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To Group or Not to Group:
A Qualitative Study of Middle School Principals' Decision Making
Processes Concerning Ability Level Grouping

A dissertation
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education

by
Linda B. Stroud
May 2002

Dr. Russell Mays, Chair
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Dr. Lori Marks
Dr. Russ West

Keywords: Grouping, Ability-level Grouping, Homogeneous, Heterogeneous, Tracking, Decision-making

ABSTRACT

To Group or Not to Group:

A Qualitative Study of Middle School Principals' Decision Making Processes Concerning Ability Level Grouping

by

Linda B. Stroud

The topic of ability level grouping of students for instructional purposes is one of the most studied areas of research in educational literature. However, because of the inconclusive findings in the literature, no clear answer to the question of whether homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping is in the best educational interest of students has been established. Middle school administrators play a particularly important role in the debate concerning the use of ability grouping in individual schools because the pattern for future educational tracks of students is established at the middle level. An exploration of the factors that affect the decision making processes of middle school principals concerning whether to implement homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping was deemed to be important in lending understanding to practitioners in the field faced with the responsibility of implementation of middle school programming.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that influence middle school principals in the east Tennessee region when deciding to implement homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping of students in their schools. Data were collected through a series of audio taped interviews and transcribed for inductive analysis. Themes that emerged from the data analysis of the open-ended interviews were deducted into findings presented within the context of reviewed literature.

The impact of student achievement, standardized test accountability, social factors that affect students, the perceptions of teachers and parents, programming for special education and gifted students, the impact of educational research, and the personal philosophies of the research participants concerning homogeneous versus heterogeneous instruction emerged as influential themes that affected principals' decisions to implement ability level grouping. Specific recommendations for educational practice included the implementation of ability grouping at the middle level exclusively in the areas of mathematics, language, and reading, flexible scheduling that allows for movement of students between groups, and changing the yearly assignment of teachers to a specific ability group for instruction. The need for additional quantitative and qualitative research was also suggested.

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family. To my wonderfully supportive husband, Tim, thank you for your love and encouragement. I realize how blessed I am to have a partner who is willing to let me be me. To my two precious children, Trent and Anna, I pray that you will set your goals high and work hard to achieve them. Your mom is your biggest cheerleader and immensely proud of you! Always.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to the students and faculty of Greeneville Middle School. Thanks for carrying on without me for several months and for the consistent words of encouragement. I hope my experience will serve as proof that “you can do it!” It is because of the students and teachers at GMS that in my heart it will always be “The Best Middle School in the State of Tennessee.”

Finally, I am grateful to the dedicated faculty of the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University for providing me with a wonderful learning experience throughout my entire program. I have the greatest respect for my committee members, Dr. Louise MacKay, Dr. Lori Marks, and Dr. Russ West. I extend special thanks to my chairperson and advisor, Dr. Russell Mays. Not only did I learn much from his suggestions and feedback, but also his patience, humor, and love for children have served as personal and professional inspirations to me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of middle school administrators toward the practice of ability level grouping of students and the administrators' decision-making processes in implementing grouping of students in their schools. The debate over tracking of students based on ability level has raged in educational forums for over 70 years (Slavin, 1993). Such prominent groups as the National Governor's Association, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Children's Defense Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the College Board, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund have condemned tracking (Oakes, 1992b). However, 82% of middle schools responding to a 1993 National Association of Secondary Schools Principals (NASSP) survey reported some degree of ability grouping was being used in their schools. Additionally, 64% of principals and 61% of assistant principals favor some type of grouping in their schools (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993).

Historically, tracking of students in the United States began during the Depression years, when students who might otherwise have been working poured into high schools by the thousands. Tracking was often used as a tool of discrimination with tests measuring IQ and academic achievement lending legitimacy to the grouping of minority and lower socioeconomic students (Mirel, 1998). In the late 1950s an American public outcry went up with the Russian launch of Sputnik. It was feared that American students were not keeping pace academically with students abroad. Programs for academically gifted students flourished, especially in math and science (Ravitch & Vinovskis, 1995). Heightened concern about racial discrimination, poverty, social inequality, and students with disabilities continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically designed programs for gifted education, special education, compensatory education, and bilingual programs gained legal backing and institutionalized the conviction that any standardized education would deny opportunities for students with extraordinary needs (Ravitch & Vinovskis,).

From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, differentiation in education in the form of tracking came under fire. It was asserted that tracking unfairly categorized students by race and socioeconomic status, stigmatized struggling learners, and assigned them to lower ability classes from which they could never escape (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1993). Slavin stated, "Because of demoralization, low expectations, and poor behavioral models, students in the low tracks are more prone to delinquency, absenteeism, drop-out, and other social problems" (p. 547).

Grouping students by ability level frequently begins in earnest in middle schools where students are often placed in homogeneously grouped classes for math and language arts and in heterogeneously grouped classes for science and social studies. Placements are made based upon students' previous grades, teacher recommendations,

and placement tests. However, it has been found that parents sometimes insisted on a particular placement and that parent interventions into grouping decisions are potential sources of inequity (Useem, 1992).

Two of the most prominent analysts in current research involving the debate surrounding ability-level grouping practices are Robert Slavin, a critic of tracking, and James G. Kulik, a defender of some forms of ability grouping. Both researchers have conducted meta-analyses of tracking and ability grouping. Slavin (1993) concluded from his evidence that tracking had no effect on achievement and asserted that, "If the effects of ability grouping on student achievement are zero, then there is little reason to maintain the practice" (p. 552). Kulik, however, found that tailoring course content to ability level yields a consistently positive effect on the achievement of high ability students. Therefore, Kulik's (1992) position was that because ability grouping benefits high achieving students and harms no one, its abolition would be a mistake.

Given the amount of conflicting research available, how do school administrators form policy and make decisions concerning ability-grouped classes in their schools? Academic standards and achievement results assume a dominant role in public educational policy. In schools, learning depends upon a multitude of factors, some within the control of the educators and some not. Loveless (1998) stated:

Individual schools must have the latitude to make decisions about the best way to educate students, including whether tracking, ability grouping, or heterogeneous grouping works best for their pupils... Teachers and principals are in the best position to structure the learning environment so that it works well because they know their students better than policymakers sitting many miles away... In this spirit, states and districts should establish clear expectations for achievement, judge schools by whether they attain them, and leave decisions about tracking and ability grouping to teachers, parents, and principals. Some schools will track, others will untrack. (p. 21)

Statement of the Problem

Although an abundance of research covering over 70 years of debate surrounds the issue of heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping of students, researchers have not come to consensus concerning best educational practice of this topic. Loveless (1998) asserted that best practice should be left up to individual school communities and administrators. Building level administrators are charged with the ultimate responsibility for learning and achievement of students in their schools. However, little research has been done concerning the decision making process that administrators use to decide whether ability level grouping will be used in their schools and to what extent.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the decision-making process that middle school administrators use to determine if ability level grouping of students will take place in their schools and, if so, to what extent. A review of the literature revealed extensive research on the subject of tracking and ability level grouping of students on the middle school level. However, little information pertaining to the decision making process used by administrators related to ability level grouping was found.

In order to explore the richness of middle level administrators' values toward tracking and how decisions are made at the individual school level to determine the extent of ability grouping, a naturalistic design of research was used. An open-ended interviewing technique using an interview guide was used to discuss the topic with middle school administrators.

Elementary schools typically use ability grouping to organize students within classes with instruction targeted to each group's level (Loveless, 1998). In middle schools, groups are often referred to as heterogeneous (mixed ability levels) or homogeneous (same ability levels), for the purpose of grouping and scheduling students into classes. Tracking is a term often used in secondary schools to describe the enrollment of students in courses in academic subjects that reflect differences in students' prior learning (Loveless). The terms ability grouping, ability level grouping, and tracking were used interchangeably throughout this study.

Limitations and Delimitations

Qualitative inquiry is naturally limited by the prevention of the results of the study being generalized to other settings and populations. However, data and theory generated from the study were presented in such a way as to enable the reader to determine its transferability to other settings and will contribute to the existing body of knowledge concerning ability level grouping. The research was influenced by the values of the participants and the researcher regarding the topic of study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study was delimited to principals of middle schools and K-8 schools in east Tennessee.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 of this study included a brief overview of the topic to be researched including an introduction

to the literature concerning ability level grouping. Chapter 1 also included a statement of the problem and the limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 presented a thorough examination of the literature beginning with the history of research on ability level grouping, including studies that support the practice of grouping and studies that condemn its use. Specific information from the literature concerning middle school instructional practices and demographic information concerning the middle school principalship was also presented. Finally, chapter 2 included specific research findings concerning the decision-making processes that principals used in making decisions concerning the implementation of heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping of students for instruction. Chapter 3 explained the qualitative process as the method of research that was used in this study. Chapter 3 described the research design, research participants, data collection process, and data analysis. Chapter 4 gave a rich description of the findings of the research including specific demographic descriptions of the sites of the interviews and participants of the study. Chapter 5 presented the conclusions of this study, including a discussion of how the findings contribute to the literature, implications for practice, and suggestions for related areas of future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Perhaps no other topic in the literature concerning educational research has been explored to the extent as the use of ability-level grouping of students for instructional purposes. More than 70 years of research and over 700 studies and articles have failed to end the raging debate concerning homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping of students in our schools (Loveless, 1998).

The first reported practice of grouping students by intellectual ability or academic achievement began in 1867 in St. Louis, Missouri (Manning & Lucking, 1990). According to Lockwood and Cleveland (1998), Alfred Binet's intelligence testing gained widespread use at the beginning of World War I when masses of young men enlisted in the American armed forces in 1917. The military used standardized IQ tests to measure perceived mental capabilities to identify potential officers from enlisted men. Shortly thereafter, American schools began to test and group students for different tracks of instruction based on the notion that the economy required workers with a variety of skills and knowledge.

The landmark Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 further stratified educational policies, and schools increasingly relied on standardized testing to educationally sort students throughout the 1960s and 1970s. However, during the 1980s, a series of alarming publications including *A Nation at Risk* (1983), *A Nation Prepared* (1985), and *Workforce 2000* (1987) called for America's educational system to make radical changes to prepare our nation and students for future global competition (Lockwood & Cleveland, 1998). Oakes made a call for the halt of the practice of ability-level tracking of students in Americas' schools in the 1985 publication, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. Oakes' scathing condemnation of tracking described why this widespread educational practice was interfering with a quality education for most students and had led to a gradual change in the practice of ability grouping in public schools (Lockwood & Cleveland).

However, George (1990) estimated that although 85% of the research on ability level grouping indicates that grouping is an ineffective practice, perhaps as many as 85% of schools use some form of grouping of students for instruction. Epstein and Mac Iver (1990), using data from the Johns Hopkins Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools survey of 1,753 middle level schools, wrote that principals reported that over 40% of the middle

grade schools used some between-class grouping, and over 20% assigned students to all classes based on their ability. Additionally, Sorenson and Hallinan (1986) theorized that the practice remains entrenched in our schools because educators tend not to believe the research findings on ability grouping that shows little or no effects on student achievement, perhaps because the research is not convincing. Indeed, Loveless (1998) pointed out that years of study on tracking have failed to quantify its impact on education and stated “the research on tracking and ability grouping is frequently summarized in one word: inconclusive” (p. 14).

The subject of ability level grouping of students has also been extensively debated in the popular press. Allan (1991) stated that a 1988 article in *Better Homes and Gardens* asked, “Is Your Child Being Tracked for Failure?” In 1989, *Psychology Today* ran “Tracked to Fail” and *U.S. News and World Report* published “The Label That Sticks” (Allan). The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported as recently as April, 2001, a huge debate among parents in that school district concerning plans to eliminate all ability grouping except advance placement classes in the city’s high schools. The report stated that one parent and former school board member brought “for sale” signs to the school board meeting, warning that eliminating grouping in their schools would drive residents out of the city and into suburban schools.

Clearly, there remain two areas of thought concerning the benefits and detriments of ability level grouping in both the educational literature and public perception. Bode (1996) stated that, “Some of these contradictory conclusions can be attributed to the fact that different outcomes—academic versus social—are being referenced” (p.1). Bode further speculated that the seemingly contradictory results found in educational research may be due to the fact that different issues are being measured by proponents and opponents. Those who posit that ability level grouping is an effective form of instruction (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000; Hallinan & Sorensen, 1987; Kulik & Kulik, 1982) typically analyze performance of students grouped for instruction as compared to whole-class instruction measured by quantitative studies. The purpose of these studies tends to be a determination of the effectiveness of ability grouping in producing student achievement as compared to not using it, usually without regard to differential effects across ability groups. Conversely, those who believe that ability grouping is an ineffective form of instruction and has detrimental effects for all students (Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1990; Wheelock, 1992), typically compare the performance of students in the higher ability groups to that of students in the lower groups. Much of this research tends to be qualitative in nature and attempts to describe the quality of instruction between ability groups, usually without regard to its effect on student achievement (Bode).

There seems to be no clear understanding of why some schools choose to group students by ability in all classes, others use ability grouping in select subject areas, and still other schools use heterogeneous grouping across subjects. The problem seems to be how to negotiate a compromise that will benefit both low and high achieving

students. Lockwood and Cleveland (1998) stated, “The term ‘excellence’ is commonly used today as a rallying cry to improve student achievement and ‘equity’ refers to the access and participation in a quality education for all students” (p. 2).

Davidson (1997) speculated that there are several explanations for the continued use of ability grouping in schools that may be deduced from the literature. According to Davidson, the first perpetuated belief in our schools remains that the educational differences between students cannot be dealt with effectively within a common school experience. Therefore, a curriculum that is stratified remains necessary to prepare students for their appropriate roles in society and the world of work. Additionally, there remain powerful social beliefs held by parents and society as a whole concerning tracking of students that perpetuates its use.

Secondly, Davidson (1997) posited that the way that schools remain organized affects the continued use of tracking. Teachers are usually responsible for large numbers of learners, making it difficult to attend to the individual needs of students. The curriculum also continues to be presented in a scope and sequence approach of sequentially arranged topics that require prerequisite knowledge and mastery of prior skills. Therefore, unless students are similar in their abilities and speed of learning, pacing becomes a problem for many teachers.

The third trend that remains entrenched in our educational practices, according to Davidson (1997), is that high track grouping offers educational and social advantages that are fiercely defended by parents and many teachers of students placed in the higher tracks. These parents and teachers are usually extremely vocal and are respected and powerful constituents in the educational community. Therefore, their efforts of lobbying for the retention of high ability grouping are much stronger than the voice of those parents or teachers who might oppose its use. Finally, Davidson claimed that it is often “easier to remain with what is familiar than to take a risk on the unknown” (p. 11). The research has provided some suggestions for alternatives to grouping, however, no consistent data seem to exist concerning what works and why (Davidson).

Anti-Ability Level Grouping Research

One of the most prolific writers in the literature denouncing ability level grouping is Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins University for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools. Slavin has conducted two comprehensive meta-analyses of the existing literature on the subject. The first meta-analysis conducted by Slavin (1987) involved grouping practices at the elementary school level. In his review Slavin (1987) attempted to clarify the discrepancies between different forms of grouping by studying the effects of four types of elementary grouping practices. These included self-contained grouped classes, regrouping classes for reading and math, cross-grade grouping by ability, and within-class ability grouping. Slavin concluded in the initial 1987 review that there is no measurable achievement gain when elementary students are instructed in homogeneously grouped classes as compared to

students taught in heterogeneous classes. It is interesting to note that Slavin's conclusions were qualified by several findings.

Slavin (1987) did conclude that some regrouping strategies provided positive effects on average achievement. The positive findings were especially notable when grouping assignments were flexible, monitored regularly, and limited to one or two subjects. However, it was not clear whether the positive findings in Slavin's 1987 review were maintained over time. Additionally, Slavin found that while there were some positive gains for average students in homogeneous grouping, there was an increased inequality of achievement between the highest tracked students and the students placed in the lowest tracks.

Slavin's findings from the second meta-analysis (1990) on ability grouping in middle and high schools parallels his findings from the 1987 review of research concerning elementary school grouping. The 1990 study included data from 27 middle schools that met Slavin's inclusion criteria for the study. Slavin found that, "across the 27 studies...the effects of ability grouping on student achievement are essentially zero" (Slavin, 1993, p. 539). However, according to Davidson (1997) although Slavin's findings were consistent with earlier findings, several limitations were widely documented. Davidson pointed out that most of the samples were small with no national representation data included for the non-experimental groups and that the comparisons were restricted to the same subjects. Slavin also acknowledged that, "None of the studies reviewed were systematic observations of teaching and learning" (Slavin, 1990, p. 493).

The findings of Slavin in his two meta-analyses mirror the earlier findings of Bryan and Findley in a 1970 meta-analysis of the first 50 years of research on ability grouping. According to Bryan and Findley the major issue of whether ability grouping was effective as an organizational technique was inconclusive as evidenced by this summary statement:

Briefly, we find that ability grouping...shows no consistent positive value for helping students generally, or particular groups of students, to learn better. Taking all students into account, the balance of findings is chiefly of no strong effect, either favorable or unfavorable. Among the studies showing significant effects, the slight preponderance of evidence showing the practice favorable for the learning of high ability students is more than offset by evidence of unfavorable effects on the learning of average and low ability groups, particularly the latter. Finally, those instances of special benefit under ability grouping have generally involved substantial modification of materials and methods, which may well be the influential factors wholly apart from grouping. (p. 126)

Oakes at the University of California-Los Angeles is another researcher who has written extensively against the use of ability level grouping. In a 1985 national study of middle and secondary schools, Oakes found a sizable difference in the curriculum content, classroom climate, and quality of instruction between high and low ability grouped classes. Oakes found that high track classes' curricula emphasized algebra, statistics, and classic literature while the low ability classes emphasized basic skills with the use of multiple worksheets. Low track classes were also found by Oakes to have low teacher expectations with disruptive classroom climates and an inordinate amount of time spent on behavior control, rather than instruction.

Oakes (1992) looked at the practice of grouping from a predominantly qualitative point of view and expounded on "studies attending specifically to the technical, normative, and political dimensions of developing, implementing, and evaluating tracking alternatives" (p. 12). Oakes agreed with Slavin's (1987) findings that ability grouping offers few or no achievement benefits and "that, in most cases, tracking fails to foster the outcomes schools value" (p. 12). Oakes stated that schools with large populations of students from predominately low socioeconomic and minority families tend to offer limited academic tracks and large remedial and vocational programs. Thus, Oakes argued that tracking reinforces societal norms of racism with low-income students and non-Asian minorities disproportionately enrolled in low-track academic classes and advantaged students and whites more often enrolled in the high tracks.

Wheelock also made a strong case against the use of tracking in public education with the 1992 release of her book, *Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools*. According to Wheelock, ability testing has proven to be more a measure of privilege or deprivation than intelligence. Additionally, Wheelock posited that underprivileged children are often tracked as slow learners and, as such, receive inferior instruction, fewer resources and lowered expectations.

Pro-Ability Level Grouping Research

Although many writers have made a strong case to eliminate the use of ability level grouping, others have maintained that it is a necessary practice that enhances the learning and opportunities for achievement of all children, regardless of their individual group placement. This justification of grouping by aligning instruction to students' academic needs in order to raise achievement is consistent across subjects and grade levels.

Just as Slavin is one of the leading voices against ability level grouping in the research literature, Kulik of the University of Michigan has written extensively in defense of the practice. Kulik has concluded that, "American education would be harmed by the wholesale elimination of programs that group learners for instruction by ability" (Kulik, 1998, p.3). Kulik also conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of existing research on the topic of ability level grouping with major differences in findings from that of Slavin. According to Kulik and Kulik (1991), tailoring

course content to ability level yields a consistently positive effect on the achievement of high ability students. Academic enrichment programs produce significant gains, while accelerated programs, where students tackle the curriculum of later grades, produce the largest gains of all. Accelerated gifted students dramatically outperform similar students in non-accelerated classes (Kulik & Kulik).

One of the major findings of the Kulik and Kulik (1982) meta-analysis was reported as follows:

The effect of grouping is near zero on the achievement of average and below average students; it is not negative...students seemed to like their school subjects more when they studied with peers of similar ability, and some students in grouped classes even developed more positive attitudes about themselves and about school. (p. 420)

Kulik (1998) used his findings to challenge the conclusions of Oakes concerning the issues of low self-esteem and inequality caused by grouping. In fact, Kulik (1998) made a strong statement that, "Oakes conclusions, however, are based on her own selective and idiosyncratic review of older summaries of the literature and on her uncontrolled classroom observations. Objective analysis of findings from controlled studies provides little support for her speculations" (p. 3). Surprisingly, Slavin (1987) also concluded that grouping students for reading and mathematics "can be instructionally effective if the level and pace of instruction is adapted to the achievement level of the regrouped class and if the students are not regrouped for more than one or two different subjects" (p. 299).

According to Loveless (1998), three things are striking about the Slavin-Kulik debate. First, the professional disagreement hinges on whether grouping results in neutral or beneficial results. Neither Slavin nor Kulik have claimed to have evidence that ability grouping harms achievement. Secondly, Loveless pointed out that Kulik's studies have included data involving academically enriched and accelerated programs while Slavin's research omits such data. Thus, Kulik concluded that tracking promotes achievement while Slavin maintained that academic achievement is simply a non-factor. Thirdly, Loveless stated that the philosophical disagreement between Kulik and Slavin is sharply opposed. Slavin maintained that the burden of proof to continue the use of tracking lies with the proponents of the issue while Kulik maintained that abolishing the use of ability grouping would harm the highest achieving students, even while it's use harms no one (Loveless).

Other researchers have also analyzed large national surveys to evaluate tracking. Two of these national studies are the High School and Beyond (HSB) (Gamoran, 1987) study that began with tenth graders in 1980 and the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) (Gamoran & Mare, 1989) started with eighth graders in 1988. These two studies followed the academic achievement, attitudes toward school, and courses taken by thousands of American students. The two massive databases have provided a multitude of data concerning the practice of tracking in American schools. Gamoran reported that high track students in HSB attain higher achievement levels than students in low track classes. Gamoran and Mare additionally reported that race and tracking are only weakly

related. These authors concluded from evaluating data from NELS that black American students have as much as a 10% advantage over white students in being placed in high track classes and that abolishing high tracks would penalize high achieving black students.

The National Education Longitudinal Study also identified apparent risks in de-tracking. Argys, Reese, and Brewer (1996) found that average and high achieving students lose achievement gains when instructed in heterogeneous math classes while low achieving students experience more learning in heterogeneous math groups. However, Argys et al. also stated that the combined losses experienced by average and high learners in ability grouped math classes outweighed the gains found for lower achieving students. Epstein and MacIver (1992) found similar results in that eighth graders of all abilities learn more in tracked algebra classes than in heterogeneous groups for algebra instruction. Conversely, Epstein and MacIver reported that low achieving students grouped heterogeneously for general eighth grade math curriculum experience greater gains than when grouped homogeneously.

In 1991, Rogers (1998) conducted a meta-evaluation of the 13 meta-analyses that had been reported on various forms of ability grouping. Rogers subsequently conducted two additional meta-analyses concerning the 26 single studies reported in the general research literature between 1991 and 1998. According to Rogers, the focus of latter studies had not changed greatly from the earlier period of research and researchers seemed to be asking the same questions about grouping. The greatest difference in perspective may be that more focus had been placed on the specific interactions that take place when grouping is or is not implemented. Rogers posited that nine conclusions may be drawn from the study of current research on the topic:

- 1). Advanced students benefit more academically than low-ability students from grouping of similar students.
- 2). Homogeneous groups are more beneficial academically for all abilities than heterogeneous grouping.
- 3). Continuous progress alone makes no academic difference, but when combined with a variety of instructional approaches, it does.
- 4). Small group learning is academically more beneficial than whole group learning.
- 5). What is done when students are grouped is directly related to achievement rather than actual placement in a group (i.e. instructional quality, instructional time, and class size).
- 6). Low-ability students benefit academically when paired with a high-ability partner, but the same may not hold true for the high-ability partner.
- 7). Both high-ability and low-ability students benefit from more social interactions when grouped within classes with like-ability peers.
- 8). There is less acting out and more direct participation in discussion from low-ability students when they

are grouped with like-ability peers.

- 9). Low-ability students tend to acquire more self-confidence about their abilities when in mixed-ability groups.

A recent study by Betts and Shkoluik (2000) also confirmed findings of little or no differential effects of grouping for high-achieving, average, or low-achieving students. This quantitative study used a data set from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY), a national study that followed two cohorts of students from approximately 100 middle and high schools from 1987 to 1992. The study analyzed 5442 observations of students, teachers, classrooms, test scores, and schools to estimate the effects of ability grouping. Betts and Shkoluik confirmed earlier findings of no overall effect of formal grouping policies on student achievement. Of particular interest to these researchers was the question of inequality of resource allocations (class size, teacher experience, and teacher education) for lower ability grouped students and classes. Their study found that there was little evidence that ability grouping generates inequality in the allocation of school resources among classes (Betts & Shkoluik).

Several interesting studies have been conducted comparing the tracking practices of public schools to those of Catholic schools, where tracking is the expected norm and is valued as a positive tool for teaching and learning. Lee and Bryk (1988) found from survey results that students attending Catholic schools enroll in more academic courses than students in public schools, regardless of their prior achievement, race, or socioeconomic status. Catholic schools also seem to foster a school climate that emphasizes achievement for all, resulting in smaller achievement gaps between tracks (Gamoran, 1992). In a 1990 study by Camarena, the grouping practices between four Catholic high schools and three public high schools were compared. The study found that the Catholic schools provided a more caring learning environment, were more willing to move students within flexible groups, and held higher academic standards for all learners than the public schools (Camarena, 1990). Valli (1986) did an initial qualitative study of three Catholic schools and concluded that while a positive learning climate was evident school-wide, the teachers of the lower tracked students demonstrated a particular commitment to student achievement. Valli (1990) found in a follow-up study that the curriculum in the lower tracked classes of the Catholic schools paralleled the high track curriculum. Additionally, the Catholic schools assigned the more experienced teachers to instruct in the low track classes (Valli).

Affect on Achievement

Differences in achievement attainment for students in heterogeneously or homogeneously grouped classes have been areas of much debate in the literature. Hoffer (1992) studied the effects of middle school ability grouping on student achievement in the areas of math and science. Comparing the achievement scores of students instructed

in both high and low homogeneous classes to students instructed in heterogeneous classes from the seventh to ninth grade showed small achievement gains for high grouped students. However, low grouped students had significant negative achievement gains in both math and science (Hoffer).

Braddock and Slavin (1992) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study (NELS) comparing scores of students in grouped and non-grouped settings in both the 8th and 10th grades. Variables such as prior grades, test scores, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and school size were considered and statistically controlled. The results showed that students in low homogeneous tracks scored worse than low ability students in heterogeneous classes in the areas of math, reading, social studies, and science. Conversely, no achievement gains were noted for students grouped in high or average ability classes. Additionally, Braddock and Slavin found that students placed in low grouped classes in eighth grade were more likely to be in non-college preparatory tracks by tenth grade than their peers from untracked schools.

Another group of researchers (Mason, Schroeter, Combs, & Washington, 1992) placed 34 average achieving eighth graders into high track pre-algebra classes with their high tracked peers. The “average” students scored higher than their high tracked classmates in several instances while the achievement of the high ability students did not suffer. The students with average ability subsequently took more advanced math classes during high school than did their peers who remained in the average ability classes during middle school .

Data from a large sample of 3,991 American eighth graders from 127 schools that was gleaned from the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS) were used in a quantitative study by Bode in 1996. Bode (1996) looked at the effects of within class ability grouping and tailoring in eighth grade mathematics instruction. Tailoring was defined as an instructional method whereby assignments are “tailored to the particular instructional needs of individual students” (Bode, p. 5). For example, assignments for low ability students are designed so that students can progress without making mistakes, while assignments for high ability students include problems that are truly difficult for them to solve. Tailoring may also involve varying the degree of difficulty of questions posed in classroom discussions. The conclusion of this study was that within class grouping and tailoring have no effect on differences in average mathematics achievement across classes. However, the researcher did conclude:

The factors affecting average achievement are class ability and opportunity-to-learn; that is, the ability level of the class as a whole and the amount of exposure to the curriculum... Thus, in terms of excellence, neither ability grouping nor instructional tailoring would be considered more effective than their nonuse. (Bode, p. 17)

Affect on Students

Oakes (1992b) also referenced data from the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS) as

showing social-class differences in the class assignments of American students. In fact, the SIMS study revealed that white students and students whose fathers held high-level occupations were more likely to be placed in algebra than other eighth graders with comparable past math achievement (McKnight et.al., 1987). Oakes also stated that educators often misinterpret the “skills and knowledge that educationally and economically privileged parents pass on to their children as innate intelligence” (p. 18). Indeed, Oakes made the case that standardized tests used to measure intelligence in fact fail to measure different forms of intelligence and are thereby further biased toward the knowledge and skills that advantaged students learn at home.

Some researchers asserted that tracking and ability grouping are discriminatory practices because a disproportionate number of minority and low-income students occupy the lower tracks (Gamoran, 1992). Braddock’s (1989) findings from a study of 14,000 eighth graders in public schools supported this belief. Asian and white students were found more often to be placed in high and middle ability groups than were African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. Likewise, Villegas and Watts (1991) found, in a study of middle school tracking practices, a large number of minority students in low ability math classes while this group was underrepresented in the high ability classes. Gender may be another area of discriminatory practice concerning student placement in tracked classes. Hallinan and Sorensen (1987) found, in a longitudinal study of 1,477 students in northern California, that males were more likely to be assigned to high ability tracks in mathematics than females.

