing a peer tutoring program. The teacher establishes the instructional goals, determines the objectives, designs the lessons, chooses materials, and makes adjustments in instructional conditions as they are needed. The instructional decisions remain in the teacher's hands.

Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, and Allen (1976) reviewed research concerning tutoring programs involving student tutors. The authors concluded that several different kinds of tutoring programs can effectively improve the academic performance of tutees and, in some cases, that of tutors as well. They stated that a number of studies have found that low-achievers in reading have made significant gains in reading achievement following their tutoring of younger

children. The evidence on whether a tutee will benefit from being tutored by a paricular kind of tutor is mixed. However, it appears that a greater age difference between tutor and tutee results in somewhat better tutee performance. Although, there may be some instances when same age tutors are preferred.

Young (1990) stated that peer tutoring provides an alternative to grouping students by ability for reading instruction. He cited that researchers have found positive achievement and affective gains for both the tutor and the tutee. He concluded that since one teacher often has thirty students, the effects of the reading program could be multiplied many times over if the teacher included peer directed activities.

King (1982) contended that one widely used approach which attempts to provide individualized instruction without ability grouping students for reading is peer assisted learning (PAL). He stated that in addition to greater reading achievement, PAL has improved self-concept, increased frequency of social interactions, aided in social adjustment, enhanced classroom behavior, and improved attitudes toward school. King implemented three PAL programs to investigate the effectiveness of PAL in cross-age tutoring, within grade tutoring, and tutoring learning disabled pupils. He found support for the positive effects of PAL in all three studies.

Students placed in the experimental groups in each study scored significantly higher on various reading tests which were given at the end of each study. King concluded that regular classroom teachers who are searching for ways to teach reading, especially to students labeled reading disabled, should investigate peer assisted learning as one alternative.

Hiebert (1980) described a variety of social activities in which children learn from each other, such as roller skating. Interaction with peers provides a healthy arena for learning and reinforcing new tasks. Many people recognize that children learn from each other outside the classroom. However, the role of peers relative to that of adults in learning to read in the classroom is relatively small. Frequently, educators have viewed peer influence in the classroom as a negative force. Peer tutoring attempts to make use of the natural interaction that occurrs between peers. The author stated that since children greatly outnumber adults in the classroom, the learning opportunities in a reading program can be multiplied many times if teachers include peer-directed activities.

Hiebert stated that teachers need to plan carefully when setting up peer-directed activities. Teachers need to take into account students' developmental capabilities and their past experiences with peer-directed activities. Teachers must also provide the structure for the activity and keep an

eye on the development of the group. It requires a combined effort of teacher and student.

Flexible Grouping

Flexible grouping offers teachers and students a wide variety of choices. It has the potential to enhance students' motivation. Progress toward more open, individualized, small group learning in classrooms depends on teachers developing more organized and sophisticated approaches to reading instruction (Unsworth, 1984).

Unsworth (1984) proposed flexible within-class grouping of students for reading instruction. He concluded that the evidence is clear that teachers need to abandon many traditional approaches to reading classroom management. He based this conclusion on the increased range of individual differences among children, current knowledge of the reading process and how children learn to read, and current research on ability grouping. He used the following three categories to identify the principles involved in flexible grouping: composition of groups, management, and nature of group tasks.

Composition of groups. There are no permanent groups. Groups are periodically created, modified, or disbanded to meet the needs of the students. Groups vary in size depending on the needs of the group; they may be as small as two or three, or as large as nine or ten. At times there is only one

variety of roles as alternatives to traditional ability grouping. The most appropriate grouping pattern for each lesson can only be determined by assessing students strengths and needs and matching this information with the choices available. Three variables must interact successfully to ensure student success:

1. Teachers must choose an appropriate basis for grouping. There are many possible bases teachers may choose when grouping students. Some of the reasons may include, skill development, interest, work habits, prior knowledge of content, prior knowledge of strategies, task/activity criterion, social skills, random selection, or students' choices.

