Teacher Perceptions of Ability Grouping Practices in Middle Level Schools

Robert C. Spear

To cite this article: Robert C. Spear (1994) Teacher Perceptions of Ability Grouping Practices in Middle Level Schools, Research in Middle Level Education, 18:1, 117-130, DOI: 10.1080/10825541.1994.11670041

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10825541.1994.11670041

Published online: 08 Jul 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1415

View related articles

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
The purpose of this study was to determine middle school teachers' perceptions on ability grouping. This study identified teachers' reasons for retaining or eliminating ability grouping. Data from 31 teachers were categorized through the use of qualitative research methodology to determine what middle school teachers perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping as well as alternative grouping practices.
Although ability grouping is a common practice in middle level schools, it has come under close scrutiny over the past few years. Several researchers strongly suggest that ability grouping as traditionally practiced is detrimental to many learners (Bryson & Bentley, 1980; George, 1988; Good & Marshall, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Low, 1988; Merina, 1989; Noland & Taylor, 1986; Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1986; Trimble & Sinclair, 1987).

Researchers have identified instructional practices that can meet the needs of young adolescents without grouping them by ability. Teachers across the country have been successful in altering their ability grouping practices while maintaining high instructional standards. A study funded by the National Education Association (Slavin, Braddock, Hall, & Petza, 1989) found that “teachers and administrators with whom we spoke were almost uniformly positive about their move to reduce ability grouping, but they also noted that in making the change there were many obstacles they had to overcome” (p.15). These obstacles included the challenge of making major changes in classroom management, instructional practice, and teacher perceptions.

Moving toward a heterogeneous grouping of students requires teachers to make tremendous individual changes in the classroom. These changes often involved a change from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction. In light of the time and effort needed to make these changes, teachers must be major participants in the decision to alter ability grouping practices.

By listening to what teachers have to say, reasons for supporting or not supporting ability grouping may become clearer. Understanding why teachers continue to use a particular ability grouping practice may help us to understand the decisions they make about grouping students.

The crucial issue is not whether we group students but how we group students. For middle school teachers to move away from ability grouping, they must first change the way they think about it. The first step toward changing teachers’ thinking about ability grouping is to understand how and why they think the way they do.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine middle school teachers’ thoughts on ability grouping. Specifically, this study identified the reasons that teachers retain or eliminate ability grouping practices in their classrooms. This study identified educators who eliminated ability grouping and described the grouping practices they implemented to meet the learning needs of young adolescents.

This study focused on three research questions:

1. What do middle school teachers perceive to be the advantages of
ability grouping?

(2) What do middle school teachers perceive to be the disadvantages of ability grouping?

(3) What alternative grouping practices do middle school teachers use to replace ability grouping?

Educators must understand teachers’ perceptions of ability grouping if they are to change those perceptions. Documenting teacher perceptions is the first step in this process. Creating conditions that might alter teachers’ thinking and help them to see plausible alternatives to ability grouping is the next step.

Assumptions

This study reports teachers’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping. However, no attempt has been made to determine the accuracy of these perceptions.

Three assumptions guide this study:

1. Elimination of ability grouping practices requires a change in teacher behavior in the classroom.
2. The process of eliminating ability grouping is complex, personal, and often difficult.
3. While the process of eliminating ability grouping practices is personal and individualized, it cannot be accomplished in isolation. Altering rigid ability grouping practices requires that educators be part of a group effort (a team, a grade level, or a school).

Sample Selection

The sample consists of teachers (n=31) who work in middle schools that contain grade seven. The selection of teachers was based upon the following criteria: (1) the willingness of teachers to participate; (2) the diversity of the middle schools in relation to size, student population, and setting (rural, urban, and suburban); (3) the teachers and school sites which provide the greatest potential for rich information; and (4) the extent to which ability grouping practices had been used (50% who use ability grouping, and 50% who do not use ability grouping).

If teachers indicated a willingness to participate, the site selection survey was completed and returned. The information contained on the survey helped the researcher to select schools. Information requested included: (1) school size; (2) school location (used to determine geographic distribution and type of community: urban, suburban, rural); (3) the average cost per student as established by the state; (4) the
organizational arrangement of the students and staff; (5) a brief description of past, present, and future grouping practices; and (6) a list of seventh grade teachers and the subjects they teach. When clarification was needed regarding any of these criteria, a follow-up telephone interview was conducted.

