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THE EFFECTS OF HOMOGENEOUS ABILITY GROUPING ON LOW-LEVEL STUDENTS'
SELF-ESTEEM, CONFIDENCE, AND MOTIVATION IN READING

A Chapter Style Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Education – Reading Teacher/Reading Specialist

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THE EFFECTS OF HOMOGENEOUS ABILITY GROUPING ON LOW-LEVEL STUDENTS' SELF-ESTEEM, CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION IN READING

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We recommend acceptance of this thesis in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for

the degree of Master of Science in Education - Reading

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ABSTRACT

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Over the course of a five-week period, a quasi-experimental study was conducted in a fourth-grade classroom at Mount Horeb Intermediate Center, a public elementary school in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of homogeneous ability grouping on the self-esteem, motivation, and confidence of students who are considered low-achieving in reading. Students received explicit and implicit differentiated instruction in a small group setting as part of a literacy instruction block. Literacy instruction routines were established which allowed students to spend a considerable amount of time within their reading groups, to account for the most accurate experiences and data collection possible. Data collection included pre- and post-research student surveys, anecdotal records and recordings, teacher observations, and teaching staff survey feedback. Data analysis indicated that reading ability grouping practices, overall, positively affected student self-esteem, confidence, and motivation in reading.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

A few months ago, I was having a conversation with a colleague about why we decided

to become teachers. During the discussion, my colleague told me one of the driving reasons she

went into the teaching field was because she loved creating and organizing classroom content.

Knowing her, I wasn't surprised by this, but when she reversed the question on me, my answer

was different: I went into teaching because I want to help kids. I am sure that is what all teachers

say. However, although I realize the importance of academics, grades and content are not

automatically the first aspects I think of when I say I want to help students.

I have always been a sensitive, intuitive, emotional person. As a child (and as an adult),

this benefited me in some ways, but sometimes these traits made school a difficult place to be.

Small things overwhelmed me. I noticed even the most minor things people said or did. Off-hand

or sarcastic remarks made by teachers or friends affected me for weeks. Academically, I

struggled with math. I still remember the moment my second-grade teacher handed back a sheet

of subtraction problems I had done, with every single question circled in red pen. All she said

was, "Oh, Tina." I had a similar experience with a math test in fifth grade, which affected me so

much that I had to take a break in the hallway after I burst into tears upon the test being returned

to me. In sixth grade, I frequently received detention for not doing my math homework; not

intentionally, but because I didn't understand how to complete it. Around this time, I remember

being put in a group during math class that I, and other kids, referred to as the "dumb group." Of

course, I picked up on this right away. Every kid in that group knew why they were there. We knew we weren't "smart" or good at math. I continued to earn a place in this group for the rest of my time in middle school.

By high school, ability grouping was not commonplace anymore, but I struggled to complete the math classes that I needed to attend college. I do not recall any teacher ever framing the math groups as flexible places to learn, or even letting us know that we had room to improve. Rarely did I encounter a teacher that saw me as a person who could grow and develop with some intervention and support, at least not in a way that was obvious to me. Even my own family, with love and the best intentions at heart, told me that my strengths lay elsewhere. I felt stuck in this "low-level group" mentality.

Looking back at my own years in school, I remember most strongly the emotional impact those years had on me. I remember how I felt when I was placed in those math groups. I did not feel like I was able to learn better because I was surrounded by students of similar ability, which I think is often a way that teachers justify ability grouping; I felt like I was being pushed into a stereotype of the "low kid", at least in this particular subject area. It definitely had an affect on my self-esteem and confidence in school, and in turn, my motivation wavered heavily. I often thought, what is the point? I'm just not good at math. Other kids know it, my family knows it, and my teacher definitely knows it. In this aspect I know I was not the only one, as I saw this attitude in my peers, and I have seen it in my students as a teacher. This is a potentially dangerous attitude for students to have, not only because of the emotional repercussions, but also because most conceptual models of learning identify student motivation as a major determinant of learning (Bottoms, Hallinan, & Pallas, 2003).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Was I potentially being overly sensitive in my younger years? Definitely. Do I think my teachers had the intention to make me feel this way? Definitely not. As a teacher myself, I now know there are many things my teachers were doing, seeing, and acting upon that went completely over my young head. However, I will go to great lengths to make sure no student in my care feels the way that I did in those leveled math groups. Additionally, regardless of my personal feelings on the subject, it seems that ability grouping is only becoming more popular since my time in school. According to the 2013 Brown Center Report on American Education, it was reported that from 1998 to 2009 the percentage of fourth-grade teachers implementing ability-based reading groups increased from 28% to 71% (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). When my district joined this trend and made it known that our reading instruction would be slowly changing over to the "push-in" model, I became immediately concerned about the ability-grouping aspect of this model. With reading specialists "pushing in" to the general education classroom, we would now be required to group all of our students by ability level, based on their standardized test scores in reading. Additionally, our relatively new reading curriculum, Journeys, requires that guided reading groups be organized by scoring and ability.

