Focused on the topic of ability grouping in reading instruction, particularly at the elementary level, this annotated bibliography contains 31 references to articles and papers entered in the ERIC database between 1983 and 1989. The citations include articles discussing recent research on ability grouping, and possible alternatives to ability grouping, such as cooperative learning and whole language techniques. (MM)
Ability Grouping in Reading Instruction: Research and Alternatives

by Mary Morgan

Ability grouping—grouping students for instruction by ability or achievement to create homogeneous instructional groups—has long been an accepted technique for teaching reading. Recently, however, some research has indicated that ability grouping does not enhance student achievement and may, in addition, have negative effects on the self-concepts of students in lower groups. Yet if ability grouping is not an effective instructional technique, what are the valid alternatives for reading instruction?

This FAST Bib addresses the issue of ability grouping in reading instruction, particularly at the elementary level, and begins with an overview discussing the social and political implications of classroom organization. The next section presents citations concerning research on ability grouping, focusing on its instructional effectiveness as well as its effect on students' self-concepts. In the final section, possible alternatives to ability grouping are considered, including documents on cooperative learning and whole language techniques.

Abstracts for some of the articles cited here have been abbreviated to conform to the FAST Bib format. The ED numbers for sources included in Resources in Education have been included to enable the user to go directly to microfiche collections, to order from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS), or to go to RIE for the full abstract on those sources not available through EDRS. A few of the most current references on this list have not yet been assigned an ED number. If a document has a CS number rather than an ED number, look in RIE or the ERIC database to find the corresponding ED number. To order from EDRS, the ED number must be provided. The citations to journals are from the Current Index to Journals in Education, and these articles can be acquired most economically from library collections or through interlibrary loans. Reprint services are also available from University Microfilms International (UMI) and from the Original Article Tearsheet Service (OATS) of the Institute for Scientific Information.

Overview


Questions the nature of classroom instruction in general, and mathematics and reading instruction in the lower elementary school grades, in particular. Focuses on the following aspects of the social organization of instruction: 1) the diversity
of student populations, 2) the motivating force behind instruction, and 3) the social arrangements through which the ongoing monitoring of student work transpires.


Argsue that the relationships of power and influence between people in schools dramatically affect the kinds of opportunities available to low-income children learning to read.

Recent Research


Synthesizes reading research in several significant areas and makes concrete suggestions for using this research to improve reading instruction. Chapter 10 focuses on grouping in reading instruction.


Examines the effect of ability grouping on first-grade students' reading achievement. Contradicts the contention that grouping has a negative effect on low-achieving students. Finds that students' success depended on the quality of instruction, referring to the appropriate combination of instructional conditions.


Examines: 1) the degree to which first-grade students engaged in within-group and across-group comparisons and were aware of group differences; and 2) the relationship between teacher praise and students' group levels and academic performances.


Because of concern about the harmful effects of placing children in low reading groups, this study tested several "sacred cows" in reading, including the homogeneity grouping practices currently utilized in most classrooms in the United States.


Examines how students' ability group assignments affect their attention spans. Finds that assignment to low-ability groups had a strong negative effect on student attentiveness, suggesting that classroom factors are important in shaping student behavior.


Reviews research findings on ability grouping. Attempts to document the mechanisms through which stratification in schools influences student achievement, focusing on within-classroom ability grouping in 12 first grade classes. Results indicate that grouping has no direct effect on reading achievement by the end of the year.


Investigates two questions about the effects of grouping: 1) does a student's within-class group rank affect his or her learning when individual ability and instructional content are held statistically constant? and 2) do teachers utilize grouping in ways that have varied effects on student learning? Suggests that the consequences of grouping are not inherently detrimental but rather depend on how grouping is employed.


Investigates the simultaneous effects of the rank of students' reading groups in first grade and their first grade achievement on their assignment to reading groups at the beginning of second grade.

