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IMPLEMENTATION OF FLEXIBLE GROUPING IN LANGUAGE ARTS  
AS A FORM OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

By  
Beth A. Connor

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree  
of  
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at  
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Approved by

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## ABSTRACT

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IMPLEMENTATION OF FLEXIBLE GROUPING IN LANGUAGE ARTS  
AS A FORM OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

2004/05

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Master of Arts in School Administration

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the effectiveness of one model of flexible grouping on second grade students' progress in reading as measured by their use of decoding and comprehension skills. This classroom-based action research used a pretest and posttest design to determine students' reading levels. In addition to the quantitative results obtained from the pretests and posttests, teacher observation of students' use of reading strategies provided the basis for a qualitative analysis on the effectiveness of using leveled reading materials in a flexible grouping format. Following several months of instruction using one model of flexible grouping that included whole class instruction, small group lessons, and independent self-selected leveled reading material, the five second grade students in this study all demonstrated modest but measurable growth in the acquisition of reading skills.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This study could not have been realized without the support and encouragement of the staff and administration of the Hess School. Mrs. Tammy Welsey provided materials utilized in the classroom, and Mrs. Melanie Cox and Mr. David Evangelist shared their knowledge about the process and format for educational research. To Mrs. Lisa Dagit I owe many thanks for her patient counsel and the time she spent discussing this and the other projects I undertook during this past year.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Focus

Adapting instruction to the needs of the learners rather than approaching curriculum with a one-size-fits-all attitude is in line with developmentally appropriate practices in education. Indeed, subscribing to such an individualized approach to teaching reflects a broader philosophical outlook.

Differentiating instruction is not an instructional strategy or a teaching model. It's a way of thinking about teaching and learning that advocated beginning where individuals are rather than with a prescribed plan of action, which ignores student readiness, interest, and learning profile. It is a way of thinking that challenges how educators typically envision assessment, teaching, learning, classroom roles, use of time, and curriculum (Tomlinson, 1999).

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of flexible grouping on second grade students' ability to decode and comprehend reading material using a classroom-based action research design. This project was relevant because it has the potential to inform educators about the feasibility and effectiveness of employing flexible grouping as a form of differentiated instruction. The elementary school in this study has moved toward a more inclusive model of instruction, grouping students more heterogeneously and pulling fewer students out for specialized lessons. Teachers have had to adapt instructional practices to meet the increasingly diverse needs of their students. Although the school district has provided

information and workshops to teachers about differentiated instruction, teachers remain responsible for finding a way to best implement it in their classrooms. This study looked at flexible grouping formats for language arts instruction as a way to support developing readers' acquisition of reading skills.

### Definitions

Among many practices for differentiating instruction is the concept of flexible grouping whereby students are grouped based on similar needs that will vary with the concept and activity in which students are engaged. Teachers provide students with opportunities to interact with developmentally appropriate materials for the purpose of improving student achievement. The idea that students continually move in and out of groups depending upon their needs places extraordinary demands upon teachers to accurately diagnose the needs and provide appropriate instruction.

### Significance

For many years elementary reading instruction has been characterized by grouping children based upon student ability (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991; Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992; Gamoran, 1992; Moody, Schumm, Fischer, & Jean-Francois, 1999; Opitz, 1999). According to Gamoran, students' ability has not really been the criterion. Students have typically been divided "according to measured or perceived performance in school" (Gamoran, 1992, p.12). He cites Oakes when she asserts that "Because school performance is related to social inequality outside the school, such divisions contribute to the separation of students from different racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds" (Oakes as cited in Gamoran, 1992, p. 12).



The issue of inequality as it relates to ability grouping is of special concern to UCLA professor Jeannie Oakes because the "groups are a very public part of the school's culture that reflects judgments that adults have that "schools really can make children smart" (Oakes as cited in O'Neil, p. 20).

With the popularity of the whole language movement in the 1980s and 1990s, ability grouping lost some ground to whole class instruction. Many teachers mistakenly believed that whole language meant whole class. Researchers who analyzed seven basal literature series published in the mid-1990s to determine what recommendations publishers gave for grouping practices found that "suggestions for grouping appeared to be the exception, while suggestions for whole class activities appeared to be the norm" (Moody et al., 1999, p. 322). When grouping was suggested, the formats most recommended in decreasing order of frequency were student-led small groups, dyads, individual, and teacher-led small groups. Most of the basals recommended using cooperative or collaborative activities but did not include instructions to help the teacher with the logistics of implementing a particular type of grouping. Findings from the Moody et al. study reveal that "teachers often think of groups and seating arrangements as one in the same" (p.322). These researchers conclude that since teachers generally have not had training and experience in organizing true grouping practices in the classroom, basals could be more effective if they were to give concrete directions for grouping practices since reliance on their use is so widespread.

Neither approach — ability grouping nor whole class instruction — has withstood the scrutiny of research on effective teaching practices when one approach

has been used to the exclusion of the other. Ability grouping has come under criticism because there is little evidence that it results in higher achievement than heterogeneous grouping and because it has especially negative effects on students assigned to the low ability group who typically perform worse than students assigned to the middle and high ability groups (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991; Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1991; Elbaum, Schumm, & Vaughn, 1997; Flood et al., 1992; Gamoran, 1992; Lou, Abrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers, & d'Apollonia, 1996; Wheelock, 1992; Wiggins, 1994).

A meta-analysis of small-group instruction by Lou et al. (1996) found that the “effects of group ability composition were different for students of different relative ability. While low-ability students learned significantly more in heterogeneous ability groups than in homogeneous ability groups . . . , medium-ability students benefited significantly more in homogeneous ability groups than in heterogeneous ability groups. . . for high-ability students, group ability composition made no significant difference.” They explain that low-ability students benefit from explanations given by high-ability students who, in turn, benefit because they deepen their understanding as a result of the elaborated explanations they give. Medium-ability students are left out in a heterogeneous group because they neither give nor receive explanations. Medium-ability students, they contend, share more in classroom dialogue when they are grouped together.

Flood et al. (1992) cite other negative effects of ability grouping on low-group children: they read fewer total words; they read more words out loud, they do more workbook skill pages; they do much less silent reading; they are asked fewer

higher order thinking questions; they are exposed to more teacher talk; they spend more time decoding than making meaning; and they read fewer authentic works of literature. In general, less is expected of them, and they know it. It becomes a case of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Other researchers have found that not only is the quality of instruction poorer than in the higher groups, but also the general learning environment in low groups is characterized by more frequent interruptions for off-task behavior (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Gamoran, 1992).