As I stated earlier, my individual experiences with ability grouping are most likely skewed in some way, based on my own personal lens on the world around me as a child. I was not sure if my experience would be the norm or the exception; perhaps the positives outweigh the negatives, or ability grouping has transformed since the nineties and early 2000's. I had a negative experience; that does not mean everyone will. Changes in the culture and climate of education could mean that ability grouping is implemented totally differently than it was when I

was an elementary student, therefore offering a more positive and inclusive experience for students today. I am interested in what the research says, and interested in how my own students will fare emotionally in ability groups. Like most teachers, my students' personal and emotional well-being is something I consider greatly day-to-day. I create and adjust my instruction and classroom management around these considerations. Bolick, et al. (2016) stated,

"Significant instructional decisions like ability grouping should not be based on conjecture, but by empirical research that provides administrators and educators alike with the knowledge to determine whether ability grouping is an effective instructional practice to implement school-wide and/or individual classrooms for elementary students" (p. 40).

Therefore, based on my personal concerns and district initiatives, research into the effects of ability grouping on student self-esteem, confidence, and motivation seemed like an important choice for my thesis topic.

Research Question

To determine how my students are emotionally affected by ability grouping in reading, I chose to conduct a study which will allow me to explore the effects of grouping in my own classroom. To measure these effects, I will conduct pre- and post-research student interviews, record anecdotal notes during guided reading groups, study reading logs and other student work, and survey other staff who conduct reading ability grouping in their classrooms. I am hoping that these strategies, as well as studying past and current research, will help me better answer the question I posed in my research question: *What are the effects of homogeneous ability grouping in reading on low-level students' self-esteem, confidence, and motivation*

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ability grouping is a practice that many teachers already participate in, particularly at the elementary level. Within the past two decades, most primary-age educators have practiced at least one type of ability grouping during their time as a teacher (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Because of this finding, as well as the statistics showing a dramatic increase in ability grouping as an instructional tool, it is important that the proper practices and procedures of ability grouping are clearly defined. It is also prudent to discuss why educators might choose ability grouping over another instructional method, or why they might choose to forgo ability grouping altogether. Understanding the intentions behind ability grouping is essential to the inclusion or non-inclusion of these groups into classroom instructional techniques.

This literature review will discuss these important points, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous ability grouping, as this type of grouping is more applicable to the research question being posed. Finally, this review will also outline what research says about the effects of ability grouping on student self-esteem, confidence, and motivation. The literature on this subject is conflicted. It seems that the findings of many studies contradict one another on whether ability grouping is efficient for student growth and learning, whether academic or personal. It is clear that research on this topic is constantly evolving, and that many individuals are interested in attempting to research and identify which instructional tools are most efficient for student growth and progress. This literature review will discuss both sides of the information

available on ability grouping, and hopefully the research will continue to evolve and shed some light on current best practices.

Ability Grouping

Overview

Ability grouping is a type of educational method that distributes students into groups based on their academic achievement and progress (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Most American classrooms consist of one teacher and a group of students who are heterogeneous in ability. Heterogeneous means that a particular group of students retain mixed abilities, whereas homogeneous groups consist of students with similar abilities (Leonard, 2001). According to Castle et al. (2005), teachers typically have students with abilities varying by three to five years within one classroom. Additionally, classrooms almost always contain students with diverse backgrounds. To more efficiently meet the needs of all students in their classrooms, teachers might adapt their instruction and divide students into small instructional groups reflecting different levels of ability.

This practice is most typical in primary grades, especially in reading (Brown Center on Education Policy, 2013). However, the practice of ability grouping can be used for any subject or grade level. Districts usually analyze and determine student ability based on a variety of data, including in-class work and achievement, standardized test scores, individual testing trends over time, and anecdotal records or recommendations provided by the teacher. Educators use several of these data points to organize their students into similar ability groups. Due to time restrictions during a school day, many teachers find the practice of ability grouping to be a tool in assisting each student with what they need as efficiently as possible. Aside from grouping students by ability level for academic purposes, Elbaum et al. (2001) states that ability groups can create an

environment for teachers to provide students with opportunities to express what they know, receive individualized feedback, and participate in discussions with the teacher and other students in the group.

Uses

There are several reasons that an educator or administrative team may decide that ability grouping practices should be implemented in their classroom, school, or district. The purpose of within-class, homogeneous ability grouping is to improve individual student achievement and reduce the achievement gap between students through differentiation of instruction (Lleras & Rangel, 2009). According to Ward (1987), ability groups provide review, practice, and enrichment opportunities that effectively meet the diverse learning needs of students in a heterogeneous classroom. Ability groups provide a more individualized learning experience that may not be possible with whole-group instruction. In the same vein, teachers may decide to use ability grouping to increase student engagement. The total student on-task time is higher in ability groups versus in whole class instruction; in particular, low ability students spend much less time off-task in ability groups because they spend less time waiting for instructions and feedback and more time engaging with the teacher (Ward, 1987). Finally, ability grouping may be used to expose students to a variety of learning techniques. Small groups are dissimilar to whole group instruction in that they do not involve solely direct instruction from the teacher. Students learn from the teacher as well as one another by gathering information, problem solving, and coordinating with other group members. Just like with adults, this group interaction can help students approach information and learning from new perspectives (Ward, 1987).