Thirty-one seventh grade teachers from middle schools constituted the sample. Each was interviewed once. Teachers were selected from lists submitted to represent the areas of math/science and the humanities. Twenty-one teachers were selected from humanities and ten were selected from math/science. Experience for teachers ranged from 4 to 35 years, with the average being 19.1 years. Length of teacher's service at the current school ranged from 1 to 25 years; the average was 10.5 years.

Eighteen teachers used ability grouping and thirteen did not. Fourteen (four math, six language arts, five social studies, and two "other") teachers were in favor of retaining the use of ability grouping and 17 (three math, three science, four language arts, three social studies, and one "other") wished to eliminate its use.

Thirteen teachers were from urban schools, eleven from suburban, and seven from rural schools. Of the 13 urban teachers, 9 used ability grouping, 4 did not, 8 wished to retain ability grouping and 5 wished to eliminate it. Of the 11 suburban teachers 9 used ability grouping, 2 did not, 5 wished to retain ability grouping and 6 wished to eliminate it. Of the seven rural teachers none used ability grouping, seven did not, one wished to retain ability grouping and six wished to eliminate it. Nineteen teachers were female, and twelve teachers were male.

Of the 18 teachers who used ability grouping, none were from rural schools, 9 were from suburban schools, and 9 were from urban centers. Of the 13 teachers who did not use ability grouping, 7 were from rural schools, 2 were from suburban schools, and 4 from urban schools.

Data Collection

Open-ended interviewing was used to collect data for this study. An interview guide was developed and a "member check" was completed. Teachers were asked to read the documents and comment in writing about the content validity of their documents.

Within-site, cross-site, and content analysis of the data were conducted to identify specific themes and frequency of their occurrence of these themes. Data were obtained by interviewing teachers in schools in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Findings are reported by themes that developed as the data were analyzed. Generalizations arising from analysis of these data and suggested areas for further study are also presented.
Data Analysis and Findings

Data are categorized into seven groups: findings by setting, subject, definitions, educational beliefs, personal dilemmas, advantages, and disadvantages of ability grouping. Alternative grouping practices used by teachers to replace ability grouping are also discussed.

Each interview transcription was analyzed to identify statements of thoughts and beliefs that best illustrated either perceived advantages or disadvantages. The data analysis of both advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping generated four general themes: (1) student issues; (2) parent issues; (3) curriculum and instruction; and (4) teacher issues. Subcategories also emerged within three of the four themes. Subcategories and themes remained consistent throughout the analysis of data. Few changes were made as data were analyzed and findings emerged.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability Grouping:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categories &amp; Subcategories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students' Self-Concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Student Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better for: Top, Middle, Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation, Participation, Expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjust to Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems With Low Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma, Elitism, Superiority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning, Frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop Labels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and Teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students Working Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling, Interaction with Peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testing, Differences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Real World</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

PARENTS' AND THE PUBLIC'S ROLE IN EDUCATION
CURRICULUM and INSTRUCTION
Pace and Rigor of Instruction
Faster, Slower, Standards
Participants were asked to state whether they would choose to eliminate or retain ability grouping based on a scale of one through six, with one strongly in favor of eliminating ability grouping (E group) and six strongly in favor of retaining ability grouping (R group).

Data were divided into two groups based on subjects' responses to this question. The R group consisted of those who answered with either a "4", "5", or "6". The E group consisted of those educators who answered with either a "1", "2", or "3". Six participants chose a "1", ten chose a "2", one chose a "3", five chose a "4", three chose a "5", six chose a "6". The data were analyzed holistically to identify general outcomes, and by type of school (urban, suburban, or rural).
Research Question One

What Do Middle Level School Teachers Perceive to Be the Advantages of Ability Grouping?

Both R and E group teachers addressed the issue of curriculum and instruction in relationship to the advantages of ability grouping more than they addressed students, teachers, or parental roles. Generally, teachers in both groups believed that ability grouping increases student learning. Teachers perceived that ability grouping provides a more challenging and enriching curriculum for "top" students, and enables "low" students to receive the help they need. E group teachers frequently talked about the needs of all students: therefore, they included the middle or average group in their statements. "Middle" or "average" students were not mentioned by R group teachers. This is interesting in light of the fact that the largest number of students are "average."