Whole-class instruction can be effective in many situations when used properly. "A classroom of students needs to share experiences that provide common language and an opportunity to construct meaning together" (Berghoff & Egawa, 1991, p. 539). As such, whole class instruction is effective for developing a community of learners. However, some of the arguments for whole-class instruction can also be given as reasons to limit its use. Whole-class instruction often means that the teacher controls and directs the flow of classroom talk, and students generally use the same materials and complete the same activities. There is an implied emphasis on uniformity rather than diversity for both learning outcomes and teaching methods and materials. This places students in a competitive situation for rewards such as grades rather than in a cooperative atmosphere that relies on the interdependence inherent in social learning (Lou et al., 1996).

If whole-group instruction is effective only some of the time and ability grouping is rarely appropriate, what is a school district to do? The school district in this study decided to require teachers to consider the principles of differentiated instruction when they plan lessons.

## Setting

This study took place at the George L. Hess Educational Complex, a public elementary school in the Township of Hamilton, Atlantic County, New Jersey. Atlantic County is located in southern New Jersey and covers approximately 560 square miles of which Hamilton Township comprises 115 square miles. It is one of the largest townships in New Jersey and boasts the fourth largest population of the 23 municipalities that make up Atlantic County.

The Township of Hamilton was organized from parts of Egg Harbor and Weymouth Townships in 1813 but remained a part of Gloucester County until 1837 when Atlantic County was formed. The town of Mays Landing, located near the Great Egg Harbor River, was named the county seat because of its central role in the economic and industrial life of the area. The original courthouse is still in use today. Because the Great Egg Harbor River was navigable to large ships during the Revolutionary War, local shipyards received “military supplies and cargo from captured British ships” (Township of Hamilton Historical Society, 2001). Its geographic location gave rise to a thriving shipping industry.

The Industrial Revolution introduced a railroad line that initially ran from Mays Landing to Egg Harbor City. As the rail line expanded, it brought people and businesses to the area. Gradually the population expanded and began to settle in the outlying areas of the township.

Today, Hamilton Township is governed by a committee whose five members are elected at large and serve for three year staggered terms. The committee elects the

mayor who serves for a one year term. A township administrator is responsible for managing the fiscal operations of the government and representing the township at county, state, and federal levels.

According to the 2000 census, the population of Hamilton Township is 20,499 of whom 71.4% are Caucasians, 19.3% African Americans, 7.9% Hispanic, 3.3% Asian, 0.3% Native American, and 3.3% some other race. The total adds to more than 100 percent because people can report more than one race. The median age of the population is 34.5 years. Of those 25 years and older, 80.4% have at least a high school diploma or equivalency while 19.3% hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

The median family income was \$54,899 with per capita income at \$21,309. Of those sixteen years of age and older, 66.4% were in the labor force. Among the civilian labor force, 30% were in management, professional, and related occupations; 26.2% were in service occupations; 25.7% were in sales and office occupations; 0.3% engaged in farming, fishing, and forestry work; 9.3% held positions in construction, extraction, and maintenance fields; and 8.5% were engaged in production and transportation.

The 2000 census indicated that there were 227 families (4.5%) living below the poverty level. Of these families, 214 of them included children under 18 years of age. Of the 1,280 individuals living in poverty, 498 of them were children under the age of eighteen.

Seventy percent of the housing inventory was constructed between 1960 and 1994 with 50% of that being built in the seventies and the eighties. Approximately 74% of the housing units were owner-occupied and the other 26% were renter-

occupied. The median price of owner-occupied housing units was \$150,700.

Approximately 85% of households moved into their homes since 1980 with almost 70% having moved into their homes since 1990. The lure of jobs from the growing casino industry in nearby Atlantic City has spurred this need for housing.

While 86% of the residents spoke English only, 14% of the population spoke another language. The most frequently spoken language other than English was Spanish which 7.4% of the residents indicated as their native tongue.

According to the New Jersey School Report Card (2002-2003):

The Hamilton Township School District is a Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 8 district. It serves over 3,000 students each and every school day. The district's students are housed in four buildings, the Joseph C. Shaner School houses Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 1, the George L. Hess School houses grades 2 to 6, the William Davies Middle School houses grades 7 & 8 and the Harold S. Duberson School houses an Alternative Education Middle School Program. The district is identified as an "Early Childhood" district, and in September 2001, an Early Childhood Program was begun to offer a half-day preschool and full day kindergarten for all students. Hamilton Township is a growing community with approximately 100 new students enrolled each year (Librera, 2003).

The average district per pupil expenditure for the year 2002-2003 was \$8,913, lower than the state average of \$9,859. The percent of total revenues from various sources included: 37% from local sources; 57% from the state; 4% from the federal government; and 2% from other sources. Since 1996, the community has supported the school budget in all but one year.

The median salary of the district's teachers was \$38,345 with an average of 8 years experience and of the district's administrators \$70,925 with an average of 14 years of experience. These figures indicate that the district has a younger and less experienced staff than the state medians for these areas. Among faculty and

administrative personnel, 80.7% possessed a bachelor's degree and 19.3% possessed a master's degree.

The Hess School is one of the largest elementary schools in New Jersey with approximately 1600 students in grades 2-6. It was recognized by the United States Department of Education as a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence in 1998-1999 and a New Jersey State Department of Education STAR School.

For the 2002-2003 school year, the student/faculty ratio was 10.9:1 and the student administrator ratio was 528:1. Student attendance rate was 95.2% with a student mobility rate of 8.2% which was a decline from 12.8% the previous year. The first language spoken at home in order of frequency was as follows: English 85.4%; Spanish 10.5%; Cantonese 0.6%; Pilipino 0.6%; Vietnamese 0.5%; Lao 0.5%; Gujarati 0.3%; others 1.6%. The percentage of students with limited English proficiency was 1.7%. The district maintains both an English as a Second Language Program for any student with limited English proficiency and a bilingual program for Spanish-speaking students.

Classified special education students numbered 57, and the percentage of students with disabilities that qualified for Individualized Education Programs (IEP) regardless of placement was 14.7%

The focus of this study centered on language arts instruction in second grade. There were 13 second grade classrooms grouped heterogeneously for language arts instruction. Ten of these classrooms had one teacher and three of the classrooms had two teachers who worked together to provide instruction to special education students and students who qualified for Title 1 services through Federal funds. Although the

two Title 1 classrooms served students who experienced various difficulties in learning to read, they nevertheless had students representing various reading levels and were considered heterogeneously grouped. In addition, there were approximately 15-20 Title 1 students identified as needing even more support than that which was provided in either of the two Title 1 classrooms that had two teachers. Even though these students were identified as below level readers, they demonstrated a range of reading levels and were considered heterogeneous for reading ability. These students were divided into two small groups and left their regular classroom to receive their entire language arts instruction from one of two teachers. It was one of these groups that were the subjects of this study.