There are non-academic reasons that teachers may choose to implement ability groups in their classrooms. One of these reasons would be to increase and facilitate social interaction

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among students. Collaborative learning is on the rise, and this type of learning can offer students exposure to new ways of thinking. When grouping students to facilitate collaborative learning, it is important to draw on the strengths of diversity (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2013). Many proponents of ability grouping anticipate that this type of instruction will promote greater trust and acceptance among students of different social classes, races, and sexes (Ward, 1987). Students are given the chance to closely interact with other children that they otherwise may not have. Additionally, teachers may ability group in order to increase self-esteem and motivation among students. The belief behind this is that some students, particularly lower-achieving students, may feel self-conscious or unwilling to share ideas or participate when they perceive that other students around them are more skilled or knowledgeable. As stated by Manning (2007), if the student is surrounded by classmates of similar ability, it is possible they may be more comfortable participating and contributing, which can foster a sense of belonging and increase self-esteem and motivation. Furthermore, when students demonstrate growth as the year goes on, there is tangible evidence of this as they move between groups, as long as grouping remains flexible. Regardless of where students may be academically, allowing them to feel like their progress is being recognized can also be a factor in increasing self-esteem and motivation.

Implementation at the Elementary Level

While ability grouping can be used as a stand-alone learning tool, typically a teacher will instruct a whole group lesson and then arrange students into small groups based on a few different factors, such as academic performance or reading levels (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). The educator will then guide these homogeneous groups in a manner that caters to both student ability level and the material already presented to the heterogeneous group. For example, after a whole group lesson on the different types of clouds, the teacher could supplement student

learning within small, homogeneous ability groups using differentiated reading materials on clouds. The prompting, modeling, and pacing used within these groups should also be differentiated to meet a varying array of needs (Lleras & Rangel, 2009). Students work together and circle back to the material that was taught in class to reinforce the concepts learned. Higher-level groups may work on enrichment activities, while lower-level groups may benefit from teacher modeling and re-checking for understanding.

However teachers decide to implement their ability groups, in order for them to be effective, it is crucial that they adapt the material to the needs of each child (Kulik & Kulik, 1996). Additionally, teachers must be able to add advanced content and adjust pacing for students who are ready to move forward. Flexibility within ability grouping is absolutely key, and grouping should never be static. Teachers should assess students frequently to determine growth, and redistribute students to different groups based on their results (Tieso, 2003). Failing to modify and differentiate instruction on a constant basis, or declining to transition students when necessary, could mean that the learning gains that are possible will fail to transpire (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2013).

Advantages of Homogeneous Ability Grouping

Individualized Instruction

Ability Level. As previously mentioned, one of the advantages of ability grouping is that, if implemented correctly, teachers are able to direct the lessons they are creating and teaching towards the specific ability levels and needs of the students in their class (Kintz, 2011). This is invaluable in a world of increasing curriculum demands and required instructional minutes. Teachers can use this individualized instruction time to their advantage, to meet more student needs in a shorter amount of time. A particularly astute quote from Raveaud (2005) states it well:

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"It would be absolutely absurd to expect all children to tackle the same degree of difficulty as it is to give them the same size shoes." Grouping students by ability level gives them a chance to learn in a way that is most suitable to their current skills, with the materials that are most appropriate, at a pace that is convenient for their personal growth. Teachers are able to closely monitor student performance and continuously adjust their instruction accordingly.

Pacing. Another advantage to ability grouping regarding individualized instruction is that students can work through classroom material at their own pace. Students struggling in a particular subject area may feel less overwhelmed with material that is too difficult for them. Conversely, accelerated learners may feel better fulfilled with their overall education and personal achievement (Kintz, 2011). As students advance or decrease in their academic achievement and learning, they have the opportunity to move in and out of ability groups, at a pace that works well for the student (Matthews et al., 2013). This removes any unnecessary pressure or anxiety a student may face when feeling as if they need to "catch up" with their peers or risk being left without a thorough understanding of the material.

Teacher Reflection. As teachers reflect on their differentiated instruction methods and adjust accordingly, individual students benefit. When utilizing ability groups, teachers are allowed flexibility in the management and modification of lessons (Leonard, 2001). Correct implementation compels teachers to consistently inspect their methods and analyze whether they are conducting their instruction in a way that maximizes student growth, both academic and personal. Paratore (2002) suggests that teachers of classrooms that practice flexible ability grouping may be more compelled to extend their own knowledge about how children learn. She goes on to state that "in classrooms where flexible grouping is effectively implemented, teachers have the opportunity to learn and study together, to problem solve, and to share new ideas." This

is, quite obviously, beneficial to all students who will learn under these teachers. It could also benefit staff, as they are given more opportunities to learn new instructional techniques, and work collaboratively with other teachers to share ideas and maximize their knowledge of best practices.

