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# **Reconsidering Instructional Groupings**

**Richard L. Allington**

For over a half-century elementary school teachers have organized students for reading instruction into achievement groupings (sometimes mislabeled “ability groups”). The traditional three group scheme – top, middle and bottom – was recommended shortly after the turn of the century as a better alternative to whole class instruction. The idea was that creating three instructional groups would allow teachers to match the pace of reading instruction to the presumed learning aptitudes of their students. The central premise of the three group scheme was that only some children could be expected to acquire full literacy – that many students did not have the capacity to learn to read and write beyond very basic levels. Remember, though, that this was in an era when most students did not complete high school and most jobs involved agricultural or assembly line work.

The three group scheme has come under increasing scrutiny over the past few years as American society changed and our understanding of how children learn to read and write increased. Today, there are few jobs in agriculture or on the assembly line and even these jobs typically require high levels of literacy. We are an information society – a society that now rewards those who can organize and manipulate information more than those who manufacture

goods. We are a society which imports high-tech workers from other countries while we export agricultural and manufacturing jobs. We are a society that no longer has useful roles for poorly educated, low-literacy level workers. We are a society that no longer can support a bottom group.

All this presents difficulties for schools that are designed to produce a bottom group – elementary schools, for instance, where it is simply accepted that not all primary grade children will learn to read with their peers. Such schools are those most likely to continue to group children by how much they know about reading and writing when they arrive for kindergarten. These low-experience with literacy children then go on to become the first grade bottom group. A major difficulty with the three group organization is that initial group placement, which usually occurs in kindergarten or first grade, is largely maintained throughout a school career. That is, children placed in the top group remain among the highest achievers and the bottom group children remain among the lowest achievers through elementary, middle and high school (Barr and Dreeben, 1991). This result should not be surprising because children in different groups receive different instruction and these instructional differences virtually ensure some children will remain behind their peers in acquiring literacy (Allington, 1983).

The most common strategy for differentiating instruction for groups of children identified as less able has been to “slow it down and make more concrete” (Allington, 1991). In other words, these children are paced more slowly through instructional materials and offered more drill and practice activities, usually on isolated subskills. As a result, children in the bottom group typically do not meet grade level curricular goals and may actually read and write less than

children in the top and middle groups. This is a case of the rich getting richer and the poor poorer.

As we have learned more about how children learn to read and write it has become obvious that virtually all children who enter our kindergartens can acquire literacy along with their peers. To accomplish this, however, requires designing schools and instructional programs that accelerate the reading acquisition of those children who arrive with few experiences with print. Acceleration requires that we offer some students substantially more and better instruction from their earliest school experiences. This instruction must offer expanded opportunities to read and write and access to teachers who can facilitate learning to read.

One problem with three groups was the need for large quantities of independent seatwork to occupy those children not working with the teacher. Thus, the traditional workbooks were developed and soon became a common feature of elementary school reading and language arts instruction (Langer and Allington, 1991). Though all children can benefit from some well-chosen independent tasks, traditional seatwork often occupied two-thirds of the reading period when children were grouped! In these cases, children spent more time on the relatively less useful tasks of practicing isolated skills than they spent on reading, writing, or in discussion of the stories they had read. Real reading and writing activities came to play only a small role in daily reading lessons. Too often, those children who were experiencing difficulty learning to read and write spent the largest amounts of time working on seatwork tasks and the smallest amounts of time actually reading and writing. Traditional seatwork occupied children but did little to develop their reading and writing abilities and did not foster accelerated development in the lowest achieving children.

## **Single curriculum with flexible grouping**

Criticism of the three group strategy has resulted in a perceptible shift toward increased use of whole-class reading instruction. The premise here is that if grouping children by achievement produces negative results, the obvious alternative is the elimination of such groups. Unfortunately, mandating whole-class instruction does not eliminate the real differences in children that produced the initial recommendation for differential goals achieved through grouping.