#### Limitations

Despite the potential feedback that data from this study could provide administrators, several limitations and assumptions need to be kept in mind. Because this study was limited to a small group of at-risk second grade students and because of confounding variables that could not be controlled, such as socio-economic status, physical, social, and emotional health, and degree of family support, it would be difficult to generalize the findings presented here. Rather, this study provided a qualitative description of the way in which one group of students responded to the practice of flexible grouping in language arts. One can, however, look at the findings and posit some implications for future practice.

#### Relationship to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC)

Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standard 2 relates directly and most appropriately to this study. Standard 2 states “A school



administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.”

The specific knowledge content that is relevant relates to the principles of effective instruction. Identifying materials and learning activities that will match the needs of each individual student requires an understanding of child psychology and growth and development, considerable subject area knowledge, and pedagogical skills in order to scaffold instruction so that all students are supported in their acquisition of increasingly complex skills.

The idea of differentiated instruction requires that an administrator possess a disposition to recognize the value of multiple ways of learning. Not only do students learn through different modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), they also demonstrate multiple types of intelligence. Instructional practices need to incorporate activities and materials that address these diverse learning styles.

Finally, an administrator must ensure that all educational programs are designed to meet the multiple needs of a diverse student body, are implemented in ways that promote student learning, and are continually evaluated to reflect best educational practices.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

Teachers need to orchestrate a successful combination of variables based on the competencies and needs of their students to successfully implement flexible grouping. As the term flexible suggests, the variables should change as the needs of the students demand. Flood et al., (1992, p. 610) suggest the following flexible grouping variables:

#### Possible bases for grouping learners

- Skills development
- Interest
- Work habits
- Prior knowledge (content)
- Prior knowledge (Strategies)
- Task/activity
- Social
- Random
- Students' choice

#### Possible formats for groups

##### Composition:

- Individuals
- Dyads
- Small groups (3-4)
- Larger groups (7-10)
- Half-class
- Whole group

##### Leadership:

- Teacher-led
- Student-led
- Cooperative

#### Possible materials for groups

- Same material for all groups
- Different levels of material with similar theme
- Different themes within a topic
- Different topics

Interestingly enough, children surveyed in one study (Elbaum et al., 1997) seemed to like the idea of grouping in different ways for reading instruction.

"Students at all levels of reading ability liked mixed-ability groups and mixed-ability pairs most, followed by whole-class instruction. Same-ability groups and working alone were the least liked grouping formats" (Elbaum et al., p.475).

This study pointed out that students are very perceptive about their own learning. They felt that better readers were very good at helping struggling readers and that this grouping benefited everyone. However, students acknowledged that those who can hardly read at all need more help than other students can provide. Clearly, students' perceptions about the classroom organization and their places in it are factors that influence their motivation and performance.

MacGillivray and Hawes (1994) found that children assume different types of roles when they read together based largely on "a sense of their own competence and that of their partners" (p. 213). The four types of roles documented include those of coworkers (helping each other), fellow artists (performing for each other), teacher/student (using echo techniques), and boss/employee (one student controlling the action). The implications of these roles are that they reflect children's understanding of the reading process and can thereby inform the perceptive teacher's instruction. Thus, in using any grouping format, teachers need a "clear understanding of the importance of group interaction processes to student outcomes" (Battistich, Solomon, & Delucchi, 1993, p. 28). In other words, the quality of the group interaction is as important as just being in a small group. Because choosing the most effective format for grouping can be the most problematic variable for many teachers, it seems appropriate to look at the particular benefits and rationale for several grouping patterns.

Cooper (2000) suggests a framework for balanced literacy instruction which is an organizational pattern using a core book with flexible groups. Although it begins with whole class instruction, students interact with the text in a variety of ways. This framework is outlined below:

*Core Book with Flexible Groups*

- Activate prior knowledge and develop background (10-15 minutes) — Some students with very limited prior knowledge may need support in advance of this whole class activity so that they may participate more fully.

- Students read the same text but in different modes ( 15-30 minutes)

Teacher-supported reading — read aloud, shared, guided

Cooperative reading — partners or small groups

Independent reading — alone

- Personal response ( 5-10 minutes) — Every student responds individually in writing.

- Discussion (5-10 minutes) — Students participate in literature discussion circles followed by whole class discussion.

- Support and extension activities (5-10 minutes)— Teachers conduct mini-lessons/activities, cooperative activities, or independent activities.

Cooper suggests keeping the pacing appropriately fast to keep students engaged. The time frames given are guidelines that should be adjusted depending upon student strengths and needs as well as grade level. Student choice, which is a potent motivator, is built into this framework. The benefits of the core book with flexible group model include:

1. It reduces the stigma inherent in ability grouping because everyone reads the same book.
2. It incorporates the teaching of skills and strategies.
3. All students engage in discussion which enhances the construction of meaning.
4. The framework is flexible providing student and teacher choices and does not depend on the sequential completion of activities (Cooper, 2000).

A slightly different version of the core book framework is the *developmentally appropriate framework* (Cooper, 2000). While the basic structure of the plan follows that of the core book model, the difference is that students choose a book they want to read from a selection of titles made by the teacher. These books represent several reading levels as determined by the teacher based on the particular needs of the class. One book is designated as the teacher book that would be read with teacher support. The teacher introduces each book with a book talk or by reading a short passage designed to create interest. After children choose their books, the plan follows that of the core book model. The major benefit of this model is that it allows teachers to provide support while children are reading books at their instructional level.

Reutzel and Cooter (1991) offer an adaptation of the Reading Workshop that can be effectively used in second through sixth grades. This model is similar to the core books or developmental frameworks in that it provides for self-selected reading

and response as well as group discussion. It can be adapted for use with a basal anthology or trade books. Its major components include:

*Reading Workshop*

- Teacher sharing time (5-10 minutes) — Teacher introduces a new book or a theme to create interest.
- Mini-lesson (5-10 minutes) — This provides whole group instruction for pre-reading activities or for developing skills and strategies.
- State of the class conferences (5 minutes) — Students let teacher know which activities they will complete.
- Self-selected reading and response (40 minutes) — This is divided into silent reading of a self-selected book with a personal written response, participation in a literature response group, and individual conferences with the teacher.
- Whole group sharing (5-10 minutes) — The class convenes as a whole to share books and projects.

The rationale for using a Reading Workshop approach is that it gives children "opportunities to make choices about how they will spend their reading time," and it encourages "reading as a primary activity integrated with other language modes, i.e., writing, speaking, and listening" (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991, p. 549).