Learning and Growth Opportunities

   Collaborative Learning. Increased peer interaction is a strong benefit of ability grouping (Elbaum et al., 2001). Small groups allow children to collaborate with other students more closely than they might during whole group instruction. Research demonstrates that collaborative work encourages improvement in both academic achievement and collaborative skills. Collaboration and cooperation with other students provides children a chance to put into practice vital life skills such as problem-solving, perspective-taking, critical thinking, and engaged learning (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2013). Students learn to cooperate with others when given group tasks, especially those that require each student to complete a different part of the task. In turn, individual effort increases due to the feeling of being a vital member of a group (Ward, 1987). Gillies (2003) found that students working together are more motivated to achieve than they are when doing the work on their own. Jobs completed as a group may serve as a learning incentive for both academic knowledge and interpersonal skills. Additionally, because students are grouped with other children who have similar levels of knowledge and ability, as well as similar learning goals, they can challenge each other to demonstrate growth and progress (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2013). Small groups not only allow for collaborative learning among members of the group, but also allow students to engage in different types of learning that may not be possible with a large group. Examples of this may include reciprocal teaching, the use of visual modalities such as whiteboards or diagrams, partner reading, or hands-on partner games

and activities (Elbaum et al., 2001). Teachers know that appealing to a variety of learning styles is crucial to reaching the learning potential of all students.

Socioemotional Benefits. Ability grouping can have benefits beyond academics. These groups can foster invaluable socioemotional skills that children will use for a lifetime by providing opportunities to improve interpersonal functioning and a better understanding of working relationships (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2013). Research conducted by Adams-Byers, et al. (2004), Kuriloff & Reichart (2003), and Niehart (2007) suggests that ability grouping results in students having a more positive attitude toward school subjects, healthy social relationships, and a higher motivation to learn new things. Additionally, small groups can promote the type of intergroup understanding and relationships that are crucial to establishing a classroom environment of caring and mutual respect (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2013). Students themselves can learn to become peer tutors and teachers within their groups, which not only gives them a more well-rounded view of the material, but also encourages peer learning and allows members of the group to interact with each other in new ways (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Reciprocal teaching is a method that teaches students to take turns assuming the role of the leader and guiding instruction (Elbaum et al., 2016). This practice calls for children to exercise and refine their communication skills, as well as their listening and direction-following capabilities.

Disadvantages of Homogeneous Ability Grouping

Effects on Low-Achieving Students

While there are obvious advantages to ability grouping, there are some disadvantages that must be taken into consideration. One concerning, disadvantageous trend in the research on ability grouping is that students in lower-level ability groups may not be receiving the same

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quality or variation of instruction as students in higher-level groups. Bottoms et al. (2003) report that students in higher-ability groups likely achieve at a greater level than students in lower-ability groups; this is apparently due to the finding that in higher-ability groups, teachers spend less time dealing with disciplinary issues and therefore have more time for instruction. Furthermore, students in high-ability groups were found to generally be more deliberate and determined about learning and demonstrated a more positive attitude towards school and their group members than their peers placed in lower-level groups. Students in these lower-level groups were shown to be more inclined to display behaviors that detract from learning (Bottoms et al., 2003).

Another disadvantage that comes with ability grouping low-achieving students is the research conclusion that these students may receive less learning opportunities and challenges than their peers. A research report by Archer, et al. (2018) on teacher experiences and approaches with low-attaining students states that ability grouping appears to potentially limit learning opportunities for these students. They suggest that the different pedagogical practices used for lower-level groups might unintentionally create a barrier for lower-level students to develop as learners. According to Chorzempa & Graham (2006), "students in lower ability groups spend more time involved in non-instructional activities, are less likely to be asked critical comprehension questions, and are given fewer opportunities to select their own reading material." Additionally, in lower-ability groups, teachers tend to praise the most minor of accomplishments, which portrays an attitude of being satisfied with basic performance (Bottoms et al., 2003). Additionally, students in lower-level groups may also be more inclined to label themselves as inferior to students in higher-level groups, and this lack of self-confidence can in turn lead to reduced academic performance (Barrington, 2018). This attitude can also create a

type of "self-fulfilling prophecy" for lower-level students, causing them to create an environment of self-sabotage and remain stagnant in their achievements (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2013).

Teacher-Dependent Success

Because the correct implementation of ability grouping is so crucial to their proper functioning, another disadvantage to this method is that it relies heavily on individual teachers to research, plan, and instruct small groups accurately. In order for ability groups to work as they are intended, teachers need to understand the many facets of ability grouping and how they affect their students academically, socially, and emotionally. Teachers are responsible for determining the degree in which students should be challenged to demonstrate growth (Barrington, 2018). They need to be acutely aware of their students' abilities, achievements, skills, and interests (Gentry & MacDougall, 2009). Importance needs to be placed on building relationships with students, especially at the start of a school year. Unfortunately, this is not always seen as necessary or essential, and teachers may feel rushed or pressured into placing more emphasis on academics than student-teacher relationships.