The effect of ability level grouping on students’ self-esteem, social interactions, and prospects for their future is another hotly debated area of concern in the literature. Hallinan and Sorensen (1985) found from a study concerning elementary school grouping practices that children were more likely to choose someone from their own ability group as a best friend. Likewise, Schwartz (1981) found that secondary students in low track classes considered their peers in the high track classes as the most popular. Vanfossen, Jones, and Spade (1987) reported significant track affects on students’ self-esteem and general attitude toward school. George (1993) stated that unsuccessful students continually grouped together year after year became negative about school by the time they entered middle school. In support of this finding, a longitudinal study of junior high school students by Black (1993) found that students assigned to low ability math classes consistently displayed lower self-esteem, had more behavior problems and were more likely to drop out of school than their high tracked peers.

In an early study conducted by Hargreaves (1967), it was reported that students in low tracks exhibited low self-concept and engaged in more delinquent behavior, which resulted in two distinct school cultures. Similarly, Meyer (1980) argued that the institutionalized characteristics of schools result in a status hierarchy. Meyer asserted that ability groups are institutionalized units with social connotations that impact students’ future college and career attainments. Because students classified by ability as early as elementary school often remain in these placements

throughout middle and high school, rigid tracking practices have been linked to students' career paths and future roles (Gamoran, 1986).

However, on the opposing side of the debate, Kulik (1992) stated that little research indicates that tracking harms students' self-esteem. In fact, according to Kulik, the evidence showed a slight indication that low ability students' self-concept was strengthened by receiving instruction in ability-grouped classes. Kulik maintained that in heterogeneous classes, a low ability student's performance is compared daily to that of high achieving classmates. Additionally, although the public labeling of low track students may cause some embarrassment, the daily display of academic differences in heterogeneous classrooms causes more embarrassment for students on a personal and social level. Kulik and Kulik (1982) further argued that the very reason that ability grouping is popular is "because it appeals to a basic need to stratify society and segregate persons into in and out groups" (p. 428).

Perceptions of Teachers

Not only does the debate center around the effects that tracking has on students but also includes research concerning teachers. Several studies have shown that schools seem to track teachers along with students, assigning less qualified teachers to the lower track classes (Rosenbaum, 1976). Finley (1984) found that teacher competencies are negatively affected when assigned to teach low track classes over a prolonged time. Oakes (1992b) discovered that teachers of low ability science and math classes typically have less experience, hold fewer degrees in their core subjects, have less training in the use of computers, and less often self-report to be master teachers than teachers who are assigned to high track instruction. Oakes (1985) also reported in an earlier study that teachers in high track classes are enthusiastic about instruction, are well organized, and use a large variety of instructional techniques, including engaging students in active learning models of instruction. Conversely, Oakes (1992b) found that teachers of low ability classes use passive instruction revolving around drill and practice, seatwork, and worksheet activities. Additionally, relationships between students and teachers appear to be supportive in nature in high track classes, whereas relationships between teachers and students in low track classes are likely to center around control of student disruptions, hostility, and alienation. However, Metz (1978) found that in two similar middle schools there were differences in the significance that teachers placed on control in the lower track classes. Worksheets were found to be the dominant tool of instruction for both schools. However, one school used the worksheets as the mechanism for maintaining control and the classroom was characterized by disorder, racial tension, and a negative stigma for students because of their placement. The other school, however, used worksheets to provide manageable assignments that were designed to enhance students' feelings of success, and the classroom was described as an orderly climate.

The 1993 National Survey of Middle Level Leaders and Schools asked principals, assistant principals, and leadership team members to rank 11 skills and characteristics of excellent middle level teachers. The survey showed that all three groups ranked “competence in adjusting instruction to the varying skills of the students” as the most important characteristic of a good teacher. Additionally, “competence in developing positive relationships with students in the classroom” was ranked as second in importance (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993, p. 91). However, Wilson and Ribovich (1973) reported a study in which teachers were surveyed to determine their knowledge of ability grouping research. Two thirds of the teachers surveyed were found to have no knowledge of ability research findings, yet 94% said that ability grouping was beneficial, and 74% of teacher respondents stated that they practiced it in their schools and classrooms.

Wakefield (1994) found in the quantitative portion of his study that the more knowledgeable a teacher is about the current research on ability grouping and the more recent their experience with teaching heterogeneously grouped classes, the more unfavorable the teacher’s perception is toward homogeneous grouping. Urdan, Midgley, and Wood (1995) worked collaboratively for three years with a middle school staff that wanted to examine and change their policies, procedures, and practices relating to ability level grouping. The staff and researchers concluded, “tracking affects the way teachers think about instruction” (Urdan et.al, p.25). Consequently, they agreed that it was particularly important to provide in-service training for teachers in middle level schools to help them teach in new and challenging ways. Roe and Radebaugh (1993) studied one middle school’s elimination of tracking in math, English, and reading classes and found that shared decision-making is extremely important for teachers to be able to make a successful transition from tracking to de-tracking. The National Association of State Boards of Education stated in a 1995 article that teachers not involved in planning for heterogeneous classes and inclusive education are more likely to feel put upon, forced, or compelled into creating an inclusive school rather than being an active participant in the process.

Perceptions of Parents

Teachers are not the only school community constituents to hold on to the belief that ability level grouping practices are beneficial to teaching and learning. Likewise, many parents, particularly parents of high achieving students, hold deeply entrenched beliefs that grouping of all students is in the best interest of their individual child. Useem (1992) reported that regardless of the past achievement of their child, many white middle class parents are likely to pressure schools for the assignment of their child to high track placements. Indeed, Loveless (1998) stated that tracking decisions for individual students are frequently negotiable between parents and schools. Parents and students who are willing to risk lower grades for a more rigorous education routinely gain access to the courses they choose. Interestingly, Loveless also reported that parents of African-American students also support the use of

ability level grouping for their children. A study conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation found that, “Opposition to heterogeneous grouping is as strong among African-American parents as among white parents, and support for it is generally weak” (Loveless, p. 18).

Particularly strong proponents of tracked instruction seem to be parents of students identified as gifted or talented. Wakefield (1994) found that 35% of teachers surveyed in his study cited either the pressure from parents of gifted education students or a conscious desire on the part of the school to maintain a gifted/talented program as the main factors in a schools’ decision to group. Oakes (1992b) also found this political pressure upon schools to be real and stated:

Educators also worry about the political consequences of de-tracking, in particular the loss of support of parents of high-track students, who are clearly advantaged by the current arrangement. This concern has been fueled by advocates for separately funded, categorical programs for the gifted and talented. In local forums such as school board meetings and in popular practitioner journals, these individuals and groups lobby strongly against policy changes that may threaten special opportunities now available to high achievers. (p. 17)

Wheelock (1992) reported a case study in Jericho, New York, where successful de-tracking initiatives were implemented because of parent involvement in the planning stages. Parents were initially skeptical of the elimination of pullout programs for gifted students. However, sharing of information between parents and teachers based on current research regarding the needs of adolescents led to parental support for Jericho’s de-tracking initiative.

Research Concerning Middle School Practices of Ability Grouping

There continues to be much debate in the literature concerning the affects of ability level grouping on student achievement, self-esteem, and future prospects for success. Additionally, the debate on whether to track or de-track continues on the part of teachers and parents. However, one particular area of the research seems to be agreed upon by most who are involved in the issue. That area of agreement is that middle school is the critical transition period where students are first departmentalized for instruction. According to Parsons (1959), “The primary selective process occurred through differential school performance in elementary school, and ‘the seal’ is put on in junior high school” (p. 299). Gamoran (1992) also noted, “To understand why some students gain admission to high status positions in high school, one must consider their position in junior high” (p. 186). Additionally, Moore and Davenport (1988) stated, “Participation in a particular track or group within an elementary or junior high school was often necessary to participate in a desired track or program in high school” (p. 54).

There have been several national calls for middle level schools to move away from the practice of grouping students by ability level for instruction. In 1989, in *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents from the Carnegie Corporation recommended de-tracking in America's middle schools. This report stated, "Tracking has proven to be one of the most divisive and damaging school practices in existence" (p. 49). In addition, the National Education Association and the College Board have also recommended the elimination of tracking (Oakes & Lipton, 1992).

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has conducted three national studies on middle level education (Valentine et al., 1993). The early studies were completed in 1966 and 1981. The most recent study included surveys from 2,000 middle schools across the United States and was completed during the 1991-1992 school year. This comprehensive national survey provided several insights into trends regarding the practice of ability grouping in America's middle schools. The 1993 NASSP report asserted, "Most middle level scholars seem to concur that heterogeneous grouping of students facilitates higher student achievement and improved sociability, and enhances student self-esteem" (Valentine et al., p. 54). However, in reality, the survey found that 82 % of middle schools use some degree of ability grouping. This percentage was down only six points from the 1981 finding that 88% of middle schools had used grouping. Specifically, the 1993 report found that 70% of schools grouped students into specific classes by academic ability, and while 13% reported that students were not grouped into tracked classes, teachers did group them within their classes. The conclusion of the 1993 NASSP report indicated a general but small decrease in ability grouping in middle schools.

Particular attitudes of middle school administrators and teacher leaders concerning the practice of ability level grouping were also examined in the NASSP survey. The study found that grouping students for instruction by ability level into specific classes is favored by a majority of middle school principals, assistant principals, and leadership team members. Grouping students for instruction only within heterogeneous classes was favored by less than one quarter of the principals. Leadership team members were most in favor of ability grouping, with 72% of respondents agreeing with the practice, while they were also least in favor of eliminating between class grouping (7%). The report stated, "If one can assume that leadership team members are mostly teachers, it is reasonable to conclude from this study that teachers still strongly support ability grouping" (Valentine et al., 1993, p. 87).

Several studies have shown that standardized test scores are the most common criteria used in middle grades to determine placement of students in grouped classes. Braddock (1990) asserted,

The overuse or misuse of tracking in the middle school is almost inevitable when a single, general criterion such as GPA or composite score on the most recent achievement test is used to determine academic placement for an academic program (p. 448).

Additionally, Dentzer and Wheelock (1990) found in a study specific to grades six through eight that a student is likely to become locked in or out of a particular placement once the student is identified for a specific ability group. Others have reported that rigid master schedules that do not allow students to move between ability groups have resulted in unintended tracking at the middle level (Garet & DeLany, 1988).

Research Concerning Middle School Principals

Whether to group students for instruction by like ability levels is an extremely complex issue that affects the total school community; individual students, teachers, parents, and the school climate and culture. The principal is the building level person with the ultimate responsibility for all aspects of curriculum, instruction, scheduling, programs, and school-wide standardized test results. Obviously, whether to implement ability level grouping of students in an individual school, and to what extent, is an extremely important question that principals must answer and ultimately accept responsibility for the results. However, Rogers (1998) concluded that:

First, there is such a large body of relevant literature that no school principal or district office administrator has the time or energy to read before making critical decisions. And second, the body of research appears to be highly contradictory in many cases, leaving one more confused than before attempting to rely on “the research” (p. 2-3).

Even though the task of the middle school leader is a daunting one, according to the NASSP report on Leadership in Middle Level Education (Valentine et al., 1993), middle school principals are more prepared than in any other time in the history of education to effectively lead their schools. The NASSP report revealed that 36% of today’s principals began their administrative careers as middle school assistant principals. This represents an increase of seven percent since 1981, and a 16% increase when compared to 1966. A total of 45% of middle school principals come into their leadership role directly from another position in a middle level school. Only 33% of the respondents of this large survey came from a high school position while 16% attained the middle school principalship after an elementary teaching or administrative position. Additionally, the NASSP survey revealed that middle school principals are experienced in their positions, with 53% reporting they have more than seven years administrative experience.

Higher levels of graduate preparation have also been a consistent pattern for middle school principals during the last 25 years (Valentine et al., 1993). The master’s degree with additional credits of graduate study in the area of educational administration and supervision is normative for middle level administrators. The percentage of principals who have completed all the coursework for, or earned the doctorate degree, nearly doubled from 11% in 1966 to 20% in 1992.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of female middle level principals from the initial NASSP study in 1966 to the study completed in 1992 (Valentine et al., 1993). Only four percent of middle school leaders were women in 1966, while female administrators led 20% of America's middle schools in 1992. Additionally, female middle school principals are apparently better prepared academically for the position of leadership with more than half of the females reporting in 1992 that they have earned the specialist or doctorate degree compared to less than one third of their male counterparts.

However, regardless of gender or academic attainment, middle school principals work many hours each week and are spending significantly more time on the job than in previous years (Valentine et al., 1993). Six percent of principals reported in 1992 that they spend more than 70 hours per week at work, with 30% reporting an average work week of more than 60 hours, and an astounding 88% of school leaders spend more than 50 hours per week at school and school functions. This figure is a significant increase from the 1981 study, with twice as many principals reporting average work hours of 60 to 69 per week than in the earlier study.

According to the NASSP report, "In the late '70s and early '80s, the role of the principal underwent a modest transformation from school manager to instructional leader" (Valentine et al., 1993, p. 24). The students, faculty, and parents in a school community interpret the school mission and vision by observing what principals emphasize and how they spend their time. Indeed, Wheelock (1992) emphasized, "It is the principal-teacher partnership that set the terms for how the mission is to be accomplished" (p. 25). Davidson (1997) also asserted, "Rather than reinforcing the status quo, principals are in a position to become creative risk takers who provide the vision and professional support to build expertise and confidence in the process" (p. 333).

The leadership goal for principals, according to the NASSP report (Valentine et al., 1993), is to involve all stakeholders in decisions affecting the entire school organization. Principals are charged with developing cultures of trust that promote and support positive relationships within the school. The NASSP survey asked principals to rank how they believe they should spend their time and how they actually do spend their time. The results indicated little change from 1981 to 1992 as to the rank ordering of the time principals spend on specified areas of responsibility and the time they believe they should spend. Principals responded that their ideal top priorities for time include the areas of responsibility associated with instructional leadership such as program development, personnel, planning, and professional development. However, the principal respondents also confirmed that in reality most of their time is spent in school management issues. In both 1981 and 1992, principals said that program development was the area in which they should spend their time, however, little real progress was noted in how they actually spend their hours at school.

Although the reality of the situation shows that middle school principals spend an inordinate amount of time in managerial tasks, the literature provides several insights into how time should be spent to effectively lead a

school in issues that affect instruction, and in particular, ability grouping of students. Hallinan (1992) posited that the use or non-use of ability groups relies heavily on the organizational structures of the school. Variables such as schedules, availability and certification endorsements of teachers, curriculum resources, and design of the classroom determine the size and number of ability groups (Hallinan & Sorensen, 1985). Useem (1992) also found that organizational structures such as track size, placement criteria, and scheduling practices have an impact on the degree of tracking practices among schools. Davidson (1997) asserted that these structural differences are linked to the cultural norms in individual schools. Much research has shown that the principal “sets the tone” for the culture and climate in their schools.

One critical responsibility of the principal is to equip the school with a set of “technical tools” designed to support the non-use of ability level grouping (Smith-Maddox & Wheelock, 1995). Some of these tools especially important in middle level instruction include flexible scheduling, teaming of teachers with common planning times, and professional development in the areas of active teaching strategies, interdisciplinary thematic units, and alternative assessments (Davidson, 1997).

Garet and DeLany (1988) found that inflexible master schedules sometimes result in unintended tracking of students because the courses are limited across subjects and levels. In fact, some “exploratory” courses such as physical education and health, which were intended for heterogeneous instruction, became grouped because of class schedules. One solution to rigid scheduling at the middle school level can be found in the use of flexible block scheduling, which provides extended periods of time for differentiated instruction (Davidson, 1997). However, the 1992 NASSP study of middle schools (Valentine et al., 1993) found that only one percent of middle schools provided class periods of instruction of 56-60 minutes, while a full 99% scheduled seven to eight periods per day with only 40 to 55 minutes of instruction per class. This chopping of the instructional day into small increments of time severely limits the ability of teachers to plan instructional activities that foster heterogeneous grouping of diverse learners.

Teaming of groups of teachers and students into small units within the context of the larger school is another technical tool that middle school principals can provide to foster a more personal context for learning for all students. According to the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (1989), “Teaming provides an environment conducive to learning by reducing the stress of anonymity and isolation on students” (p. 38). Providing students with a limited number of teachers and peers to interact with on a daily basis within their team is being “developmentally responsive” to the needs of middle level students. “Developmental responsiveness” is a term used in middle level education to describe the effort to provide an educational setting that meets the needs of early adolescents (Lipsitz, 1984, p. 6). The 1992 NASSP report (Valentine et al., 1993) showed that 57% of middle schools used interdisciplinary teams and that the increase in the use of the practice has been steady in recent years.

The report further stated, “Teaming is becoming the norm, rather than the exception, in middle level schools” (Valentine et al.).

Middle school principals also have the responsibility of overseeing the curriculum and how instruction is offered in the classroom. Oakes (1985) stated, “As long as curriculum is presented as a sequence of topics and skills that require prerequisite knowledge and prior mastery of certain skills, teaching heterogeneous groups of students will remain problematic” (p. 151). Many middle schools that adopt a philosophy of heterogeneous instruction are centering the curriculum around interdisciplinary themes that accommodate differences in prior knowledge by using problem-solving skills and active learning strategies (Davidson, 1997). One extremely popular active teaching strategy at the middle level is cooperative learning, where students work in small heterogeneous groups to help one another learn academic material (Slavin, 1993). However, Oakes (1992b) asserted that training teachers only in cooperative learning techniques was not enough to support a change to school-wide heterogeneous grouping. Other issues such as disconnected subject areas, fragmented curricula, isolation from colleagues, and norm-referenced assessments must be confronted to effectively de-track a school program.

The use of standardized test scores as the sole criterion for placement of students in particular levels of instruction is another issue that principals must confront (Kilgore, 1991). The political pressures concerning standards of learning, accountability, and ranking of school systems and individual schools based on standardized test scores have increased in recent years. In some states, principals are being relieved of their duties and salaries are cut or raised based on the test performance of schools. “Low performing” schools are put on notice by state departments of education and the names of particular schools are released to the media for public perusal. The political pressures applied to schools may result in an increase in the practice of stratifying instruction by ability level. Davidson, (1997) stated:

When major decisions for the instruction and placement of students are dependent on norm-referenced standards, they may serve to reinforce the practice of ability grouping and tracking unfairly. An undesirable by-product of testing has been the emphasis on academic achievement which becomes a mechanism for weeding out those deemed minimally competent, usually students at-risk for failure. An over reliance on test scores may foster a narrow conception of ability that results in nonacademic programs that accompany children into their adult life. Also, when city and state tests are aligned with high stakes consequences (i.e. promotion, graduation, ranking), the real losers are those relegated to the bottom groups, posing a danger for at-risk students. (p. 335-336)

Given the inordinate pressure placed on building level leaders for their schools to perform academically, yet provide a developmentally responsive environment for middle school learners, how are principals to decide

whether to group classes by ability level? The 1992 NASSP report on Leadership in Middle Level Education (Valentine et al., 1993) provided some insight into decision-making procedures in America's middle schools. This national study revealed that there was almost unanimous agreement among principals that they should share the decision-making process with the faculty on important school issues. In fact, 98% of both male and female principals indicated a strong commitment to shared decision-making. Duttweiler (1990) confirmed that shared decision making is associated with improved morale and job satisfaction for employees, reduced absenteeism, increased productivity, and reduced resistance to change. In reality; however, the NASSP report also showed that for all issues involved in education, principals were the single most frequently and highly involved person in the decision-making process.

The NASSP report (Valentine et al., 1993) further showed that middle schools principals are involving other stakeholders in having a voice in the decision making process concerning several areas of school importance. The most notable area that all school stakeholders had a voice in deciding was the formulation of school goals and mission, with 70% of schools reporting shared decision making in this area. Curricular reform including grading practices and teaming also included a broad base of involvement. The development of rules for student behavior was another area where the input of many in the school was used in the decision making process. Although leadership teams were frequently involved in discussions about instruction, their involvement was typically in making recommendations, not reaching decisions. For example, in the areas of addition of new courses or programs, curriculum reform, budget development, and evaluation of teachers, the leadership team was three times more likely to be involved in the discussion rather than in actually making the decision.

The NASSP report (Valentine et al., 1993) concluded that while leadership teams and school staffs do have input into issues, the findings did not reflect a high degree of active involvement in the actual decision-making. School board members and central office staff were not involved in as many issues as other groups on the individual school level. However, when they were involved they were highly influential in the final decisions. Comparison of data from the 1992 survey with the questions asked of principals in the earlier 1981 study showed little evidence that participative management strategies had increased or decreased significantly. The most notable patterns revealed that assistant principals, individual teachers, and parents had increased involvement in decision-making, while the influence of team leaders and the faculty as a whole actually decreased. The report concluded, "The overall picture of participative management by shared decision making is disappointing. The degree of change...and the level of impact of shared decision making in typical middle schools across the nation is modest at best" (p. 39).

It appears that middle school principals are making most of the decisions regarding curriculum and programming in their individual schools, including whether to group instruction by ability levels of students. Additionally, current research supports the conclusion that the majority of decisions made about students'

placements in specific levels of instruction were based largely on performance on standardized tests. Schneider (1990) reported that grouping of middle school students is very common, especially in the areas of mathematics, English, and reading. Peltier (1991) concluded that instructional decisions underlying the practice of grouping were based on three assumptions concerning students and learning: students of diverse abilities require different and separate schooling experiences; less capable students suffer less emotional and educational damage when grouped with peers of similar ability; and ability grouping provided low achievers with attainable goals and extra help. These assumptions were supported by earlier findings by Trimble and Sinclair (1987) that teachers believed the content of instruction was more effectively adapted when the range of abilities was reduced and, secondly, that classes were perceived to be more manageable when students were grouped homogeneously.

Davidson (1997) found in a prolonged qualitative study of two middle schools that the principals of both schools removed themselves from decisions that supported heterogeneous grouping. One principal assigned teachers to particular classes based on the teachers' requests for certain positions. Additionally, teachers were given teaching assignments based upon the principal's perceptions of who would work well together, rather than on the teachers' levels of experience and specific areas of strength in content knowledge. The principal of one school in the study reverted to establishing a fast track for higher ability learners because the teachers complained about heterogeneous grouping. Davidson concluded, "The principal's lack of commitment and vision for finding alternatives to conventional practice supported the status quo" (p. 325).

Rogers (1998) reported that her meta-evaluation of the research on ability grouping from 1991 to 1998 revealed five approaches that administrators use to make decisions concerning placement of students in stratified levels of instruction. Rogers referred to the first approach used by principals in making decisions about this issue as the "I found this student" approach. Specifically, the principal simply reflected on past personal experiences and outcomes and made the current decision based on previous results. No research was read or considered. Therefore, if grouping students by ability had been a positive or neutral experience in previous administrative or teaching roles, the principal would make a decision towards homogeneous grouping. Secondly, the "famous person" approach may be used. Rogers stated that this scenario involved staff development using a "famous" speaker or expert that had been secured to motivate the school or district about implementing a change in practice. The principal would often make a decision based on the research referred to by the speaker. However, Rogers pointed out that the research reference may only relate to a portion of the larger body of research on the practice or strategy.

The third decision-making approach used by principals as described by Rogers (1998) was the "I found this study" approach. In this method, the administrator may assemble or use an existing committee or team to research a possible change in practice. The committee then studied several articles usually procured from professional journals rather than research journals, and "the research" was then used as the basis for the decision. Again, Rogers pointed

out that with this method it was difficult to discern whether or not the collection represented the larger body of research. Fourthly, an administrator may use the “kitchen sink” approach, whereby the researcher employed the technique of meta-analysis. The principal would collect many research studies on the topic and analyze the academic effect when all the research studies were accumulated. This approach was almost impossible with the topic of ability grouping, however, given the sheer amount of existing literature on the topic and the limited amount of time a typical principal had to spend in research before making a decision. Finally, Rogers stated that a few administrators actually employed the “best evidence” approach to research-based decision making. Meta-analyses on the topic of ability grouping may be accumulated and rank ordered according to their design quality. However, Rogers also pointed out that the applicability of the research to the principal’s individual educational setting may still be unclear.

Conclusion

Clearly, the debate surrounding the use or non-use of ability level grouping of students for instruction is a question that has not been unequivocally answered by more than 70 years of research. Kulik (1998) stated, “For every research reviewer who has concluded that grouping is helpful, there is another who has concluded that it is harmful” (p. 1). Additionally, ability level grouping is still a widespread practice in schools today with as many as 85% of schools reporting the use of some type of grouping (George, 1990). To further complicate the issue, it seems that many stakeholders in a school community have an opinion as to whether or not ability grouping should be used. These include parents of individual students and teachers with varying levels of experience and knowledge concerning the subject. Finally, the secular media and public press have written in popular journals about the topic, sometimes presenting biased opinions that further influence the beliefs held by parents and the public about the use or non-use of grouping in local schools.

Several well known researchers have written profusely and emphatically against the use of grouping or tracking in America’s schools (Oakes, 1985, 1992; Slavin, 1987, 1990; Wheelock, 1992). These researchers posited that ability grouping does not have positive effects on achievement gains and negatively impacts individual children’s self-esteem by locking them into certain tracks at an early age, often by race or socioeconomic status. Conversely, others put forth research findings that expound the use of the practice as a means to raise achievement for high-ability learners, while creating learning environments that are more supportive of low-achievers (Argys et al., 1996; Gamoran, 1987; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Kulik, 1998; Kulik & Kulik, 1991). The difference in evaluation of the research seems to lie with whether it is examined from an academic or social perspective (Bode, 1996). Proponents of grouping practices emphasize effectiveness in raising achievement as the rationale for homogeneous grouping and typically use quantitative methods of research to further their cause. Advocates of heterogeneous

grouping, however, seem to be more concerned with equity for all students in the public educational process, and their preferred research process tends to be qualitative in nature. Lockwood and Cleveland (1998) summarized the debate as follows:

One might claim that grouping *per se* is not “bad,” but it is the *way* we group that is problematic...

That is, some grouping, particularly for remedial purposes, seems unavoidable. Ability grouping is not always done poorly, but it does seem that we often do it improperly. (p. 10)

Analysis of the research concerning America’s middle schools revealed that the practice of grouping becomes more pronounced during the middle grades. Although several national studies have made pleas for the elimination of ability level grouping of students for instruction specifically at the middle school level, statistics show that 82% of middle schools employed the practice in 1992 (Valentine et al., 1993). A National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) survey also showed that the majority of middle school principals, assistant principals, and leadership team members favor the practice of ability level grouping of students. Additionally, research has revealed that standardized test scores are the most common criterion used in middle grades to determine placement of students in grouped classes (Braddock, 1990).

Middle school principals face myriad conflicting factors when deciding whether their schools will employ the use of ability level grouping. The sheer volume of research in the literature is daunting and becomes an almost impossible task to read and evaluate given the time demands placed upon the building level administrator. Parents and teachers also often express conflicting views regarding the practice of tracking and both groups often lobby powerful voices in the school community that can affect the policies and decision-making process of the principal. Further, outside political influences concerning schools’ performance on standardized tests and achievement gains place inordinate pressures on principals to raise achievement levels or risk negative public scrutiny in the media, state and local sanctions for improvement, and even loss of their position as principal.

Given the high stake results that may evolve from the decision to employ homogeneous grouping or heterogeneous grouping in middle schools, it is important to examine the process that principals use to evaluate whether grouping will take place in their schools and to what extent. A qualitative study of principals’ opinions and evaluation of factors that influence their decision-making processes concerning ability level grouping will lend further understanding to this important and often debated practice.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter 3 is devoted to providing a description of the design and methods that were employed to conduct an investigation into the decision making processes of middle school administrators when deciding whether to schedule students into heterogeneous or homogeneous groups in their individual schools. The study was conducted in city and county school systems in east Tennessee.

Design

Selection of a Research Paradigm

“Qualitative researchers are intrigued with the complexity of social interactions as expressed in daily life and with the meanings the participants themselves attribute to these interactions” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2). In attempting to understand how school administrators make decisions concerning the tracking of students in their schools, a naturalistic inquiry approach was necessary due to the complexity of the topic and the values of the principals in selecting heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping.

In their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Lincoln and Guba (1985) put forth five questions to be answered when looking at a research question from a perspective of qualitative research. The qualitative researcher must first determine if the research question has multiple realities. In evaluating the topic of ability level grouping of students from a naturalistic paradigm, gathering many individuals' perspectives on this topic was important. Reasons for supporting tracking were investigated from the perspective of school administrators who were charged with the responsibility of making curriculum decisions in schools. A review of current literature on grouping revealed that in a qualitative study by Spear (1994) teachers who wished to retain ability grouping were more subject centered, and those who wished to eliminate grouping were more student centered. Spear also concluded that teachers believed that teaching was easier in ability-grouped classes. Understanding the perceptions of the principal concerning teacher attitudes and beliefs about grouping and how teacher perceptions influence the principal in making decisions about tracking was an important area to explore. The beliefs of principals about how the use or non-use of grouping in their individual schools affected students were also important areas for discussion. Slavin, (1993) stated, “Because of demoralization, low expectations, and poor behavioral models, students in the low tracks are more prone to delinquency, absenteeism, drop-out, and other social problems” (p. 537). Clearly, multiple realities exist in education today concerning ability level grouping. Principals must consider the opinions of many stakeholders when making decisions for or against ability level grouping in their schools.