R group teachers may not change for a variety of other reasons. Their belief structure may limit thinking, or they may simply not want to invest the time, energy, and thought necessary to alter ability grouping practices. Teachers may perceive the advantages of ability grouping to be content-centered as opposed to student-centered. Teachers who wish to retain ability grouping are more subject-centered and those who wish to eliminate ability grouping are more student-centered. "They talk about putting kids into heterogeneous groups for self-esteem, but I don’t think that helps them at all. I think that it works against it. I think that a child who has trouble in math is only frustrated to see someone so far superior, and they can’t keep up. We also have a substantial number of students who have not memorized number facts by seventh grade; and when you are giving an explanation to a child whose scores are off the range and they are completely understanding it and this child is not, that cannot help self-esteem." VS "I just feel that when we’re teaching students, we’re not just teaching math. We’re teaching all sorts of problems." This finding, coupled with the perception that teaching is easier in ability grouping classes, and more difficult in heterogeneous classes, provides a solid basis for understanding teachers' perceptions about ability grouping.

Research Question Two

What Do Middle Level School Teachers Perceive to Be the Disadvantages of Ability Grouping?

Both R and E group teachers perceive the importance and power of parents to influence decisions about ability grouping by either supporting ability grouping or supporting other grouping arrangements. Both R and E group teachers agree that placement of students in ability grouped classes is not accurate. There appears to be no one
way to group students that is effective for all students. E group teachers suggest that flexible grouping based upon specific needs or skills is appropriate.

Developing appropriate skills of teachers while holding high expectations of all students is a powerful combination. E group teachers believe that if you expect all students to achieve, they will! If you expect more able students to work with peers and learn to high levels, they will! "No matter what kind of group I’ve had, whatever heterogeneous type of situation I’ve had, the kids who don’t seem to shine sometimes will often be the kids who offer some really perceptive ideas—especially when you do group work, add a lot to a group. And it gives them an opportunity to see that they have more ability than they think they do sometimes. And certainly it does bring out the best in some kids."

Both R and E group teachers believed that teaching a mixed ability classroom is more difficult. Teachers must manage materials, assignments, curriculum, and classroom strategies. "...to have more of a homogeneous type grouping, it makes it a lot easier for me to teach the material." "[Heterogeneous grouping] takes more work. By more work I mean you have to be able to reach a range of abilities. You have to change your questioning strategies. You have to let students become active learners and not just passive listeners. And it’s threatening. It can be really threatening. And you have to, when you get ready, make the change to go from homo to heterogeneous. You have to realize you’re going to fall on your face a couple of times"

Personal reasons and beliefs about education enter into E group teachers’ perceptions about the disadvantages of ability grouping. Because of their experience with ability grouped and non-ability grouped classes, their exploration of research and professional literature, and discussion with colleagues, E group teachers believed strongly in non-ability grouped classes. They feel that it is important to reduce or eliminate ability grouping.

E group teachers confront the disadvantages of non-ability grouped classes that R group teachers perceive to be troublesome. E group teachers believe that there must be a better way to work with young adolescents than using ability grouping. They believe that they can learn how to manage a non-ability grouped classroom, or already know how to manage such a classroom.

E group teachers have found ways to move beyond these perceptions. Perhaps their reward for their extra work is seeing the students achieve success in their non-ability grouped classes. E group teachers tend to measure success through academic, personal, social, and holistic measures. "...the bottom line’s gotta be what’s best for the kids. And I guess what bothers me is sometimes I think decisions are made for teachers instead of the kids. And I know it involves more work
sometimes and it may involve making more individualized plans and plans for groups. I know, in some ways, it's demanding more and I think that many times teachers feel as though more and more is demanded of them every day. “You are not giving the kids opportunity to learn from the others. You ...as a teacher, you have a rich experience if you have non-ability grouping because then it is a challenge for you. You have to look for different techniques, teaching techniques, and you have to think how to reach the students too. And you are giving the students a very rich challenge to perform because you are telling the student, ‘Okay, you are here because you can do it. You can do it and I know you can do it because you are here.’ That really works—it does work”

Research Question Three

What Alternative Grouping Practices Do Middle Level School Teachers Use to Replace Ability Grouping?