Additionally, throughout the research on this topic, one finding that remains consistent throughout is that flexibility in ability grouping is crucial in allowing them to work effectively. In order for groups to remain flexible, responsibility shifts completely to the teacher. They must be able and willing to consistently assess and reassess students and, if necessary, reassign them to groups to match their growth and skills (Tieso, 2003). Along the same lines, effectiveness of ability grouping is made easier by ensuring that teachers have the proper resources to implement these groups, including the correct materials, assistance from paraprofessionals or other teachers, the space and time to conduct group instruction, and adequate planning periods (Center for

Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2013). Without proper education, training, materials, and time, teachers may struggle to properly implement ability groups, which could in turn reduce their effectiveness on student learning and growth.

Accuracy and Reliability Concerns

In some research on this topic, the accuracy and reliability of the student placement process within groups is called into question. Typically, school districts rely on a combination of many different aspects of a student's academic performance to sort them into a certain ability group, including in-class performance, standardized test scores, and teacher recommendations. In some situations, parent recommendations may even be taken into consideration, as well as recommendations from counselors or social workers (Bottoms et al., 2003). Studies have shown that regardless of the amount of data points used, the criteria used to assign students to ability groups may not always be accurate in terms of homogeneous abilities. Students are not robots, and therefore, sorting them into groups remains largely subjective and could mean that a student is placed in a group where the material is far easier or far more difficult than their actual abilities. For this reason, the student may not learn as efficiently as they would in a different group (Bottoms et al., 2003).

Other studies have shown that children in higher-ability groups are more likely to attain higher test scores and overall academic achievement than children in lower-level groups, due to the aforementioned notion that students in higher-level groups are given a more challenging and engaging curriculum and a better quality of instruction (Paratore, 2002). It is no wonder that students who are more immersed in an academic environment, and presented with greater challenges and learning opportunities, would benefit more from ability grouping than students who aren't given those same opportunities. If the research is accurate, and continues trending in

this manner, it may be difficult for districts to justify beginning or continuing a practice that is one-sided and unreliable for certain learners.

<div align="center">**Effects on Self-Esteem, Confidence, and Motivation**</div>

Self-Esteem and Confidence

The opinions of researchers on the effects of ability grouping on student self-esteem and confidence are varying and conflicted. Some researchers have found that ability grouping has a mostly positive effect on student self-esteem and confidence at school, as well as an increased positive attitude toward their education, better social relationships, and a more positive self-concept (Kuriloff & Reichart, 2003). Castle et al. (2005) found that flexible ability grouping generated increased self-esteem and self-confidence in lower-level learners in particular, according to the teachers participating in the study. Similarly, in another study conducted on this topic, the majority of the students involved in the study felt that the small group atmosphere had a positive effect on their self-confidence, regardless of their ability level, reporting that they felt supported and assisted by their group members even if the task did not call for it. This study also states that through collaborative group work, all students can gain a more stable sense of who they are, and what their learning capacities may be (Chiriac, 2014). Kintz (2011) states that because students are working with others of similar ability, grouping prevents lower-level students from having their self-esteem damaged due to their work being compared with higher ability students. Neihart (2007) found that generally, homogeneous grouping also has positive effects on the self-esteem and self-image of high-ability and gifted children, due to the fact that they are able to move forward with challenging and advanced work at a quicker pace. This study also found positive effects on high-ability students' emotional and social well-being.

However, Neihart's study does note that this is not the case for every high-ability student, and it is mentioned that while the results of the study were mostly positive, ability grouping produced neutral effects for some students and even damaging effects for a few others. Kulik & Kulik (1992) found that ability grouping had a positive effect on the self-esteem of lower-ability students, but a negative effect on the self-esteem of average- and high-ability learners. Manning (2007) suggests that teachers avoid the use of ability grouping to preserve student self-concept and self-esteem, but does note that maintaining flexibility in groups may reduce the negative effects. Finally, several studies report that the effects of ability grouping on self-esteem and confidence are unclear, as grouping seems to affect students differently with no one "right answer." Abadzi (1984) writes about a study conducted in a fourth-grade American classroom that compared student self-esteem and academic achievement in ability grouping. The study found that from the beginning to the end of fourth grade, no significant differences in self-esteem were noted, regardless of whether academic achievement increased or decreased. Niehart (2007), Vogl & Preckel (2014), and Leonard (2001), all found inconclusive results as well, finding that ability grouping can be beneficial to the self-esteem of some students, while damaging to others. Generally, research is inconclusive, showing that there are no clear answers or evidence to suggest that ability grouping is always positive or always harmful to student self-esteem or self-confidence (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016).