2. Choosing the most effective format is essential. Teachers need to look at the composition of the groups and the leadership roles in the groups. Group composition options usually include: individuals, dyads, small groups of three or four, larger groups of seven to ten, half-class groups, or whole class groups. Leadership options are typically teacher-led, student-led, or a combination of the both.

3. The authors identified choosing appropriate materials as the final major category. Some possible choices include: using the same materials for all groups, choosing different levels of material with a similiar theme, using different themes within a topic, or choosing different topics.

Flood et al. (1992) concluded that more research will need to be conducted to further clarify the strengths and weaknesses of flexible grouping patterns. However, they stated that it appears to hold promise for reading classrooms as an alternative to ability grouping.

Cunningham, Hall, and Defee (1991) developed a model of first-grade instruction that did not use ability grouping but did meet the diverse needs of a heterogeneous class of first graders. They conducted a study in which they used a combination of the following four approaches to reading instruction: the basal approach, a phonics approach, a literature approach, and a writing approach. The experimental group received instruction in each of these approaches daily. Grouping strategies that were used ranged from whole-class instruction to a variety of flexible grouping strategies. The results indicated that the non-ability-grouped instruction was very effective for children whose reading performance was low and did not appear to hinder the progress of children with high performance in reading.

Young (1990) defined flexible grouping as grouping students for a variety of purposes. Students may be placed in research groups, interest groups, needs groups, project groups, friendship groups, or visiting groups. He stated that these groups function only until that specific purpose is achieved. The interaction contained in flexible grouping

models provides struggling readers with good academic and behavior models that may not be available in low reading groups. Young contended that flexible grouping strategies can add both variety and interest to reading instruction.

Cooperative learning, mastery learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping models provide teachers with effective alternatives to ability grouping students for reading instruction. Teachers may choose to use one model exclusively or they may use a combination of several grouping strategies. Research has shown that reading instruction can be enhanced through the use of alternative teaching strategies.

Chapter 3

Interpretation

How to group students for reading instruction in the elementary school continues to be a problem faced by many educators. Since 1867, a traditional grouping practice in the United States has been to group students by ability or achievement (Manning & Lucking, 1990). Research has presented potential hazards in ability grouping students for instruction in the following areas: academic achievement, self-concept and attitudes, teacher behaviors, and multicultural concerns. The evidence presented seems to make it clear that educators must look for alternatives to ability grouping students for reading instruction. Cooperative learning, mastery learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping may offer such alternatives.

Academic Achievement

One potential hazard to ability grouping students can be found in the area of academic achievement. There has been no consistent evidence that academic achievement is enhanced when ability grouping is used for any group of students; however, there is evidence that it may reduce achievement levels in average- and low-ability groups (Dawson, 1987). Evidence has been presented that several of the alternatives addressed in this paper may enhance academic achievement.

Cooperative learning. Research on cooperative learning

has shown that academic ahievement in the elementary school is consistently increased when group rewards are given based on individual learning (Manning & Lucking, 1990; Slavin, 1990). This positive achievement appears to be dependent on the inclusion of group goals and individual accountability. If these two objectives are included high achievers as well as all students have been shown to benefit academically from cooperative learning (Slavin, 1991a).

Mastery learning. Evidence presented on mastery learning indicated that group-based mastery learning had no significant effect on standardized achievement testing (Slavin, 1987c). There was some evidence of gains in achievement when continuous-progress forms of mastery learning were used (Slavin, 1987d).

Peer tutoring. Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, and Allen (1976) found that peer tutoring programs can effectively improve the academic performance of tutees, and in some cases tutors as well. The authors identified a number of studies which stated that low-achievers in reading made significant gains in achievement following their tutoring of younger children.

Flexible grouping. Specific research was not available on whether flexible grouping strategies enhance student's academic achievement. Flexible grouping does provide students a wide range of choices and alternatives which are aimed at enhancing a variety of learning styles.