The second question to be considered according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) was how likely is the researcher to interact with the topic to be studied? Although Slavin (1993) asserted that over 70 years of research exists on the topic to justify moving away from tracking, many schools are still involved in the practice at some level. In fact, it has been found that as many as 82% of middle schools use some degree of ability level grouping (Valentine et al., 1993). Ability grouping is prevalent in many schools in the east Tennessee area, which gave the researcher ample opportunity to interact in open-ended interviews about the topic with local school administrators.

Thirdly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that the naturalistic researcher must consider how the context of the study affects the research question. Will the data to be collected be like data from other studies about the topic, or will the context of the study reveal different and unique perspectives concerning the research? Schools in east Tennessee are still involved in the practice of ability-level grouping, much like schools from other parts of the United States. However, the perspectives of participants from this region were unique from those of administrators from other communities. Although national studies have been conducted surveying specific middle school trends and indicators, this writer found no specific research indigenous to east Tennessee concerning tracking of students.

An existing cause-and-effect relationship concerning the research topic is the fourth area to be explored when considering a qualitative design. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that a naturalistic study should have several factors that may affect the data, rather than a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Slavin, (1993) in a review of his previous work on ability level grouping of middle schools students asserted, "If the effects of ability grouping on student achievement are zero, then there is little reason to maintain the practice" (p. 546). However, tracking is still a prevalent practice in education today. Why, after so many years of research, does this practice still prevail? Why do parents continue to support it? Why do administrators continue to allow its implementation, and why do classroom educators still vehemently champion it's use? Obviously, a single cause-and-effect relationship concerning the use of the practice of ability level grouping does not exist.

Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) questioned the importance of values in a qualitative study. Clearly, the topic of ability level grouping of students is value laden. The values of the administrators who implement the use of grouping, the values of parents who support the practice for their children, and the values of teachers who continue to use the practice would all be important and influencing elements in such a study. The values of the researcher would also undoubtedly affect the interview questions and interpretations of the data.

A review of relevant research revealed that much work has been done in the field of education over the past 70 years to explore the effects of the practice of ability level grouping on the achievement gains and social effects on students enrolled in grouped classes. Using the five questions suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for researchers considering a naturalistic research design, a study concerning the decision-making process used by administrators to justify the use or non-use of ability level grouping met the conceptual framework for a qualitative study.

Research Participants

Administrators in middle schools and K-8 schools in east Tennessee were asked to participate in this study. School systems in the east Tennessee region funded by additional monies from local city municipalities typically enroll students in separate middle schools in grades six through eight or five through seven. However, many east Tennessee districts funded by county governments often enroll students in the middle grades in schools that encompass kindergarten through eighth grade. Administrators in both types of school systems and grade configurations were included in the study. Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated:

A realistic site is where (a) entry is possible; (b) there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest are present; (c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; and (d) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured. (p. 69)

Access to school administrators in east Tennessee was possible due to the proximity of the researcher in the region. The fact that the researcher was also a middle school administrator also helped in building trust and rapport with the participants. Interviewing principals of both middle schools and K-8 schools added to the richness of the “mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest” (Marshall & Rossmann, 1999, p. 69).

Data Collection

Directors of Schools in city and county school systems in east Tennessee were contacted for written permission to conduct the study with administrators in their systems. Further, building level administrators were contacted to determine their interest and willingness to be interviewed concerning this topic. Permission forms to interview participants were signed by both Directors of Schools and principals. Study participants also participated in the informed consent process as required by East Tennessee State University.

An in-depth interviewing technique of qualitative inquiry was used in this study. Further, a general interview guide was developed to outline a list of topics that were explored during the interview (Patton, 1990). It is understood in qualitative interviewing that the interviewee will take the questions where they lead, and the interviewer will refine the interview guide as subsequent questions arise or need to be deleted. All interviews were audio taped for later transcription. A field journal was kept by the researcher to record notes immediately following the interviews. The audio tapes, transcriptions, and field notes from the interviews will be kept in a secure location in the office of the researcher for a period of 10 years after the completion of the study.

Extreme cases were sought out by purposeful sampling to add richness to the data. Administrators who employed tracking of students in their schools, those who did not, and those who had both heterogeneously and

homogeneously grouped classes in their schools were identified. Participants were selected serially, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and the interviews continued until redundancy of data was achieved.

Data Analysis

The data collected during the interviewing process were analyzed throughout the research process. According to Glesne (1999):

Analysis does not refer to a stage in the research process. Rather, it is a continuing process that should begin just as soon as your research begins. It follows, then, that interviewing is not simply devoted to data acquisition. It is also a time to consider relationships, salience, meanings, and explanations – analytic acts that not only lead to new questions, but also prepare you for the more concentrated period of analysis that follows the completion of data collection. (p. 84)

Following the reasoning of Glesne and others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) concerning the organic process of data analysis, the analysis of the data was an ongoing process throughout interviewing and transcription of the data.

The first process in analysis was data reduction. The researcher kept a field journal with notes taken immediately following the interviews. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed following each interview. The interview transcriptions were used in the analysis process. Secondly, the data were coded into units as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “single pieces of information that stand by themselves” (p. 203), and were necessary in the process of inductive analysis. After the data were coded into units, they were organized into categories of similar characteristics. At that stage of analysis, the formation of theory to answer the research question began.

Finally, the data were verified for credibility and trustworthiness. A peer debriefer was used to question the process of the study as it unfolded and to help the researcher identify possible areas of bias. An inquiry audit of the raw data (field journal, audiotapes, and transcriptions of tapes) was conducted by an unbiased and outside auditor. Finally, while it is acknowledged that the scope of this study was limited to school administrators in middle schools in east Tennessee, the phenomenon of tracking of students academically is well established in educational settings across the United States. The role of the values of administrators in making decisions about grouping of students is important information that links to prior research concerning the topic and was presented in a manner that will enable the reader to determine whether it is transferable to other settings.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that affect the decision-making processes of middle school administrators concerning whether to implement heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping of students for instruction. More specifically, this study explored the personal and professional paradigms held by principals involved in middle level administration concerning ability level grouping of students. Internal factors within the school community and external factors from outside sources that affect the principals' decisions for implementation of heterogeneous or homogenous grouping were also explored.

As designed, this study involved collecting data by open-ended interviews with 20 principals from schools that included the middle grades in the east Tennessee area. The principals interviewed served in a wide range of demographically diverse schools that included middle grades instruction. Eight of the schools included kindergarten through grade eight and eight schools housed the traditional middle school configuration of grades six through eight. Additionally, the study included individual schools with grades six and seven, seven and eight, five through eight, and one school with kindergarten through grade 12. The student populations of the schools also varied widely from a K-8 school with 930 students, a large middle school with 1,050 sixth and seventh grade students, to a private K-8 Christian school with a total population of 150 and only 17 students in grades six through eight. Four of the schools were administered by city school systems, 15 of the schools were part of county school systems, and one was a private school operated by a local church body.

Thirteen male principals and seven female principals were interviewed in this study. These middle school principals were typically experienced career educators with 17 out of the 20 principals having more than 20 years of service in the field of education. Six of the principals reported having 30 or more years of experience, and only three of the interviewees had less than 20 years experience. Five of the 20 principals expressed strong opinions against homogeneous grouping in their schools and as a basic paradigm that they held in their belief systems. Five additional principals conversely expressed strong beliefs that homogeneous grouping is the best instructional strategy for middle level learning and wholly embraced the concept as part of their school programs and cultures. However, 10 of the principals, or one-half of those interviewed, stated that they were "not sure" about how they felt concerning the use of ability grouping and made statements both for and against its' use within their interviews. Regardless of the principal's personal belief concerning the topic, only three of the 20 schools profiled were using truly heterogeneous grouping of students with no homogeneous grouping of students at any time during the school day.

Table 1 is a summary of information about the participants in this study. Pseudonyms are used for the names of all principals and schools throughout this study.

Table 1.

Demographic Information Concerning Research Participants and Schools

NAME	GENDER	# YEARS AS EDUCATOR	# YEARS AS ADMIN.	GRADES	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	6-8 ENROLLMENT
Tom Merita	Male	31	27	K-8	900	300
Tammy Knight	Female	24	8	K-8	530	200
Rhonda Smith	Female	24	2	K-8	930	360
Donna Roller	Female	26	6	K-8	360	120
Tim Jackson	Female	30	23	K-8	150	17
Will Mowery	Male	16	7	6-8	720	720
Larry Taylor	Male	27	2	K-8	540	180
Joyce Easterly	Female	26	3	K-8	700	180
Bill Mitchell	Male	22	16	K-8	645	200
Claire Cassell	Female	25	15	6-7	1,050	1,050
Joe Founder	Male	37	20	6-8	580	580
Dave McGar	Male	23	9	K-12	525	125
Lester Vance	Male	15	1	6-8	265	265
Nancy Strickland	Female	31	10	7-8	600	600
Donna Greene	Female	17	12	6-8	625	625
Tommy Bird	Male	22	3	5-8	570	430
Don Mullins	Male	25	17	6-8	540	540
Terry McGinnis	Male	25	7	6-8	600	600
David Carter	Male	30	27	6-8	450	450
Gary Hensley	Male	33	17	6-8	515	515

Written permission from the Director of Schools of each school system was obtained before the research participants were contacted concerning their possible interest in participating in the study. The audio-taped interviews took place in the principals' offices of the schools where the participants were employed. The Informed

Consent process was explained in detail to each participant before they were asked to sign consent as voluntary participants. A copy of the Informed Consent form was provided to each principal. An in-depth interview method of inquiry was used, using an interview guide set of questions. According to Seidman, (1998), “The interview questions most used in an in-depth interview follow from what the participant has said” (p. 76). Therefore, the interview guide was used only as a tool to focus the interview, while allowing each participant the opportunity to reconstruct his or her personal and professional experiences concerning the ability level grouping of students.

Participants were chosen for the study in order to achieve a typical case sampling of middle level principals in the east Tennessee region. According to Patton (1990), the purpose of typical case sampling is to be “illustrative, not definitive” (p. 173). Additionally, Glesne (1999) stated that in order to achieve greater breadth in the research process the researcher should “carry out one-time interviews with more people and fewer observations in more situations” (p. 30). Twenty east Tennessee principals were interviewed over a three-month period during this study. Seidman (1998) stated that one of the criteria for concluding the interview stage of the study is when the researcher has reached sufficiency. Seidman described sufficiency as when there are “sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it” (p. 47-48). The researcher and an independent external auditor determined the sufficiency of the number of interviews and saturation of the data. Glesne stated that in order “to promote trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest a procedure for enlisting an outsider to “audit” fieldwork notes and subsequent analysis and interpretations” (p. 152). All transcription of the audio-taped interviews was conducted by the researcher, which aided in the categorization, coding, and analysis of the data.

Several themes that contribute to the decision-making processes of middle level principals concerning ability level grouping emerged from the inductive data analysis gleaned from the interview tapes. Themes identified in that analysis are presented below using descriptions from the principals’ interviews. Academic achievement of students, standardized test accountability, social factors that affect middle level students, the influence and beliefs of teachers, parental influence and concerns, needs of special education populations, the impact of educational research, and the principals’ personal paradigms concerning heterogeneous and homogeneous ability grouping of students in the middle grades were identified as common themes from the data analysis. The research participants were introduced within each section that applied to their experiences and appeared repeatedly within other sections as the data analysis unfolded.

Impact of Student Academic Achievement

The implementation of algebra for high school credit in eighth grade, the impact of homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping of students in the subjects of math, reading, language, science, and social studies, the addition of an extra period within the school day for acceleration or remediation of students, and the use of multi-age grouping of students were identified by principals as tools used to raise student achievement. Additionally, the pressure for schools to attain high scores in the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (Terra Nova standardized achievement test or TCAPs and the Gateway exit exam) emerged as a major category of concern for principals throughout the interview process.

Algebra in Eighth Grade for High School Credit

Throughout the interview process, the mounting pressure to offer algebra on the eighth grade level for high school credit was discussed by 16 of the 20 participants. The inclusion of algebra in the middle level curriculum was identified as a key factor contributing to the implementation of homogeneous grouping of students in the area of mathematics. Ten of the 20 schools included in this study offered algebra as part of their curriculum. Algebra was not considered an appropriate curriculum offering for the school with the student population of sixth and seventh graders only. However, three schools with the typical middle school structure of grades six through eight were actively planning for the addition of algebra as a course offering for the following school year. Additionally, three schools had offered algebra in the past, but no longer were including it in the curriculum.

Bill Mitchell, the principal of a K-8 school that included a student population of 200 sixth through eighth graders, was very open about the affect that algebra had had on the grouping practices of his school. Mr. Mitchell was a soft spoken man who put deliberate thought into his answers before speaking and often referred to test data, discipline records, and his school improvement plan to add emphasis to the point he was discussing. Mr. Mitchell had 22 years experience as an educator and had served as the principal of his school for 16 years. Mr. Mitchell's school was the only school in his city's school district. The total population of the school was 645 students enrolled in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The students attended the consolidated comprehensive high school in the county school system upon completion of eighth grade at the school where Mr. Mitchell served as principal.

Mr. Mitchell's school was located in the downtown area of a small historic town nestled against the east Tennessee mountains. The original building was over 70 years old. However, the school had recently undergone a

complete renovation and building addition process. The entrance was in the new addition of the building and the open, two-story lobby was decorated with greenery and sparkling lights for the Christmas holiday season. Mr. Mitchell suggested that the interview take place at a small conference table in his office and stated that he preferred not to sit behind his desk to talk with guests. He was very relaxed and open during the interview.

When discussing why his school had made the change from heterogeneous to homogeneous ability grouping in the middle grades in mathematics three years prior, Mr. Mitchell stated,

We had to because of algebra. That was the key subject that was forcing us to do it, because you had to have pre-algebra in seventh grade. That was forcing us to do that, but we still maintained heterogeneous groups in the other subjects, and the teachers liked that. But that's why we had to ability group in seventh and eighth grade. They had to have pre-algebra in seventh in order to take algebra in eighth. That's the key. But when you start grouping in math, it will eventually bleed over into the other subjects. But the algebra was the key that got us thinking about our program and meeting needs by ability groups. We initially grouped for math, then reading and language, and this year we added science. It's working well for us. We've seen a real jump in our test scores and the teachers are happy with the grouping.

Mr. Mitchell further explained that the addition of algebra to the eighth grade curriculum three years ago came about from a decision made by the Director of Schools. He explained:

I think, initially, she decided that other schools in city school systems around us were offering algebra in eighth grade. We typically have students in our school that perform well and some of our students pay tuition to attend here instead of the county middle school. I think there was some discussion with the high school, but it was not really discussed with me until the decision was about made. I had to work with my eighth grade teachers over the summer to get ready to add the algebra that first year. The first year there was no credit given, basically we just beefed up our eighth grade math and pre-algebra curriculum and called it algebra. We worked on it that year so that we could give credit the second year. Now they get high school credit and they have to pass the Gateway exam. I think we had 27 students take algebra last year, and 24 of them passed it. Because of the way that we divided the math, we now have two Algebra 1 classes for the first time. Of the four groups, I have two algebra classes, one pre-algebra, and one general math. That's pretty good because we just have around 65 eighth graders, so about half of them are now taking algebra for high school credit.

Nancy Strickland, the principal of a city system middle school with the grade configuration of seventh and eighth grade, also expressed that the addition of algebra to the eighth grade curriculum had been the catalyst for further ability level grouping in math in her school. Mrs. Strickland's school was located in the downtown area of a small city in the east Tennessee area. The school population was 600 seventh and eighth grade students with approximately 300 students per grade. Mrs. Strickland greeted me warmly and asked the school secretary to hold her phone calls and not to be interrupted unless it was an emergency. A tall, striking woman, Mrs. Strickland was dressed casually in a sweatshirt bearing her school's name and mascot. She explained that all faculty wear school shirts on Fridays and the students have come to expect her to wear her school shirt also. She laughed easily throughout the interview but spoke passionately concerning her pride in her school and students. Mrs. Strickland had

served as principal of her middle school for the last 10 years. She had 30 years experience as a public educator and stated that she had no immediate future plans for retirement. Concerning the history of algebra in her middle school's curriculum, Mrs. Strickland stated,

We used heterogeneous grouping in every subject for probably the first six years after we became a middle school in the mid-eighties. Then we added algebra in eighth grade. That was probably around 1992 or '93. Our school system takes great pride in the achievement of our students and where we score compared to similar systems our size. We were one of the first to offer algebra for our students. We have a high percentage of our high school students that go on to college and getting a head start on their credits helps them to be able to take higher level math courses in high school. So, when we began the algebra, our math classes became pretty much leveled in both seventh and eighth grade. So, we have Algebra offered in the eighth grade. Now if we have an exceptional student that is ready and takes the qualifying test and meets certain criteria on that qualifying test, then we will go ahead and let that seventh grade student take algebra with the eighth graders. Then in seventh grade generally, we have a pre-algebra class on each team and general seventh grade math. They'll probably teach two or three classes of that. In some cases they'll use a really low level basic book that's probably not yet a seventh grade level. It just depends on where the students fall. This year we've started giving the students a pre-test in math to see where their skills lie. And then the math teachers group according to that.

Several other research participants talked very matter-of-factly about algebra's being part of their curriculum for eighth grade students. Terry McGinnis's school had implemented algebra in eighth grade for the first time during the current school year. Mr. McGinnis was in his second year as principal of his 600 student traditional middle school with grade six through eight. Mr. McGinnis had served for five years prior to becoming a middle school principal as the administrator of his school system's alternative school for behavior disordered students. He talked frequently of his new respect for middle level education and middle school teachers because of his experiences in middle level administration for the past two years. Mr. McGinnis had a total of 25 years invested in his career in education. In explaining the transition to algebra in his school's curriculum, Mr. McGinnis stated,

This is the first year we've done it. We have to add algebra because we have to get these kids ready to pass the Gateway exam in high school. The teachers here and at the high school and the central office staff are in a panic because of these Gateways. I've never seen anything like it. All four of the middle schools in our county will have algebra next year, but the other three decided to wait a year. We wanted to be the first in our system, so we went ahead and started this year. It's going fine so far. We looked at Terra Nova test scores and started out with a cut-off of 90 and then reduced that to 88. Then they were allowed to take a placement test to qualify. We started out with 31 students that fit the criteria. Two or three didn't want to do it and then I think we lost two students. I think we still have 27 students in Algebra 1. We're making it a high school course to get the high school credit. They have to pass the Gateway. Then that groups the rest of your math classes, when you pull those top 30 or so kids out for algebra, because they're not mixed up with the rest of them in the other math classes. So in the lower grades we are grouping in math, but we divided them like, one, three, five, seven, so that one teacher wouldn't come up with the top 25 students and someone else with the lowest 25. Basically, what happens is, you have two math classes of one through fifty, the top fifty students. So that you don't have this last class with the very bottom students. But it has caused grouping in our math.

Gary Hensley was a colleague of Terry McGinnis in the same school system. The middle school where Mr. Hensley was principal had an enrollment of 515 students in grades six through eight. Mr. Hensley was an experienced middle level administrator and had been the principal of his school for 17 years, with a total of 33 years experience in education. Mr. Hensley was outspoken about his belief in heterogeneous grouping for middle school students and had staunchly protected his school against the pressures of implementing homogeneous grouping for many years. However, he openly discussed what he described as changes in education, including the addition of algebra in the middle school curriculum and the subsequent grouping in math that this caused. Mr. Hensley explained,

I'll give you a little background on what we have done, and what we're trying now. We feel like we're always in a state of change. For years I haven't supported grouping at all, I just haven't believed in grouping. At this age...all the facts that we know about grouping. But as we have gotten into our new situation...the ultimatum to add algebra. We started looking at some things that we felt like we needed to make some changes, or corrections, in. Math being something that we were really struggling in. So we are going to group in math. And we based that, due to the fact that as we tried to teach as teams, it kind of lent itself to mini-groups. So we've broken it down into two groups. One is the advanced group, and I'm not sure what the cut-off would be. Somewhere around to 40th to 50th percentile. So it's a pretty large grouping method. However, this year in math we did decide to put a little more meat into it. We went to a seventh grade curriculum in our sixth grade, for our students that had a 90 percentile or better. And we went to an eighth grade curriculum for our seventh graders who had a 90 percentile or better. I'm kind of looking forward to see how that works out. As far as the scheduling part of it, it creates problems. I don't get into a lot of grouping, as I said, to protect the middle age kids, that kind of thing. But I do give the teachers some lee-way on each grade level. Right now I have no grouping except in math. We're moving to algebra in eighth grade next year. We had an option of doing that this year, but we didn't feel like without them having pre-algebra or the eighth grade curriculum last year that we were quite ready for that. But next year we will have an algebra class for those seventh graders who are taking the eighth grade curriculum and pre-algebra for those taking the seventh grade curriculum.

Don Mullins was another colleague of Terry McGinnis and Gary Hensley who also was under a mandate from the school system to add algebra to his curriculum. He was also an experienced educator, having served as principal of his school for 17 out of the 25 years he had been employed as an educator. Mr. Mullins' school was similar to the other middle schools in his district in size and grade composition with 540 students enrolled in grades six, seven, and eight. Mr. Mullins explained the plans for his school to implement algebra in the following school year.

We're going to start with algebra next year. What we're doing now in math...sixth grade, they've got a class that does seventh grade math. Seventh grade has a class that does eighth grade, and eighth grade does pre-algebra and he mixes in some algebra. But next year they're going to make us have an Algebra 1 class, and they'll get high school credit if they pass it. They used to do that at one time, but the high school teachers didn't like it. But now they've worked it out with all this Gateway stuff. So we're doing that next year. That will create a schedule problem. If you've only got 15 that can take the algebra, what do you do with the other 15? So what we'll probably do is take the ones that qualify. They give them a test at central

office. If they're close, and say the teacher has 15 or 20, and we have four or five more that are close, then we'll put them in there and see how they function. And then they'll get high school credit for it.

Only seven of the 20 schools with eighth grade students that were included in this study did not offer algebra in the eighth grade. Five of those seven schools were K-8 schools that did not separate the middle school population from the elementary population and were identified as "elementary" schools. Only one of the traditional middle schools with students enrolled in grades six through eight did not offer algebra. This school's principal was Donna Greene, a petite woman with a quick step and dressed in a business suit. Mrs. Greene's school enrollment was 625 students. She had been the leader of her school for seven years, an administrator in two elementary schools for five years prior to becoming the middle school principal, and had 17 years total experience in education. Mrs. Greene's school was housed in the old high school of her county school system, with the new high school located next door. The instructional programming in Mrs. Greene's school was totally heterogeneous grouping in all subjects and grades. Algebra for high school credit was not a course offering. Mrs. Greene explained,

We've talked about it. At one point we did have it. The first two years that I was here we did, it was already in place. But the criteria we used became more of a social issue. Parents were saying, "I want my child in the algebra class." They didn't like following certain criteria, so I said, "We're not going to do it!"

When pressed to explain further how her decision was made, Mrs. Greene replied,

Conferring with my teachers. Parents were making a social issue, instead of children being in algebra because they met these five criteria. Teachers were concerned about that and it bothered me. If we couldn't be fair and consistent, then just don't do it. Our 8th grade math scores right now are either sixth or seventh in the state. So that shows you that even without the algebra they are doing well. All the other schools in our conference offer algebra. They look at our scores and say, "What are you doing?" I have two excellent math teachers. They take all the objectives and correlate their lessons to Terra Nova to make sure that everything is covered, and our test scores show it. It goes back to accountability. If our data starts changing or it starts showing that we are not doing a good job, then I need to have a plan and I'll change it.

The principal of a K-8 school located in a farming community in a beautiful mountainous setting also expressed his opinion that algebra was not needed for his students. Larry Taylor had taught eighth grade science at his school for 27 years before becoming the principal two years ago. Mr. Taylor was a large man with a weathered complexion but exuded a gentle nature and offered a quick smile. The instruction for the 180 students in grade six, seven, and eight was totally heterogeneous. Mr. Taylor was honest about his feelings that algebra was a course that should be offered at the high school level. He stated,

We've talked about algebra. At least the people in central office have. And some of our kids here are given some pre-algebra. They have been for several years. In fact, we've got a regular eighth grade math book and a pre-algebra book that's used. So they are getting a taste of algebra before they get to high school, but not to the extent that some of the other schools are getting. I think that Glendale and Ralston Grammar are

more prepared than ours are. But as of right now, I don't think we need it. When I look at the Terra Nova tests, there is some algebra in there, but most of it is still basic math. Until you can get kids to understand basic math and how to solve a problem, I don't think algebra will help that much. I'll leave that to the high school. Of course, you have to remember that this is my 29th year, I may look at things a whole lot differently. I think computers are fine and dandy, but I don't see pushing computers on kids until after they get to high school and take keyboarding. You know, the "hunt and peck" idea. I think algebra is getting pushed back into elementary schools, and I think it ought to be a high school course. I think we are trying to push too much on them at one time. I would much rather have a kid that leaves this school, that is able to sit down and figure the amount of change they are going to get back when they buy something. Or, just sit down and write a letter or read the newspaper than worry about some of the things that are being pushed on kids now.

Heterogeneous versus Homogeneous Ability Grouping in Academic Disciplines

Although the addition of algebra to the eighth grade curriculum emerged as a major theme that caused the implementation of ability level grouping in several middle schools, the decision to group students either homogeneously or heterogeneously in other academic disciplines was also a concern for principals. As revealed in the interviews of several principals, grouping students for an algebra class caused further grouping in the area of mathematics. However, the homogeneous grouping in mathematics also caused ability level grouping in the areas of reading, language, and in a few cases, science instruction. In most cases, science and social studies emerged as two disciplines that principals determined were important to maintain heterogeneous instruction.

Donna Greene did not express that the addition of algebra in her school's curriculum was necessary, and that the heterogeneous grouping of the students in her school was validated by high test scores in the area of mathematics. However, Mrs. Greene described the frustration expressed to her by her math teachers concerning the heterogeneous grouping of the students. Mrs. Greene explained,

I've had teachers say to me, math teachers, "I'm concerned that I'm having to teach at a lower level and some of my higher students, I'm not really doing them justification." I've had that. They've told me that they feel like they are teaching in a "shotgun" approach. You know, shooting toward the middle and hoping that what they are teaching hits some of the lower students and challenges some of the higher students. I don't know. I believe that my teachers are the experts in the classroom and that I need to listen to them, but the test data just doesn't pan out to what they are saying. I guess if the math scores started to slip that I would be willing to look at some grouping.

Don Mullins was another principal that philosophically did not support the concept of ability level grouping for middle grades students. However, he had implemented homogeneous grouping in the areas of mathematics and reading in order to attempt to raise test scores. Mr. Mullins stated,

Where you have the most problems is with math and reading scores. Of course, we've brought them up by grouping the kids and putting more emphasis on accelerated math and accelerated reading. So with the extra time in those subjects, plus giving teachers groups of students that basically have similar skills, the teachers like it. I still worry about it sometimes, but if the teachers are happy and the scores are good, I

guess I'm happy, too.

Similarly, Gary Hensley freely expressed his dislike of homogeneous grouping of middle school students and the fact that he had resisted the implementation of ability level grouping for most of his 17 years as principal.

However, Mr. Hensley stated ,

I feel comfortable with what we are doing right now. I feel comfortable with the math, especially. We have gone now from being a very poor math school to being an excellent math school. I think when we get our algebra it's possible that it could help scores even more. It's something that we take a lot of pride in.

Joe Founder was a principal of a typical middle school configuration with grades six through eight and a student population of 580 students. Mr. Founder had an astounding 37 years experience as an educator, with 20 of those years spent as principal of his middle school. Mr. Founder jokingly stated that he had "been around long enough to see it all come and go, and come back again." Mr. Founder's school was located in a rural county school system. The building was over 40 years old and several portable classroom units were located in the back parking lot. Mr. Founder's office was tucked in a small space next to the gymnasium, away from the main office area. He explained that additional classroom space had been needed, and he gave his office to be used for a special education class. Although his makeshift office space was cold on the morning of the interview, despite a small heater clanging noisily in the background, Mr. Founder stated that he did not mind giving up his office for student use. He stated that he did not spend much time in his office and would rather that the special needs students have a warm room to work than himself. Mr. Founder was very proud of the gains his school had made in achievement scores in the area of mathematics in the past two years, and stated that he believed that the gains were due to ability level grouping of the students, combined with additional time for instruction. Mr. Founder explained,

We still have a mixture of heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping. It's a mixture. In math, we went to grouping and block schedule about four years ago, so they are ability grouped in math. Also, in language arts, we started this year. We found out that putting the students together by ability and extending our time to teach has been very helpful to us. We began partly because of the algebra, but mainly our math scores were low and we were trying to find a solution to that. So, I decided to go back to grouping and to try block schedule. Our math scores are going up. My language arts teachers are much happier this year, too, and I think that our scores on the writing exam and TCAPs will also be much better. We're anxious to find out. But if the language and reading scores do what the math scores have, they will go up.

Like Mr. Founder, Terry McGinnis also explained why the pressure to score well on mathematics standardized testing was instrumental in implementing the ability grouping in math in his school. Mr. McGinnis stated,

I have begun to discover why math scores are held in such high esteem. It's because it's the only course that we teach that is black and white. And so a math score is probably a true score. We all know that a

social studies score isn't, a science score isn't. But the math score...and that's the reason I've begin to learn that these other schools take such pride in their math scores because, "Hey, look, that's the real score!" It's like people think, "if we've got a good football team and we've got good math scores, we must be a great school!"