Motivation

While the research on the effects of ability grouping on student motivation is more scant, it is generally more succinct and positive than the research conclusions on student self-esteem and confidence. According to the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2013), ability grouping can increase intrinsic motivation by fostering a positive connection with other

group members, cultivating a sense of self-determination, and promoting feelings of personal and interpersonal competence. In support of this, Adams-Byers et al. (2004) found that ability grouping resulted in high motivation among group members of all ability levels, and other studies echo this finding. Ward (1987) states that students are more intrinsically motivated when working in a group, because the sense of belonging and the perception of being a necessity to the group are great cultivators of motivation. Chiriac (2004) also found that being a member of a small group is more motivating to students in that they were better prepared to learn and dedicated more meaningful time and effort when working with others.

A study conducted by Eccles & Jussim (1992) links student motivation to teacher expectations. This study claims that teacher expectations have an immediate influence on student self-esteem and self-image, which in turn affect student motivation. Teachers who are supportive and have high but realistic expectations for all their student groups, regardless of ability level, may notice an increase in student motivation to succeed. This study also asserts that assigning students to groups that challenge their personal learning and help form and support future goals increases their motivation to learn. When given the opportunity to make decisions, assess the work of other group members, exercise cooperative learning opportunities, and coproduce work with other students in a group, students show higher achievement and motivation than students who are given less of these opportunities (Bottoms et al., 2003). Other studies, like the one conducted by Anderman et al. (2006), note that students show the most motivation when their classroom and school encourage the understanding and mastery of skills and knowledge, while school environments that focus on competing for grades and demonstrating high ability can decrease student motivation.

Given the above information, it is plausible to suggest that teachers play a large role in the level of motivation their students display in ability groups. The effects of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" conjecture outlined by some studies support this, suggesting that teachers should hold all of their students to high expectations, regardless of their ability level. It is also plausible to note that teachers should be offering a wide variety of instructional materials and meaningful learning opportunities, even among low-level groups where educators may be inclined to use more basic materials. Finally, teachers should focus on individual successes and growth to promote student motivation, rather than creating the goal of all students becoming a part of a high-level group.

Summary

There is no question that ability grouping is on the rise as an instructional tool in American classrooms. Teachers and administrators may find several benefits to adding ability grouping practices to their instructional routines, including ease of differentiation, increased student engagement, increased socioemotional benefits, and the ability to meet a wider variety of individual student needs. However, it is important to remember that ability grouping is not a "one size fits all" technique for children (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Continued research is needed in order to determine the true effectiveness of ability grouping on student growth and wellness. Studies both endorse and oppose ability grouping, and most found the effects on student growth are largely individual. Another discovery remained clear throughout many studies: it is important for teachers to understand and implement flexible grouping within their classroom. Remaining stagnant almost always produces a negative effect on students, especially lower-level students. Allowing groups to remain fluid is a critical determining factor in whether

or not ability groups are a positive experience for both student and teacher, and this fluidity

allows for the most growth and progress when using this method of instruction.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study was to evaluate the effects that flexible, homogeneous ability grouping had on low-level reading students' emotional well-being. I wanted to see if my low-level reading students were helped or hindered personally by this instructional method. Through research, I intended to discover whether or not ability grouping increases, decreases, or has no effect on low-level student self-esteem, confidence, and motivation in reading. Over the course of my research, the following question guided my exploration: *What effects do homogeneous, flexible reading ability groups have on lower-level student's self-esteem, confidence, and motivation?*

Context of the Study

This study was conducted during the first semester of the 2019-2020 school year in my fourth-grade classroom at Mount Horeb Intermediate Center in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. Mount Horeb Intermediate Center is a public school, with 571 students currently enrolled. Of those students, 90.5 percent are white, 3.7 percent are Hispanic, 3.5 percent are two or more races, 1.8 percent are African American, and 0.5 percent are Asian. The participants of the study were ten fourth-grade students, who received small group instruction based on their ability levels four times per week. Students were placed in small groups of five based on their standardized test scores in reading, as well as by teacher and specialist recommendations.

Small group instruction took place as part of a one-hour and forty-five minute literacy instruction block. In accordance with our daily schedule, small group instruction took place in the morning, with students either participating in their assigned small group or engaging in independent reading work. Due to time and schedule constraints, small groups did not meet every day of the week. Students who were identified as at-risk or low-level readers met with classroom teachers or a reading specialist four times a week. Other student groups (those not participating in the study) met two to three times a week.

During their reading groups, students worked closely with both the teacher and other students in the group. They participated in various reading exercises such as fluency practice, text analyzation, comprehension strategies, questioning, summarizing, partner reading, reciprocal teaching, and other reading strategy activities. While engaging in the reading content, students were guided by the teacher using both explicit and implicit instruction.

Description of Participants

Students in the two lowest-ability reading groups in my literacy class were chosen to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. Students from both my classroom and my partner teacher's classroom were involved in this study, as we combine our students during literacy instruction using a workshop approach. To be considered "low-level" or "low-ability" readers, students scored at least one grade level below the fourth-grade fall testing benchmark in reading, with some students scoring two or more grade levels below. Three of the ten students were identified as Tier 3 readers, who received additional instruction from a reading specialist. The seven other participants were identified as Tier 2 readers, meaning they required increased instruction minutes in reading. All students' parents/guardians were notified of the study and research within the first week of school. With parental consent obtained, all students in both

groups chose to participate in the study. The participants were ten fourth-grade students; six boys and four girls. Nine out of the ten students were white; one student was Hispanic. All students were English proficient.

