

LaBotta Taylor and Mary Harris  
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## **Ability Grouping of Elementary Students in Urban Schools**

Elementary educators seek reforms that advance student learning. Recently, budget cuts eliminating numerous teaching and support positions have caused frenzy in Texas school districts. In addition, the 81<sup>st</sup> Texas Legislature, House Bill 3, called for replacement of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test with the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test, rolling out in 2011-12. With an increased focus on academic achievement and fewer resources, various grouping arrangements of elementary students in urban schools demand attention because of their potential to advance the learning of students.

### **Descriptive Context**

#### Grouping in the elementary school

Elementary schools provide the basic knowledge and skills for children usually in kindergarten through Grade 5. Wikipedia (2011) defines an elementary school as “an institution where children receive the first stage of compulsory education” (p.1). In the United States, the individual states regulate education. States, which accept federal funding to assist with national goals, must adhere to strict policies and procedures. Standardized testing, such as the TAKS test in Texas, has made scheduling and grouping a priority in elementary schools, where children are assessed beginning in third grade with the possibility of retention if national goals are not achieved. High stakes testing may prompt school administrators to take desperate measures to maintain acceptable school accountability ratings. With limited staff, resources, and time, instructional grouping arrangements are one of the variables available to accomplish this difficult task. Why not place children in groups by ability? Why not assign them to groups within their grades so that children of similar ability can be taught at the same level, increasing efficiency for teachers and students?

#### Urgency in urban schools

Urban students, in particular, suffer through the intense scrutiny of school reform. They often do not have the experiences associated with the higher scores earned by suburban students on the standardized tests. Many families in urban settings have incomes at or below the national poverty level. Many urban elementary students are not exposed to the latest technologies. It is critical that instructional practices in urban schools are productive and aligned with the curriculum for maximum learning. Cooper and Sherk (1989) explain that, “Teachers who believe urban children are mostly disadvantaged, unruly, unsocialized, slow, and backward will treat them that way, thus perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 319). They go on to note that, “Teachers who

expect students to be successful will work toward that end and usually, they will produce results that justify their optimism” (p. 316). Thus, grouping arrangements in urban schools should not be based on a ‘one size fits all’ approach, but support a conscious array of instructional methods that can contribute to adequate yearly progress.

The University Council of Educational Administration (1987) conducted a study, which reflected the following profile of the students served by urban schools:

The Council of Great City School study of 44 of the nation’s largest urban systems found: 75% minority enrollment (Black, Hispanic, and Asian); 33% of students come from families receiving public assistance; 80% of school children qualify for free or reduced priced lunches; ten different languages are spoken by students; teachers shortages in central city schools exceed teacher shortages in all other schools by 250%.

### Vocabulary Terms

**Heterogeneous grouping:** Children of various abilities are grouped together

**Homogeneous grouping:** Children are grouped for instruction on the basis of a defined similarity, often ability, but grouping can also be done by interest, friendship, gender, or other identifiable similarities

Hoff (2002) defines the following types of classroom grouping arrangements:

- *Clustering:* grouping together all of the gifted students that a specific grade while heterogeneously dividing the remaining students in that grade.
- *Ability grouping (“tracking”):* students of like ability at one grade level are grouped together.
- *Cooperative learning:* a heterogeneous group of students work together, often with assigned roles, to accomplish a learning task.
- *Cross-graded classes (the “Joplin Plan”):* students at one grade level are heterogeneously grouped for most of the day but homogeneously grouped for reading instruction. (p. 1)

**Flexible grouping:** Students are grouped for instruction, but all groupings are temporary, with students working together to accomplish a specific and defined task.

### Differing Perspectives

#### Dangers of Ability Grouping

While ability grouping is sometimes employed for gifted and talented children, it may have a detrimental effect on average and below-average students (commonly referred to as “bubble kids” in schools where their responses to multiple choice questions on

standardized tests can determine their own fates and those of their school). In an interview with author Anne Wheelock of *Crossing the Tracks: How “Untracking” Can Save America’s Schools*, Senior Editor, Meg Bozzane, of Scholastic Books, states that tracking is harmful for the following reasons:

- The criteria we use to group kids are based on subjective perceptions and fairly narrow view of intelligence.
- Tracking leads students to take on labels.
- We associate students’ placement with the type of learners they are and therefore create different expectations for different groups of students.
- The notion that students’ achievement levels at any given time will predict their achievement in the future becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.  
([www.teacher.scholastic.com](http://www.teacher.scholastic.com))

### Permanent Grouping (Tracking)

Ability grouping, often referred to as “tracking, is the “practice of grouping children together according to their talents in the classroom” (NEA, 2010, p. 1). In 1980, there were two specific types of ability grouping defined by Bryson and Bentley as reported by Vacca to the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute. First, *achievement grouping* is defined as grouping students “based on scores students make on achievement tests and on their past performance” (p.2). Second, *tracking* is commonly known as assigning students “based on intelligence tests, achievement tests, past performance, teacher judgments, or a combination of these” (p.2).