Teachers agreed that placing students in classrooms within flexible grouping arrangements is a reasonable alternative to ability grouping. These classrooms are characterized by cooperation and flexibility, with the teachers guiding the groups involved. “[In heterogeneous grouping] I think they learn from each other. The work habits of working together are effective. Just the work that they see somebody else do can spark them....The low groups feed off of each other and can become very difficult behavior-wise. I find those groups, especially in heterogeneous groups, really work well....I think there is more to be gained. I think that the top students can be enriched in the context of the regular class and have more to learn as far as the future goes, related to different people different than themselves. In middle school, I think that it is the last shot they get to relate to people that are different from themselves, and for everybody else they are going to have the advantage of higher expectations”

R and E group teachers think that cooperative learning can be effective when used in a non-ability grouped classroom. Other suggestions for more general kinds of group work were offered. Twenty of the thirty-one teachers perceived group work to be helpful. Peer tutoring was specifically mentioned as an alternative that works.

In addition to flexible grouping practices, adjusting curriculum and materials can enhance individualized learning. A “hands-on” relevant curriculum that captures students’ interest, and includes their thoughts and ideas, is perceived effective by many teachers.

Teachers perceive smaller class size, thematic and interdisciplinary instruction, and sufficient time to plan and develop lessons as vital components of successful non-ability grouped instruction. Classes with less than 25 students enable teachers to manage a diverse group
of students.

The use of a differentiated curriculum, best accomplished by using thematic integrated instruction and a variety of materials, books, manipulatives, and equipment, is also perceived as effective. Teachers believed that process learning (less emphasis on facts, and more emphasis on learning how to obtain information) and individualized curriculum are helpful in teaching diverse groups. Individual goals and evaluation, and small group lessons are also key.

Teachers believed that adopting a middle school ideology and organization can encourage the elimination of ability grouping. Middle level schools are concerned with the uniqueness of each child. They are organized to provide caring and supportive learning environments through the use of interdisciplinary teaming and advisory groups. Middle school organization presupposes flexible scheduling and teacher decision making. E group teachers believe that teaming, with its common team planning, team scheduling, common core of teachers and students, and flexible block of time schedules, will support the elimination of ability grouping practices.

Summary of Findings

Both R and E group teachers understand the issues surrounding ability grouping. Teachers talk about ability grouping in terms of their school, their students, and their community. Those who wish to retain ability grouping perceived that it works where they are, and that other forms of grouping will not work as well. R group teachers reported nearly as many disadvantages of ability grouping as advantages. These perceptions are consistent for urban, suburban, and rural teachers.

E group teachers are more adamant in their belief in eliminating ability grouping. They stated fewer advantages of ability grouping, and many times more disadvantages. They believed that non-ability grouped methods, coupled with other teaching methodologies, are effective ways to teach middle school students while promoting the students' personal growth.

Parents also seem to be important in the discussion of the perceptions of ability grouping. Teachers listen to or at least understand the power parents have in determining educational practice.

It is interesting to note that 16 of 17 teachers interested in eliminating ability grouping had taught in both ability grouped and non-ability grouped classrooms. The opposite was true for the teachers who wished to retain ability grouping. Only 1 of the 14 R group teachers had taught both ability grouped and non-ability grouped classes. This situation seems to suggest that to be supportive of eliminating ability grouping in classrooms, teachers must have used both types of instruc-
Educators who wish to reduce ability grouping practices in schools may want to consider these findings. Administrators in public schools should find ways to have teachers experiment with and use non-ability grouped classrooms. Teacher educators should find practicum placements where non-ability grouping is practiced. This experience seems to be necessary for potential teachers to think differently about ability grouping.

While the diversity of students in urban schools is usually greater than in suburban and rural schools, E group urban educators held equally optimistic views about non-ability grouped classes and thought urban schools could successfully eliminate ability grouping. Urban educators frequently said their environments are more diversified than rural or suburban schools. Nevertheless, these teachers were eager to find ways to work with students of all abilities within one classroom. They see this reduction of ability grouping as possible and productive.

Great numbers of urban educators are not necessarily more eager to explore alternatives to ability grouping than suburban or rural educators, but many are. Perhaps, teachers in urban schools see more clearly the deleterious effects of ability grouping and more beneficial outcomes of not using ability grouping for students.

**Recommendations**

The data in this study are rich with recommendations to eliminate ability grouping practices in middle schools. Findings from this study point to several important directions to improve public education for young adolescents. Both R and E group teachers offered keen insights into the complexities of this fundamental educational change. Educators must examine their own settings for directions for improvement.

**Recommendations for schools**

For schools to reduce ability grouping it seems likely that (1) the professional development of teachers is a key to changing teacher attitudes; (2) exposure to teaching students with different abilities within the same classroom offers an invaluable experience to teachers; and (3) educators must cultivate teachers who are more student-centered and less subject-centered, and who understand the needs of young adolescent students. This will assist educators to identify and appreciate learners as individuals with unique needs so that subjects can be adapted for the learners.