Procedures and Data Collection Plan

This study, including all procedures and data collection, took place within my classroom, following a typical literacy routine. During literacy instruction, the classroom was shared with my co-teacher, Annalyce Dower, and a building reading specialist, Shirlanie Heydenrych. I collaborated with Mrs. Heydenrych during my research instruction, as she assisted with the lowest reading group, who are all Tier 3 readers.

Literacy block routines were established within the first week of school, so students were familiar with the procedures early on in the school year. This allowed the most time for both my research and for students to begin receiving reading interventions. The first step toward evaluating how ability grouping affected my students was to divide them into their respective ability groups. In order to do this, the reading specialist and I reviewed student test data we received from the spring of the previous year, as well as evaluated student work completed at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. After groups were formed, we also evaluated their fall (2019) test scores, to solidify our choice of grouping.

Once the reading groups were solidified, students began practicing routines related to literacy instruction. Routines were practiced for several days throughout the first week of literacy instruction, as solidifying routines was an important part of ensuring students were prepared, engaged, and successful in their learning. Awareness of classroom routines was also important in establishing that the data collected from this study is as accurate as possible; distracted, consistently unprepared students will produce inaccurate results. The literacy instruction block

was conducted in a workshop format. We began our instruction as a whole group. After whole group lesson instruction was completed, we began our workshop arrangement. While some students participated in small groups with a teacher or reading specialist, other students engaged in independent reading or writing work, supervised by both a teacher and a paraprofessional. In order to strengthen these routines in the first week of literacy instruction, students practiced preparing, transitioning, and appropriate participatory behavior in order to prepare themselves for our literacy routine. After the first week of literacy block instruction was completed, students were expected to know and observe our classroom routines as we transitioned into literacy each day.

Once reading groups were in full swing, I began my data collection and processes. Working with the two lowest reading groups, I used several different methods of data collection. One of the first methods I implemented was a pre-research student reading survey (Appendix A). Kear and McKenna (1990) state that heavy emphasis on student proficiency in reading largely ignores the important role of children's attitudes towards reading. Beard et al. (2005) affirm that assessment of students' reading attitudes is an essential part of a thorough literacy program. I believe one efficient way to measure student attitude is to ask them their opinions directly. This survey, which was taken by all students in the two lowest groups, asked age-appropriate questions such as whether or not the student believes they are a confident reader, how being in a reading group makes them feel, and whether or not they read at home with their family. Students completed this survey with no prompting or assistance, and I retained copies for comparison purposes at the end of the study. Throughout the study, I took anecdotal notes using the recording sheet Appendix C. According to MacFarland (2008), anecdotal records provide a meaningful and detailed view of a child's personal development. They can be used to inform

teacher planning and instruction, track student development, and even enhance parental

communication. A few times a week, as I met with the two lowest reading groups, I recorded

notes on general student attitude, participation levels, effort levels, and positive or negative

emotional reactions to group activities, meant for analyzation at the end of the study.

In addition to these data collection tools, I studied, collected, and retained student work

from the individuals involved in the study. In another attempt to efficiently gauge student

attitudes toward reading, I analyzed this work, including their daily reading logs (Appendix D).

Furthermore, a few weeks into the study, I asked a few colleagues who conduct ability groups

within their classrooms to fill out the staff survey I created regarding grouping in reading

(Appendix E). Dochy et al. (2015) present that positive teacher collaboration and interaction, as I

accomplished with my survey, benefits students on many levels, including improved student

learning and performance and a more positive school and classroom climate. Since improved

student performance and wellness is ultimately what this study is aiming for, I evaluated staff

feedback, which helped me come to a conclusion regarding my research question. Finally, at the

end of the research period, I asked the students participating in the study to fill out a post-

research survey (Appendix B). This survey was similar to the pre-research survey, for

comparison purposes, but also contained a few questions that differ from the pre-research survey.

Analyzing and comparing the answers between the pre- and post-research surveys also

contributed to answering my research question.

By implementing the above data collection methods over the course of the research

period, I am able to see a clearer picture of how ability grouping in reading affects the emotional

well-being of lower-level readers. The variety of collection methods offered a wide array of

insight into the personal attitudes of the participating students. The anecdotal records, along with

the completed staff surveys, provided observations from another source on the effects of ability

grouping.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to identify the emotional effects that homogeneous ability grouping has on low-level readers. Ten fourth-grade students participated in the study, all of whom were identified as "low-level" or "low-ability" readers in accordance with student test scores and work evaluation performed by a teacher and a reading specialist. Instructional groups were formed based on these findings. Students were observed in a classroom setting four times a week, while participating in reading groups of five students each.