Classrooms will always contain children who differ one from another on a myriad of features, including their outside of school experiences with reading and writing and their proclivity for learning to read and write. We cannot expect that whole class instruction will be equally useful for all children. At the same time, the negative impact of organizing achievement groups is so well documented that we can no longer view the traditional three group classroom organization as viable. Fortunately, we do not have to choose – this is not an either/or situation. We can organize classroom instruction in ways that acknowledge the differences in children as literacy learners and yet does not limit their potential for learning (Cunningham, Hall and Defee, 1991).

We must begin with the children. We must agree that all children have the right to access the same rich literacy curriculum. In other words, all children have access to wonderful children's literature, to higher-order instruction, to rich opportunities to read and write and the opportunity to talk about their reading and writing with their peers. We begin with the belief that all children are learners and that each can and will learn to read. We begin by acknowledging that some children need more and better teaching than others (McGill-Franzen and Allington, 1991). This done, we begin

to rethink how we might organize our classrooms to achieve these goals.

A central premise of the alternative approach is that we can accelerate the literacy learning of children, especially those children who have often found learning to read difficult. This view acknowledges that children differ in many ways, especially in their literacy experiences before beginning school. However, rather than viewing these differences as signals to slow down instruction, the differences we observe in children are viewed as signals to enhance instruction, by any of several means, in order to accelerate their literacy learning and allow all children to become literate with their peers. We might enhance instruction by using whole group, small group, pairs or independent work.

For instance, we might work with a small group of children in a review or reinforcement activity following presentation of a main lesson to all children. We might have a reading, learning disabilities, or bilingual specialist teacher who will reinforce, reteach, or offer a review lesson for some students after the main lesson. We could organize cooperative learning groups and allow children to learn from each other. Perhaps we will elect to use pairs, reading partners, older student tutors, or some other one-to-one arrangement. We might have the reading material audio-tape recorded so that some students could preview or review the material outside of school. We might move around the room and work briefly with several individual children as they work through their lesson. We might decide that we need to offer another whole-class main lesson because so many children did not seem to understand our first attempt. We might create literature study groups of children who elect to read the same book. We could involve some children in dramatization to support understanding or extend interpretation.

We could elect to do a shared reading or a read-aloud if the story poses much difficulty. We could create an extended-day, after school program that provided children with the opportunity for close personal attention. In other words, we might adjust instruction in any number of ways – but how we adjust depends upon the children.

Some will say, “But that is just whole-class teaching.” But that is not really an appropriate description. It is better viewed as a single-curriculum approach – an approach that recognizes that while children do differ in many ways, they remain yet more alike than different. It is a variety of instructional groupings within the framework of a single rich literacy curriculum for all children. In order to ensure all children access to this rich curriculum we organize and reorganize our reading instruction, always attempting to address the differences individual children present as readers and writers. There is no single organizational scheme that we can simply put in place and leave alone. Every lesson, every story, every day presents a different set of opportunities for teaching and a different set of instructional problems. The only organizational strategy that can work is one that is flexible.

Providing all children with access to the same rich curriculum does not mean that all children always do all the same tasks and activities nor do they all read the same books and write on the same topics. There should be a core of readings and instructional activities that all children experience. It is this common curriculum that allows children to talk with one another, to learn from and about one another. It is also this core curriculum experience that allows the teacher to observe the similarities and differences in learners. But this core experience is just the beginning from which we adjust instruction. The core experiences hold the

lessons together and provide direction from which children can work.

## Summary

Once we decide that all children will work on the same curriculum, we need to think about how to best adjust our teaching to meet the needs of those children who need more challenging tasks and those who need more instructional support than other children. We need, also, to think about how to foster students' independent, self-selection of reading material and writing topics. We need to reorganize our resources to provide some children with access to more and better instruction in order to accelerate their development. However, until we decide that all children will learn to read there is little motivation to redesign our instruction. Eliminating achievement groups can begin the redesigning process, but it will only be the beginning.

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