In addition to the decisions that the interview participants explained concerning ability grouping in the content area of mathematics, reading, and language skills also emerged as disciplines that were considered for homogeneous grouping. Claire Cassell was the principal of a large city middle school with grades six and seven only but with a student enrollment of 1,050 students. Mrs. Cassell hurriedly greeted the interviewer and led the way to her office at a fast clip, talking into a walkie-talkie along the way. She apologized for her rushed schedule on the morning of the interview with a smile, and stated that it was just "a typical day." The interview was interrupted by walkie-talkie calls to Mrs. Cassell twice during the 45 minute session, with Mrs. Cassell having to leave her office at one point to handle a student discipline situation. Mrs. Cassell was passionate about her beliefs in heterogeneous grouping but stated that the heterogeneous groups are determined by reading level. Mrs. Cassell explained,

Reading level is very important. We try not to overload any teacher with a class of lots of non-readers. We are totally heterogeneous. There are eight elementary schools that feed us. So they come from all backgrounds. On the placement card that the fifth grade teacher fills out for us, they give us the students' spring scores on the achievement test in the four major subject areas. Then they make some comments on the student's learning style and if there are problems that we should know about. So all of that is noted. So when we get the cards from all the elementary schools, we try to make sure that we have a blend from throughout the community in each classroom, so that there are students from each elementary school in each classroom. Plus they are leveled by reading scores so that we have a third of the class that are high achievers, one-third that are low achievers, and one-third that are average.

William Mowery was the principal of a new middle school in its first year of operation in an affluent county consolidated school system. Mr. Mowery's school implemented ability level grouping in mathematics with algebra as a course offering for eighth grade students. Mr. Mowery had the opportunity to work at his new school for the spring semester prior to the official opening of the school during the current school year. He stated that he planned the scheduling and programming of the school with ability-level grouping in mind. The school enrollment was 720 students in grades six through eight. Mr. Mowery had been an educator for 16 years, with seven of those years spent in administration. He explained the addition of grouping for the language and reading curriculums that were being planned for next school year.

Yes, we will do it in language arts next year. Basically, we will take a look at TCAP scores at the end of the year, but we also do our own assessment at the end of the year to determine. Teacher recommendation will bear a lot on who goes where. I really wanted to start our new school with a program of grouping students by ability in both math and language arts, but I decided I needed to wait a year for the language and reading. I have teachers in my school that came from schools all over our district when we opened this year. Some of them were used to teaching in ninety-minute periods with only certain levels of abilities. But

not all of them were. All the math teachers came to us from a background of grouping for instruction, so we went ahead with the math curriculum, particularly because of scheduling the algebra classes. But I really believe, especially in teaching reading, the kids need to be grouped by their reading level. You just can't teach as effectively with low level readers in the same class with kids that are reading above their level.

Gary Hensley also discussed that once grouping was introduced at his school because of the addition of algebra, the language arts teachers asked permission to be able to try homogeneous grouping for instruction in their discipline. Mr. Hensley stated,

They came to me and asked. It wasn't at my insistence. The language and reading teachers had seen that the math scores had improved, and they wanted to try it. I had my eighth grade language arts teachers who came to me last year and said, "We'd like to try it." And so they did, and it worked out well for one of the teachers, and not the other one. This year they're not doing that. They decided they wanted to try it again without grouping. But they know they can go back to it if they need to. I've had to change my schedule with where do you teach reading and spelling. How do you get all this crammed in? So we were forever into five academic periods, but that only gave us, by the time the we changed classes, 45 minutes for instruction. So we went to a 65 minute period and incorporated the reading with the language arts. That's kind of put a little pressure on my language arts teachers, but that's the way it's got to be. So, you know, if they feel comfortable with what they're doing, then I'm fine with it. It's just a matter of finding it. I really think the language arts teachers will go back to grouping again next year. They're already complaining about how frustrated they are this year. I've had complaints about how much we're trying to get accomplished. The language arts teachers got together and came up with a plan on how to incorporate all the parts of the grammar and reading, and spelling, and vocabulary into a lesson every day. They're really frustrated again with the wide range of abilities in all their classes with all the topics they have to teach.

Dave McGar was the principal of a school with classes for kindergarten through grade 12. Mr. McGar taught reading to all grade levels during his 14 years as a classroom teacher before becoming a principal nine years ago. Mr. McGar's school did not use ability grouping in the middle grades, but advanced students may take high school level classes if they meet certain qualifications. Mr. McGar spoke from his personal experience as a reading teacher concerning teaching reading in heterogeneous versus homogeneous groups.

I think that grouping students of like abilities is more important in the skill areas, like math and reading. That's where it makes the most sense. I think we dropped the ball with the whole language thing. Everybody is not ready for the same skills. It requires the teachers to have good management skills and be able to be highly organized. You can do reading groups within your class, but I've never thought that was as effective. I've watched teachers do the three groups, the old traditional way. I've always thought that was pretty amazing how they did that. There has to be a balance. It's imperative that kids can read. It's not fair to either group to hold the good readers back while the teacher works with the lower kids. It's also criminal to leave the low readers sitting with nothing to do while the teacher works with the higher kids. I just think the skill subjects need to be taught with like abilities. It's better for the kids and the teacher.

Although Donna Greene did not espouse the use of homogeneous instruction in the regular curriculum, she described a method used at her school to remediate the students with lower reading abilities. Mrs. Greene explained,

I guess I see the disparity more in reading. We started doing the Accelerated Reading program two years ago. I think there's more of that, the sporadic range of abilities, in reading. The whole school has reading

from 7:45 to 8:45 every morning. All related arts teachers, all assistants, and all special education teachers also help. That allows me to have two teachers per class. The homeroom teacher and another teacher with them. We are trying to...if the student is so low, then the related arts teacher or assistant can pull those kids out in small groups for individual help.

Nancy Strickland also described a method of remediation for low level readers at her school. Mrs.

Strickland explained,

The teachers would like to be able to teach the low level students together at their level. They are seeing a different level of opportunities for those students. But, if you've got a real high level reader in that low level class...What I'm telling them is, "Pick out your lowest of the low and let's use our reading lab for them." And we're doing that. That's exactly what we're doing. We've moved some kids in and out of that particular scenario. If they have more skills than what their tests show, we move them out, and they're tickled. We have some kids that move into it, and they love it too, because they get to go to the computer lab. But we're finding too, that they also need some classroom time. One instance that I can think of right off the top of my head. One team for five years had integrated reading and language arts. That's fine if you've got an extended period. But when one teacher has to teach all of those skills in both of those subjects, we found the scores and frustration level of the teacher, it isn't going to get better. That team consistently, even though they were a great team; the kids loved it, they had a ball. But they consistently scored low in either reading or language, or both. It just didn't work, and they weren't willing to give it up. So I took the data to them and I said, "You are going to do something differently." So one of the veteran teachers on that team said, "I'll teach the reading and integrate social studies." So, last year we had much better reading skills, much better language skills, terrific math skills, and social studies was a major failure. So this year I said, "You do not have a choice. You will teach your area of specialty, and you will split this subject. But that subject is going to be taught, it will not be swept under the rug." So that's what we're doing this year, and they hate it, but I don't care. We're going to do it, and I have the data to prove it.

Homogeneous ability grouping of students in the areas of math, language, and reading emerged as a common strand of thought for many of the research participants. The consensus among the principals, however, as derived from the interview data, was that the subjects of science and social studies were more adaptable for heterogeneous instruction.

Tom Merita was a principal of a K-8 school in a large county school system located in a rural, mountainous region. Mr. Merita had 27 years experience as a school administrator during his 31 year career. His school was large, with a student enrollment of over 900 students and approximately 300 students in grades six, seven, and eight. Mr. Merita expressed conflicting views concerning his beliefs about ability level grouping of students throughout the interview. He readily admitted that he saw "both sides of the issue," and had "done it both ways" at different times during his career. Mr. Merita's school placed students in heterogeneous groups for science and social studies instruction and less time was mandated for instruction in these subjects from the Director of Schools and central office. Mr. Merita stated,

Dr. M. (Director of Schools) has put in a lot of new time requirements. It was a little more difficult to meet some of those requirements than we were used to. But it worked out. We have a mandate to spend at least an hour a day in instruction in the skill areas of math, reading, and language. We also group some for those

subjects, but not in science or social studies. His plan is that the science and social studies are getting less time. There are no time requirements for those. I don't know how this will work. If our scores go up in math and reading, they'll probably start looking at science and social studies. Those just don't seem as important.

Gary Hensley also stated his concerns about instruction in the areas of science and social studies. Mr. Hensley explained,

The thing about science and social studies is it's hard to make them (teachers) understand that these two aren't skill type situations. We still try to teach facts, instead of, "What do you think?" How do you go about getting the information? I think another school in our system went to the 90 minute block and went to social studies for half a year and science for half a year. I didn't really feel comfortable with that. I've allowed my teachers to add the grouping in math and language arts, but I'm going to hold the line in science and social studies. The kids need to be together socially. Besides, all the kids can contribute something to the type of cooperative group work we do in science and social studies. They are not linear skill subjects like math and reading.

Rhonda Smith was the second year principal at a large K-8 county school in a rural area. Mrs. Smith, a petite woman who was self described as, "small in stature, but big in energy," had taught for 22 years at the school where she was now principal. The school had 930 students with 360 of them being enrolled in the middle level grades of six through eight. The school will undergo a major building addition within the next year, with a large addition planned to house the middle grades students. Mrs. Smith's professional background was in the area of special education and she stated that she "has a heart for my special kids." However, Mrs. Smith stated that her philosophy concerning heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping was that students can learn more efficiently when grouped with their like ability peers. Mrs. Smith implemented ability grouping in the middle grades of her school when she became principal. However, in explaining the instruction in the areas of science and social studies, Mrs. Smith explained,

I put in the grouping this year. We do departmentalize, get teachers that specialize in a particular subject area. Before this year we had totally heterogeneous grouping. They are all together in a homeroom situation and they are all together in special classes. When they go to reading and math, they are grouped according to TCAP scores. I did that myself. I did the scheduling based on the Terra Nova scores. But I've found out that in the concept subjects, like science and social studies, it's O.K. to have them all together. And, truly, I don't know that I will change that even though we will have the room in the new building. Because, a lot of times they will pair children up that have academic problems, but that child may be more inclined to do the hands-on projects than a child that is very academic. So it works out real well.

The Implementation of an Extra Class Period for Remediation or Acceleration

Although several of the research participants expressed philosophical concerns related to the homogeneous grouping of middle school students, several of the principals included in this study had implemented some type of

homogeneous remediation or acceleration program for students, even if the regular program was structured in a heterogeneous fashion.

David Carter had fully implemented a homogeneous program for his middle school students in order to raise achievement scores. However, Mr. Carter also implemented a school-wide “advisory” period for academic, social, and behavioral accountability. Mr. Carter explained,

We’ve done several things. We set up an advisory group three years ago where...when children come to school in the morning, after dismissal from bus duty, children report to an advisor. And every teacher in this building has a group of no more than 14 children that they are responsible for academically, socially, and behaviorally. I tied that to our assertive discipline program. In other words, if I’m in your advisory and I get in trouble in another classroom, then that teacher e-mails the advisor and says, “Look, David got in trouble in my class today for this.” Then it’s that advisor’s responsibility to sit down with the child and say, “Look, here’s what’s flipping this teacher’s switch. You need to stop that.” I can’t say enough about the advisor/advisee program. As a teacher, you become responsible for those 14 children. Academically, socially, and behaviorally. I looked at keeping that child with the same teacher for a three year period and did a lot of research on it. Some schools do that. But I was concerned that if a child got with an advisor that they really didn’t like, then they were stuck with them for three years. So I chose to go the yearly route. It’s the grade level teachers that they have for advisors.

Gary Hensley added a school-wide program to practice basic skills in all classes in order to focus on math and language arts skills. Mr. Hensley described his program,

We also do what we call a focused activity. Every teacher at our school teaches a grammar, language arts skill or math skill at the beginning of every class. In other words, we felt like that if these skills can’t be taught in that regular language arts class on a regular basis, then we want them practiced in other classes. Every class, even related arts teachers, start their class by teaching a focused activity. Either a grammar or math skill activity. Takes about five to ten minutes at most, if it takes that long. So they have come up with kind of a program to help with all the skills in language arts. I had gone to a focused workshop, and it’s also where we started that concept also. Our eighth math teachers were doing focused math activities at the beginning of every class and testing them on Friday. Just practicing those skills everyday. And we saw a drastic improvement, so we adopted that school-wide as well.

Other principals chose to add an additional period during the school day or use a related arts period for remediation. Joe Founder explained the class offering used at his school,

We added a tutorial program for one of our related arts. It started out small, but our students liked that and the teachers liked it, so we have a lot of students in it. So they are getting extra help, even though they have 90 minute periods of instruction. The guidance counselor chooses the students. They have to fill out an application and then it’s based on Terra Nova scores. Those who need help the most, based on their scores, have first shot at getting into the tutorial class.

Don Mullins’ school used ability level grouping in the areas of math, language, and reading and also implemented a school-wide program for remediation of low ability students during one of their two daily related arts offerings. Mr. Mullins explained,

We take the low ones and put them in an academic enrichment class. So they have academic enrichment in the morning, and PE in the afternoon. Before, they had had two related arts. So we looked at that and tried

to take some of the lower ones. We started out trying to put everybody in academic enrichment, but we changed our minds a little bit and decided to put the lower ones in it first. So there are some of them that have two related arts, and some just have one. One of the things we are planning on doing, and I almost did it this year, if we have to retain somebody, I'm not going to let them go to related arts at all. They will go to academic enrichment for morning and afternoon related arts periods. I'll get some phone calls. When we first started, I got some phone calls anyway. "Oh, you're taking my daughter out of PE!" or whatever. And I said, "Yes, ma'am, we're trying to raise her scores." I also told her, "If I had taken her out of two math classes, you'd have never heard about it, because your daughter wouldn't have complained." So you just have to do what you think is right for kids.

Terry McGinnis added a program similar to the one being used at Don Mullin's school. However, the program described by Mr. McGinnis was for all students, not just for remediation of lower ability students. The program did use ability grouping for advancement of higher performing students or remediation for lower performing students. Mr. McGinnis stated,

We tried to come up with what we call Academic Advancement. For us, academic advancement is where they go to PE one day. Well, then some of those students can't go to PE. It wound up being about 15 students per teacher. So that teacher was supposed to take Terra Nova test scores and group those students where you would have a group of students that had common problems. We would have a low, middle, and high group. We called the high group the advanced group and we tried to be creative with that group and go as far as you could go. Help the low group, and not forget the middle group. We were going to go so many weeks with math, and then switch to English, and so that it wound up right before the Terra Nova test, that every student would be in one of these classes. It was especially aimed at really raising that low student's Terra Nova test scores. That's why we called it advancement. We were advancing the high group, the middle group, and the slow group. We were grouping them by common weaknesses, or common strengths. It has worked. Not to the degree that we wanted. This is the first year. At first the teachers were totally opposed to it. They said they had tried it before, but I don't think in the past they were ever grouped where the teacher could work with specific skills. I gave each teacher additional monies so they could order materials to deal strictly with Terra Nova skills. We won't know until we get the scores back. And I'm not sure we will even know after we get the scores back after only one year's data. It has been, I think the teachers are getting used to it now and it's not as bad as they thought. They can still get out some worksheets, and have some students working on their own. It wasn't as time consuming as they thought once they got it planned. Last year we did it as a spelling period. It ended up being a study period. So we changed the focus. They go every other day to PE or academic advancement. We moved spelling back to the reading class.

Nancy Strickland's school also added a class called "Comprehensive Academic Period" to the schedule that was designed to allow enrichment for high performing students and remediation for low performing students. The class was built into an extra eighth period of the academic day so that all students were involved without giving up a related arts offering. Mrs. Strickland described the program,

We have scheduled the last two years, a class called the Comprehensive Academic period where every teacher for 40 minutes is involved in teaching a group of kids. Now the teams decide what the focus is going to be. The students that go into those groups have certain limitations or kinds of skills...it's a fluid group. The groups will change. Some teams change them weekly or monthly. It depends on what the focus is. This month in seventh grade the whole focus is writing. The TCAP writing exam is coming up February fifth. So every group is focused on writing. Now some teams have divided those groups into high writing groups and some of them are students with a score of "three," or deficient, on the writing exam.

Mrs. Strickland further described the CAPS program later in the interview when she said,

We actually have an eighth period in there and it's called CAPS. We have a ten minute homeroom and then we go to CAPS after that. All related arts teachers have a class. The teams utilize them differently. Everyone of our academic teachers are teaching a class. It can be reading, vocabulary, writing, math. Science fair is coming up. Our science teachers will pull a group of high level students who they want to do science fair projects. They will take those students and teach them how to actually set up their projects during CAPS. Because we don't require everybody to participate in science fair. Everyone does a science project, but only the top level students actually go to the science fair.

Lester Vance spent a good deal of time talking about the "standards class" implemented at his school. Mr. Vance was the first year principal of a small sixth through eighth grade middle school in a large county school system. Mr. Vance's school was a beautiful old red brick building that was set in a small valley in a rural farming community. The school sported a white steeple at the top of a pitched roof with the American flag flying proudly in front of the large, porched entrance. Mr. Vance had taught at his school for 15 years prior to becoming principal for the current school year. He spoke with great pride concerning his school and his new position as principal. Although Mr. Vance was not a proponent of ability level grouping in the regular curriculum, he talked openly concerning the remediation and acceleration offered by specific ability level groups to all students in the standards class. The standards class was part of the seven period regular school day, and students still had the opportunity to be involved in two related arts classes. Mr. Vance described the standards class as follows,

We started last year developing what we call a "standards class." And what standards class is, math or language arts remediation. What we do is, as teachers meet every day as a team, basically, the kids are divided into groups based on their needs. One group may need help with fractions, and another group may need help with punctuation. Second period is the standards class. It's posted each morning in homeroom as to where they are to go that day for standards class. So it's kind of like a floating class. Second period is the standards class school-wide. Every student in the whole school goes to standards. Even if they are accelerated, we do accelerated work with them during that period. We hit every student. For example, some of the accelerated students were doing a unit on measurement and they spent three days in the cafeteria doing an activity. Another group was in the computer lab doing A+. Another group was working on punctuation. So this is across the board for the teachers, too. Not just in their content area. What we have on each team is a specialist in math and reading, so they help the science and social studies person teach whatever is needed. We started last year. We weren't really sure how it would go. We think it has helped us tremendously. We saw a difference in test scores last year, and that's what I think it is attributed to. It was difficult, not really hard...we were not really sure how we would do it. We experimented as time went on. What we typically do is, on Monday, they have what we call regular standards class. In other words, they are assigned to certain teacher. So on Monday they go to their regular standards teacher. We work on spelling on Monday's. Then on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, they go to another teacher, after the teachers have met on Monday. On Monday they meet together and decide which students need help with what. Then on Friday, they meet back in their regular standards class and have the spelling test and maybe another little activity. Usually, Tuesday through Thursday are the remediation days. And that can change for the students...it may be math this week and something else next week. You may be in a standards class for only one day. It just depends, and it fluctuates. We do that all three grades. Resource students are in there, Outreach (gifted) students are in there, everybody. The academic periods are 45 minutes, plus the standards class is 45 minutes. We run two related arts, they have a morning related art and an afternoon related art, so we run a seven period day.

Multi-Age Ability Grouping

As stated previously, several of the schools included in this study had student enrollments of grades kindergarten through eight and did not employ homogeneous grouping within specific grade levels. These schools were typically referred to as “elementary” schools, and, although some had large total student populations, many had small numbers of students in the middle grades with a limited number of teachers assigned to those grades. Several of the principals of K-8 schools who were interviewed stated that their small student enrollment in grades six through eight limited their capacity to group students by ability. However, some of these smaller schools were found to be using a multi-age grouping configuration of instructing students of like abilities, regardless of the student’s grade level.

Bill Mitchell’s school included grades kindergarten through eight and actively employed the practice of homogeneous grouping. However, because the student enrollment in the middle grades was relatively small with approximately 65 students per grade, Mr. Mitchell and his staff had included in their plan cross grade instruction according to ability level. Mr. Mitchell explained,

In the past, the seventh and eighth grades were two separate entities. If you were in the seventh grade you had one of four teachers, if you were in the eighth grade you had one of four teachers. So now it’s multiage. They are ability grouped wherever they fall between the grades. Between the eighth teachers you can fall anywhere. You could be in the seventh grade, but in an eighth grade math class. Or visa versa. You’re still considered to be in the seventh grade, but you would be in the top group of seventh grade. But you may pick up an eighth grade homeroom teacher to teach your math. And eighth graders who score very low, they can cross down to a seventh class if they need remedial help.

Rhonda Smith also expressed an interest in implementing multi-age grouping in the middle grade classes of her large K-8 school. Mrs. Smith had changed the instructional program in her first year as principal to include homogeneous grouping in math, language, and reading. Concerning her plan to add homogeneous instruction across grade levels, Mrs. Smith stated,

I’ve not broached that with my teachers yet. I have a plan to be able to teach the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students strictly according to their ability, regardless of which grade they are in. It will further utilize the staff that I have available in the middle grades, and will allow us to meet the needs of all of our students more efficiently. I’m moving toward that, but not yet. The teachers here have never done that. So I don’t want them to feel that I’m coming in and revamping everything. They’ve done real well with anything that I’ve done so far. They’ve been receptive to what we’ve done in math and language arts this year, but I don’t want to push it too soon.

Donna Roller was in her sixth year as principal of a small K-8 school with a total enrollment of 360 students. Mrs. Roller had served as an elementary teacher in several schools for twenty years before becoming the

leader of her school. Throughout the interview, Mrs. Roller expressed frustration with what she described as the limited services and opportunities available to her students because of the small size of her school. However, Mrs. Roller stated that she had been considering options to give her students more instructional opportunities, despite the limited number of teachers and specialists available in her school. A strategy that Mrs. Roller explained she was planning on implementing during the next school year was multi-age instructional grouping in the area of reading. Mrs. Roller stated,

Next year we are going to try some multi-age teaching in the middle school grades. We have thought about it and I think we will next year in reading. We're just going to start in reading. We haven't really set out our criteria yet. I don't know how many grade levels we will go down or up. But, I think that we actually will allow students to move up or down one or maybe two grade levels, depending on need. But, that can be a problem, especially with the younger kids here, to move them too far. Again, because of the size of the school, we are only going to have two sixth grade classes. If they don't fit in there, then they're in different grades, see. But I'm tired of my school being overlooked just because we're small. I understand the situation with the budget crunch and all, but my kids deserve to do well, also. So, there are some other schools in our county that are using multi-age, and it's working well for them. So, we're going to start with reading next year, and see where it goes from there.

Tom Merita was another principal who expressed frustration with the status quo at his school and with trying to introduce a different teaching strategy to his faculty. Mr. Merita stated that he had been unsuccessful in convincing his faculty to try multi-age grouping in the middle grades. Mr. Merita explained,

Each grade is basically departmentalized within the grade. We do not teach between grades. I tried to investigate a little bit of that last summer, but I did not get a whole lot of support from the teachers. I saw it as an opportunity to be able to do a whole lot more grouping if more teachers would teach language arts or reading at the same time, and so forth. We could move the kids to ability groups, but I didn't have that much support. So, I thought that after just my first year, I wasn't going to fight that yet. They (the teachers) prefer teaching the way they always have. They have separated by grades for years and they are not willing right now to go another way. They are comfortable with it. They like teaching the heterogeneous and just staying with the "I am an eighth grade teacher and I just want to deal with eighth grade students." So, the plan that I had would be like four teachers teaching English and then if one of those teachers had the low kids in sixth grade and some seventh graders may come to that group. It would be a multi-age grouping based on the student's needs. That was the design I was trying to sell. Then you would have those classes running simultaneously for that hour and you would have the flexibility to move children between groups. But I didn't get that sold. And I wasn't strong enough, my attitude wasn't strong enough to force it.

However, Tammy Knight was a principal that was highly pleased with the multi-age grouping of instruction at her K-8 elementary school. Mrs. Knight was in her first year at her current school, having spent seven years previously as the principal of small elementary school in her county system. Mrs. Knight had 26 years total experience as an educator. Mrs. Knight was dressed in her school's sweatshirt and greeted and hugged several students who were in the office area while the interviewer waited for our appointment. Mrs. Knight's school had a total enrollment of 530 students in grades kindergarten through eight, with 200 students attending classes in sixth

through eighth grade. Mrs. Knight stated repeatedly throughout the interview how impressed she was by the multi-age grouping configuration that had been put in place by the previous principal at her school. Mrs. Knight explained,

They are ability level grouped for math and somewhat in reading. We do multi-age grouping in math. In reading we try to do inclusion as much as we can, but we do have some pull-out programs for lower-level students. That doesn't necessarily mean they are special education students, but we still consider that multi-age grouping as well. Everybody teaches reading at the same time, except for an eighth grade class. There are three teachers there and they teach reading among those eighth grade teachers. We pull for that special lower-level class, on about a fourth grade level, at the same time, so we have to schedule students so that they can be pulled at the same time. The multi-age includes everybody in fourth grade and up. At 1:00 we have math for grades four through eight. Eighth grade also has two other math classes for higher level students at another time. But, we also use an academic-behavioral specialist to help with the grouping, because we have so many other levels in math than we do in reading. We try to accommodate more in the regular class for reading and language arts than in math since those skills build upon on another. So, we have students assigned to teachers from fourth through eighth grade of different levels of math. Everybody has math at the same time, and they are ability-level grouped. They go to whichever teacher that teaches their level. We try not to put eighth graders in a fourth grade class. I think it makes the expectations higher for each class. Because we don't say, "Well, they're not able to do this." And the curriculum is not watered down for them, at least not in math. Now we do make some modifications for them in reading. But they're required, at whatever level they're on, you get it and go. Eighty percent is mastery. So we are really working hard to make sure that they are accomplishing what they are supposed to. But it works really well here, I've been really impressed with the program. And instead of students being really frustrated with being in an eighth grade class and working on a fifth grade level...you don't have that level of frustration, they are on task more, and they are making progress.

Standardized Test Accountability

In addition to the comments specific to academic disciplines and the perceived need for homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping of students, the principals in this study also identified the self-imposed pressures they feel for their schools to perform well on standardized tests. Some of the research participants further identified specific expectations from their central office or other outside sources concerning test performance as having an influence on their decisions to implement homogeneous grouping. However, a few of the principals discounted the influence of test performance and stated negative attitudes toward grouping of students in order to achieve higher performance levels.

Rhonda Smith had tears in her eyes during the interview when she talked about her belief in her teachers and the heartbreak she felt personally for her students and teachers because of test scores that were considered low performing. Mrs. Smith stated,

This year our test scores were low and it concerned me greatly. I don't know exactly why, because we have excellent teachers and I think the students tried real hard, and it concerned me greatly. So, I took TCAP scores and grouped accordingly. So I don't think it was a big surprise to anybody when I came to them and said, "What do you think about this?" They were ready for it, to try to help test scores. They are just terrible. And we made such improvement last year, we truly did. But, when you look at the report card, you don't see that. It broke my heart and my faculty's heart. I felt so sorry for them. But when you get the data

and start breaking it down like I did, we made six, almost seven NCE gains in math last year, and that's great. All A's in value-added. I told my people, "That shows you are doing your job." Of course, a lot of that is our population, too. I'm willing to do whatever I need to do. Teachers don't deserve to feel like they are not doing what they are supposed to.

When asked what had been the driving force behind his decision to implement ability level grouping in his school, Joe Founder also replied,

The pressure to get our test scores up. In our case it was. Because our scores were low enough that they were a major concern. The more I thought about it, I thought the extra time in class would be helpful, along with the ability grouping, too. I think it's proved right. I think it's the individual situation. And the teacher.

Gary Hensley expressed similar feelings when he stated, "You know, you've got to make changes.

I mean we've been undergoing changes for the last three years. It's kind of data driven us to where we feel like we've got to make those changes."

David Carter, the outspoken principal of 17 years at his traditional middle school of 450 students, also talked about the pressures of test accountability for his school. Mr. Carter had 33 years experience as an educator and stated that he had "loved every one of them." Mr. Carter had implemented ability grouping at his school several years prior in a sweeping movement of change that also included the addition of extended block periods of time for instruction in math and language arts. When asked why he had decided to make the changes in grouping of his students, Mr. Carter answered,

Test scores and expectations that I had for our school. About 65% of our student body is free and reduced lunch. We had to set some expectations for our children to get them where I wanted them to be academically. We've done several things. We spend a lot of time crunching numbers as far as OPI scores of kids. Knowing what performance levels that kids are on. I require every one of my teachers, in their grade books beside the student's name, to put their performance level that they are functioning on. So it will become second nature to that teacher every time they record a grade in the grade book, where that child is. We sit down in advisor groups and say, "Hey, here's where you are academically, and here's where you need to be." We've had kids, when we started doing that, we've had kids say, "Hey, I didn't...no one ever took the time to sit down and tell me this. I didn't know that you even looked at those things. I just thought that was a test we took and somebody sent it off and that was it." So we've raised the level of concern with our student body about testing.