Early Intervention in Reading (EIR) is a successful in-class small group program that classroom teachers can use for low-achieving first grade students (Taylor, Short, Frye, & Shearer, 1992). It is similar to Reading Recovery in intention

and method except that it is neither an individual tutorial nor a pull-out program. The materials used include 50 picture books and summaries of these books on charts and in booklets. The children spend three days on each book and story summary.

- Day 1 — Teacher reads the original story and the summary, develops phonemic awareness, models the use of cueing systems, teaches segmentation and blending, and models the use of Elkonin boxes.
- Days 2 and 3 — Children re-read the story summaries and write a sentence about the story. They also illustrate their summaries and re-read them to a teacher's aide.
- After day 3 — Children take a copy of their story summary home to read to parents or guardians who are requested to sign the last page of the summary.
- Transition to independent reading — The final 14 stories are read independently by the children with teacher support. No summaries are used. The children re-read the stories several times during the 3-day cycle until they can read them fluently.

This program can "significantly improve the reading of many low-achieving first-grade students by providing quality, supplemental early intervention in their classrooms" (Taylor et al., 1992, p. 597). Many school districts cannot afford the expense of a Reading Recovery program, and Early Intervention in Reading provides a successful, cost-effective alternative. Classroom teachers can implement the program in the classroom using a flexible grouping format.

As an alternative to ability grouping, Cunningham, Hall, and Defee (1991) developed a program for use in a heterogeneously grouped classroom incorporating the four major approaches to early reading instruction — the basal, phonics, literature, and writing. This model has come to be called the Four Blocks.

### *Four Blocks*

- *Writing block* — This begins with a 5-minute mini-lesson during which the teacher thinks aloud and models writing and invented spelling. Students then decide what they want to write. With teacher assistance, they eventually revise and publish.
- *Basal block* — This includes guided reading lessons using a basal series. Instruction begins with a whole-class format for pre-reading activities, then moves to partner reading, and back to whole-class for discussion.
- *Literature block* — This includes teacher read-alouds and self-selected reading that can be done alone, with a partner, or in a small group.
- *Phonics block* — The authors call this *working with words*. It includes the weekly addition of five new words to a word wall with practice reading and writing them. Another component is *making words*. Children use a given set of letters to make many different words which are then sorted by initial or final consonants, rhyme, and so on. *Rounding up the rhymes* (Cunningham et al., 1998) follows a teacher read-aloud and encourages children to listen for the rhyming words which are then listed according to spelling patterns. *Guess*



*the covered word* is an activity that helps children "practice the important strategy of cross-checking meaning with letter-sound information "

(Cunningham et al., 1998).

•Adjustments — A "15-minute, variable-membership, small group" was created to address the needs of several struggling readers (Cunningham et al., 1991).

Data from the original school and across the following six years indicate that this format has been successful for children of diverse ability. Cunningham et al. (1991) believe that this format worked as well for the highest achievers as it did for the lowest.

At the end of first grade, 58-64% of the children read above grade level (third grade or above); 22-28% read on grade level; 10-17% read below grade level (preprimer or primer). On average, one child each year is unable to meet the instructional level criteria on the preprimer passage. At the end of second grade, the number at grade level is 14-25%; the number above grade level (fourth grade level or above) increases to 68-76%; the number reading below grade level drops to 2-9%, half what it was in first grade. . . . Of the 10-15% of children who do not read at grade level at the end of first grade, half are reading on or, in some cases, above grade level at the end of second grade. (p. 659-660)

The success of this program is attributed to the fact that children spend half their time in self-selected reading on their level and writing activities "in which there is no limit to the level at which they can read and write" (Cunningham et al., 1998, p. 663).

## Conceptual Framework

The literature reviewed above concludes that the traditional practice of permanently grouping students by reading ability does little to address their individual instructional needs and that flexible grouping is preferable. Flexible grouping is based on the idea that learning occurs in a social setting and that instruction should be aligned with student needs and the appropriate group dynamics. Berghoff and Egawa (1991) remind us that just as important as the grouping possibilities is the philosophy supporting this practice.

Having three reading groups makes sense only if a teacher believes in the assumptions underlying ability grouping: that all learning should progress in a linear manner, that a teacher has the sole responsibility for supporting each student in the class, and that the stigma attached to being grouped is negligible. . . . We hold the beliefs that learners need to have choices that allow them to make connections and develop their own courses for learning, that learners in a community should support one another, and that every student brings a unique and equally valuable contribution to the dynamics of the learning community. (p. 537)

Coupled with the social aspect of learning should be the belief that not only can all children learn, but also that they should have "equal access to valued knowledge" (Wheelock, 1992, p. 6). Ability grouping has been shown to be discriminatory toward those in the lowest group (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Cunningham et al., 1998; Flood et al., 1992; Gamoran, 1992; Wheelock, 1992). Duffy-Hester (1999) asserts that "our goal as reading educators must be to design and implement reading programs flexible and diverse enough to accelerate the reading growth of all children" (p. 491). In the final analysis educators need to "act on the belief that persistent effort

rather than inborn ability is the precursor to success in life and the basis for life-long learning" (Wheelock, 1992, p. 8).

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of flexible grouping on second grade students' abilities to decode and comprehend reading material using a classroom-based action research design. Information gleaned from this study could be beneficial when a school district decides to employ new instructional approaches. The findings have the potential to inform educators, parents, and students about the benefits of flexible grouping and how to effectively implement it. It can provide the feedback necessary to better assist administrators in helping teachers meet students' individual literacy needs. The following study question helped to guide this research: To what extent will incorporating a model of flexible grouping in language arts improve student performance in reading?

## Chapter 3

### The Design of the Study

#### Description of the Research Design

This research employed a qualitative action research design intended to study the phenomenon of flexible grouping in one second grade language arts classroom. The acquisition of reading skills is a combination of many discrete skills. The act of reading is the orchestration of those skills in an attempt to construct knowledge. Since the materials used in reading instruction must match students' instructional levels, a flexible grouping format provided the best approach to delivering appropriate instruction.

The district-approved reading series was a Houghton Mifflin reading anthology entitled *A Legacy of Literacy* which is used by all students at the Hess School. The students in this study received instruction using this anthology as well as a series of leveled readers that were components of the basic anthology. The purpose of the leveled readers was to provide students reading below grade level with books written at their instructional level but related to the anthology stories in terms of theme, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. The leveled readers were very short stories (8-12 pages) with minimal text that was heavily supported by pictures. Although the leveled readers were valuable additions to the program for these struggling readers, they did not provide enough authentic reading practice because they were so short.