According to the North Central Educational Laboratory (2011), tracking is ineffective and reduces equity among children. They note that tracking affects the career path chosen by a student and has the following negative results:

- A disproportionate number of minority and low-income students are placed in low-ability groups and tracks.
- By the time elementary students who have been tracked get to high school, their science and mathematics experiences are strikingly different.
- Students in low-ability tracks tend to receive lower-quality instruction. Their instruction covers less content, involves more drill and repetition, and places more emphasis on classroom management tasks.
- Students in low-ability tracks have difficulty moving out of low tracks into higher tracks. ([www.ncrel.org](http://www.ncrel.org))

### Arguments for Ability Grouping

Although tracking was common in American schools prior to desegregation, today’s proponents do not advocate permanent or exclusive ability grouping for elementary students. Proponents do perceive benefits of some ability groups for both low and high achievers. Hollifield (1987) explains that “ability grouping allows the teacher (1) to increase the pace and raise the level of instruction for high achievers, and (2) to provide

more individual attention, repetition, and review for low achievers” (p. 1). There is a benefit for elementary students to learn in a competitive, yet non-threatening learning environment.

In support of ability grouping, Hollifield (1987) details Robert Slavin’s recommendations for implementation of successful grouping plans:

- Students should identify primarily with a heterogeneous class. They should be regrouped by ability only when reducing heterogeneity is particularly important for learning, as is the case with math or reading instruction.
- Grouping plans should reduce student heterogeneity in the specific skill being taught, not in IQ or overall achievement test.
- Grouping plans should allow for frequent reassessment of student placement and for easy reassignment based on student progress.
- Teachers must vary the level and pace of instruction according to student levels of readiness and learning rates in regrouped classes.
- Only a small number of groups should be formed in within-class ability grouping. This will allow the teacher to provide adequate direct instruction for each group. (p. 3)

These recommendations derived from Slavin’s review (1987) of five inclusive ability grouping plans: ability grouped class assignment, regrouping for reading and mathematics, the Joplin plan, nongraded plan, and within-class ability grouping. Each of these comprehensive methods draws on achievement effects that relate to student ability levels.

- Ability Grouped Class Assignment: Places students in self-contained classrooms based on achievement levels in elementary lower grades and departmentalizing them in upper elementary grades.
- Regrouping for Reading and Mathematics: Assigns students to heterogeneous homeroom classes for the majority of the day, but regroups them based on reading and mathematics ability levels.
- The Joplin Plan: Assigns students heterogeneously for all core classes, except for reading instruction. During reading instruction, students are regrouped across grade levels based on reading ability.
- Nongraded Plan: Places students based on performance, rather than age, in flexible groups accordingly.
- Within-class Ability Grouping: Groups students in the classroom unique to their ability levels. (Hollifield, 1987)

### Snapshot of Legislative Bills

Although federal legislation makes no statement about grouping, some states adopted policy in this area during the past decade.

- Indiana, SB292, requires every district to review its programs to judge if practices of separating students by ability, placing students into educational tracks, or using test results to screen students result in the systemic separation of students by race, color, creed, national origin, or socioeconomic status. This bill was signed into law in March 2002. ([www.state.in.us/legislative](http://www.state.in.us/legislative))
- Mississippi, HB246, prohibits public schools from engaging in ability grouping and other tracking practices that place students according to ability and for related purposes. Section 1: Beginning with the 2004-2005 school year, the principal or any other school employee who is responsible for assigning students in the public schools to the various classrooms may not group the students by ability or engage in any other tracking practice that places students in certain classrooms based upon their ability without express written consent from the student's parent or legal guardian. In assigning students to various classrooms, each public school shall endeavor to achieve heterogeneously grouped classes only. Section 2: This act shall take effect and be in force from and after July 1, 2004. ([www.billstatus.ls.state.ms.us](http://www.billstatus.ls.state.ms.us))

### Implications of Current Education Policy

Grouping has become vitally important with the demands of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

#### NCLB's Core Requirements

- All students must be proficient in reading and math by 2014, as defined and measured by state standards and assessments.
- States must assess students in math and reading once annually in grades 3–8 and at least once during their high school years.
- Every public school is evaluated to see if it has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), based largely on the percentage of students scoring “proficient” or above on state assessments, overall and for each of the following subgroups of students: economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency.
- Schools that do not make AYP for two years in a row are identified as “needing improvement.” School and district AYP information is communicated to parents and to the public through annual school report cards.
- Those schools that receive federal Title I funding and are identified as “needing improvement” must develop a school improvement plan and, for each additional year that they don't make AYP, must undertake specific actions. These schools are

required to spend federal funding to implement federally mandated strategies—public school choice, supplemental education services (SES), corrective action, and restructuring. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p.3)

In this climate of accountability, all strategies that may help students to learn and improve test scores must be considered. Research findings suggest that ability grouping is a cost-effective measure for urban schools. Purkey and Smith (1983) note that the following variables “have been found to bear little relationship to achievement: decreasing class size, raising teacher salaries, buying more library books, changing the reading series, constructing new school buildings, or adding compensatory education programs” (pp. 427-428). Thus, school districts look at ability grouping as an effective instructional strategy. However, as noted, some states ban such practices.