Self-Concept and Attitudes

A second potential hazard is that the self-concept of students placed in low-ability groups may be impaired, whereas the self-concept of students in high ability groups may be artificially inflated (Grant & Rothenberg, 1988; Hiebert, 1983). The alternatives addressed in this paper appear to offer positive results in improving students' self-concepts and attitudes.

Cooperative learning. Students' positive self-concept and attitudes have been enhanced when cooperative learning has been used for reading instruction (Coe, 1992; Madden, 1988). Coe found that some of the specific effects cooperative learning had on students' attitudes toward reading were an increase in the length of books children were reading, increased value placed on finishing a book, and a greater appreciation of free reading time.

Mastery learning. Manning and Lucking (1990) concluded that whether group-based or continuous-progress mastery learning approaches are used that the stigma placed on students who are grouped with a cluster of all low-ability students is significantly reduced. Bloom (1988) stated that as students begin to have greater success, their interest in learning and their self-concept will become more positive.

Peer tutoring. Young (1990) stated that researchers found positive affective gains for both the tutor and the tutee

when a peer tutoring format was used. Peer tutoring attempts to make use of the natural interaction which occurrs between peers.

Flexible grouping. One of the components of flexible grouping is that there are no permanent reading groups. Groups are created to meet the needs of the students at a particular time and then are disbanded. Students are not identified as low- or high-ability readers, therefore low-ability readers may be able to maintain a higher self-concept. The interaction which takes place in flexible grouping models provides struggling readers with good role models which often creates higher interest and more positive attitudes toward reading.

Teacher Behaviors

A third potential hazard involves the way teachers behave in dealing with various ability groups. Research has shown that teachers responded differently to students in different levels of ability groups. Students in high-ability groups often received higher quality instruction and more instructional time (Wuthrick, 1990). The teacher's role is clearly defined in each of the four alternatives to ability grouping.

Cooperative learning. The role of the teacher in cooperative learning groups is that of a facilitator. Students take responsibility for their own learning (Smith, 1989).

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1990) identified five major sets of strategies included in the teacher's role:

1. Clearly specify the objectives for the lesson.

2. Make decisions about placing students in learning groups before the lesson is taught.

3. Clearly explain the task and goal structure to the students.

4. Monitor the effectiveness of the cooperative learning groups and intervene to provide task assistance or to increase group skills when necessary.

5. Evaluate the students' achievement and help students discuss how well they collaborated with each other.

Mastery learning. In a mastery learning model, the teacher's role is to address the individual needs of each student rather than basing instruction on the needs of identified groups of students or on the needs of a whole class. The classroom teacher must recognize that it is the learning which is essential and that many instructional alternatives are available.

Peer tutoring. The teacher plays an active role in implementing a peer tutoring model. The teacher establishes the instructional goals, determines the objectives, designs the lessons, chooses materials, and makes adjustments in instructional conditions as they are needed (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1981).

Flexible grouping. Teachers may choose to use a variety of flexible grouping strategies. Each strategy requires a considerable amount of teacher planning. Teachers must have: (a) a plan for the composition of the groups, (b) identified group management strategies, and (c) tasks which reflect the needs and interests of the students in the group.

Multicultural Concerns

A final potential hazard is that poor and minority students are substantially overrepresented in the lower-ability groups (Goodlad & Oakes, 1988; Manning & Lucking, 1990). Although the research reviewed for each of the four alternatives did not directly address these multicultural concerns, each alternative maintains the philosophy that equal opportunities must be presented for all students.

Cooperative learning. Since cooperative learning groups must be heterogeneous, including students of low, average, and high ability, and must include both male and female students, poor and minority students are provided equal instruction with that of any other student in the classroom. Students may need to be taught how to work cooperatively and to accept individual differences (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1990). One of the essential components of cooperative learning is the inclusion of group goals. In order to achieve these group goals students must be able to maintain effective working relationships.

Mastery learning. Bloom (cited in Beliner, 1985) stated that 95% of all students can master what teachers have to teach them. All students, including minorities and students from low-income families, receive quality individualized instruction in a mastery learning model.