For this reason, exposure to other leveled text material was provided by organizing instruction around the Four Blocks model discussed previously. Since this model included guided reading lessons using a basal reading series, it addressed the curriculum requirement to use guided reading with the grade level anthology.

Instruction was organized as follows in the classroom under study:

- Phonics – This included spelling that was taken from the spelling component of the anthology, creation of a word wall, and making words which was an activity using a given set of letters to make many different words.
- Anthology – This was a whole class activity using the anthology and the leveled readers to build background knowledge and develop comprehension strategies.
- Writing – This included interactive writing, an activity where the teacher modeled writing but included students' suggestions and invented spelling.
- Literature – This segment afforded students the opportunity to read self-selected books at their instructional level.
- Flex Grouping – This was a flexible group whose membership varied and was created to address the changing needs of the students. It met several times a week for 10 minutes at a time.

The goal was to arrive at an understanding of the way in which this model of flexible grouping may have helped students improve both their ability to decode new words and their comprehension. However, causal relationships could not be ascertained because extraneous variables were not isolated and a control group was

not employed. This study resulted in a qualitative analysis of the use of flexible grouping in language arts.

### Research Instruments

Students' initial reading level was determined by individually administering Houghton Mifflin's *Leveled Reading Passages* (Cooper & Pikulski, 2001). The reading passages represented developmentally sequenced stories that provided information about students' decoding skills, use of reading strategies, knowledge of vocabulary, reading rate, reading fluency, and reading comprehension skills.

Students' reading levels were again assessed at the end of the study. The *Leveled Reading Passages* contained different passages for each reading level. Therefore, it was possible to use different passages on the pretest and posttest and reduce the possibility of the threat to validity resulting from the effect of taking the pretest.

Houghton Mifflin field tests validated the reading passages for decodability, reading levels, developmental sequence, and text difficulty with 1200 students in the United States.

The pretest and posttest instruments provided a frame of reference for making a judgment about each student's achievement in reading. It was possible to obtain valid and reliable performance indicators for oral reading accuracy, oral reading rate, and comprehension because of the extensive field-testing of these instruments.

However, a comprehensive evaluation of reading performance depends on a holistic assessment of a student's facility with decoding skills, reading fluency, and the use of reading strategies as well. This type of evaluation depends heavily on the evaluator's observation and judgment and is, therefore, subject to possible bias.

Consequently, the quantitative measures provided by the *Leveled Reading Passages* helped to support the classroom observations upon which this qualitative study rests.

#### Sample and Sampling Technique

Participants in this study initially included 7 second grade students who had been identified by their first grade teachers and a district screening test as requiring extra help to succeed in reading. As a result, these students received language arts instruction in a program entitled Reading Equals Academic Development (READ) which is supported by Title 1 funding. The students in the READ program required the most support of all the Title 1 students in second grade. Consequently, they left their regular classroom to receive their entire language arts instruction by another teacher in a small group setting. These students were selected for this study because they formed an intact classroom for the purposes of implementing a flexible grouping practice in language arts.

#### Data Collection Approach

All students took a pretest to determine their reading levels as identified by their ability to decode and comprehend unfamiliar text material. Knowing the students' individual reading levels allowed the teacher to select appropriate instructional reading materials for each student. Herein lay the element of flexibility in the grouping arrangements in the classroom. Some of the time students were engaged in reading from the same text as required by the district curriculum. However, a significant amount of instructional time was spent with students reading and responding individually to self-selected text appropriate for their reading level.

After exposure to this type of instruction, all students took a posttest to again identify their reading level as determined by their ability to decode and comprehend unfamiliar text.

In addition to the results provided from the pretest and posttest, the teacher observed differences in students' reading behaviors indicative of any changes in their application of reading skills and attitudes toward reading.

#### Data Analysis

Pretest and posttest reading levels were compared for each student to determine the extent of reading achievement over the course of this study. Although such a comparison provided a valuable quantitative measure, it nevertheless painted a somewhat limited picture of the complex act of reading. Therefore, teacher observations of students' reading behaviors formed the basis for the holistic assessment of student growth contained herein.



## Chapter 4

### Presentation of Findings

The study began with 7 second grade students all of whom were individually tested to determine each student's reading level using Houghton Mifflin's *Leveled Reading Passages*. Of the original 7 students, 5 remained in the class to complete the study while 2 moved out of the district before the study was completed. Therefore, the findings presented in this study reflect data for the 5 students who completed the study. The pretest and posttest measured students' reading ability in four areas: oral reading accuracy, comprehension, reading rate and fluency. Oral reading accuracy scores indicated the percentage of words a student read correctly. Comprehension was assessed by asking students to retell the story in their own words and by asking four comprehension questions about the story. The reading rate measured the time it took the student to read the story orally. Fluency assessed the attention a student gave to phrasing, expression, and meaning.

Tester judgment was required to score fluency and comprehension, and the following rubrics, included with the Houghton Mifflin *Leveled Reading Passages* (Cooper & Pikulski, 2001, p. 11), were used:

#### *Fluency Scoring Rubric*

4 = Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrases. Although the student may make some errors or repetitions, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Most of the story is read with expressive interpretation, guided by meaning and punctuation.

3 = Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrases, although there are some word-by-word slow downs. However, the majority of phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the author's meaning. Some expressive interpretation is evident.

2 = Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- and four-word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to meaning. Little expressive interpretation is evident.

1 = Reads primarily word-by-word. Two- or three-word phrases may occur occasionally, but these are infrequent and/or they do not preserve meaning. No expression is evident.

#### *Retelling Scoring Rubric*

4 = Includes the main idea or problem, all significant events or information, many supporting details; retelling is organized in proper sequence and is coherent.

3 = Includes the main idea or problem, most significant events, some details; may miss the resolution; may include some minor misinformation; retelling is generally organized and sequenced.

2 = Has some information from the passage but misses the main idea or problem; may have a few key events, information, or details but not integrated into the larger story; little organization or sequence.

1 = Little or no content is included in the retelling; may include some points from the passage, mostly details, but misses the main idea or problem and

significant ideas; retelling is unfocused, sketchy; misinformation or little information.

*Rubric for Comprehension Questions*

2 points = complete answer

1 point = partially correct answer (either not detailed enough or answering only one part of the question)

0 points = incorrect or no answer.