Although federal policy makes no statement about classroom grouping of students, it does encourage realignment of urban students through development of charter schools and parental choice. As the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan experienced first-hand the need for a drastic change in the urban school sector. The portfolio approach to urban education advanced by the administration, distinguishes the urban school superintendent as the primary stock investor who administers a portfolio of investors (contractors/vendors) based on investments (student achievement scores). The premise surrounding “portfolio districts” emerges from four business-based restructuring ideas: 1) decentralization; 2) charter school expansions; 3) school closures with charter replacements; and 4) accountability, largely through testing (Saltman, 2010). Ultimately, this top-down approach gives a great deal of power to outsiders with a vested interest in education.

### The Issue in Practice

In spring 2006, Maryland school implemented ability grouping or performance-based grouping and experienced improved achievement scores. Performance-based grouping was very popular in the region. One school in particular, Rock View Elementary, served a growing immigrant population with most students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The school closed the achievement gap, exceeding 72% proficiency among each subgroup. Students were assessed regularly and regrouped as their skills improved for more rigorous coursework. The principal, Patty Roberson, explained, “When you have all the students who are academically alike for 90 minutes and you don’t have to split them up and give 30 minutes to each group, you get more bang for your buck” (de Visa, 2007, p. 2).

The Charles A. Dana Center (999) released a report entitled *Hope for Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools* outlining use of the following program components that included grouping methods as a catalyst for student success:

- A visible and attainable initial goal helped schools move toward broader, more ambitious goals.
- A sense of responsibility was fostered among students for appropriate behavior, cutting down on time spent with discipline and enhancing instructional time.
- The use of data helped schools to identify, acknowledge, and celebrate strengths while focusing attention and resources on areas of need through student grouping.
- Instruction was aligned to the standards and assessments required by the state and/or the school district.
- Professional development for teachers was added in tandem with school-wide or curriculum changes. School leaders made sure that teachers felt like they had adequate materials, equipment, and training.
- Confidence and respect of parents was pursued by educators, primarily by improving the achievement of students. (p. 1)

### Further Questions and Related Issues

There are a number of issues surrounding ability grouping in general and in urban elementary school settings. Here are some of the questions that surfaced in development of this policy brief and require further research.

1. How much more expensive is flexible grouping, with its requirements of teacher planning for each group, use of differentiated materials of instruction, and assessment, and management of multiple small groups than whole class instruction that may not address differentiated student needs?
2. How can the impact of various grouping practices on student achievement be measured with changes in other important factors such as STAAR testing and larger class sizes due to budget cuts?
3. How effective is teacher professional development in regards to ability grouping?
4. How will beginning teachers, who typically receive mentorship from veteran teachers, learn important classroom practices such as the use of flexible grouping in urban schools that employ an increasingly inexperienced teacher workforce?
5. How will districts recruit and retain high-quality teachers for urban schools as financial stresses continue?
6. Is Response to Intervention (RTI) a form of ability grouping for children who are not performing at grade level in general education classrooms?

### Summary

Ability grouping is a very controversial topic that has caused and still causes much debate among educators, researchers, and citizens. What appears to be a harmless grouping method in elementary schools can have long-term detrimental effects on students, especially students in urban areas, if practice is not carefully designed and monitored. It is important that classroom practice support students in becoming productive citizens who can meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. Labeling

students undermines the confidence they need to growth as learners and thinkers. Unskilled and poorly prepared teachers may not have the skills to support student learning through flexible, responsive practices, such as flexible grouping, opening the door to the evils of the past for our most vulnerable children.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations will assist in phasing out curricular stratification:

- Phase out low-track classes where they exist.
- Take care to ensure rigor; providing all students with access to the best curriculum and teaching.
- Continue to phase out tracking until all stratification is eliminated.
- Make the high-track curriculum the default curriculum.
- Ensure that detracked classes are heterogeneously grouped.
- Provide students with the supports needed to be successful in challenging classes.
- Schedule all students in heterogeneous classes that provide primary instruction; schedule any necessary supplemental instruction separately. (Burriss, Welner, & Bezoza, 2010, pp. 19-21)

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