Nancy Strickland also talked openly about the pressure she felt for her school to perform well on standardized achievement tests and the influence that those tests have had on her decisions concerning ability grouping students for instruction. Mrs. Strickland stated,

This year, because of the pressure on schools to educate everyone and achieve certain levels, especially in value-added, we are trying the leveling in reading as well. The reading and math seem to be the push. Our reading scores in seventh grade are not what they need to be. Math is probably one of our strong suits, but it's probably because we have a real leader in that department.

Mrs. Strickland also explained some of the teaching strategies that her teachers employ in order to prepare students

for the standardized exams. Mrs. Strickland said,

Our system has had three practice writings up to this point. In addition to that, our teachers have had three practice timed writing sessions in seventh grade. So they're really focused on that. The students are working with the rubrics and saying, "Where can I improve?" They are really practicing that. That will be the focus through February fifth, the state-wide date for the seventh grade writing exam. Then, if I were to guess, the math teachers will begin focusing on skills prior to TCAPs. They'll start honing in on those math skills that have appeared as weaknesses through all of their evaluations.

Perhaps one of the most poignant explanations of the pressures that middle grades educators feel due to standardized test accountability was expressed by Terry McGinnis when he stated,

Even though I've been in education a long time, I just learn more and more each day about middle school. I have so much more respect for middle school because of the Terra Nova tests. You know, the high school teachers do not live with a test hanging over their heads. Most elementary teachers do not live with a test hanging over their heads. But to me, it's really good. And it's not, "You're accountable, ha, ha, ha!" It's not that kind of thing. It really makes it competitive. And being the old coach that I am, I'm saying, "Hey!" And the teachers want to see those test scores as soon as they come in. A few of them are afraid of it. But once they begin to realize that this can drive education, then I believe you're going to have quality education where you have teachers that want to see that score. And even though they're not sure what value-added is, they still want to see that score. And they're looking forward to that, and they're upset when that score went down a point or two. I tell them, "Well, look at your three-year average, though." And then they'll say, "Well, I don't care, that was not a good group of students last year, anyway, but I thought I did better than that." I think that whether you group, or don't group, I think the real driving force is that there is a test that sixth, seventh, and eighth graders all receive. There is a writing assessment test given in the seventh grade. And these things are real data that you can turn over to your teachers. I think, I don't know that I would ever do this, but it would certainly help me a lot in hiring teachers and putting them on tenure.

In addition to the accountability that middle school educators feel to perform on achievement tests for their specific grade levels, several research participants also mentioned accountability for their students to pass the Gateway exams in high school. The Gateway exams are end-of-course exams required by the Tennessee State Department of Education as graduation requirements beginning with the class of 2004. All students must successfully pass Gateway exams in the areas of Algebra I, Biology I, and English II in order to be eligible to earn a regular high school diploma beginning in 2004.

When discussing the addition of algebra to the eighth grade curriculum, Gary Hensley mentioned the need to prepare students for the Gateway exam gradually in the area of math. Mr. Hensley stated,

The thing that they've got to understand too, and this is something we've talked about quite frequently with the Gateway testing, is that if we don't get them the background and put them in algebra too soon, they're not going to pass that Gateway. So let's make sure that we take this one step at a time.

Likewise, Bill Mitchell also mentioned the Gateway exams and his perception of the effects that the tests may have on the future of middle school education. Mr. Mitchell expressed his feelings this way, "Gateway exams

will change things too. We have to try to adjust with the things that are happening. Then they want to hold us accountable for everything when they make decisions like this.”

Lester Vance is another principal who mentioned Gateway exams in the course of the interview. Mr. Vance’s school used heterogeneous grouping in all academic subjects. Concerning the Gateway exams, Mr. Vance stated,

You never know what will happen in the future, and things in education seem to cycle. I have to think that Gateway exams will eventually cause a lower rate of graduation in our state. It could cause pressure on middle schools if students do not perform well on those tests in high school. But for my standpoint right now, heterogeneous grouping is the best situation right now for us.

Not all of the principals who were interviewed expressed feelings of pressure or concern about standardized testing, however. In fact, for three of the principals, the testing issue was viewed as just another reason not to implement ability grouping against their belief of what is best for their students. Tom Merita expressed his feelings by stating,

I think the potential is there. You probably could make some gains as far as the Terra Nova testing is concerned. I guess I’m just too old. I realize how important it is, I realize that everybody is looking at it, I know that the grade card is out but, there are just so many other factors that affect scores. On a particular day I’ve looked at them and seen a kid score at the 80th percentile and the next year score at the 40th. I don’t think there is a particular magic to it. You may over time, gain a little bit. But I think as many students that basically are here that have an input into that average, whether it’s value-added or achievement, the kids that you move anyway, in my experience are the ones that score above the 30th percentile. The ones that score below the 30th percentile, you’re not going to get much movement with them. But those between the 40 to 50th I think you can move them to 50 or 60th. Those who are below 25 and 30, you are lucky to....their motivation and confidence....I’m not sure that the instructional program has an impact on those.

However, at the end of the interview, Mr. Merita returned to the test accountability issue and further stated,

The only thing I feel like I ought to go back to is this testing issue and the grouping issue. I guess I’ll say it like this. This is kind of the “tail wagging the dog.” But as administrators, we are foolish if we don’t pay very, very close attention to that information and that data, and be proactive to it for the greatest extent possible. This school made big jumps, basically because of decisions they made three years ago. I’m not sure we can maintain that, because I’ve had a five teacher change-over after school started. So, five new staff members that are teaching in skill areas. They are O.K., but they are inexperienced. We lost teachers that dealt with these skills very thoroughly in the past. So, there are issues like that that the newspaper or the state grade card cannot account for. Now, I know it, but the newspaper’s not going to pay any attention to me when I say that.

Dave McGar was another principal who seemed unaffected by any pressure for his school to perform at a specific level on standardized tests. Mr. McGar stated, “No, we don’t pay a whole lot of attention to that stuff anyway. We just sort of do what we do best, and let the chips fall where they may. They always seem to fall sunny side up for us and that works pretty well.”

When asked about test accountability affecting his decision to maintain heterogeneous grouping or causing him to consider the possibility of homogeneous grouping of students in the future, Larry Taylor replied,

Not me. I don't think it will. I'm not a big proponent of all those tests to be very honest about it. You give those tests...it's like I told some of my teachers, if I was standing at a machine stamping out bottle caps....yeah, you could hold me accountable. I'm supposed to stamp out 260 caps with no more than ten percent bad. Yeah, you could hold me responsible for that. But how you can hold a school or even a teacher accountable for what they teach kids, as much as they've got on them these days, that's beyond me. There's just too many factors. The teacher is one of them, the surroundings, the life history, the family, what they have to go through, how late they stay up at night, what TV shows they watch, what they are exposed to. You can't do that...there's just too many factors involved with it.

In addition to the self-imposed responsibility that principals expressed for their schools to perform well on standardized exams and high school end-of-course exams, several principals also spoke openly concerning specific directives from their central offices. Tom Merita, Tammy Knight, Rhonda Smith, and Donna Roller all mentioned a new time requirement implemented in their school system for basic skill subjects. Each school is required by the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction to provide a minimum of one hour of instructional time each day in the core subjects of math, reading, and language.

Tim Jackson, a retired public school principal with 30 years experience, was now serving as the principal of a small private Christian school that included an enrollment of 150 students in grades kindergarten through grade eight. A youthful, active man, Mr. Jackson spoke openly about one of the reasons he had decided to retire at his eligibility date of 30 years of service was due to pressures he perceived from the central office.

Mr. Jackson stated,

Early in my career we did a lot of grouping in the elementary grades. That's how things were going when I first started out as principal. Then we really got away from that. Even in the elementary grades. A lot of times in K-8, the same things happened in the middle grades that happened in the elementary grades. You just didn't divide it up like you would if you were just in a middle school. I guess in education things change. For whatever reason, who knows why? Just a difference emphasis. Probably the achievement didn't pan out that they were getting what they wanted. Especially as we changed administrations it would be a different emphasis. Some would come in and it would be instructional, and then that would drop off. And the principals have to play the game of what's coming out of central office. You are always involved in instruction, but with a different emphasis depending on what's going on with different programs. I guess I just got tired of playing the game with the different directives. So much of what comes out of central office is political, anyway, instead of what's best for kids. The big thing right now is scoring well on the tests, making "A's" on the state grade card. Principals are under enormous pressure to make sure their schools look good. Things in education go in cycles. We used to group, and then we got away from that, and now we group again. I think a lot of it is coming from the test pressure, though.

Donna Greene also spoke about the directives she had received from her central office concerning standardized test preparation. Mrs. Greene said,

I think my teachers are feeling so much pressure right now. We've been told in all of our principal's meetings that any staff development that we are preparing, in our Tennessee School Improvement Plan, make sure we include the Gateway and make sure our sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers are preparing them. So we are getting a lot of that pressure. Our test scores are great, I have a great faculty, but I think we are going to have to start scrutinizing and looking. I know that central office looks closely at those scores and compares our performance to other schools in our area and across the state. The pressure is there. Sometimes it's not really stated, but it's there. Other times they will come right out and tell us, "Make sure your scores are what they should be." They look at individual teacher performance, too. It really makes me feel responsible for protecting my teachers and making sure I do whatever I can to help them score well. If that means putting in some grouping, I guess that's what we'll do. It's supposed to be about the kids, but I think we've forgotten that somewhere in all this mess.

Impact of Social Factors Affecting Students

During the interview process, social factors associated with the ability level grouping of students emerged as a theme with the research participants. Concerns about the behavior of students who are grouped homogeneously, the perceptions that students have about themselves when grouped with their like ability peers, and the need for flexibility in moving students between groups were identified by the principals throughout the data analysis.

Issues Related to Student Behavior and Discipline

Student behavior emerged as a major concern of principals interviewed in this study. The principals who espouse the use of heterogeneous ability grouping expressed strong beliefs about having students of mixed ability in each classroom to counteract possible behavior problems. Some of the principals who used homogeneous grouping, however, said that when students were learning with like ability peers there were less behavior issues. Finally, several of the research participants who also used homogeneous grouping expressed concerns about the lack of role models for the lower achieving students when they were grouped exclusively together.

Donna Greene explained the heterogeneous method of grouping students for instructional and behavioral reasons in her school,

I do a survey at the end of each school year. Each homeroom teacher will fill out if they have had a problem with a particular student and feel like they need to be separated. Also if we have had them in the office as behavior problems, then we put them in separate homerooms. My sixth and seventh grades travel by homerooms, but the eighth grade we do a little bit different to prepare them for high school. I pretty much do them by hand. They are divided into homerooms heterogeneously. But then I hand schedule and try to divide them up so that they don't travel as a group. To give them more diversity in their schedule.

Likewise, Claire Cassell also strongly expressed her belief about maintaining heterogeneous grouping in her school. Mrs. Cassell spoke of discussions she had had with her teachers concerning homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping of students in their classrooms. Mrs. Cassell shared,

Oh yes, they've discussed it. But I think they understand on the other hand that there wouldn't be...I mean who wants a room of basically behavior problems? Because that's what you get. And then, to deal with them for an hour and a half! They don't want to do that either. But sometimes you can mix and match kids, if you have a team of 100 kids, you can match them. And classroom management...when we put a low kid in a high group we get better behavior. You get what you expect. I think they understand that. Of course, they don't like that large gap that we have, and we do have a large gap.

However, other principals who regularly used homogeneous grouping of students, expressed views that the behavior in their schools had improved since the implementation of the like ability classes. Tammy Knight stated that the behavior issues were much less at her new school where multi-age grouping was used than it had been at her previous school where students learned exclusively with their grade-level peers. Mrs. Knight explained,

Yes, all on grade level. They tried it a couple of different ways. They tried scheduling everyone at a certain level in one classroom. We wound up with a high, medium and low. You wound up with all the behavior problems together. Those that get frustrated easily and can't do the work alone. That just didn't work. I guess that's one of the hardest things, especially for scheduling in the office. Trying to get those schedules coordinated to where you have those kids spread out. And we did spread behavior problems out, regardless of what levels they are on. But the number of discipline incidences that I have to handle is just so much less than the school I came from. This school is twice the population. It's just totally different. I'm actually able to do some academic things.

Similarly, Rhonda Smith expressed her satisfaction with the decrease in discipline referrals she was dealing with during the current school year after the implementation of ability level grouping in the middle grades when she said,

No, in fact, I'm seeing less discipline than we did last year. The discipline I have is the discipline I would have no matter what. I try to make sure that the kids know I care about them. Out of 900 kids, I think I know about 700 names. That was a goal for me because I think that is very important. We have academic pep rallies and we make a big deal about that. I think they want to achieve because they know that somebody cares. You have to have that positive attitude. I love this school and these people. It works me to death, but I enjoy it.

Conversely, not all of the principals who had implemented homogeneous grouping of their students stated that behavior problems had decreased. In fact, several participants expressed concerns over what they perceived as an increase in behavior problems that they suspected may be due to the homogeneous grouping. Bill Mitchell had kept student discipline records for a period of several years that he shared with the interviewer,

I keep totals of detentions since 1990. (Shows the interviewer the discipline records). You can see in 1990 with ability grouping throughout the whole school, then there is a huge drop when you go to heterogeneous. From 1990-1991, 1258 referrals, to 1992-1993, when heterogeneous grouping began, it dropped to 485 referrals for the whole year. It has consistently stayed down. I was talking to some of my upper grade teachers just the other day and they think, and this is one of the reasons that we did what we did a couple of years ago. But, one of the reasons why we changed and kept the eighth grade as the eighth grade, and the seventh grade as the seventh grade with no flip flopping over, is because of behavior. Because you have a tendency as you cross over, I don't know, the pecking order. Eighth graders are going to bump the seventh graders, not out of meanness. And we do not have fights here really, it's been years, just some bumping and shoving when we were crossing over. I was talking to one of my teachers the other day and they were

talking about the interactions between the seventh and eighth grades, the negative interactions. Especially where you get eighth grade boys liking a seventh grade girl, and she's been liking a seventh grade boy, but now here's the opportunity to like a eighth grade boy. So you get into those types of situations that can lead to behavior problems when you group across grades.

Dave McGar agreed with the sentiments expressed by Bill Mitchell concerning the increased probability for behavior problems when middle school age students are grouped together by ability. Mr. McGar stated,

The problem we ran into in middle school that I don't like is that you put all your leaders in one class. It creates a situation with no good role models. I don't see that as being a problem here. A good many of our students have been here since kindergarten. I think we sometimes make a mistake when we group them together for extended periods. They need to be with peers that have different backgrounds, life experiences, study habits, things like that.

Don Mullins also expressed a belief that lower ability students who are grouped together can have more discipline problems under certain conditions. However, Mr. Mullins qualified his statement by expressing a different opinion based on his experiences with students grouped for special education services. Mr. Mullins emphasized,

Probably, you'll have a few more in the lower classes because they kind of feed off each other and show out for each other. Part of it can be frustration. If we've got somebody like that and figure out that he's basically a good kid, I'll have the guidance counselor talk to them and see what the problem is. If they say, "I hate that class, I can't do this," then we try to do some modifications to help them, even if they're not special ed. But yes, you seem to have a little more discipline problems when the lower ones are together. But at the same time, in special education, where they are grouped for extended resource, I don't have a lot of problems out of those kids. The ones that are borderline, you'll have more problems out of. But the ones that are low functioning, you don't have any problems out of them most of the time. Sometimes it's just the individual. And it could be home problems. They may be mad at somebody at home, and then come in here and be mad at everybody else. So we try to look at all of that before we do what we need to do. Because I'm not one to tolerate any misbehavior of any type. Special ed. kids here are expected to act and do the best they can do. I don't excuse them for getting in trouble anymore than I would anyone else. Different guidelines, you have to handle them by, as you know. I don't make excuses if they're on medication. We've just got to expect everybody to do the best they can do. I tell students that, and the parents that. I've had them come in and say, "Well, he's on medication." Fine. He's still expected to perform and behave at school. There are students that need extra help and we try to give it to them. At the same time, follow the rules and regulations.

Terry McGinnis discussed his conflicting feelings about homogeneous grouping based on what he described as a change in the climate of his school because of the implementation of the grouped instruction. Mr. McGinnis clarified,

I think somehow we are beginning to see more of our...you'd think that it wouldn't work this way, but somehow you begin to see a lot of classrooms with a lot of students who...again, I'm saying this as a generality...that students who have lower grades are also the students who are bored and can't keep up, so therefore they are also the students who are somewhat disruptive. And I think we are seeing more classes like that this year. And even though our school is so fortunate. In the two years that I've been here, we've had one kid bring marijuana. We just do not have major problems. Now, that could happen while we are talking. I mean I'm sitting here with no guarantees. I think one of the things that I spend more time on than any other one thing, is that I really want to have a good crisis management plan. I update it and we rehearse it, and we really do those things here. I think, looking back, experience is the best teacher. I think that the swap off isn't that big. That the discipline of the school, and again, we don't have major discipline

problems, but if we could improve those. A student teacher once told me that if he could have one rule...he came to me while I was still at the high school. I asked him, "What about your rules?" And he said, "I've got one rule." And I said, "You do?" And he said, "That's right. Teachers are allowed to teach and students are allowed to learn. That's the one rule. If teachers can't teach and student's can't learn, then you're in violation." And boy, that just stuck with me. Whoever taught that young man that, or whether he came upon that himself, that was a case of the student teaching the teacher. And we try to follow that here. And so, even though the little things build up and we do have assertive discipline and things like that, I think we are having more little things than we did in the past. There's two or three teachers that wind up with that low group, and they are really just not happy campers. And I just think that school climate....again, I will do it at the end of the year. I'll sit down with the teachers and ask them what they think about this grouping situation. And if they say that they don't want to group in reading next year and they want to make these changes in academic advancement, I'll probably buy into it. I don't see it as a step backwards.

Student Perceptions

Just as the research participants expressed concern about the possibility of increased discipline problems due to ability grouping, they likewise spoke honestly concerning the perceptions of students who are placed in like ability classes. Not surprisingly, the principals who stated that homogeneous grouping had not increased discipline referrals in their schools had a quite different outlook concerning student perceptions of the issue than did their counterparts who expressed concern over increased discipline due to homogeneous grouping.

Larry Taylor had been very outspoken concerning his anti-ability level philosophy throughout the interview. His views on the affects that grouping had on student perceptions of themselves was consistent with his prior statements. Mr. Taylor declared,

Again, if it were to be done, and I don't think it should be, it should be kept discreet so the kids wouldn't have some idea that they were being grouped according to ability. I can see the advantages of ability grouping in very few cases. But when they get it in their heads, and they get to the point that they think they are slower than the others, you are defeating your purpose. There are more important things with dealing with kids than just what some test says they are able to do. If they don't believe in themselves we don't stand a Chinaman's chance of making a difference with that kid. The worst thing we can do is be the reason that they are down on themselves by putting them in a class that they think is the dummy group.

David Carter echoed the feelings of Larry Taylor when he stated,

Hopefully, our other programs like advisory help offset that. But you still have it. I would be foolish to say to you that doesn't happen, because it does happen. I'm not an advocate of grouping. At all. But my community pretty well mandates it. I tried to do away with it one year, and it bit me. I think children label themselves as "blue birds" and "red birds." We don't have to label them, they label themselves. One of the changes that I wanted to make for my students was to get away from this, "I'm dumb and I can't learn." That's not true. Everybody can learn.

Bill Mitchell also expressed concern about students' perceptions of themselves when grouped with their like-ability peers. Mr. Mitchell related his personal experience with this issue when he stated,

I think anytime that you ability group that you have a certain amount of that. When I first came here, 20 years ago, they were ability grouped, grades one through eight. And we broke that cycle. By the time the kids were in fourth or fifth grade, they were beat. The ones that were in that low group were demoralized,

down. They knew they were quote “the dummy group” and so there was no drive, no initiative. After a couple years of looking that, we made the recommendation to go self-contained. If the teachers wanted to divide within that self-contained in reading groups or whatever, that’s fine. But we were seeing those kids by the time they were in fifth or sixth grade, they weren’t bad kids, but they had given up. You couldn’t get homework out of them or anything. You could make them sit there and behave, but they weren’t producing. So we began to switch. Of course, now we’re back to the grouping again, and this is the one thing that worries me the most about it.

Not all of the interviewees expressed such concern over the issue of negative student perceptions caused by homogeneous grouping. Conversely, some of the principals stated that they dealt with the issue openly with their students. Gary Hensley expressed his surprise that he had not heard more negative statements from his students when he said,

You know, it’s been good for me, in that I expected to hear a lot of that. But I haven’t heard much, I have heard some. Of course, we’re very conscious of that because of not being a grouping school for so long. And any time we hear that we address it openly with them. We want you to move at your pace. That’s something that our teachers talk to them constantly about. If they hear that kind of negative statement, that is explained. We sit down and talk to them. We tell them that it’s not because they are “dumb,” but to let them know where they are. Just trying to let them know that it’s a placement issue so they can learn.

Don Mullins was another administrator who took a very matter-of-fact attitude about dealing with student perceptions concerning their placement in an ability grouped class. Mr. Mullins stated,

Yes, we see that a lot. If a kid has a question about it, we just tell the child and the parent that we put them in there where they can function and learn something. If they are in the real high classes and can’t do it, and fail, then it makes them feel bad. But we put them where they can all have some success. I have two extended resource classes and two resource teachers. They make sure they have some success, even though they can’t function like the regular kids. But they gear it to what they can do. We try to keep them where they are successful. I think kids feel worse when they are in over their heads and are made to feel bad in front of the whole class because they can’t keep up with the other kids. It all depends on how you present it to them. Putting them where they can succeed is a positive thing in our school, not a negative thing. We make sure that we are open with the kids about that.

Tammy Knight also spoke favorably of how her students perceive the multi-age grouping in her school when she explained,

I think the key is that they are achieving on their level. They are able to meet their expectations in that class. And the expectations are high in every class, it’s not a watered down curriculum for them. They are required to do whatever in that class. I think I have seen a majority of students be very motivated. We do an academic pep rally for each grade, regardless of what level they are on. Not just A’s and B’s, but if they meet their goals. This is the first year we’ve done this. We celebrate, cheers and prizes. Eighth graders are rewarded in front of their peers, regardless of their academic level. We also play music every morning on the intercom. I want it to be positive and upbeat. Fridays are orange and black day, for school pride. Each adult tries to establish rapport with certain students. That’s the biggest thing we can do for students, because some of them don’t have anyone at home. So I really believe the way we handle the multi-age for our kids is in their best interest. I haven’t heard any negative comments from students, but I have gotten a lot of hugs from kids who are succeeding who have never had any success before.

Rhonda Smith expressed her initial concerns about student perceptions when she implemented ability grouping but stated that the practice has not been perceived negatively. Mrs. Smith explained,

I worried about whether it would make the kids feel bad. Dr. F. is the curriculum supervisor. He wasn't really gung ho about this. I thought, well, maybe he knows something about this that I don't. And I'm sure he does. But this is the way that I went to school and I know I shouldn't go back to that. But I felt like students moved quicker, even in the lower grouping they moved quicker, and I don't remember ever thinking that about other students. So, I thought, let's try this here. Our school has a very unique student population, and it may not work everywhere. But the kids' socio-economic status is basically the same. So I don't think that is really a problem. And each teacher has those students for something, so it's not like it's just her class. And then they are grouped together at several points each day. They eat lunch together, go to special classes like art, music, PE, and library, they have computer together and homeroom. I don't think it's a problem. I think it just kind of flows.

Flexibility of Student Placement Between Groups

An additional factor that principals identified through the interview process was the importance of flexibility of movement between groups. This movement was identified as being when a student was either struggling academically in a high group and had need of being placed in a slower group or a student who was ready for more of a challenge than was presented in a low group.

Lester Vance expressed concern about moving students out of the algebra class into a lower ability math class. Mr. Vance stated,

Yes, we really discourage it. But if a student is struggling, we can do what we can during the first six weeks. If, after the first six weeks, if the student is not making it, then we make that change. We won't do it in the middle year or last sixth weeks. If that move is made, it's after the first six weeks, and it is usually very minimal. We didn't move anyone this year or last year, and the year before that we moved one. So it's not a big thing.

However, most of the principals interviewed stated that it was an important part of successful student placement to not lock them into a misplaced ability group. The principals stated that they encourage their teachers to make necessary adjustments whenever necessary. Bill Mitchell explained his school's philosophy,

We make sure that all four levels of math are taught at the same time so that we can move them easily without messing up the rest of their schedule. Math, reading, language, and science are all taught at the same times. So that if a child doesn't make it in one level they can move. Either way, up or down. We've actually had that happen. One moved up, and maybe two or three moved down. By choice. They just come in and say we're struggling. But I've recommended the same thing to them...tutor help. We strive to really push our children as hard as we can within reason. Now if it gets to the point where it's stressing them out, then it's not worth it. But we want to encourage them. My teachers have high expectations, and we encourage the parents to have high expectations. If they do great, if they don't, that's O.K.

Joe Founder also stated that his school makes every effort for the students to have flexibility between groups. Mr. Founder said, "Yes, it can, and we've had that happen. Sometimes the teacher will say this student is

having a hard time and we will change them. Sometimes a parent will say my student can do better, and we may move them up.”

Don Mullins also explained the importance of having students placed in the correct ability class when he said,

How we do that is with Terra Nova scores and recommendations from teachers. Because we have some students that do not do well on the test, but are capable of passing the class. They just get all nervous and everything. We look at several things like that. Then we make adjustments throughout the year. If we have someone that needs to be moved down because they are having problems, then we will move them down. If we've got some that are just lazy, then we try to put some pressure on them. And then sometimes parents don't want them in those higher groups because the kids go home and say they have to work hard. What they usually do in the accelerated groups is they're doing the same thing, they just do it faster and go through it quicker, and a lot of kids at this age do not like to do that. They would rather be where they don't have to put forth so much effort. But that's basically what we look at, teacher recommendation and Terra Nova scores. We also work with the lower ones, we look at their scores and put them where they can do the best they can do.

Tammy Knight agreed that flexibility between classes is imperative in order to make the multi-age grouping at her school work appropriately for students. Mrs. Knight stated the importance of teacher collaboration in making placement decisions when she explained,

Based on how they scored, that determines where they are placed. With the multi-age grouping, we meet once a month in S-teams to talk about placement of students. If teachers feel like they are in an inappropriate placement, we feel free to move them. That can be either up or down. So far, most of the moves have been up. They (the teachers) have to have documentation, a copy of the grade card and at least three examples of student work. They have to have proof of why. They can't just say, "I feel like they would do better in another group."

Perceptions of Teachers and Parents

A third major theme that was identified from the inductive analysis of the interview data was the influence that the perceptions of teachers and parents had on the principals' decisions to implement heterogeneous or homogeneous instructional grouping of students in their schools. Specifically, the assignment of teachers to classes of ability groups in a manner that did not foster tracking of teachers, the teachers' beliefs about instruction in homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping, and the influence of parents when assigning students to classes were all identified by a majority of the participants as being issues they dealt with when implementing instructional strategies in their schools.

Teacher Assignments

How teachers are assigned to grade levels, subject areas, and specific teaching duties for ability groups of students was identified as concerns for many of the principals interviewed in this study. Nancy Strickland spoke of the considerations she assessed when hiring and assigning teachers to her grade level teams. Mrs. Strickland stated,

Certification area is the first consideration. When I'm assigning a person to a team, I look at personality. The mixes of "warm fuzzies" versus lots of structure and "stand-offish." What that team needs. My philosophy is that there needs to be a pretty healthy mix of those two. I don't want to get all males, try to stay away from all females if I can. Just because at this level they need the role modeling from both sides. If I have the opportunity to say to a teacher, "You're certified in two areas, which do you prefer to teach?" then I do that. I certainly give them a choice. If there is a choice of grade levels also. But sometimes you find yourself in a situation, like right now I've got too many people certified in science. I would really like to have one more math certified person. But I have a science person teaching math. She's doing as good as she possibly can. But I would rather have her in science since she's a great science teacher but I have to have her in math. I had a math teacher retire two years ago and they did not replace that position. I was stuck in having to move someone in math that wasn't trained, but I would rather have her in science rather than math. So that leaves me with, "Which group do I put her with?" I need a strong teacher for the algebra and high functioning math students, but the lower ability kids also need someone with specific skills. Of course, they have the advantage of having the special ed. person to help, or most of them do. So what I've done is assign her to average math classes. I know that's not fair. It seems that the average kids always get the short end of the stick. But sometimes it comes down to a bad situation or a worse situation. You just do what you have to with the resources you have and hope it comes out all right.

Gary Hensley, however, stated that assigning his strongest teachers to the highest level classes was the preferable strategy for his school. Mr. Hensley commented,

Unfortunately, my staff has changed because of numbers. We've gone from a 680 student school down to 515. So I've lost teachers. I definitely schedule my best teachers for the advanced classes. I don't hesitate if I have the numbers. Such as the sixth grade, we've got a large number of math students coming in. So I assigned both of the sixth grade math teachers to an advanced class. I just feel like if they are going to teach math, and they have a math background, then they are responsible for bringing those kids to where they need to be.

Not all of the principals considered the certification area or experience of the teacher when assigning them to teach specific ability levels of students. Rhonda Smith explained her random method when she said,

We are departmentalized, so all of them teach math. I just let them draw out of a hat. That way, I didn't have a veteran teacher that got the cream of the crop. In fact, in sixth grade one of the brand new teachers got the accelerated homeroom group. It just worked out.