The Houghton Mifflin *Teachers' Manual for the Leveled Reading Passages* provided benchmarks for determining students' instructional reading level. Students who scored within the benchmarks for oral reading accuracy and comprehension were considered to be at their instructional level. Scores for reading rate and fluency needed to be interpreted in light of overall reading performance since they can be affected by the testing situation itself as well as by the type and density of text. The reading passage levels appropriate for this study corresponded to the following traditional grade levels:

Reading Level Passages

Grade	Level
Kindergarten/beginning grade 1.....	AB
Early grade 1.....	CD
mid-grade 1.....	EFG
late grade 1.....	HI
early grade 2.....	J
late grade 2 .....	KL

The following criteria, listed in the teacher's manual, describe the three different levels into which the students in this study fell:

#### Reading Passage Level AB

##### *Reading/Decoding Skills Benchmarks*

- initial and final consonants
- short vowels

##### *Text Criteria*

- one line of text per page
- text always appears in consistent place below the art
- stories consist of simple words, building on repeated sentence patterns

#### Reading Passage Level CD

##### *Reading/Decoding Skills Benchmarks*

- initial and final consonants
- double final consonants
- short vowels
- two-letter clusters
- -s,-ed, and -ing
- contractions with 's

##### *Text Criteria*

- one to three lines of text per page
- use of simple dialogue
- stories build on decoding and high-frequency-word recognition skills

#### Reading Passage Level EFG

### *Reading/Decoding Skills Benchmarks*

- digraphs
- clusters
- CVCe and other long vowel patterns
- vowel pairs
- triple-letter clusters
- contractions with 'll

### *Text Criteria*

- more text per page
- multiple paragraphs
- varied sentence structure

The leveled reading passages were administered to all basic skills students at Hess School as part of their reading record. Nevertheless, in the interest of confidentiality, the students in this study have remained anonymous. They are referred to as Student A, Student B, and so on. When they arrived in class in September, they were all clearly emergent readers showing few skills beyond the pre-primer level. Although they demonstrated a limited knowledge of beginning sight words, none of them had developed a repertoire of decoding or comprehension strategies to help them create meaning from the text.

Therefore, the beginning of the school year was devoted to developing phonemic awareness, enjoying read-aloud stories, building up sight word vocabularies, engaging in interactive reading and writing activities, and participating in guided reading instruction with leveled books. The pretest was administered in

November, and the results indicated that all 5 students were at the AB level (kindergarten/beginning grade 1). This meant that the AB leveled reading passage was the highest in which the students' comprehension and oral reading accuracy fell within the benchmarks given for that level. When tested at the next highest level (CD), comprehension and/or oral reading accuracy suffered. All students placed at a higher instructional level on the posttest. However, they exhibited different strengths and weaknesses, and an individual analysis of each student's growth has provided the data included in this study. The findings relevant to each student are given here in narrative form in an attempt to present a more holistic assessment of each student's reading progress and the way in which reading behaviors changed during the course of the study.

Student A was cooperative but unenthusiastic during the pretest. He seemed to want to please the tester, but was not particularly interested in the story he was asked to read. He kept making eye contact as if he were seeking approval. He focused on initial consonants and several times ignored the medial vowel sound in short one-syllable words. Pictures heavily support the text at this level, and he frequently looked at them to aid his reading. Of the 3 errors he made in word identification, two made no sense, and yet he did not attempt to correct them. He read primarily word-by-word, with little expression, and frequently ignored punctuation. His retelling of the story was somewhat out of sequence and did not include any details. He answered the comprehension questions in short phrases with no elaboration.

Since both his fluency and reading rate were below the benchmarks at this level, Student A needed instruction to improve automaticity in word identification.

He also required direct instruction in monitoring his understanding because he made no attempts to self-correct the miscues (errors in oral reading) that did not make sense. To improve instant word recognition he read many short books with repeated sentence patterns and hence was exposed to many sight words numerous times. To help him monitor his understanding so that he could independently correct his own miscues, the teacher modeled different fix-up strategies that a reader could use to make more sense of the text.

On the posttest Student A placed at the CD (early Grade 1) instructional level. He showed more interest and enthusiasm in reading. His retelling of the story was marked by good sequencing of story events and a firm understanding of the main idea although he did miss some of the subtleties in the plot. His reading strategies continued to focus on initial consonant sounds for decoding words. The two miscues he made were with medial short vowel sounds. When confronted with a word he did not know he would make the correct initial sound and then guess at the rest of the word. If it made no sense he would not stop to make a correction but continue to read. The use of context, including picture clues, helped him compensate for his limited decoding ability. However, his sight word reading vocabulary had expanded as evidenced by his improved fluency and reading rate. He paid more attention to punctuation and read phrases in thought units rather than word-by-word.

Student A's performance at the CD level was strong enough to test him at the EFG (mid Grade 1) level. He scored within the benchmarks for oral reading rate, fluency, and comprehension but was substantially below the benchmark for oral reading accuracy. Consequently, this could not be considered an instructional level

for him since accurate word recognition is the foundation of good comprehension. His coping skills for comprehension would be severely tested if instructed at a level beyond his ability to decode accurately. Nevertheless, with continued intensive instruction in word identification skills and self-monitoring strategies, his move into this next level seemed imminent.

Student B completed the pretest in a perfunctory manner showing little enthusiasm. He often put his chin on the page of the book and tilted his head to the side as if he were tired. He turned the pages very slowly as if he could not get the pages to separate. His oral reading accuracy, oral reading rate, and comprehension were within the benchmarks for this level but his fluency was below the benchmark. He read primarily word-by-word and with little expression although he did observe punctuation. He looked for meaning while he read as shown by his self-correction of 3 out of 4 miscues. His retelling of the story demonstrated an understanding of the main idea and proper sequencing of events despite the omission of a few details.

Although his reading rate was within the benchmarks for the AB level, he needed instruction in automatic word recognition of high frequency words. This was accomplished by having him read many predictable books with repeated vocabulary and sentence patterns. Word study activities were planned to help build his reading vocabulary. They built upon the most common phonograms so that he could make analogies with known words. He was encouraged to continue using the strategies he had developed for monitoring his understanding. It is quite possible that his limited fluency resulted from his deliberate attempts to understand what he was reading. For example, he frequently repeated previously read words to help the sentence flow



better. Nevertheless, this resulted in a choppy reading of the story. Ultimately, however, comprehension was his goal and that was a good thing.

On the posttest Student B placed comfortably at the CD (early Grade 1) instructional level. His scores for oral reading accuracy, oral reading rate, fluency, and comprehension were within the benchmarks for this level. He demonstrated more confidence as he read the story. He made only one repetition but continued to read primarily word-by-word with only slightly more expression. He retold the story in correct sequence and identified the main idea. Although he missed some minor details, he still focused his efforts on comprehending the text. He demonstrated competence in reading initial consonants, short vowels, clusters, and suffixes. Out of 6 miscues, he self-corrected 2, and 2 that he did not self-correct were unimportant because they did not change the meaning of the sentence. Therefore, he made 2 mistakes that could have compromised his understanding of the story, but his use of context clues enabled him to comprehend fairly well.