Time must be provided for teacher to teacher conversation to take place. Study groups, conferences, faculty meetings, professional days, conversations over coffee, and early release days are a few suggestions.
Action research in schools by those involved will provide data specific to that school and those students. Research could address the many issues raised in the professional literature, or issues raised by teachers and parents. The results would provide the data necessary to make an informed decision.

Teachers will find it necessary to develop new skills. Training will be needed and "permission" to experiment with new strategies will be needed. Specific training in cooperative learning, process learning, "hands-on" learning, and peer tutoring would be helpful. Coupled with curriculum changes, these training sessions will provide the tools necessary for teachers to restock their teaching tool boxes. As teachers learn new skills, they should experiment with non-ability grouped classrooms over an extended period of time. They will need to discuss, share, and evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts.

The voice of students and parents should also be heard. Discussions, surveys, and hearings are but a few ways for students to participate in this process. Some ways parents can become involved are serving on committees, doing research, compiling survey results, and volunteering in the classroom.

Finally, moving to a middle school ideology and organization seems to encourage the elimination of ability grouping. The pieces of the middle school pie that lead to this change are: (1) the philosophical base necessary to understand the students served, (2) teaming the same teachers and students together, (3) scheduling that allows for teachers to have common time, (4) schedules which teachers can change without affecting other teams, (5) advisory time to better know each student individually, and (6) schedules that allow teachers to plan integrated or interdisciplinary curriculum.

**Recommendations for higher education**

This study suggests that educators, in higher education, should ensure that new teachers think carefully about how students learn and how they, as prospective teachers, could alter their own behavior to create environments to enhance learning for students. It seems important that new teachers seek clarity to the problems students have with learning. Understanding the problems gives direction for solving the problems. Quick fixes or predetermined programs will not solve complex problems.

This study suggests that teachers who have thought carefully about ability grouping seem to be able to determine that there are various ways to group or cluster students to enhance their learning. If new teachers knew how students learn, they might also understand that ability grouping is not a panacea for enhancing student learning.

If teachers have carefully considered their thoughts and perceptions about student learning, understand current research regarding
ability grouping, and the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping, then they presumably will need to develop the skills necessary to create dynamic learning environments. Teachers may become knowledgeable of cooperative learning, integrated curriculum, and other identified strategies for addressing individual differences, but teachers must look internally to discover and develop the tools necessary to create effective classroom environments and reduce the need for ability grouped classrooms.

Colleges and universities that prepare prospective teachers should carefully consider placing students in practice teaching situations where cooperating teachers are thoughtful of student learning problems and have skills in leading classrooms where students are grouped in many ways. Prospective educators should graduate with an ability to bring clarity to student learning problems as well as the strength to practice creative intelligence so that diverse student populations will be served within the classroom.

**Conclusion**

The findings in this study shed light on the thought process of teachers regarding ability grouping. Most of the teachers interviewed were knowledgeable about the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping through experience or professional development. Despite this fact, some teachers refuse to change their ability grouping practices.

By comparing the thoughts of teachers who want to eliminate ability grouping with those who wish to retain ability grouping, greater understanding of the complexities associated with this issue might take place. Having this knowledge and understanding may be helpful to those who wish to change ability grouping practices in schools, and armed with this knowledge, teachers may be able to overcome the forces that perpetuate ability grouping. Educators could then develop non-ability grouped classrooms and eliminate the deleterious effects of ability grouping. Most importantly, all students would have the opportunity to learn to high levels and not be excluded or limited by inappropriate grouping practices in schools.

**References**


Good, T., & Marshall, S. (1983). Do students learn more in heterogeneous or
homogeneous groups? In P. Peterson, L. Wilkenson, & M. Hillinan (Ed.),
*The social context of instruction: Group organization and group process*, pp. 15-


Noland, T. K., & Taylor, B. L. (1986). *The Effects of ability grouping: A meta-
analysis of research findings.* San Francisco, CA: American Educational
Research Association.

Yale University Press.

Slavin, R. (1986). *Ability grouping and student achievement in elementary schools:
A best evidence synthesis.* Baltimore MD: The Center for Research on
Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University.

to ability grouping.* Baltimore, MD: The Center for Research on Elementary
and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University.

the threat to equity. *Equity and Excellence, 23*(1), 12-21.