William Mowery had a more specific rationale for assigning teachers to several classes of all abilities. Mr. Mowery elaborated,

Well, because we are on a teaming situation, almost all of them have a situation where they have a high class, usually a medium or two medium classes, and then a low class. So, that doesn't seem to be an issue. So they all have the different levels. We're not tracking teachers so that it is obvious to the students and community that if you are in so-and-so's class that you are in the highest or lowest group. We wanted to purposely stay away from that. We didn't want...too, if you take all of the highest kids and put them on one

team with that particular teacher, then you basically have yourself an exclusive team and we didn't want that. So they are divided between the teams.

Teacher Perceptions

Beyond assigning teachers to classes of specific groups of students of varying ability for instruction, the principals in this study also spoke of the influence that teacher attitudes had on their decisions when determining whether to implement homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping in their schools.

Claire Cassell discussed her continued reluctance to implement any homogeneous grouping of instruction in her school despite the interest expressed by some of her teachers in implementing heterogeneous grouping when she expressed,

Now they do say that, I will say that. Their classes are very large. We are really full. They actually do group some, but I don't encourage that because it tracks students all day. They don't have good role models that way. But they (the teachers) have come to me and asked if they could have three teachers teach language arts and put the students in low, medium and high groups. I just don't think that's the right thing to do. I think some of the teachers would feel very uncomfortable teaching outside their strength. But they would like to sometimes group, I'll have to say. They'd like to take, say if I'm the math teacher, the bottom group in the afternoon, and the top group in the morning, and the middle group right before lunch. I just feel so strongly about homogeneous grouping that I just can't bring myself to do it. But, yes, my teachers have approached me about it on several occasions. I guess if I'm honest with myself about it, my reluctance to do it probably does cause them some frustration.

Joyce Easterly was another administrator who stated that her teachers' attitudes concerning the issue of grouping students in her school had had an impact on her decision of whether to push for more homogeneous instruction. Mrs. Easterly was in her third year of service at a city school that had 700 students enrolled in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The school population included 180 students in grades six, seven, and eight. The old, stone school building sat stately high upon a hill overlooking a small, rural town. The students at Mrs. Easterly's school attended a consolidated county high school upon completion of eighth grade. Mrs. Easterly had spent most of her 26 year career teaching and as an administrator on the college level before accepting her current position. She openly stated in the interview that at the end of her current contract obligation she planned to retire and "go home and rock my grandbabies." Mrs. Easterly related a conversation she had had with one of her teachers concerning the issue of ability grouping,

I spoke with one of my math teachers. She said she had real mixed emotions about ability grouping because currently if she could have the brighter students in a math class she could take them so much further than she's able to the way that we have set the program up now. She said that is both good and bad because of the new Gateway tests. If these lower level students are not exposed to the higher level math skills, which they get the basis for in elementary school, they may not pass that Gateway test. So they need to get it now. She said for that reason, she would have to lean toward no ability grouping.

Mrs. Easterly elaborated on her reluctance to push for ability level grouping in her school because of resistance to change on the part of her staff and how the teachers' attitudes had affected her beliefs concerning the issue. Mrs. Easterly stated,

Apparently the teachers have done it this way (heterogeneous grouping) for so long and they're just satisfied with it. And they really are quite resistive to change. They don't want to change. To tell you the truth, I've had so many battles, this has not been one I've tackled. But after having talked to them...I'm sort of torn. I can see both the good and bad of it. My own children were taught in homogeneous groups for some of their subjects, and I always thought it worked well for them, so I've had a positive attitude about it. But the teachers here that I have talked to about it really have concerns about the grouping. It's really not a big issue here. It's not even come up in discussions except with just a couple of teachers. It's probably not something that I'll pursue. I'll leave that decision to the next person.

Tammy Knight discussed how the teachers at her school feel about the multi-age ability grouping across grade levels when she explained,

I think they view it as easier to teach, because you don't have to teach that broad spectrum of skills. You have a group of kids that's supposed to be able to work on the level that they are on. And if they are not capable, or if they are well beyond, then we can move them to another group if the teacher can provide documentation. Another way that some teachers look at it...in second grade we have a teacher that also teaches the computer lab class. Her class travels to other teachers. We picked the "cream of the crop" kids to stay in that class. It's the only class in the whole school that has students that are very responsible grouped together. So, the other two teachers wound up with the lower levels. I see a higher level of frustration with those teachers because they don't have any "shining stars." I can see how, especially in the lower grades, some of those children that are capable of working above and beyond would help motivate the others and you could use them as peer tutors. I guess you can look at it both ways. But in grades six through eight, they love our multi-age grouping.

Joe Founder also agreed that his teachers support ability grouping in his school when he said,

The math teachers, especially, felt good about it. They wanted it. I had one math teacher come in and say that it was the best thing we had ever done. You can tell by looking at the scores when we went back to grouping the students and started block scheduling...they started going up.

Bill Mitchell also expressed that his teachers had supported the implementation of homogeneous grouping for the middle grade students. Mr. Mitchell explained how he had presented the idea to the teachers of changing the program from heterogeneous to homogeneous grouping when he remembered,

Well, we pulled them in. As a team we sat down and finalized what we wanted to do. I shouldn't say finalized, because that wasn't it. We had a plan of how we wanted to present this to the other seventh and eighth grade teachers. So we could answer questions and kick it around. I took all of my sixth through eighth grade teachers into a meeting after school one day and just laid it all out. We said, "This is what's happening, and how do you feel? Do you think this will go?" Out of about twelve teachers, I had one or two that were a little skeptical. The vast majority were saying, "I think this will work," and liked it. Because, it's like anything else when you're dealing with parents. And when you have ability groups you always have those parents who are influential parents that want their child to be in the top group no matter what their scores are. Even though as teachers we tell them they are not ready for that. The teachers felt that now we had data and it would not just be arbitrary to move them up. Now we can say, "Here it is, here's the cut-off." The teachers were willing to give it a try.

Rhonda Smith also involved her teachers in the final decision before implementing a middle school concept in grades six through eight that included homogeneous instruction in math and reading at her school. Mrs. Smith stated,

My teachers were very supportive when I first started talking about grouping the middle school kids. In fact, I met with them and kind of let them think that it was their idea! We did meet as grade levels first, at the first of the year. And then we met as a middle school group. I told them that I wanted our school to have a middle school concept for the new building addition, even though we've never had that before, technically. And they liked that. I think there is a difference in elementary teachers and middle school teachers. I didn't realize that until I came here. But there is a major difference. There's also a difference in elementary and middle school kids. Most K-8 elementary schools just kind of lump all of their students into the same kind of instructional program. But that's not necessarily developmentally appropriate for the middle school kids. We've been looking at other middle schools and sort of trying to do some of the things they do for that age student. We can't be exactly like a six through eight middle school, but we should try to tailor our program for them the best that we can. But, I think my teachers had secretly wanted to try some grouping for some time, because what we were doing obviously wasn't working.

Nancy Strickland stated that her philosophy was to let the teachers make the decision concerning how they group students for instruction as long as achievement results remained high. Mrs. Strickland explained,

I think that some of the language arts teachers have looked at the math scores and said, "Well no wonder they do so well. They level their classes and all of that." I'm the type of principal that invites input from my teachers...site-based management. I'm saying to the teachers, "Do what you want to do, but the bottom line is achievement." So I'm giving them the leeway to level if...as long as it's skill based and not anything else. If they can say these students have these skills in this area, and these don't...and they've identified those and they want to group according to those skills, that's fine. But don't level according to anything else.

Parental Influence

In addition to considering the preferences of their teachers concerning ability level grouping, several principals interviewed for this study also discussed the fact that some parents did not agree with the level in which their child was placed and had requested a change of class placement. None of the research participants identified parent complaints as a major issue with which they had dealt, but they did include it in their discussions. Most of the principals stated that they tried to honor parent requests. The principals also stated that the criteria used for inclusion in a certain level of instruction, particularly algebra, also protected them from parent complaints because the criteria were objective and fairly applied to all students.

Donna Roller spoke of her philosophy concerning parental requests when she stated,

I feel that...I don't say that parents always know best. But I do know that if parents are not happy, that's going to lead to a school year with more problems. I don't see any reason not to. That's just one strike against everybody. Usually it works out pretty well.

William Mowery expressed surprise that he had had so few parent requests for students to be placed in the algebra classes. He explained that he had anticipated parent concerns based on the experiences of other principals who had implemented algebra when he elaborated,

You know, our parents have...I've not received any phone calls or any kind of feedback from them of being upset with a particular placement. We have had several parents come in and say that they would like their child to drop down a level. Especially recently when we've been getting into some higher-level math. But I really haven't had eighth grade parents saying I want my child in algebra. I really anticipated that, I really did. Because I had a lot of people tell me that that would happen. But it never materialized. I'm grateful for that, but it may come down the road next year.

Gary Hensley talked about his feelings concerning parent requests for certain classes when he said,

Well, again, that's not been a big problem so far. First of all, I don't have a problem with putting a student in a higher group if I feel like he can be successful and the teacher feels like he can be successful. You can't always place them just by test scores. There's also something called heart. Hard work and those kinds of things that go into that. I'm not going to hold a child back. I'm also going to be honest and say to the parents, "Everything here says we better be getting him some background. We can move him up there to where you'd like to have him, but the test scores say and the teachers say...we want him to be successful and we don't want him to fail." I'm not going to draw the line in the sand and say, "This is the way it's got to be." Every situation is taken seriously. But I haven't had that many parents that do that.

Joyce Easterly discussed a particular incident in which a parent made a request for a change, and her feelings about honoring such requests when she remembered,

A mother came in and expected her child to be moved up into a higher level class and I did speak to the...no actually, she wanted her to be moved out of algebra into a lower level. I talked to the teacher and he said the student could do the work. She was making C's, but she could do it. The mother wanted her to make the honor roll. She went and talked with the teacher and he relented. I didn't really agree with that decision, because it probably wasn't in the best interest of that child, academically. However, the teacher had already told the parent that he would move the child to another class and I felt like I had to support my teacher. We did have a discussion about it later though, and he now knows to send the parent to me or at least talk to me about it if he's going to make that kind of decision. I don't want to unnecessarily make parents angry, but our job as educators is to speak up for what we believe is in the best interest of the student. We're the trained professionals, not the parent.

Bill Mitchell mentioned the power of parent influence on grouping placements when he stated, "Because, it's like anything else when you're dealing with parents. And when you have ability groups you always have those parents who are influential parents that want their child to be in the top group no matter what their scores are. Even though as teachers we tell them they are not ready for that." Mr. Mitchell also discussed his belief in the importance of working with parents when they make a specific request when he said,

I had one girl that had scored better than where we thought she should be. She scored very well in math. It jumped her into algebra with her high scores. But we were suspicious if she was ready for algebra or not. In cases like that we called parents in and said, "Hey, here's where she scored. Do you want to put her there? We recommend pre-algebra". The parent said to try algebra. Well, mom was in here this week and said she is struggling and suggested we move her back. I said now it is a little bit more difficult for your child, not for us, we can move her easily. We talked about it and decided before we move her back and

deflate her self-esteem, because self-esteem is the key to everything that these children do. I said, "Before we do that, I have a teacher that tutors after school. Are you willing to pick up the tab for tutoring to catch her up to where she needs to be?" She said, "That's a good idea, let's try that." It just happened this week, so I don't know how it will work out. But, I think that once we move them up and then move them back you see their self-esteem go down. And that is so important. I think we need to listen to the concerns of the parents. They do really have their child's interest at heart and they know their child better than we do.

Nancy Strickland related an incident in which the parent request may have not been in the best interest of the child. However, Mrs. Strickland explained how she had dealt with the circumstance when she stated,

Last year we started holding students to the guidelines in order to be in algebra. We had one student whose parents were not going to accept that. So we said, "OK, we'll give your child the opportunity to retake the test the week before school starts. This is the date that you need to come in and take the test again." It was the algebra qualifying test. So his mother had him tutored in math over the summer. He did make the score on the qualifying test. But he is struggling. His parents just wanted him to be in algebra. I'm sure he will have to take algebra in high school again next year. But at least we tried to tell the mother that, and we did stick to the guidelines that we had started.

Ability Grouping to Meet the Needs of Special Education and Academically Gifted Students

The research participants in this study identified programs designed to meet the instructional needs of students legally identified to receive services due to special education or academically gifted criteria as another major theme that affected ability level grouping in their schools.

Special Education Services

Regardless of whether a school grouped students heterogeneously or homogeneously for instruction, special education service delivery models varied according to the research participants. Most of the principals related some combination of services for special needs students that included self-contained resource classes, pull-out instruction during regular academic periods, and inclusionary instruction within homogeneously grouped classes.

Tom Merita had related that his school incorporated heterogeneous grouping of students in all subject areas. However, Mr. Merita explained that the special education students in his school were basically assigned to two homeroom groups on each grade level, which had caused some homogeneous grouping. Mr. Merita said,

Initially, students are assigned in a heterogeneous type grouping, a good mixture. Although we do assign special education students to no more than two homerooms just so it easier to schedule them for pull-out if we need to. We do some pull-out in special education in sixth, seventh and eighth, but probably 80% of it is inclusion. They still go to homeroom in mixed groups, but after about the first 45 minutes they pull some of the low ones together, and then they move through the rest of the day together. So they basically have a low grade level group.

Tammy Knight also stated that the pull-out instruction for special education students had an effect on the multi-age grouping configuration used in her school when she explained,

We still have several students that are in the classroom that are special education students but their parents wanted them to be included in the regular classroom. We have a pull-out for special education. Each grade level has a teacher for language arts, and if they are working below level, they are pulled out. So it's really not true multi-age for language arts and reading.

Gary Hensley expressed his thoughts concerning meeting the needs of special education students in ability grouped instruction and the fact that meeting specific ability needs of those students had had an affect on his decision to implement homogeneous grouping in his school. Mr. Hensley stated,

Programs group children. We have, of course, our special education students that go out to the different classes. And that pretty well groups those children. Of course, a lot of it is driven by IEP's (Individual Education Plans). But basically those children are in classes where teachers realize they need the extra help or whatever. That was a big factor for me when we first started the grouping. My teachers were really frustrated with being able to meet the needs of our special students in classes with more advanced kids, even though we do have special education teachers to help them. It just wasn't working.

Bill Mitchell's school also used a homogeneous grouping model of instruction, but Mr. Mitchell explained that special education services were still provided in a pull-out model for certain subjects. Mr. Mitchell explained,

There is a certain amount of...pull-out has a negative connotation to a certain degree. What we do...O.K., you know how we block into the groups...whoever has the lower group, that is obviously the Title 1 and special education children. So if you taught two sections, let's say reading and language, of the special needs children, then one-third of your salary could be paid by Title 1. So it's not really a pull-out. So they are receiving some services within the regular classroom. But, well, there are some, depending on their handicapping condition and their needs, there are some who go to special education teachers in an academic resource class. If their condition requires a reading and language component, then they go to the special education teachers. They will work with them for reading and language, and then they will be in inclusion for science and social studies in the regular program.

Rhonda Smith discussed the fact that she drew upon her experiences as a former special education teacher when determining how to develop the homogeneous grouping for all students in her school. Mrs. Smith elaborated,

I have two teachers that are special education teachers for the middle grades. We have inclusion also. They are pulled out for reading and language, and math, only. A few years ago I was teaching special education in seventh grade and we were doing three different levels in one class. I thought I would die. It like to have worked me to death. I told our principal at the time, "Why can't we group?" He wouldn't do it. So this year I incorporated it into reading and math. So that really plays into the levels of classroom grouping in reading and math, because those students are pulled out. Special education kids are pulled at the same time as other students are grouped for reading and math. Now with the new formula that the state department has added as far as value added can't keep us off the schools on notice list, low functioning students do have to perform. I thought the grouping combined with the pull-out would help in that way, too.

Programs for Academically Gifted Students

The data analysis of the audio-taped interviews revealed that providing services for academically gifted students was accomplished in a number of ways in the 20 schools included in this study. Some programs were designed as a related arts offering outside of the regular classroom program. Other schools provided pull-out services for their gifted students, while still other principals expressed that the ability grouped advanced classes met the needs of the academically gifted students. Providing these legally mandated programs, however, was identified by many of the interviewed principals as a contributing factor in the implementation of homogeneous grouping.

Tom Merita and Rhonda Smith were principals of schools within the same county school system. Both Mr. Merita and Mrs. Smith spoke of the discontent of parents of gifted children in their district caused by a central office decision to change the gifted program from a pull-out model to an inclusionary model. Mr. Merita explained,

We did have pull-out. That program is in the midst of a lot of change at this time. The change will be that we will use web-sites within the class or labs in each content area. It is no longer a pull-out. They did pull-out for the first eight weeks, because parents were so upset. We have had some parents resist that, they liked having their students grouped together. Their point was that their students need to interact with other students of like abilities. That was their complaint. This way they're not. Although as big as our school is, we could do some grouping for 45 minutes a couple of times per week. I think it would be very difficult at smaller schools.

Mrs. Smith agreed with Mr. Merita that the parents of the gifted students in the school district were unhappy with the change in the program. Mrs. Smith elaborated,

Now that is probably the biggest thorn in my side. The gifted parents that I have basically are very supportive, except for a couple. And it's not that they are not supportive, but they didn't like it when the pull-out instruction was taken away. They felt like their students needed to be with their peers. The ironic thing is that the parents that complained, their students were certified as gifted because they did a project. I'm an old special ed. teacher, so I have my own thoughts on that. They (central office) let them go to their special class together for the first six weeks, and now the gifted teacher comes here every week. She is relatively new, and it will take her a while to get her grounding. I don't know how the gifted parents feel about that. Truthfully, I don't think they like it. But, I think if they see some good things come out of it, it will be O.K. I've probably had fewer complaints from my parents than some of the other smaller schools because we started the advanced classes this year. I think they would still like to have a pull-out class for their students, but they have seen that they are being challenged because of the way we have grouped our kids. Basically they are with their peers, so my parents have not been near as vocal as the parents in some of the other schools.

Joyce Easterly discussed the emerging plans to provide gifted education services to the students in her school and the obstacles to be overcome when she said,

We are just getting into developing our gifted program now. As a matter of fact, we have a parent meeting with the school psychologist today. My understanding is that in the past we had a gifted program that was not very successful. But we are getting more demands from the state department, parents, and legal activity. So we are identifying children now. The other question is if this child is gifted, can we meet his needs in the regular classroom? The feeling has been, and I think, that for the most part we can. However, we have

budget problems, and hiring a gifted teacher would be impossible for me right now. I will probably contract with another system for their teacher one day per week. I have no idea how it will work, but we will have to work it out. Because the testing has been completed. We have contacted the county about contracting with their teacher. We are in the process of meeting with parents to see what their pleasure is. As you know, you have to meet the needs of the parents and well as the child. On the other hand, you may have a parent that does not want their child identified as gifted. I agree with that. Sometimes being gifted is a stigma. They are sometimes ostracized and labeled. I'm guessing we may have ten students identified, and about half will choose to leave their child in the regular class. I have been able to justify not having a special program so far because of having an algebra class for those students. But I've got to do more.

The gifted education program at Claire Cassell's school was well established with a full-time gifted education teacher. Mrs. Cassell explained how the program worked,

We have a certified gifted educator. They are planned as a pull-out in the related arts schedule. One of the things we have worked on is developing notebooks for each student. So each teacher has a notebook with additional activities. Usually your gifted students are also in band or orchestra. That has that become a problem, them choosing between band and gifted. We have an A-B schedule in related arts. So it gives them another slot for choices. Next year we are planning on adding Spanish and I know they will want that also.

Joe Founder expressed concern that even though the instruction in his school is ability grouped, the students identified for gifted education may not be receiving the level of service they need. Mr. Founder explained,

I felt that we didn't do enough for the gifted. Two years ago we were able to hire a special education teacher that is really good with the gifted. Because of the size of the school, it's a real plus for our school. She pulls those out and works with the "Imagination Destination" program. So it's an enrichment program on top of the regular program. But, we're not anywhere close to where we need to be with that. County wide we're not. But I think our school may be ahead because we have a teacher with that assignment she's taken on. Years ago we had a gifted teacher, that's all she did. We've had parents asking about programs for their students, wanting more. And I can see their point. Many times the gifted students are not given what they need. For the most part, I'd say we are meeting those student's needs academically by having the instruction ability grouped. But we still have some gifted students that need some extra.

Nancy Strickland stated that her school was meeting the needs of students identified as gifted through myriad opportunities. Mrs. Strickland expounded upon these programs when she explained,

The teachers make modifications for assignments, compacting, etc. We have an advanced reading class during CAPS time. They can choose to go to that class. They are reading higher level literature and really being stretched, and they love it. They also have an advanced social studies class. We also offer a Latin class during CAPS for high school credit. It's a year long class and they choose to be in it. They have to meet all the criteria of the high school to earn the credit. They also have the algebra. So their needs are being met in the regular program through advanced courses such as algebra, Latin, advanced reading, etc., and they also have band. They can also be in honors chorus if they are in band. They are the ones that perform. Honors chorus meets before or after school or once every two weeks on club day. Those are other opportunities for those students if they are exceptional music students.

Other principals related that though they were not offering any additional services for gifted education students, they believed the instructional needs of those students were being met through advanced classes with

homogeneous grouping. Bill Mitchell stated, “We meet their needs in the regular classroom because of ability grouping. Especially in algebra. I think we do a pretty good job there.”

Don Mullins also expressed his satisfaction with the level of instruction that the gifted students in his school were receiving through the higher ability grouped classes when he stated,

We meet the needs through the regular classroom. They are pulled out, not for academic work, but they do plays. They put them on for the whole school. That’s how we use some of the gifted people. You’ll find those, most of the time, will be in Scholar’s Bowl. We give a test for Scholar’s Bowl. Anybody that passes the test and is capable of doing it, then we put them in Scholar’s Bowl. They are in the higher level classes, and we expect a lot out of them also. But as far as saying, “We’re going to pull you out for gifted,” we don’t do that. As you know, Tennessee is the only state that considers high achievers to be special ed. I don’t understand that. It’s a big deal to parents.

Terry McGinnis likewise explained that the implementation of homogeneous instruction had, in his opinion, allowed for the needs of gifted students to be met through the regular instructional program. Mr. McGinnis said,

We don’t have the gifted anymore. That’s one of the reasons I like the academic advancement. It gave the advanced students...the teachers really like teaching those students. We no longer have a quote, “gifted program.” So, by grouping, we do have, you know, those students are still getting pre-algebra, next year algebra, higher reading instruction, and academic advancement. I think the parents are satisfied because of the scores.

David Carter discussed the fact that providing advanced homogeneous classes for gifted students had dictated the further use of ability level grouping in his school when he stated,

We have an advanced class that is for children that are functioning above grade level. Our talented and gifted class, I guess you would say. I am able to have two classes of the advanced group each year per grade level. The basic group, for low achieving students, and the advanced group pretty well mandate the grouping.

Impact of Educational Research

Throughout the interview process, the research participants repeatedly referred to educational research they had undertaken before implementing homogeneous grouping in their schools, or as the basis for preserving heterogeneous grouping for their middle level students. Specifically, research concerning the implementation of what the principals referred to as a “block schedule” of increasing time for academic instruction in conjunction with ability grouping emerged as a major theme. Additionally, several principals identified research in the form of visiting a particular successful middle school program in the state of Tennessee using homogeneous grouping as a benchmark for program changes in their schools.

Educational Research

Two of the principals who expressed passionate beliefs about the detrimental affect that homogeneous grouping had on the self-esteem of middle school age students cited specific research they had undertaken in graduate school programs as the basis for their heterogeneous grouping paradigms. Claire Cassell explained the reason that she had insisted on the continued use of heterogeneous grouping in her school despite the requests of teachers to group students homogeneously. Mrs. Cassell explained,

I believe in heterogeneous grouping. What developed that was...when I was going through my master's program I did a paper on heterogeneous vs. homogeneous grouping for reading. And what I found was that the kids did better in heterogeneous grouping. That there were better role models, the behavior was better, higher expectations were achieved and everyone learned more. So, that, I guess, has influenced me throughout my career. My teachers have a hard time with that because of what they deal with daily in the classroom, but I have never forgotten that research paper.

Larry Taylor related a similar experience when he shared the following story,

When I first came here sometime in the '80's, I was introduced to my first sixth grade class. The principal at that time said that this was the best sixth grade class in the county. So I went into my class and started. After I started, those kids started telling me that they were "the dumb class." I couldn't quite understand what they were talking about. I found out that there was some ability grouping going on here at the time. It didn't take the kids long to find out that they were either in the high or the low. I worked real hard with those kids that I had in that lower group. There were kids in there that were suffering from...they didn't have anything to work for because they were put in that lower group. By the end of the year, I had six or eight of those kids making honor roll. I was tickled to death for them. When I was working on my Masters', I chose to do my paper on grouping. I went through this school and all the different paperwork and research. I did a report on it. I went to the principal and talked to him about it. I didn't like the way it was being done because I don't like kids being labeled that way. That's something that I will never forget. When they told me that, I was still working on my Masters' and trying to decide what to write my paper on. It just jumped out at me and is what I decided to write my paper on...ability grouping. Then I brought it to the principal and presented to him and told him I thought it was something we needed to look at. And the next year they did change it. I don't know if I had an influence. I think there were some problems before. But when I asked the principal to read my paper and told him what the kids had told me, I think that probably was part of it. It really bothered me when the kids introduced themselves as the "dumb class." That's just really stuck with me all these years, and I've never changed my mind about it. I don't think I ever will.

Other principals also referred to research they were familiar with concerning ability grouping from reading professional literature or attending educational conferences. Rhonda Smith mentioned,

I'm not sure there is a right or wrong answer to it. One year you'll look at what the literature says and it will recommend that's what you should do, and the next year it will say, no, that's not what you should do. I just knew that we were not doing well with heterogeneous grouping.

Don Mullins also expressed frustration with the conflicting research sited in professional journals on the topic of homogeneous versus heterogeneous instruction when he said,

I don't know. You have mixed emotions about things. The biggest thing we try to go by is try to put the students where they can function, where they can have some success and learn some things. I don't really

have any great philosophy about it from reading books or anything, it's just that we try to put the child the best place they can be placed. I'm a member of all the middle school and principals' organizations, TAMS (Tennessee Association of Middle Schools), ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals), that sort of thing. I get all the magazines and journals and you can read something different about whether to group kids or not in every one of them. I don't have time to worry about what the books say, because that just changes all the time. Like I said, I just try to put kids where they can have some success.

Gary Hensley echoed the sentiments of his colleague when he stated,

Even with the middle school concept and everything else, I think somebody came up with an idea that there's parts of it that I feel better about rather than buying the whole lock, stock, and barrel. So I try to put in the parts of it that I feel like are best for our students and best for the staff. You can't go by what the research says about grouping students anyway. From what I've read, you can justify doing it or not doing it depending on which parts of it you choose to believe. So I guess my philosophy has changed a little bit, but not to the point where I feel like tracking is the answer. It's a mixture. The bottom line is, an administrator can worry themselves to death trying to figure out the right thing to do based on the research. You've just got to go on your gut, and do what's best for your school.

However, David Carter was an interviewee who spoke of the importance of using research as the key to developing appropriate programs for middle school students. Mr. Carter related his experience,

I think the biggest factor is staff development. You know, we can work very hard on doing something, but if we're not doing it correctly, we're just wasting our time. I got to the place that I felt as though our staff was working hard, but working the wrong way. So I went about determining what was good sound educational research of how children learn and how we should group them for instruction. And I set off on a course of staff development to change some paradigms and teacher attitudes about how they teach children. And I think that's made a bigger difference than anything. I would use to overhear teachers say, "Well, little Johnny, he's from the housing project and he just can't do." I don't hear that anymore, and I would be very upset if I heard a teacher say that. So we've changed the attitudes and the way we do things. I think that's the big thing that's made a difference. Staff development is the key. It's got to be the tail that wags the dog. But before you can make staff development effective, the leader has to educate yourself and know what you believe and have the research to back it up. Because some of them (teachers) will challenge you. You have to know more about it than they do.

Terry McGinnis discussed his frustration with conflicting views concerning educational research that he had experienced at professional meetings when he related,

You know, you'll go to the principal's academy, or to a conference, somebody will get up and say, "To heck with scores, we live in a society, let's teach our kids..." And people will just clap and clap and you'll think, "Yes, that's true, we need to love our students." And then someone else comes along and says, "That's the parents job. Yes, we want to have compassionate teachers, but our job is to educate." And so then they take the other side. And when they get through you think, "Well, they're right. If we are in the business of educating students then the test scores are important. Can they read, can they write?" So you don't know what to believe. I know that we took the change back to grouping very seriously. We looked at the research and visited other schools, and I learned as much as I could by going to the principal's academy. But, at the end of all that process, we weren't any more sure about what to do than before we started. There's just no black and white answer.

In addition to the research they had engaged in personally or learned of in professional journals and workshops that were cited by the participants, several principals also discussed visiting a specific middle school that

had consistently scored extremely high on standardized exams as having an affect on their decision to implement homogeneous grouping.