Like Student A, Student B's scores on the CD level were impressive enough to warrant testing him at the EFG (mid Grade 1) level. Similarly, his oral reading accuracy, as well as his oral reading rate, were below the benchmarks and could not justify placing him at this instructional level despite both fluency and comprehension scores within the benchmarks for this level. The pictures enabled him to understand the story despite 13 miscues of which he only self-corrected 2. Of the remaining 11, only 2 made sense in the context of the story. Therefore, he made 9 mistakes that, without picture support, would likely hinder his comprehension. With continued

growth in word identification skills, it could be predicted that his move to the next level also seemed imminent.

Student C approached the pretest with no apparent interest in reading the story, but once he began he seemed to enjoy it. He was somewhat impulsive in his decoding efforts, sometimes focusing on initial consonants and sometimes on final letters to read words. Of his 3 miscues, he self-corrected 2 of them when he realized they made no sense. His reliance on pictures and contextual information enabled him to comprehend the story. When retelling the events he could quickly recall the correct sequence of a series of details. His oral reading rate and fluency scores were below the benchmark for this level. This was demonstrated by the choppiness with which he read the story. His reading was punctuated by pauses for self-corrections and attempts to decode resulting in little expressive interpretation. Nevertheless, he frequently made comments about the story showing that he not only understood what was happening, but also relating the events to personal experiences.

Since Student C's oral reading accuracy and comprehension were within the benchmarks for the AB level, his instruction focused on developing better fluency and improving his reading rate both of which were below the benchmarks for this level. This was accomplished by having him engage in repeated readings of familiar stories. Such a strategy was designed to help him build a broader sight word reading vocabulary and begin to read with more expression. Short books with predictable patterns were chosen so that he would have multiple exposures to many of the most common high frequency words.

On the posttest Student C placed at the CD (early Grade 1) instructional level. His enthusiasm and confidence level were more evident during this test session than on the pretest. His scores for oral reading accuracy, oral reading rate, and comprehension were all within the established benchmarks for this level. Only his score for fluency fell below the benchmark, and that could be attributed to the more difficult vocabulary in this story and his need to make several self-corrections that he did in the interest of making sense of the story. Consequently, his reading was rather stilted, but his goal was comprehension.

Student D did not display any interest in reading the story during the pretest. She would fidget in her seat and occasionally look around the room or ask the tester questions unrelated to the story. As a result, her reading rate and fluency fell below the benchmarks for the AB level, but her oral reading accuracy was above the benchmark. She relied heavily on the pictures to help her decode and read the story word-by-word with no expression. Her scores seemed to indicate that she may be able to read at the next level, but when tested at the CD level both her reading accuracy and comprehension fell just below the benchmarks for that level. Considering her slow reading rate and distractibility, it was determined that her instruction level was most appropriately AB. However, it was predicted that she would move quickly into the next level.

Her instructional plan included reading many short, high interest books to help focus and maintain her attention. She was permitted to select her own independent reading for a portion of each class period. Her direct instruction included guided reading of leveled theme books to practice and enhance comprehension strategies;

word study activities focusing on familiar phonograms to expand vocabulary; and repeated reading of familiar stories to improve fluency and reading rate.

On the posttest Student D placed at the CD (early Grade 1) instructional level. Her oral reading accuracy was again above the benchmark for this level indicating good decoding skills. However, her reading rate and fluency were extraordinarily below the benchmarks. She seemed unusually preoccupied with things such as her hair that she would smooth back, her socks that she kept pulling up, and the book itself whose pages she would rub as if dusting them. Her retelling was barely within the benchmark, and although it contained the main idea of the story, it left out most significant details. Nevertheless, her comprehension fell within the benchmark.

Because her comprehension and oral reading accuracy were adequate at the CD level, it was decided to test her at the EFG level. Her reading rate was again extraordinarily below the benchmark as was her fluency. Her oral reading accuracy was just below the benchmark, and her retelling was very brief simply stating two events, which placed her comprehension barely within the benchmark. Clearly, the higher level text with more complex sentence structure and more multi-syllable words presented her with too difficult a challenge.

Student E seemed very detached during the pretest. She read each sentence as if it were a question, and looked at the tester for approval. Her oral reading accuracy, oral reading rate, and fluency were all within the benchmarks for the AB level. She self-corrected once and the other 2 miscues changed the meaning of the sentence. She retold the story in a short sentence that missed the main idea. When prompted for additional information, she declined to add anything else. When asked the

comprehension questions, however, she scored within the benchmark for comprehension. She was able to answer the literal questions but could not answer the question calling for an inference.

Student E's instructional plan called for explicit instruction in comprehension and self-monitoring. Because she appeared to have difficulty with expressive vocabulary, many story discussions took place between her and the teacher in which the teacher modeled how to retell a story using story elements. Periodic summarizing of story events as the stories were read was another strategy used. Before, during, and after reading activities were completed to help reinforce comprehension. She was also taught how to set a purpose for reading to help focus her thoughts.

On the posttest Student E placed at the CD (early Grade 1) instructional level. Her oral reading accuracy fell somewhat above the benchmark, and her oral reading rate and fluency were barely within the benchmarks for this level. Although she made 4 miscues, she self-corrected the 2 that made no sense, and the other 2 were minor substitutions that did not change the meaning of the sentence. She was apparently practicing some of the self-monitoring and comprehension strategies she had learned. It did not seem as if she were particularly engaged in the story. When she attempted to read with expression, it was awkward and inappropriate as she usually raised her voice at the end of a sentence as if asking a question. When she retold the story, she gave the main idea in a simple sentence with no elaboration and no details, indicating continued difficulty with comprehension and expressive vocabulary. She again could answer literal comprehension questions but not inferential or evaluative ones. This placed her comprehension score just barely within the benchmark for the CD level.

Students' scores in individual categories on both the pretest and the posttest are given in Tables 1 and 2. Determining students' instructional reading levels required using the benchmarks as guidelines for evaluation. A student's overall performance provided the final determination of instructional level and teaching plan.

