



Lecture Transcript

Session 6: Differentiating Instruction

Dr. Jeanne R. Paratore: Today's topic is differentiating instruction and we had, I think some, maybe, provocative readings last night that we're going to get a chance to talk about. Let's start by talking about research related to grouping and the influence of grouping on children's literacy, learning, and literacy achievement.

When you look at the many studies about ability grouping, they're really quite consistent in indicating that the assignment of children to ability groups does not enhance achievement in reading. Now, this is really important, because teachers choose to place children in ability groups, so that they can improve achievement in reading. And if, in fact, that's not the outcome, then what are we doing? Well, the evidence is kind of interesting. The evidence doesn't suggest that the practice of grouping children homogeneously is problematic. Instead, the evidence suggests that there are things teachers do in different ability groups, that have ill effects for children. So, for example, Dick Allington and Alfrieda Hiebert, in separate studies and reports, have taught us that teachers treat children in high ability groups, different from the ways they treat children in low ability groups. Children in high ability groups listen, have more opportunities to read connected text; they have more opportunities to write extended text; they're asked more critical-thinking questions; and they have more opportunities to talk with their peers. So, there are qualitatively different activities that the high performing children are given, when compared to the low performing children. It's not the act of grouping them homogeneously that's problematic. It's the type of instruction we offer them in those homogeneous groups that's problematic.

Now, we move beyond ability groups and look at the research related to whole-class instruction. You find also some negative findings. When teachers were confronted with the ill effects of ability grouping, many people shifted to whole-class instruction. What researchers found was that in whole-class instruction, the results were not much more promising than they were in ability grouping; that again, high performers did reasonably well, average performers did OK, but the low performers continued to lag behind; that whole-class instruction didn't serve children any better than ability groupings served children. And so, we're sort of left with this combination. Grouping by ability didn't seem to serve children well, shifting to whole-class instruction didn't serve children well. So, what's the teacher to do?

Well, there isn't any evidence that says grouping is a bad thing. There's evidence that says the ways teachers were using grouping was not necessarily effective. And that led a number of researchers and experts to suggest a concept that's come to be known as flexible grouping. And what flexible grouping suggests is that there are times for teachers to use an array of grouping patterns. That sometimes whole-class instruction works really well. When we're introducing a new idea or concept -- much as I'm doing in this room right now -- when we're introducing information that you want to be held commonly by all of the children, whole-class instruction can work really well. But when you want to meet particular needs, small-group instruction is important. And it's rather simplistic, rather important, for teachers to accept a very common truth, and that is that children have different needs. That we don't have a one-size-fits-all classroom full of children. Many of our children have different needs, and we've got to recognize and acknowledge that. So to do that, we look to people like Patricia Cunningham and her Four groups, Four blocks model, some of the work of by Michael Pressley, some of the work by Allington and his colleagues. Indeed, some of my own work has suggested that there are ways to mix and match grouping patterns, starting with whole groups, going to small groups, sometimes working with children as individuals. There's not a lot of research (what would be considered rigorous research) related to flexible grouping, but the few studies that there are -- and in my last count there were about a dozen studies -- the few studies that there are related to flexible grouping, suggests that when it's done well -- and that's an important caveat, when it's done well -- the use of flexible grouping correlates with higher performance in reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and reading fluency. And the next phrase is really important for all readers: We don't have to accept the fact that some children, by design, simply can't meet grade level expectations. The evidence suggests that when we group them appropriately and provide them adequate learning opportunities, we can in fact, raise the bar for all children.

Now, what does that mean? How does it play out in the classroom? Well, essentially, we're talking about three very important -- not just important, I should say essential -- daily reading routines. And my emphasis here is on the word daily reading routines. Shared reading, which is a time of day, as I define it, when every child has the opportunity to participate in what I call grade level curriculum. The way I define grade level is I simply say, I'm going to let the publisher define grade level for me, or if there are district benchmarks, what the district defines as grade level will hold for me. The point here is that I don't want to track children in different curricula. I don't want my three children who are my lowest performing readers, never to have the opportunity to read what is identified as grade level text for my other children. So, shared reading is that time of day when every child participates in some form of grade-appropriate text or curriculum. Guided reading is that time of day, when children read what's just right for them. In my own work, I've called these just right groups.

Now, I use the term just right, with some elasticity, because in fact, unless I'm going to form six, seven, eight groups, it's not going to be just right. I believe these groups should happen every day. If a guided reading group takes approximately 20 minutes, having three of them will take an hour. And if I'm still going to have time for shared reading and independent reading, I can't have many more than three. So, that's how I've derived that decision. And then, there needs to be time every day for independent reading. Time when children get to read what they want, on their own. I see shared reading as the time of day that's driven by the district level curriculum. This is curriculum driven; this is teacher driven. It's driven by the teachers' knowledge of what children need. And independent reading is driven by the child. It's child driven, this is what children want to read on their own. Curriculum, teacher, child, choices.

Now, in differentiating instruction, in one model of flexible grouping -- and again this is elaborated on in your readings -- but very quickly, I would see children starting together during the shared reading period, starting together and then breaking apart into two groups, because some children can't read that grade level text and they need help. So, the children who can read it on their own go ahead and read it. The children who need help read it with the teacher. And then, the children might reconvene in small heterogeneous groups to talk about it.

Flexible grouping is effective. I said that when it's effective we have good achievement outcomes. It is effective when teachers establish reliable and consistent daily routines. When the daily reading routines are predictable by the children. When teachers provide demonstration and guided practice in the strategies we're going to ask children to do on their own. When teachers create centers where students can work when assignments are completed -- and again, there was a reference in your reading (Yetta Goodman's concept of kid watching). When teachers observe children closely at all times, and intervene briefly to either provide them the support they need, or to keep them on task.