William Mowery's school is located in a district geographically near to Standard Middle School. Mr. Mowery expressed frustration that his school is compared to Standard Middle School and the effect that it had in developing the programming for his new middle school. Mr. Mowery explained,

We have a school system down the road who is basically all homogeneous. You probably know who it is. In fact, they went to homogeneous social studies this year because their social studies value-added score was a "D" on the state report card. The principal was furious. That's why they went to grouping in social studies. It was a big shock for them. That's what they live for, the test scores. But, this year they've taken steps to add a social studies lab period. Basically all it is is grouping for social studies instruction. So now every subject is homogeneously grouped. I've had some pressure to do the same thing. My teachers and I agree that we will group in math, and next year language and reading. But we have to think about the kids and allowing them to be with all their peers, not just their like ability peers. I really don't want my school to be exactly like Standard Middle School, but there's no doubt that they set the standard for middle school education across our state. Lots of people have modeled their programs like theirs.

Terry McGinnis described his experience of learning about middle grades instruction as a new middle school principal. He stated that his visit to Standard Middle School and the effect it had on his decision to implement homogeneous grouping. Mr. McGinnis stated,

Remember, I had been in the classroom...that was a high school classroom. And then I went to the Alternative school, and that was mostly high school students. This was my first encounter with middle school students. And so when I came to a middle school, which I will admit, experience is the best teacher, I don't think I had any problems doing the organizational things. But my first thought was, I thought that we were really wasting a lot of time. And so I visited some other schools. And you are familiar, if you're going to go visit a middle school, you're going to go to Standard Middle School. And so I went down there, and I saw some of the things they were doing. And they talked about how they grouped everywhere and they did this and they did that. And I've got a friend who is the middle school supervisor in another county, and I went to the TAMS conference, and I tried to get as much information as I could. They were all saying if you want to push your students...they just all really pushed grouping. I was going to go with math and English. And they all said, "No, no, no, go with math and reading." So, when I came back from these different things, I put it all together and just followed what other people who had been successful had said. I'm not positive that I will do it next year. I'm not positive that I'll not go back to heterogeneous. After seeing it one year without it, one year with it, when you look at our test scores here, I just think that we are lucky. When you look at value-added scores, student scores, I'm not sure that we need to be as structured. I don't know that it will really affect the quality of education at our school.

Bill Mitchell also spoke of the influence that Standard Middle School had on the development of the homogenous grouping plan implemented at his school. Mr. Mitchell explained,

This is the first year we've changed. In the past we ability grouped based on teacher recommendation for reading, language and math. Science, social studies, health and related arts classes were all heterogeneously grouped by homeroom. This year, we went to Standard Middle School to see what they were doing. They were doing things a little differently than we were, so we decided to give it a try. Basically, we tried to group like Standard Middle does. The problem we have is that we don't have the numbers that Standard has. So it's harder to differentiate and have as many classes as you would like to have. We took all of their (student) TCAP assessment data and had cutoffs. We put children into math, reading, language and science

by scores. Almost strictly by their scores. There were a few children that fell in or out of categories of where they probably should be, so based on teacher recommendation we put them in what we feel is the appropriate category. But it is strictly based this year on Terra Nova scores. We caught some complaints from some parents. Because there were a handful of students...the majority of them fell just where they should be. I honestly don't know how this is going to work in the long run, but we had struggled with test scores for so long. And Standard just consistently beats everybody in the state year after year. So we are trying their method. It sounds really good when you go there and talk to them. But, I don't know, after you get home and try it for a while. I agree that we need to group in math and language, but I don't know about all the other subjects. I have this gnawing little voice in the back of my head that says that it's just too much.

Don Mullins also described his visit to Standard Middle School when he explained,

We started a couple of years ago with the longer classes and doing accelerated classes in math, English and reading. But for a while the central office didn't think it was a good idea. But then they sent myself and the three other middle school principals down to Standard Middle School, who scores real well. We came back and they said, "What did you learn?" And I said, "They group. They group in everything." They do a lot of different things. Of course, you've got to figure in free and reduced factors. Which, just because you're on free and reduced lunch doesn't mean you're not smart. But that's always been there. So, they did a lot of grouping and a lot of extra things. He would hire aides instead of teachers. If he had a choice of hiring a new teacher or more aides, he would hire two more aides. They work with the kids. And then, if there is a teacher out, he would use them as the substitutes, because they know what is going on. Money is the game, you know? He's got pretty much what he wants. But you can't argue with his test scores.

Block Scheduling

Several principal interviewees talked about their belief that implementing extended periods of time for instruction in conjunction with homogeneous grouping had an impact on student achievement in their schools.

Research promoting block scheduling was also emphasized in several interviews.

Tommy Byrd explained the modified block schedule used at his school,

The seventh and sixth grade is on almost like a block schedule. They have a math and science block together. We group them by reading scores. Social studies is the last period of the day and we they are mixed up. The teachers have homeroom for math and science for 90 minutes. If they need more time for math, they can cut back on science and spend more time on math to try to help our math scores. It's working real well and the teachers wouldn't change back for anything. Especially the math teachers. Our math scores have gone way up since we started grouping the kids and giving the teachers more time to teach.

Rhonda Smith expressed her satisfaction with teaching students in blocks of time combined with homogeneous grouping when she said,

Central office changed the time requirement for math, language and reading this year, too. An hour in the upper grades for each of those subjects. Dr. M. (Director of Schools) did a system-wide in-service and presented the research on why we need more instructional time in the core subjects. We did ours in block scheduling, most of ours is an hour and ten minutes. Eighth grade almost has 90 minutes now, but sixth grade has an hour because of five teachers. Anyway, it worked out great with the changes that we were starting with grouping the students in those subjects. So the teachers have specific levels of instruction and longer periods of time to teach. They think they've died and gone to heaven.

Joe Founder was firm in his belief that additional instructional time in a block schedule combined with homogeneous grouping was the right decision for his school. Mr. Founder stated,

In math, we went to block schedule about four years ago, so they are ability grouped in math. Also, in language arts, we started this year. We found out the block scheduling is very helpful to us. Ability grouping has helped, too. We do have a problem with language arts. Some of the veteran teachers were kind of skeptical about going to the block schedule, but it has worked out well. We studied all we could about it. We're thinking about going to some other subjects in the block schedule. I like the way we did it, we didn't go all block schedule at one time. Our language arts teachers could see how it had gone in math. I know that they are glad to have more time and to be able to focus on a certain level of students. It was just too much to try to cover with all the curriculum and the different abilities of students.

Don Mullins likewise stated that extended instructional time with ability grouped classes had been a good programming decision for his school. Mr. Mullins said,

We're doing a block. Each academic is probably 75 minutes long. Sometimes, seventh grade for example, a teacher has an English class for second period, and then they go to related art's for 37 minutes, and then that same group will come back to her again. Her class would be split, and other classes are straight through. That's not ideal, but it's better than just a straight 45 minutes, total. The 45 minute classes that we had used for years just doesn't get it today. And everything you read recommends giving kids longer periods of time to process information. We were just throwing too much at them, and then sending them to another subject and throwing more at them. We needed to slow down. So we started the block at the same time that we began grouping. It's in math and language arts only, but our teachers are real pleased with it.

Gary Hensley agreed that longer instructional periods were a necessary change at his school when he explained,

We had started grouping in math and the teachers started talking about the 45 to 50 minute classes, and most of them said, "We just can't get it done, we can't get enough done by the time we get the kids settled down." So I actually made the change without a whole lot of input. I just decided that we weren't getting enough academics. So I made the schedule out and said, "We're going to try it this way, and if it doesn't work, we'll go back." I don't have a teacher here that would change back. They've been really satisfied. They like it.

David Carter also made an administrative decision to change his program to a block schedule with homogeneous grouping of students for instruction. Mr. Carter changed his total school program in the middle of a school year because of his concerns for student achievement. Mr. Carter remembered,

We are using grouping, especially in language arts and mathematics. About four years ago I made a drastic change as far as our master schedule is concerned. I realized that we could not do a successful job with our children with the number of skills that they had to learn in math and language. So, therefore, I abandoned, really abandoned our existing program at mid-year. We had been teaching them all together in mixed ability classes for 45 minutes for many years. It just wasn't working. I sent a letter home to parents and told them that we were changing our master schedule, which would reflect 90 minutes of instruction on math and language. When we came back from Christmas it was a whole new ballgame. I had really been concerned. Of course, we are a Title I school, and we have to jump some different hoops that other schools don't have to jump. I just knew that our kids couldn't be successful with the amount of time they had and with all different abilities in the same class. We were spending 45 minutes per class period. So we left that and went to 90 minutes in seventh and eighth grades, and 70 minutes in sixth grade. Basically the 70 minutes was due to the age level of the sixth graders. Of course, we spent a lot of time with the teachers in

in-service training. We had to change the way that we taught, basically. Methodology was completely different now. Because we would be wasting our time if we taught for 45 minutes and then let them sit and do homework for the other 45. So, it was a paradigm change. We are in the fourth year now with the change. We like it. Our teachers wouldn't have it any other way. Basically, each teacher teaches three to four classes instead of six. It really works well for us.

Personal Philosophies Concerning Homogeneous versus Heterogeneous Grouping

Within the interview process the personal beliefs and philosophies of the interview participants concerning the topic of homogeneous versus heterogeneous ability grouping emerged. The personal beliefs of the principals were as varied as the instructional programs implemented in their schools. Five of the 20 principals interviewed in this study expressed a firm personal belief in heterogeneous grouping of students for instruction in the middle grades. Although only an additional five of the principals stated that their personal philosophy supported homogeneous grouping of middle school age students, 14 of the schools employed the use of ability grouping in some form at some time during the school day, with one additional school making definitive plans to move to a grouping configuration for the following school year. Ten of the 20 principals either expressed support for homogeneous grouping at one point during their interview and then questioned its use at a later point in the interview, or stated openly that they had mixed emotions about its use.

The passionate views of Claire Cassell and Larry Taylor against the use of homogeneous grouping of middle level students were presented in an earlier passage of this study. In addition to Mrs. Cassell and Mr. Taylor, three other principals agreed that heterogeneous grouping was their philosophical choice. Tom Merita expressed his views as follows,

I like heterogeneous better because of the modeling issue. I don't like homogeneous because you are grouping mostly difficult to manage kids, either academically or behaviorally. That's kind of a characteristic of a child that doesn't do well at school, of developing other issues. Like not getting along with classmates, or doesn't like the teacher, or self-concept issues. If they are in a group with good models, sometimes it doesn't become as much of an issue. But when you put 25 of those kids together, I really think that you have more problems. Because the peer pressure is so strong that even if kids struggle academically, if they have friends that are behaving well that they are trying to impress, they do well. Besides grouping, I've come to realize that self-concept and self-esteem issues are more critical. If you can make them feel good, just part of the day then they might be successful. Because I think that what's in your gut and heart determines if you are successful, more than what is in your mind.

Likewise, Joyce Easterly stated her position concerning heterogeneous grouping similarly to Mr. Merita when she stated,

I'd have to go to my personal experience with my own three children. My son's first grade teacher told me never to push him, because he pushes himself so hard. That was the best advice anyone could have given me about him. I think it's very important for children to feel a part of the group and not to feel ostracized.

They'd never really had a mission statement here and asked me at a board meeting to work on one. I said my belief for our school is to celebrate children's differences and to guide students to a happy, healthy, and successful life. When I leave here, I hope the one thing I have done is help children understand that it's O.K. to be different. It's O.K. to be bright, or not so bright. It's O.K. to be black, white, Muslim, whatever. There has been a problem here with that in the past. We are all in this together. So if I had a choice, I'd have to say heterogeneous.

Lester Vance also discussed his belief in heterogeneous grouping of children based on his professional experience as a classroom teacher in a homogeneous classroom. Mr. Vance remembered,

Well, going back to my first year teaching here, we were grouped. The principal here then thought that was the best thing to do. I felt the students were labeled more that way. They were never mixed together. That same group always followed all day long. It could be that if you're in that lower group it affects your self-esteem. Since we have gone to heterogeneous grouping we don't see that, except in those few classes. You might hear a snide comment every once in a while, but for the most part they are interacting with one another. My personal feeling is that's what they need to be doing. Because when you get out in life you're going to be working with a mixed group of people.

Just as some of the principals were adamant about the exclusive use of heterogeneous grouping in their schools, others stated just as strongly that homogeneous grouping was a more effective instructional strategy and also healthier for students. Tammy Knight had changed her thinking concerning ability level instruction after becoming principal at her current school where multi-age grouping was the norm. Mrs. Knight stated,

Well, prior to coming here, my thoughts were that it's wonderful to teach a child on the grade that they're at, but, eventually, they get to a point where they can never catch up. And that's still true. But, I really think that multi-age grouping is the way to go. In first grade and kindergarten, I think we are just trying to decide what they can do. But by second grade we can see some patterns developing about what they are capable of doing. From there on, I think the only progress we are going to make with them is by working with them where they are at, regardless of what grade they are in. This has been a real change in my thinking. But I am convinced that grouping them together to help them succeed is in their best interest. I think the achievement level of this school proves that.

Tommy Byrd agreed that homogeneous grouping had made a difference in the performance level of the students in his school when he said,

It really helps our students who are low, because they need that extra attention. They really struggle sometimes and you have to modify their work. When I saw the test scores, it showed me that it is working. Some students made a 30 point difference. It really convinced me that it was working. I think it's both the extra time and having them grouped. The teachers also have less students each day, so they know their students. They try to make it a home for those students, and I think it's really helped. We've seen a large increase in test scores since we went to this. It's working well and the teachers like it. If it gets the results and everyone's happy, I'm happy.

Donna Roller drew from her personal experiences as a classroom teacher to develop her philosophy concerning homogeneous grouping. Mrs. Roller stated,

Well, I go back to thinking more like a teacher more than anything else when thinking about this. I know that at times I always had a classroom of just everybody. There are times when it would be nice...you can't go on with your gifted or advanced students because of some that are slow. You sometimes need to stop

and re-teach and the others are ready to do something else. I like to have parts of the day to have grouping. I can see where sometimes they all need to be together and treated the same. I think it is more productive to have them grouped, I really do.

Likewise, William Mowery also referred to his professional background in the classroom as a music instructor when stating his belief about implementing ability grouping in his school. Mr. Mowery explained,

Well, my background is in music education. From that standpoint I guess I just have to rely on gut instinct there in terms of how I structured my classes. In addition, just from observation over the years at the high school level where there is more grouping, obviously. But, I do think that it's very difficult for any teacher, regardless of how good, if you have a tremendously broad range of abilities for them to differentiate the instruction enough. We can talk a good game, I feel like we do in education. But, the fact is that most teachers will teach to the middle and there will be too many students left behind. So, if we can narrow that range somewhat, and allow that teacher to teach in that type of environment, I think they can be more effective. I'll tell you another part of my philosophy is that I know that one of the arguments is that, "We don't want to have the dumb class here, and the smart class here." I think that what happens though, even in heterogeneous groups we do it anyway. The kids do it. And so you basically have to ask yourself do we want to create that situation and try to put some pieces in that puzzle that bring those kids together in other ways so that we can not have that "dumb" and "smart" kind of thing and that big divider.

Dave McGar also stated that his positive paradigm concerning homogeneous grouping was a result of his experience as a reading teacher and in middle grades instruction. Mr. McGar said,

It just depends upon who you talk to as to whether they like it or not. Coming from a reading background, it makes sense. One of the real difficulties that a teacher has is the range of abilities in the classroom. Some students come to school reading, while others we are basically domesticating. We seem to spend a lot of time trying to close the gap. It makes sense on some level to try to "disability group" within a class. For example, you've got a group of students that are all struggling with short vowels, you can make a flexible group there and try to address the situation. There's no point in trying to give it to everyone. We need to address those issues somehow. One of the ways, you can do some multi-age type of stuff. We are considering that in the K-2 area. We're not there yet, but we have superficially discussed it. I've been in middle schools where we had one period a day where everyone dropped everything and taught reading. We grouped those kids by ability. We did that with math for one half hour per day where everyone taught developmental math based on ability groups. So if a student had trouble multiplying, they would go to a multiplication group. Those types of situations work real well.

Rhonda Smith reminisced about the homogeneous instruction she received as a young student and how her personal experience had shaped her professional philosophy concerning ability grouping. Mrs. Smith remembered,

I was taught... I'm from another part of the state, originally. I liked the way I was taught. I went to a truly open school when I was a child and through middle school. We had teacher stations in the middle of the classroom, and all the centers around it. We, per se, didn't have...we had a teacher. But, like, say when I went to math class, that teacher was in the training station and we had a syllabus. We knew exactly how much it would take to make an A, or a B, and all that. We were more self-motivated. I think we've taken that away. I think we've taken the responsibility of parents and students away from their own learning. And they need that. We were taught in homogeneous groups, but everyone seemed to feel good about themselves. I never worried about...I never remember a teacher fussing at students for not doing what they were supposed to be doing, because everyone was always doing something. And some teachers think that's chaotic, I don't know. I remember it wasn't to me as a student. I remember us going...we had little centers set up. There was not a lot of social interaction during class time because you were geared to that center, and that's what you did. When you were finished, you went somewhere else. Now that I think about it...I wonder if the teacher had a hard time getting us to move from center to center. I wonder how that would

work now. If someone had a harder time it could be a problem...but I don't remember that. So I don't have negative connotations when I hear the word ability level grouping. Based on my personal experience that's not a negative thing, because it's the way I grew up. I was fortunate. Maybe I wouldn't have felt that way if I had not been a student that wanted to achieve and do well. But, I don't see that even here. I don't. So, if everyone is achieving on their level, it can be a positive thing.

Other research participants in this study readily admitted that they struggled with a definitive strong belief about homogeneous versus heterogeneous ability grouping. Some of the principals stated that their philosophy had changed over the years, and some actually spoke in favor of homogeneous grouping at one point in the interview and against the practice later in the interview.

Tim Jackson explained why he believed in ability grouping in the early grades but not as an appropriate practice for middle school age students. When asked about his philosophy Mr. Jackson replied,

Well, I guess I believe some in grouping and some not. We just have 17 middle school students here (private Christian school). I believe in grouping early, and then later on, not group in the middle grades. I think if we do our job in grouping in the elementary grades, and even use retention, then in the fifth grade...because things change for kids. Other things become important. Unless there is a very special need. But kids that are just a little behind in reading, or a little behind in math...when they get to those grades, let them get in there and dig it out with the rest of them. I just know kids. I can see that look in their eyes. Education is very important, but there are other things that are important, too. I go from my background...I was not an academic person. I learned skills...I feel like they need to go on with their peers. Because if you've not done in kindergarten through fifth grade, six years with those kids what you can do with that child...setting up those basics...you can't hold them back. Let them get out there in the real world and go at it and see where they are. There's a lot of kids out there with ability and drive, but we hold them back many times. So I had a different outlook on education. And especially now being in a Christian school, academics are important, but there are other things that are important too. We place a lot of emphasis on what kids know. But, I'm just from a different school altogether.

Bill Mitchell described his philosophy as one of being "not sure" concerning the issue of ability level grouping. Mr. Mitchell had implemented homogeneous grouping for all academic subjects except social studies during the current school year and had previously shared his concerns stemming from the degree of grouping that had been implemented in his school. When asked to talk about his personal beliefs, Mr. Mitchell paused and then stated,

OK, my own personal thoughts are that number one, that you do have to be ability grouped for the math, reading, and language. I believe that...simply because the algebra sets the tone for it. And some kids are not ready for algebra, I've seen that. No way they can handle it. I like, personally, I liked it when we were heterogeneous for the other subjects, science, social studies, etc. Because, I do think that we learn from each other. I think the children learn from each other. And I wanted to try to stay away as best as possible from the labeling regardless of whether it is the top group or the bottom group. Because you get some kids in the top group that get that real arrogant attitude. And it creates divisions within the class itself and that sets tones for things and can lead to other problems. I also liked it better when all of my eighth grade was in one level, and all of the seventh grade was in one level. That's a control thing, not that I'm a control freak, but I think the teachers will tell you that they had better control of those kids. If something happens, they were right there. They could pull the four teachers together and say, "OK, how are we going to handle this? What's going on in this class or with this kid?" Now it's a little bit more difficult because you are dealing

with eight teachers, rather than four. The other thing they are pointing out is, if something happened in the eighth grade restroom, they knew it was an eighth grader. Now, they're not sure. So, I guess my personal thinking on ability grouping is a little bit of "not sure." I see it as being about achievement, but then there are also social issues. And they are both equally important, I really believe that.

Don Mullins talked at length about both sides of the issue of ability grouping and the fact that he did not have a strong personal paradigm concerning whether homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping was better for students. Mr. Mullins said,

Whether I like it, or teachers like it, I tell them we are here for the kids. If it makes us a little inconvenienced in scheduling, then so be it. But, I don't have a set viewpoint on it. Every child is totally different. If you can put them where they can function and make progress and have some success, we just try to do the best for the child. I go a lot on what the teachers recommend, because they're with them. You'll have parents that will say, "Well, mine needs to be in this higher group cause I know he is smart." Well, the kid may be pretty smart, but he may not be as smart as mother thinks. So we use teachers' recommendation. And those tests, you don't have much backlash on that because we can show them. So I don't know. I'm just interested in making sure that every student is put where they can do the best they can do. Regardless of whether it's grouping or non-grouping. Some of them will function better with people of their own ability, and every once in a while you can move some others in and they'll pick up. And we have moved some people down, and they'll do just as well. You've just got to be careful not to put them in over their heads. That's the way I sort of look at it. Everybody can't take calculus when they get in high school, but that doesn't mean that they can't pass some good math programs and be proficient in math. We hope they will all pass Algebra I on the Gateway test! We're trying to prepare them for it. That's the key thing. We're trying to prepare them for high school, and to pass, and to get on into life. I always tell kids the easiest thing they'll ever do is go to school. Some of them don't believe me until they've been out of school for about five years. But some of them will come back by and tell you, "Well, you knew what you were talking about." And I'll say, "Well, at least you've learned something!" So, you've just got to work with them the best you can. I don't have a viewpoint on what the books say to do this or do that. As you know, a lot has changed. We're all grouped, whether we like it or not. You can either take calculus or you can't. You're either in special ed., or you're not. Special ed. is grouping. A lot of people don't want to admit that. And you're grouped according to things at home. Your lifestyle, what your parents make, and what they did. We try not to put quote, labels, on them. But the bottom line is that grouping is working for us right now, so I guess I'm in favor of it.

Donna Greene also had difficulty in defining her personal beliefs about ability grouping. At one point in the interview Mrs. Greene stated that she was considering a change to homogeneous grouping when she said,

I think I'm starting to lean that way more because we are getting more students that are not prepared for sixth grade, especially in reading and math. Personally, I think we are going to have to look at more homogeneous grouping. The reason for that is, again this is very personal, but I have a young child coming on in the next few years. We all think our own kids are gifted. As I look at the schedule and heterogeneous grouping, I think, "Is my child going to be one of those who suffer because they are either middle or high?" Because we are teaching more to the low group with the heterogeneous grouping. So this is something that I've started to think about, and I've thought about it for a year or so. I have to admit that some of it is more personally driven. Not totally, but that plays into it.

However, later in the interview Mrs. Greene expressed her satisfaction with the heterogeneous grouping and the level of academic achievement in her school when she said,

If you are statistically backing up what you are doing, until a person shows you why you should change, it's real hard to justify going away from the heterogeneous. It's working for us right now. Although

personally, in my mind, I can see lots of benefits for homogeneous grouping. I don't really have a plan right now. It's just something that I'm watching my data and it's in the back of my mind for the future. But a lot of the things I've put in place have made the teachers feel good. I'm not patting myself on the back, but until they tell me that this is not working for them, or they see problems with it, or I see some data, test analysis that can tell me it's wrong...why change something that is working?

Joe Founder had related that his school had successfully changed from heterogeneous to homogeneous grouping of students four years prior and that, in his opinion, it had made a significant difference in higher achievement for his students. However, Mr. Founder related that he still had some personal reservations concerning homogeneous grouping. Mr. Founder stated,

I have mixed feelings on it, really. I think that slower students can learn from brighter students. Then also, you take students that are more alike by ability and the teachers can move faster and organize the classroom. I've seen it work well in both instances. Sometimes it's hard to say which is better. I don't have a strong feeling either way. I was hesitant to have all the bright students in one class because sometimes you can have problems with all the lower students in one class. But I do know that teachers can move along at a faster pace with ability grouping. It does seem to work out better. But I do have thoughts about how the lower functioning students address it.

Some of the principals in this study stated that they had openly opposed homogeneous grouping in their schools for many years but had made personal concessions in their beliefs during the last few years. Gary Hensley related a story that explained his willingness to implement some ability grouping in his school after years of being adamant about not homogeneously grouping students in the middle grades. Mr. Hensley related,

Well, first of all, I feel like one of the reasons that I like middle age students, is the fact that they are going through so many changes. It doesn't take but one word sometimes to ruin a kid's whole year. They're so sensitive and just so unsure of themselves. So I've tried to stay away from grouping for that reason alone. I felt like if we could bring students along and keep them involved in school, when they come to school you could do it a lot easier if you create a comfortable atmosphere for them. So I've been totally opposed to grouping. Matter of fact, at one point I told my teachers that I would get out of this business before I went to grouping in our school. But, about three years ago, one of my eighth grade teachers, a new teacher, a very promising teacher, talked to me about doing some grouping. I was totally opposed to it. But one day she asked me to come back to one of her classes. I said, "sure." And she said the students would like to talk to me about grouping. So I went back and the students spoke up and said, "We would support grouping because we'd like to be taught at our level." So it was the first time I had heard that from the students, both the high and low level students. I asked, "Some of you students that don't do so well in this class, do you support this?" And they said, "Yes, I would because there is a lot of this that I don't understand, it's too much." I know that was just one class, but I felt like if we could sell it to the students...you know, this is why, and we want to meet your needs. So, I guess the little visit to the eighth grade class and listening to some of the students, it just hit me. I'd never heard how they felt about it. You're going to have some isolated incidents of where somebody does feel put down and not part of the group. But then, if it's done correctly with the right attitude, I think students are going to get more out of it. Especially in some skill classes, especially in math. I've heard it both ways pertaining to math, as far as students can learn from the faster students. I know from having taught math myself, you have to really understand each step, and if you have to try to move too quickly. So, I guess my philosophy has changed a little bit. But not to the point to where I feel like tracking is the answer. It's a mixture.

Likewise, Nancy Strickland also related that she had changed her thoughts on homogeneous grouping over the last few years and was now allowing its use in her school. Mrs. Strickland stated,

When I first became a principal, the standard philosophy in middle school was heterogeneous grouping for everything except math. I endorsed that whole-heartedly and I can see a lot of social issues that are solved because of that grouping. I have sort of crawled across the fence, tenuously, just because of the pressure for the academic achievement or gains that teachers have to show. We have done in-services on differentiated instruction in a mixed-ability classroom, brain-based, learning styles, multiple intelligences. We've had all that training which should enable us to teach all abilities in that classroom. And yes, we've gotten better at it, we've had to. But, if we can see the academic gains that we are expecting through an aligned curriculum and teaching what we are supposed to, to meet the objectives of the test, then I think we are going to see a mixture of those two philosophies. My general philosophy is, "Do what works." Whatever is successful. I also believe in giving teachers the opportunity to try different things without smacking their hands. We're going to learn from our mistakes. As long as we don't keep repeating the same mistakes, I can live with them trying different things.

Within the data analysis of the taped interviews, several themes emerged that identified factors that influenced the decision making process of the principal study participants. These themes included the impact of student achievement, standardized test accountability, social factors that affect students, the perceptions of teachers and parents, programming for special education and gifted students, the impact of educational research, and the personal philosophies of the research participants concerning homogeneous versus heterogeneous ability grouping. Thick description was used to present the themes from the perspective of each of the twenty principals included in the study whenever possible. Information from the data analysis chapter was used to develop findings and implications for future research presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND FUTURE PRACTICE

The factors that affect the decision making processes of middle level administrators concerning whether to implement heterogeneous or homogeneous ability grouping of students as the preferred instructional delivery model were investigated in this phenomenological study. Interviews were conducted with 20 principals of schools in the east Tennessee area that included student populations of grades six through eight. Eight of the schools included in the study housed the traditional middle school configuration of grades six, seven and eight, and eight other schools included grades kindergarten through grade eight. Additionally, the study included individual schools with the grade levels of six and seven, seven and eight, five through eight, and kindergarten through grade 12. Thirteen male principals and seven female principals were interviewed over a three-month period for inclusion in this study. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted using an open-ended technique with a set of interview guide questions to focus the inquiry. The qualitative methodology used in the study allowed for the emergence of detail that would be omitted through the use of quantitative survey analysis. Personal interviews with the research participants revealed thick description of the factors that affected the principals' decisions to employ the use of homogeneous grouping in their schools and created a large body of data for the analyses of common themes. Descriptive information was derived from the audio taped sessions and inductively coded into common categories. Major themes emerged from the coded transcriptions, which were organized through the process of data analysis.

A large amount of information was derived through the review of literature concerning homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouping. However, over 70 years of intense debate by respected researchers in the field of education has failed to definitively answer the question of whether one model of instruction is preferable over the other. School principals were found to have a critical influence on the use or non-use of ability grouping in individual schools (Hallinan & Sorensen, 1985). Middle school administrators, especially, have a critical decision to make concerning the implementation of homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping in their schools because of the far-reaching effects that grouped instruction has on the future educational careers and personal lives of their students

(Braddock & Slavin, 1992; Gamoran, 1986; Gamoran, 1992; Moore & Davenport, 1988). The findings of this study confirm the entrenched nature of ability grouping as an accepted practice in middle level education and add understanding of the internal and external factors that affect the promotion of the practice by middle school administrators.