Table 1 Pretest and Posttest Scores for Reading Skills

Student	A	A	B	B	C	C	D	D	E	E
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Consonants	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Clusters	na	A	na	A	na	A	na	L	na	A
Short Vowels	A	L	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Prefixes/Suffixes	na	A	na	A	na	A	na	A	na	A
Use of decoding	L	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Use of self-correcting	L	A	A	A	A	A	A	L	L	A
Use of context	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Use of punctuation	L	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	L	L
Use of Grammar/Syntax	L	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	L	L
Phrasing	L	A	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
Appropriate rate	L	A	L	A	L	A	L	L	A	A

A = Adequate

L = Limited

na = not applicable

Table 2 Pretest and Posttest Scores for Determining Reading Level

Student	A	A	B	B	C	C	D	D	E	E
Test	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Level	AB	CD	AB	CD	AB	CD	AB	CD	AB	CD
Accuracy	W	A	W	W	A	W	A	A	W	A
Rate	B	W	W	W	B	W	B	B	W	W
Fluency	B	W	B	W	B	B	B	B	W	B/W
Retelling	B	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	B	B
Comprehension questions	A	W	A	A	W	W	A	W	W	W

AB = Kindergarten/Beginning Grade 1

CD = Early Grade 1

A = Above Benchmark

W = Within Benchmark

B = Below Benchmark

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

#### Conclusions

Following three months of intensive instruction following the Four Blocks model previously described, all students showed modest gains in reading performance. It should be noted that this group of students could not be considered an average class. First, they had all been identified in first grade as needing extra support to succeed in reading; second, they received their second grade language arts instruction in a small group setting; and third, they were all referred to the Pupil Assistance Committee (PAC) during the course of this study because they demonstrated unusual difficulty in acquiring many fundamental reading skills. PAC recommended 3 of the students for Child Study Team evaluation to determine if any of them qualified for special education services. The Child Study Team had not completed any of the students' evaluations before this study was concluded. PAC recommended that one student continue receiving basic skills instruction, but had not made a recommendation about the fifth student before this study was completed.

It was somewhat surprising that the 5 students who participated in this study were all at the same instructional level at the beginning of the study. However, the results of the pretest showed that each student had different strengths and needs. While the district curriculum required that all students receive instruction using the same anthology materials for part of their language arts class, the inclusion of leveled reading material helped to address their individual needs. Students read not only the



leveled readers that were thematically integrated into the curriculum, but also leveled books that they chose from a collection selected by the teacher and read independently or with partners. These practices addressed their need to read books at their instructional and independent levels every day.

The results of the pretest provided one measure of the student's reading skills, but more importantly it was used to help the teacher plan instruction to meet the needs of each student. While all the students required instruction to help build their instant recognition of high frequency words, some of them needed an emphasis on decoding strategies and others required more help developing comprehension strategies. Although the class was small, the teacher individualized instruction by meeting with individuals or groups of 2 or 3 students who needed instruction in a particular area. These small flexible groups, whose membership was always changing, met just about every day for approximately 10 minutes to help the students focus on and practice a particular skill.

The posttest indicated that each student had progressed to the next reading level. More importantly, 3 of the 5 students approached the act of reading with more confidence in their ability to interact with the text. They demonstrated more effective use of strategies for both decoding and comprehension and would frequently relate what they were reading to their personal experiences. It was evident that 2 of the students were just about ready to move into the next instructional level when this study ended.

It would be misleading to conclude that the implementation of flexible grouping itself was responsible for the modest gains in reading demonstrated by the

students in this study. However, given the relatively low instructional level of these second grade students, it would be unlikely that they would make significant gains without intense, direct instruction in their areas of need. Since the small flexible groupings provided that instruction, it seems probable that the practice had a positive impact.

It should be noted that the difficulty these students had in achieving any success in reading may have been as much a function of their particular learning styles as it was of any particular curriculum or pedagogy.

### Implications

Educators are continually searching for ways to improve student achievement. The danger to be avoided is looking for a “silver bullet” that promises to cure what ails everyone. Differentiated instruction is a flexible approach that recognizes that most methods will work for some children, but that no one method will be successful for all children. It respects the reality of the classroom with its diversity of both teachers and students. It requires reflection and modification on the part of teachers as they make thoughtful daily decisions about the best way to help each child.

Helping struggling readers develop the language skills they need to be successful is a special challenge. Reading is the orchestration of many discrete skills, and children learn at different rates and in different ways. The developmental nature of acquiring reading skills can hardly be overemphasized.

This study paired struggling readers with books on their instructional level for the purpose of facilitating their acquisition of reading skills. Through it all, the importance of making meaning from the text was the paramount goal. Strategy

instruction was embedded in discussion of the stories and served the authentic purpose of enhancing comprehension. Students began to realize how the use of strategies could be personally useful when trying to understand text. The ultimate goal was that students would independently use a repertoire of strategies in their search for meaning. The teacher provided opportunities through a careful balance in areas such as: instructional approaches and independent reading time; code and meaning methodologies; incidental and planned lessons; grouping arrangements; trade books and published teaching materials; informal and standardized assessment.

Although this study showed that students made modest gains in reading achievement during a period of differentiated instruction, it could not establish a causal relationship. That would most likely be attributed to the short duration of the study and the multitude of variables that affect learning how to read.

#### Impact on the Organization

Since this was action research in one classroom, the immediate impact was limited to the teacher and the students involved in the study. The students participated in an educational program designed to meet their individual needs in a way that enabled each of them to achieve a modest, yet measurable, amount of success. The teacher believed that the students gradually began to view themselves as readers. This in itself was cause for celebration because so often students who have experienced difficulty in learning to read see themselves as failures. Turning that perception around is arguably as important as the gains the students made in achievement.

The teacher needed to use assessments to measure student growth as well as to inform her instruction. The ongoing diagnosis of students' strengths and needs

provided direction for choosing materials, planning lessons, and deciding on grouping arrangements. The classroom became a place that dynamically responded to students' changing needs without abandoning what already worked.

### Leadership Development

As a leader in the classroom, the teacher exhibited knowledge, dispositions, and performances delineated in ISLLC Standard 2. Specifically, this study required knowledge of child growth and development, learning theories and principles of effective teaching, and the multiple uses of assessment tools.

The teacher provided a supportive classroom environment where students felt safe taking risks and were recognized for their effort and accomplishments. She provided multiple opportunities for learning that respected the diversity among her students and were designed to meet their needs and promote achievement.

### Further Study

Included in this study was one way to think about instituting differentiated instruction. The flexible grouping format used was chosen because it worked well within the framework of the existing curriculum. Because the study was of short duration and the participants were a very small group of struggling second grade readers, it would be informative to see how this model worked over the course of a full academic year and in the average classroom where a greater range of abilities would be evident. Would the program have been more effective in the classroom under study if leveled books had been used to the exclusion of the anthology which took up considerable time? Was student achievement affected by undiagnosed learning disabilities? Although the teacher noticed positive changes in students'

reading behaviors, an attitudinal survey of the students who participated in this study would supply important information because students' perceptions of their ability often affect their subsequent performance.

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