Peer tutoring. Peer tutoring may employ students of varying ages, grade levels, sexes, academic and intellectual potentials, and ethnic backgrounds (Ehly & Larsen, 1980). Tutors and tutees are selected based on their individual needs.

Flexible grouping. Students are placed in a wide variety of grouping settings. Groups may be formed for research, interests, needs, projects, friendships, or visiting (Young, 1990). There are no permanent groups which may lead to the isolation of poor or minority students.

Cooperative learning, mastery learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping are four possible alternatives to grouping students by ability or achievement for reading instruction. The four alternatives appear to offer positive results in regard to concerns identified by researchers in the area of ability grouping.

Chapter 4

Application

One purpose of this paper was to apply the results of the literature which was reviewed, regarding the merits of ability grouping, to a classroom setting. The author of this paper teaches fourth-grade in a K-5 elementary school in La Crosse, Wisconsin. There are approximately 24 students in this classroom, which has a diverse group of students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. Both students labeled Cognitively Disabled Borderline and students labeled Learning Disabled are mainstreamed into the classroom.

The school district's reading curriculum is in a state of transition. It is moving from a traditional ability grouped format to more holistic instruction. Teachers are using and receiving support from the school district for holistic instruction on a voluntary basis.

After reviewing current literature on ability grouping and possible alternatives, this author is not planning to group her fourth grade students by ability level for reading instruction. My plan is to maintain a heterogeneous classroom of students during reading instruction. Within this heterogeneous classroom I plan to use a variety of grouping strategies, some of which have been investigated in this paper. Cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping strategies will be integrated into a heterogeneous

whole group instructional format.

The philosophy supporting the reading program will be that of a holistic approach. The classroom environment and daily routine will encourage independent reading as the primary activity integrated with writing, speaking, and listening. Isolated reading skills will be taught only as they are needed. Students will be given ownership of their time.

This author believes that all students can succeed and that success breeds success. Therefore, all students will be provided with opportunities to succeed and reinforced for those successes. The format for reading instruction will require students to choose and read books independently at their individual reading level. Students will record the books which they read and respond to their readings in a journal format. A mini-lesson will be taught at the beginning of each reading class. Mini-lessons are short, teacher initiated whole group instructional sessions for demonstrating reading strategies and preparing students to read new books successfully and independently. The mini-lessons will address both the observed needs of the class and teacher-selected skills.

Cooperative learning will be used daily as part of the reading class. Each student will be a member of a cooperative learning group. The cooperative groups will have both group goals and individual goals (Johnson, Johnson, &

Holubec, 1990). Each group member will be individually responsible for completing the 3 R's of the reading class: read, record, and respond. On the last day of the week, one member from each group will be selected on a random basis to represent the group. If this group member has completed the 3 R's, each member of the group will receive a reading award for that week. Students will have an opportunity to meet with their groups on a daily basis to respond to the books they are reading and to check that each group member has a plan for completing both the individual and group goals for that week.

Students will periodically be involved in peer tutoring. The fourth grade students may be asked to tutor younger students, either on specific reading skills or simply by reading to them from a variety of reading genre. Paired reading activities within the fourth-grade classroom will also be used. Students may be asked to read together, quiz each other, reteach a specific skill, or assist each other in book selection.

Flexible grouping strategies will be applied within the whole group instructional format. Groups will vary in size and nature depending on the group's task (Unsworth, 1984). Students may be placed in research groups, interest groups, needs groups, project groups, friendship groups, or visiting groups (Young, 1990). Flexible grouping will be used to achieve a specific purpose and then will be disbanded. This

will provide students with an opportunity for individualized instruction without the label of a specific reading group.

The grouping strategies which were researched in this paper show promise in effectively meeting the individual needs of elementary school children. This author plans to use a variety of these strategies as alternatives to the traditional ability grouping of students for reading instruction. Cooperative learning, mastery learning, peer tutoring, and flexible grouping strategies hold the potential to bring positive changes to future reading instruction in the elementary school.

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