Seven major themes emerged from the inductive analysis of data from within this study and were underscored by previous research findings. Areas identified as themes included the impact of student achievement, standardized test accountability, social factors that affect students, the perceptions of teachers and parents, programming for special education and gifted students, the impact of educational research, and the personal philosophies of the research participants concerning homogeneous versus heterogeneous ability grouping. The context of reviewed literature was presented for findings within each identified theme area. Conclusions and recommendations for future research and practice were also related to study findings.

General Findings

The findings of the 1993 National Association of Secondary School Principals survey found that grouping students for instruction by ability level into specific classes was favored by a majority of middle level principals (Valentine et al., 1993). These findings were supported by the preferences for homogeneous grouping expressed by the 20 principals included in this study. Of the 20 participants, only five, or 25%, stated unequivocally that they opposed the use of homogeneous grouping in their schools. Another 25% openly stated their belief that homogeneous grouping was the preferred method of instruction for middle school aged students. However, 10 of the principals in this study, or 50%, stated that they struggled philosophically with their belief concerning grouping practices, even though homogeneous grouping was practiced in their schools. These 10 administrators used descriptors such as “unsure,” “wishy-washy,” “I’ve done it both ways,” or “I can see both sides of the issue” when struggling to verbalize their philosophical positions concerning ability level grouping.

Although five principals stated that they held a personal paradigm favoring heterogeneous instruction, only three out of the 20 schools employed the use of total heterogeneous grouping, with no ability grouping used in any programs at any time of the school day. Seventeen out of 20 schools where the administrators were interviewed for this study included some form of homogeneous grouping of their middle grade students for at least a portion of the instructional programming. This number reflects 85% of the schools in this study that use homogeneous grouping

and mirrors the findings of George (1990) who estimated that as many as 85% of schools use some form of grouping of students for instruction. Additionally, the 1993 NASSP report (Valentine et al) found that 70% of the 2,000 U.S. middle schools surveyed reported grouping students into specific classes by ability.

Impact of Student Academic Achievement

All 20 of the principals interviewed in this study emphasized the responsibility that they feel for their students to attain high academic achievement. The implementation of homogeneous grouping emerged as a strategy that principals identified as being necessary to provide optimal opportunities for student achievement in their schools. The debate concerning whether homogeneous grouping positively affects student achievement is well documented in the literature. Many quantitative studies have suggested that homogeneous instruction does not result in increased achievement gains (Bryan & Findley, 1970; Slavin, 1987; Slavin, 1990). Conversely, other studies have shown that students grouped for instruction with their like-ability peers does yield a positive effect on student achievement, particularly high ability students (Argys et al., 1996; Epstein & MacIver, 1992; Gamoran, 1987; Kulik, 1998; Kulik & Kulik, 1991). The research participants in this study agreed that raising student achievement was a catalyst in their decision to implement ability grouping in their schools.

The addition of algebra in eighth grade to the middle school curriculum was also identified by 13 of the 20 research participants as having a profound affect on the grouping strategies in their schools. Ten of the schools selected for this study were offering algebra in eighth grade for high school credit, with three additional schools actively planning for its addition to their course offerings for the following school year. Nine out of the 10 principals of the traditional middle schools (grades six through eight, five through eight, or seven and eight) reported that algebra was a course offering in their school and had resulted in ability grouping in the area of mathematics. Oakes, (1985) found that algebra was a common curricula found in high track classes, and Epstein and MacIver (1992) reported that eighth grade students of all abilities learn more in tracked algebra classes than in heterogeneous groups for algebra instruction.

The principals also agreed that the homogeneous grouping initiated in their schools with the implementation of algebra had an affect on the grouping practices in other academic subjects as well. The homogeneous instruction of eighth grade algebra classes had perpetuated a need for pre-algebra in seventh grade and an advanced math curriculum in sixth grade, resulting in homogeneous instruction in the area of mathematics

school-wide. Additionally, several of the principal participants reported that the other skill areas of reading and language had also become ability grouped in their schools because the homogeneous instruction in mathematics had resulted in gains in achievement. Therefore, the principals reasoned, the subjects of reading and language also became homogeneously grouped in order to raise student achievement in those core subjects. Schneider (1990) reported that grouping middle school students is very common in the areas on mathematics, reading, and English, while Slavin (1987) also concluded that grouping students for reading and mathematics can be “instructionally effective” under certain conditions (p. 299).

An additional finding from this study was the prevalence of academic enrichment strategies employed by many of the principals in their schools in order to further academic achievement opportunities for students. This strategy was used by 12 of the 20 principals, including three principals who expressed philosophical opposition to homogenous grouping. All 12 of the academic enrichment strategies used ability grouping of students specifically for remediation of low achieving students or for providing advanced curriculum opportunities for high achieving students. Kulik and Kulik (1991) found that academic enrichment programs with course content tailored to specific abilities, especially high ability students, produced significant academic gains.

Eight of the principals interviewed for this study served as the leader of a school with students enrolled in grades kindergarten through grade eight. These schools were typically administered by county school systems and many had small student populations. Several of the principals of these schools expressed frustration with the lack of academic opportunities they were able to provide their middle grades students because of limited numbers of teachers, resulting in the inability for teachers to specialize in content areas. However, five principal participants talked about multi-age grouping as a possible solution to this problem. These principals stated that in their opinions, multi-age homogeneous grouping would allow opportunities for specialized instruction at individual ability levels, regardless of assigned grade level.

Impact of Standardized Test Accountability

Middle school principals in this study not only expressed the perceived need to develop programs that provided opportunities for high academic achievement for their students, they also related a common concern for their students and schools to perform well on state mandated standardized tests. In the state of Tennessee the tests that are mandated for middle grades students are encompassed in the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment

Program, which was commonly referred to by the principals as TCAP. This state-wide testing program includes the Terra Nova achievement test, a seventh grade timed writing exam, and value-added scores which measure teacher effectiveness. Moreover, the addition of three high school level end-of-course exams in Algebra I, Biology I, and English II was identified by principals as a factor that had caused increased test accountability on the middle school level. These exams were commonly referred to by principals as the Gateway exams, and successful scores on these exams will be required of all students for high school graduation beginning with the class of 2004. Principals stated that the Algebra I Gateway exam as a high school graduation requirement had been a factor in the implementation of algebra on the eighth grade level in many of their schools.

In the course of the interviews, 100% of the research participants talked about the pressures they felt for their schools, students, and teachers to perform well on standardized exams. Principals also identified standardized test scores as major factors used in their schools as criteria for placement of students in specific ability groups. Braddock, (1990) warned that,

the overuse or misuse of tacking in the middle school is almost inevitable when a single, general criterion such as GPA or composite score on the most recent achievement test is used to determine academic placement for an academic program (p. 448).

Additionally, Davidson, (1997) emphasized:

When major decisions for the instruction and placement of students are dependent on norm-referenced standards, they may serve to reinforce the practice of ability grouping and tracking unfairly. An undesirable by-product of testing has been the emphasis on academic achievement which becomes a mechanism for weeding out those deemed minimally competent, usually students at-risk for failure. An over reliance on test scores may foster a narrow conception of ability that results in nonacademic programs that accompany children into their adult life. Also, when city and state tests are aligned with high stakes consequences (i.e. promotion, graduation, ranking), the real losers are those relegated to the bottom groups, posing a danger for at-risk students. (p. 335-336)

Impact of Social Factors that Affect Students

The effect that ability level grouping had on student behavior, the students' perceptions of being placed in a tracked class, and the importance of providing flexibility in the scheduling of homogeneous classes so that students could be moved to either a higher or lower group as needed also emerged as findings through the data analysis.

The research participants were divided in their thoughts concerning whether homogeneous grouping had caused an increase in discipline referrals in their schools. Principals who held personal paradigms against the use of homogeneous instruction cited the possibility of increased inappropriate behavior if low ability students were to be grouped together. Likewise, some of the principals who had implemented ability level classes stated that they had seen an increase in inappropriate behavior or had sensed a negative change in the climate of their schools. Conversely, other principals who were also using homogeneous instruction said that the behavior in their schools was unchanged, or better, than in the past. The perceived successes that low ability students were experiencing in appropriate class placements were seen by the interviewees as the reason for decreased behavior problems. The differing opinions expressed by the principals on the issue of the effects that grouped instruction had on classroom behavior was also reflected in the literature. Several researchers reported increased negative classroom behavior on the part of low achieving students when grouped together (Black, 1993; George, 1993; Oakes, 1985). However, other studies have challenged those findings and shown that students of both high and lower abilities actually benefit more from social interactions when grouped with their like-ability peers, with low achieving students having less acting out and more participation in discussion in homogeneous instruction (Kulik, 1998; Rogers, 1998).

Student perceptions of themselves and the effect that homogeneous grouping may have on self-esteem also emerged as a concern for the principals participating in this study. Similar to the diverse views of the principals concerning the effects of grouping on student behavior, they also disagreed in their opinions of how students perceived being grouped for instruction. Several participants related personal examples of when students had told them directly, or they had overheard, students referring to themselves as the "dummy group." The interviewees who were using homogeneous grouping stated that they encouraged their teachers to talk with students directly when such comments were made and to explain that placements were specifically made in the best interest of students for maximum academic success. Other principals expressed that, in their opinion, students group themselves even within heterogeneous classes and that social grouping was a common human experience. Again, the research concerning the effect that like-ability grouping has on the self-perception of students is conflicting (Black, 1993;

George, 1993; Hallinan & Sorensen, 1987; Hargreaves, 1967; Kulik, 1992; Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Oakes, 1985; Shwartz, 1981; Wheelock, 1992). The principals who perceived homogeneous grouping to be successful for their students stated that they had specifically worked to develop a school climate of “this is how we do things here.” However, they cautioned that they were constantly aware of the threat that grouping posed as a possible negative influence on the climate of their schools.

Principals who employed homogeneous grouping of students in their schools agreed that flexibility of movement for students between specific ability groups was imperative for academic and social success. Most of the programs that used like-ability class instruction were specifically designed by the principals to allow flexible student movement among the groups. This held true with the multi-age ability grouped programs as well. Although not a proponent of homogenous grouping, Slavin (1987) concluded that some grouping efforts provided positive effects on average achievement when grouping assignments were flexible, monitored regularly, and limited to one or two subjects. The research does speak clearly on the dangers of “locking in” a student to a particular track and that inflexible master schedules can cause additional unintended tracking (Dentzer & Wheelock, 1990; Garet & DeLany, 1988).

Impact of Teacher and Parent Perceptions

Along with the documented concerns cited in the literature concerning inflexibility of student placements, the research also points to negative consequences of assigning teachers to low track instruction over prolonged periods of time (Finley, 1984). Additionally, it has been found that weaker and less experienced teachers are commonly assigned to low ability classes (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, 1992a; Rosenbaum, 1976). The research participants in this study differed widely in their methods of assigning teachers to specific ability level courses. The data analysis revealed that some principals assigned each teacher a low, middle, and high group for instruction, while other principals stated that they purposefully placed their strongest and most experienced teachers with the high ability groups. One interview transcription described a particular principal’s frustration with placing a teacher outside of her certification area to teach average ability students, while still another principal admitted that she had teachers “draw out of a hat” for class assignment. Other data analysis uncovered statements made by principals that their teachers assigned to the lower groups were “not happy campers.” The majority of principals stated, however, that

just as student placement in a specific group is not static, teacher assignments to levels of instruction could change from year to year.

A majority of the principals also discussed that the perceptions of their teachers concerning ability grouping was a factor in their decision to implement or not implement the practice in their schools. Wilson and Ribovich (1973) reported that 94% of the teachers surveyed in their research said that ability grouping was beneficial and 74% of teachers actively practiced grouping in their schools or classrooms. Most interview participants stated that their teachers had asked them to implement grouping in their schools, especially in the areas of mathematics, language, and reading. Trimble and Sinclair (1987) found that teachers expressed that the content of instruction was more effectively adapted when the range of abilities was reduced, and that classrooms were more manageable in homogeneous groups. Some principals said that the reading and language teachers, in particular, had approached them for permission to implement stratified ability groups because of the increased achievement in mathematics on standardized tests. It was also related that reading and language teachers had expressed frustration with teaching the wide range of abilities of non-readers in the same class with students of advanced reading skills. A few of the principals related that their teachers also had conflicting emotions about the practice of grouping and struggled with the desire to increase achievement, while not increasing negative classroom behavior.

Principals also mentioned the effect of parental influence on the implementation of grouping in their schools, particularly parents of gifted education students and students enrolled in algebra. The majority of principals expressed openness to parent input and a willingness to work with parents concerning their student's placement. One principal, however, stated she had taken algebra out of her school's curriculum offerings because parents perceived it to be an elite social issue for their students to participate in the algebra class. Useem (1992) and Loveless (1998) documented the fact that parents place pressure on schools for particular track placements for their children and that placements are often negotiable between parents and schools. Additionally, parents of students identified for gifted education services were also found to have an impact on the grouping practices of schools by their insistence on separate programs and advanced curriculum offerings for their children (Oakes, 1992a). Although parental input concerning programming in their schools emerged as a finding of this study through the data analysis process, most of the principals stated that they either handled parent requests very matter-of-factly or expressed surprise at the relatively low number of parent complaints they had received concerning the placements of their students in

particular tracks. The participants stated that having concrete criteria based on standardized test scores had been instrumental in allowing them to set objective standards for student placement in algebra and higher ability classes.

The Impact of Programs for Special Education and Academically Gifted Students

Providing services to meet the educational needs of students legally identified as having a handicapping condition was identified by study participants as being an influential factor in the development of programs stratified by ability in their schools. Special education services and programs for academically gifted students were provided in a number of ways in the schools included in this study. Student needs were met through the use of inclusionary instruction within the regular classroom, pull-out services provided in a separate resource class, and by homogeneous grouping of like-ability low achieving or academically advanced students. Most of the principals stated that a combination of services was used in their schools.

Only three of the 20 schools in this study used a model of total inclusion of special needs students within the regular program with certified special education teachers supporting the students in the classroom. Most of the principals described a combination of services using resource class instruction in the areas of math, reading, and language for low ability students, and modification of assignments in the regular classroom for science and social studies instruction. The principals of schools that homogeneously grouped instruction stated that the needs of special education students were either met in the low ability classes, or those students were pulled out of the regular program to attend a resource class during the mathematics or reading period.

Academic enrichment programs were most often cited as meeting the needs of the academically gifted students. In fact, only one school out of 20 provided a separate class identified exclusively for the instruction of gifted students. This school used a model of total heterogeneous instruction within the regular academic program, and gifted students were allowed to choose the gifted class as one of their two related arts offerings. However, the majority of principals of schools that had implemented homogeneous grouping cited the advanced classes, including algebra, as meeting the needs of the academically gifted students. The need for schools to meet the needs of students identified as gifted has been cited in the research as a factor in the implementation of homogeneous grouping (Oakes, 1992a; Wakefield, 1994).

The Impact of Educational Research

The findings of this study are closely aligned with previous research concerning “best practice” in middle school education. The 20 principals interviewed for this study were experienced educators with only three of the participants having fewer than 20 years experience in the field of education. The percentage of female administrators included in the interviews was higher than the reported norm from the 1993 NASSP report (Valentine et al., 1993), which found that 20% of middle level principals were women. Seven of the principals included in this study were females, which reflected 35% of the total participants. One hundred percent of the principals interviewed stated that they used the concept of grade level teaming in the middle grades of their schools and had also provided a common planning time for teachers in the daily schedule. Principals also reported that regardless of whether students were homogeneously grouped in academic subjects, all students attended related arts, or exploratory classes, in mixed-ability instruction.

Principals in this study also mirrored previous reported findings in their attitudes and understanding of educational research concerning ability level grouping practices. Eight principals, or 40% of the participants, specifically mentioned educational research on this topic during their interview. The interviewees stated that their experience with the research included formal studies in graduate programs, readings of professional literature and journals, attending workshops or conferences, or visiting other schools that employed the use of ability grouping. The principals expressed frustration that the research they were familiar with was conflicting and confusing. The general consensus among the interview participants was that they made the decision to homogeneously group students based on what they believed to be in the best interest of their students, despite what they may have read in the literature. Several writers have validated the fact that the body of research on the topic of homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping is daunting in scope, contradictory, and unconvincing to school administrators (Loveless, 1998; Rogers, 1998; Sorensen & Hallinan, 1986).

One finding of this study, however, that did coincide with documented recommended practice for middle grades instruction was the use of extended time for academic instruction, or block scheduling. The topic of block scheduling in the middle grades emerged in 12 of the 20 interviews. Eight of the principals, or 40%, had implemented extended academic periods into their schedules while two other participants stated that they had current plans to extend teaching time in the core academic subjects for the next school year. The NASSP report (Valentine et al., 1993) found that only one percent of middle schools were providing extended academic periods,

while a full 99% of middle school schedules included seven to eight periods of 40 to 55 minutes per class. Interestingly, however, the reasons that principals in this study stated for implementing a block schedule were in direct contradiction to the reason it was recommended in the literature. Davidson (1997), stated that one solution to the problem of rigid master schedules that foster ability grouping was the use of flexible blocks of time for differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classes. However, the principals in this study stated that they had implemented block periods to allow more time for instruction in homogeneous groups in mathematics, language, and reading.

Personal Philosophies Concerning Homogeneous vs. Heterogeneous Grouping

The 20 principals interviewed in this study expressed varied personal philosophies concerning the topic of homogeneous versus heterogeneous grouping of middle level students. Five of the principals espoused the exclusive use of heterogeneous grouping, five stated an unequivocal belief in the use of homogeneous grouping, and 10 interviewees expressed mixed emotions concerning the topic. The research participants also varied in the reasons they explained for their personal paradigms.

Davidson (1997) posited that there were three basic explanations for the continued use of ability level grouping that may be deduced from the literature. These included the belief that educational differences between students cannot be dealt with effectively within a common school experience, the organizational structure of schools maintain the continued use of tracking, and teachers and parents defend the practice of homogeneous grouping for high achieving students. According to the data analysis in this study, the principal participants agreed with two of Davidson's findings in that they stated that grouping in their schools had been implemented in part to alleviate the instructional "gap" between high and low ability learners in the same classroom, and teachers in their schools had championed the use of homogeneous grouping. However, the principals in this study expressed their understanding of the need to design flexible schedules, either for extended periods of instruction or to allow movement between academic classes in grouped instruction. Undue parental influence as a major cause for the implementation of grouped instruction in their schools was also discounted by the principal interviews.

Rogers (1998) reported five approaches that administrators use to make decisions concerning the implementation of ability level grouping. The first approach referred to by Rogers was the "I found this student" approach, whereby the principal's paradigm is developed from past personal experience. The vast majority of the

principals in this study related that their personal beliefs concerning homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping were developed due to their personal experiences either as a student or teacher in grouped instruction. However, there was no clear finding as to whether their personal experiences caused the principals to favor one form of instructional grouping over the other. Some participants stated positive personal experiences with homogeneous grouping and did not express a negative connotation concerning its use. Other interviewees, however, stated they had had negative experiences with like-ability grouped instruction and expressed concerns about the exclusive use of stratified learning.

Rogers (1998) second stated approach used by administrators concerning the implementation of ability grouping was the “famous speaker” approach whereby an opinion expressed by an “expert” on the topic influences their belief. Only one principal in this study mentioned that he had heard speakers on the topic of ability grouping and that no clear answer had been derived from the experience. The third approach found by Rogers was the “I found this study” approach. Two of the principals in this study related personal experiences where they had conducted research on the topic of tracking in their graduate programs. Both of these administrators expressed very strong opinions against the use of homogeneous grouping and cited the findings of their research as the basis for their beliefs. None of the research participants were found to have used Rogers’ final two approaches of the “kitchen sink” approach to meta-analysis, or the “best evidence” approach of rank ordering accumulated research studies.

The majority of principals interviewed in this study expressed the belief that higher academic gains could be achieved in homogeneously grouped classes, yet stated concerns about the possible social impact of labeling middle level students in stratified groups. Several principals also stated that they had changed their paradigms concerning the use of homogeneous grouping in the past few years in that they were not as adamant against its use as they had been earlier in their careers. Regardless of their position on the use or non-use of ability grouping, all of the principals in this study expressed a sincere desire to implement programs that were in the best interest of their students, both academically and emotionally.

Implications for Future Practice and Further Research

The issue of ability level grouping has been debated in educational literature and practice for over seven decades. The increased pressure on middle school administrators for their schools to perform at high levels of academic achievement as measured by standardized assessment scores will likely only heighten the debate.

However, it becomes even more critical for middle school principals to fully understand the benefits and risks associated with implementing homogeneous or heterogeneous instructional strategies in their schools.

If homogeneous ability grouping is to be successfully used at the middle school level, several factors must be designed into the instructional plan. Consideration should carefully be given to of the use of homogeneous grouping only in the core academic skill areas of mathematics, reading, and language. It is important not to lock students into a specific track of instruction for the entire instructional day. The subjects of science and social studies at the middle level lend themselves well to the use of thematic units and cooperative learning groups of mixed ability students. Students should also be allowed the opportunity to interact with others in diverse learning groups within the exploratory or related arts classes offered at their schools.

Flexibility within the academic schedule is also critical in order to allow students to move to a higher group if more challenge is needed or to a lower group if the student is not successful at the higher level. Every effort should be made to initially place students in the appropriate level of instruction with the use of standardized test scores, teacher recommendation, academic placement tests other than standardized assessments, portfolios of examples of student work, and prior academic records. Grouping placements should not be made based upon a single score from a single standardized achievement test.

Middle school administrators should also carefully consider teacher assignment to specific groups of learners and allow for flexibility in teacher assignment from year to year so as not to track teachers. Allowing teachers to teach a group of each level of instruction has been found to be optimal. Staff development remains a critical component of the principal's responsibility to ensure high quality instruction for all students, regardless of ability group. The curriculum should be challenging for all levels of instruction with active learning strategies routinely employed.

Principals should be willing to take risks in finding solutions to help their students and teachers achieve at the highest level possible. However, it is also critical that administrators remain flexible and open to the possible need to change programs in their schools that are not effective for students, either academically or socially. For some principals this may mean a willingness to allow some ability grouping in their schools, while for others it may mean a willingness to lead their school in a de-tracking initiative. As stated by Loveless (1998), "Some schools will track, others will un-track" (p. 21).

Quantitative research comparing the Gateway algebra scores of Tennessee eighth grade students to the scores of students who take algebra in high school on the Algebra I Gateway exam would be helpful. Such data would help answer the question of whether algebra is needed and in the best interest of students in the middle school curriculum. The elimination of algebra in eighth grade would allow for less ability grouping in mathematics and other subjects. Additionally, a quantitative study comparing the TCAP and value added scores of Tennessee middle schools before and after the transition from heterogeneous to homogeneous grouping would help quantify whether ability grouping does affect student achievement and, if so, to what extent. Further qualitative research with middle school students who are placed in ability-grouped classes would also lend understanding to the social and emotional effects of ability grouping. Such understanding would be valuable to principals and teachers as they make programming decisions concerning homogeneous instruction in their schools and individual classrooms.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter of Request to Director of Schools

Dear Director of Schools:

As a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University in the program of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, I am interested in how students are organized for learning in middle level grades. The purpose of my study is to research the decision making processes that principals use to determine if ability level grouping will be used in their schools, and to what extent.

In order to conduct my research, I am requesting your permission to contact middle level principals in your school district to determine their interest in interviewing with me concerning this topic. All audiotapes and written materials will remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants and schools. In addition, participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form as required by East Tennessee State University.

If you would be willing for me to contact principals in your district, please sign the enclosed permission form and return it to me in the enclosed stamped, self-addressed envelope. If I can answer any questions or provide any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. I very much appreciate your cooperation in this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Linda B. Stroud
Doctoral Student
East Tennessee State University

PERMISSION TO CONTACT RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Date: _____

I, _____, Director of _____ Schools, give permission for Linda Stroud, a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University, to contact middle level principals in my district to ask their interest in participating in a research study concerning grouping practices of middle level students.

Signature: _____

APPENDIX B

East Tennessee State University

Informed Consent

East Tennessee State University

INFORMED CONSENT

Principal Investigator: Linda B. Stroud

Page 1 of 2

Title of Project: To Group or Not to Group: A Qualitative Study of Middle Level Principal's Decision Making Processes Concerning Ability Level Grouping

This Informed Consent will explain about a research project in which I would appreciate your participation. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to be a volunteer. By no means is there any pressure for you to participate in this research.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research study is to examine the processes that middle level principals use when making decisions concerning the use or non-use of ability level grouping of students in their schools. The study will attempt to identify beliefs held by principals that lead to decisions to implement or not implement grouping of students for instruction, as well as identify other sources that influence the decision making process.

DURATION

The participants will be asked to participate in an audio-taped interview with the researcher that should last approximately 30 minutes, and no longer than one hour.

PROCEDURES

The participants will be asked to participate in an audio-taped interview with the researcher. The researcher will use an open-ended interviewing style and will utilize a list of interview guide questions to conduct the interview. The interviews will take place at the schools where the principals are employed and appointments will be set at time that is convenient for the participant. An introductory letter and permission to contact participants form will be sent to the Director of Schools in each school district before the participants are contacted.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

No risks or discomfort should be associated with this research, nor is there any direct benefit or compensation to the volunteer participants.

BENEFITS

Any potential benefit to the participant would arise from that individual's reflection upon the interview questions and his or her personal reaction to those items. The benefits of the study would be a better understanding of how middle level principals make decisions as to whether to implement the practice of ability level grouping of students for instructional purposes.

November 13, 2001

initial_____

Principal Investigator: Linda B. Stroud

Page 2 of 2

Title of Project: To Group or Not to Group: A Qualitative Study of Middle Level Principals' Decision Making Processes Concerning Ability Level Grouping

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

If you have any question, problems, or research-related medical problems at any time, you may call Linda Stroud at (423) XXX-XXXX or Dr. Russell Mays, at (423) XXX-XXXX. You may also call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at (423) XXX-XXXX for any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that my study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in a locked file in the office of the researcher for at least 10 years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the East Tennessee State University/V.A. Medical Center Institutional Review Board, the Food and Drug Administration, and the ETSU Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis have access to the study records. My records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

COMPENSATION FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) will pay the cost of emergency first aid for any injury which may happen as a result of your being in this study. They will not pay for any other medical treatment. Claims against ETSU or any of its agents or employees may be submitted to the Tennessee Claims Commission. These claims will be settled to the extent allowable as provided under TCA Section 9-8-307. For more information about claims call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board of ETSU at (423) 439-6134.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

The nature, demands, risks, and benefits of the project have been explained to me as well as are known and available. I understand what my participation involves. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to ask questions and withdraw from the project at any time, without penalty. I have read, or have had read to me, and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A signed copy has been given to me. Your study record will be maintained in strictest confidence according to current legal requirements and will not be revealed unless required by law or as noted above.

Signature of Volunteer: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

November 13, 2001

initial _____

APPENDIX C

Key Informant Interview Guide

- 1) How are students assigned or scheduled for classes?
- 2) What criteria are used to place students in classes? (i.e. test data, placement tests, teacher recommendations)
- 3) Who does the scheduling of students into classes? (computer system, principal, guidance counselor)
- 4) Are the number of classes scheduled for a particular subject and level of instruction determined by the number of students placed in that group?
- 5) Can student placement in classes change? How often can student placements change? (grading periods). Who decides if a child needs to move to another placement?
- 6) How are teachers assigned to teach particular classes?
- 7) Do teacher assignments to particular levels of instruction change? How often?
- 8) How do your teachers feel about teaching in heterogeneous vs. homogeneously grouped classes?
- 9) Do parents influence the assignment of students to particular groups?
- 10) Does your school system have a School Board policy concerning the grouping of students for instruction?
- 11) Does your school have pullout instruction for particular groups of students? (Special education resource classes, gifted instruction, Title I)
- 12) Does your school use an inclusionary model for special education instruction in the regular classroom?
- 13) Does your school offer Algebra I for high school credit? How does that affect scheduling and grouping?
- 14) What is the student/teacher ratio at your school?
- 15) Are your teachers arranged instructionally by teams? How often do the teams meet?
- 16) What kinds of staff development has your school been involved in within the past few years? Are S.D. days built into the system calendar? Have teachers been involved in training in the use of cooperative learning groups?
- 17) What is your personal philosophy concerning heterogeneous vs. homogeneous grouping of students in your school? How did you arrive at this philosophy? How do your personal feelings about grouping affect the decisions you make about instructional planning for your school?

VITA

LINDA B. STROUD

Education: University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee;
Speech/Language Pathology, B.S., 1982.
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;
Comprehensive Special Education, M. Ed., 1995.
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, Ed. D., 2002.

Professional

Experience: Speech/Language Pathologist, Greeneville City Schools, Greeneville, Tennessee,
1982-1983
Child Abuse Caseworker, Department of Human Services, Greeneville, Tennessee,
1983-1986
Alternative Learning Program Teacher, Greeneville City Schools, Greeneville,
Tennessee, 1986-1993.
Director, Family Resource Center, Greeneville City Schools, Greeneville, Tennessee,
1993-1995.
Assistant Principal, Greeneville Middle School, Greeneville, Tennessee, 1995-1999.
Principal, Greeneville Middle School, Greeneville, Tennessee, 1999-2002.