Haller, Emil J.; Waterman, Margaret. "The Criteria of Reading Group Assignments," Reading
Concludes that children’s reading ability is not the sole reason behind their placement in particular reading groups and that teachers also consider such things as their ability to do academic work, work habits, classroom behavior, personality, and, occasionally, their home environment.


Examines the relationship between grouping and friendship in a longitudinal data set containing information on students in 110 reading groups in 32 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classrooms.


Using empirical evidence from 48 classrooms, this article argues that structural and organizational factors affect the stability and the formation of ability groups in an elementary classroom, which in turn affect growth in academic achievement. Holds that teachers are often impeded from forming the types of groups most conducive to student learning.


Reviews research on ability grouping. Notes several negative effects of ability grouping, and discusses the implications of this research for classroom practice.


Investigated the claim that pupil race affects the reading grouping decisions of elementary school teachers, causing Black children to be overrepresented in lower ability groups. These analyses failed to uncover evidence of racial bias, though Black pupils were more likely to be placed in the lowest groups.


Reviews the literature on the nature of processes within reading groups of different ability levels and the effects of these processes on children's reading development. Presents a perspective on instructional-social contexts for reading instruction.


Reviews briefly the research on achievement effects of the following: (1) ability-grouped class assignment; and (2) student grouping alternatives that would accommodate learning differences among students. Discusses instructional effectiveness of those alternatives and their potential impact on segregation.


Reviews research on student grouping, focusing on these types: tracking; grouping within classes (reading and mathematics); ability grouping for just one or two subjects; and classes for the gifted and handicapped. Asserts that ability-grouped class assignment is the most harmful form.

Alterntatives to Ability Grouping


Summarizes some of the criticisms which have been directed at basal instruction. Discusses how whole language approaches enhance the ability to teach children to read, and engage students in a democratic and democratizing educational experience.

Presents two basic parallel block elementary school schedules (schedules in which a block of time is scheduled for essential and/or desired small skill groups parallel to instructional activities in large groups). Contends that parallel block scheduling in elementary schools can lead to improved instructional programs for low achievers.


Advances the notion that students should be assigned to classes according to the time of day they learn best.


Intended for teachers and prospective teachers, this book provides information about reading instruction from kindergarten through the elementary grades. Includes a chapter on organizing for instructional needs.


Concludes that three experimental programs were more effective than traditional approaches in beginning reading instruction: (1) a literature program using special decoding strategies; (2) a literature program not using the special strategies; and (3) a traditional basal approach using the special decoding strategies.


Describes a variety of methods that can be used for instructing classes with students whose abilities and backgrounds vary widely, including individualization of instruction, homogeneous grouping, team teaching, and modifying whole-class instruction.


Presents effective methods for the discussion, sharpening, and enrichment of readers' responses. Includes methods to teach students how to choose a good book, an individualized and/or group reading and response program, and journal writing techniques. Provides a bibliography of Canadian children's literature for intermediate grades.

Harp, Bill. "What Do We Do in the Place of Ability Grouping? (When the Principal Asks)," *Reading Teacher, v42 n7 p534-35 Mar 1989.

Presents two alternatives to ability grouping—flexible grouping (based on students' level of independence as learners), and cooperative learning groups. Discusses the benefits of cooperative learning and provides a sample cooperative learning lesson.


Presents a kindergarten reading curriculum, including a description of major instructional techniques, a time-line illustrating how instruction might evolve across the school year, and finally, a battery of informal tasks for assessing reading ability at the end of the kindergarten year.


Points out that traditional teaching methods, which have been replaced by more effective methods for the majority of students, are still used for low-ability students. Argues that these students need the best materials available and teachers who are knowledgeable about current educational theories.


The concept of student team learning is described, with details on cooperative learning techniques developed for reorganizing classrooms into exciting, high-achieving places.

Unsworth, Len. "Meeting Individual Needs through Flexible Within-Class Grouping of Pu-

Offers an example of how to use flexible reading groups to attain the greatest level of student achievement.