Throughout the research period, data were collected to examine the effects of these ability groups on student well-being. As described in Chapter 3, data collection took place in a variety of formats, including pre- and post-research surveys, observations, anecdotal records, and teacher staff feedback. This chapter will present the research question investigated, followed by the results obtained throughout the data-collection period. Results obtained from student behavior and performance, as well as from student feedback via the survey results, will be presented first. Data from the beginning of the research period will be compared to data from the end of the research period in order to most accurately convey the effects on student well-being. This data presentation will be followed by the results obtained from teacher and staff observations and feedback.

Research Question

The research question that guided the investigation and the data-collection was as follows:

What are the effects of homogeneous ability grouping in reading on low-level students' self-esteem, confidence, and motivation?

To answer this question, student performance and feedback from throughout the course of the research period was considered. One area of student data that was researched and analyzed was the pre- and post-research student survey results. The pre-research survey was given to the participating group of students at the end of the first week of school, while the post-research survey was given to the same group of students the week after the research period concluded. Both surveys contained the same questions.

The findings of these surveys were compared to identify any themes or trends regarding the effects on student self-esteem, confidence, and motivation in reading. Select questions from the student surveys were identified as being of stronger importance to the research. These questions were identified as being of stronger importance because they provide the most relevant insight into student evaluation of the three emotional components identified in the research question: self-esteem, motivation, and confidence.

However, all data obtained from the surveys is usable, and if it is not included in a table, will be provided and interpreted in another capacity. Below, several tables will display student feedback from these identified questions from both the pre-survey and the post-survey. The tables will indicate if there was any change present from student answers in the pre-survey versus the post-survey. Additionally, it will be identified within the table if the question being presented is relevant to either self-esteem, confidence, motivation, or a combination of the three.

Finally, the tables will indicate whether or not the change showed a positive improvement in

student feedback, a disimprovement, or no change in their feedback from pre-to post-survey.

Table 4.1 describes the data for Question 1, Confidence.

Analyzing Student Data

Student Survey Data Response 1				
Question 1 (Confidence): On a scale from 1-10, how much do you like reading in a group? (1 = not at all, 5 = I kind of like it, 10 = I love it!)				
Student	**Pre-research rating**	**Post-research rating**	**Change Present**	**Improvement, disimprovement, or no change**
1	4	6	Yes	Improvement
2	10	10	No	No change
3	8	10	Yes	Improvement
4	1	5	Yes	Improvement
5	5	7.5	Yes	Improvement
6	4	4	No	No change
7	5	6	Yes	Improvement
8	3	9	Yes	Improvement
9	5	10	Yes	Improvement
10	9	10	Yes	Improvement

Table 4.1 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 1 Results*

Table 4.2 describes the data for Question 2, Self-Esteem.

Student Survey Data Response 2				
Question 2 (Confidence, Self-Esteem): I feel confident when asked to read aloud in my reading group. (Yes, No, or Sometimes)				
Student	Pre-research	Post-research	Change Present	Improvement, disimprovement, or no change
1	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Improvement
2	No	Sometimes	Yes	Improvement
3	Yes	Yes	No	No change
4	No	No	No	No change
5	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Improvement
6	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Improvement
7	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	No change
8	No	Sometimes	Yes	Improvement
9	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	No change
10	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Improvement

Table 4.2 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 2 Results*

The results of survey questions one and two showed that most students showed some improved confidence in regards to reading groups. All but two participants demonstrated at least some improvement in their comfortability and confidence with reading among other students in a group, and over half of the participants felt more confident reading aloud after the research period than they did before. The other students surveyed did not necessarily feel less confident reading aloud, their answers simply demonstrated no change in their confidence.

Other questions in the survey not included in the tables support the amount of improvement in confidence displayed in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. For example, when asked in the

post-research survey if they felt like they belonged in their reading group, Student 1 answered,

"Yes, because nobody will judge me." Students 3 and 5 had similar answers, stating that other

students include them in their group discussions. Students 8 and 9 shared that "everyone in my

group is at the same level" and that other students in their group treat them well.

Table 4.3 describes the data for Question 3, Self-Esteem.

Student Survey Data Response 3			
Question 3 (Self-Esteem): I feel comfortable participating in my reading group and sharing ideas with my group members. (Yes, No, or Sometimes)			
Student	**Pre-research**	**Post-research**	**Change Present?**	**Improvement, disimprovement, or no change**
1	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	No change
2	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Improvement
3	Yes	Yes	No	No change
4	Sometimes	Yes	No	Improvement
5	Yes	Yes	No	No change
6	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Improvement
7	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	No change
8	No	Sometimes	Yes	Improvement
9	Yes	Yes	No	No change
10	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Improvement

Table 4.3 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 3 Results*

Table 4.4 describes the data for Question 4, Self-Esteem.

Student Survey Data Response 4				
Question 4 (Self-Esteem): I am happy and comfortable during reading class and in my reading group. (All of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or never)				
Student	**Pre-research**	**Post-research**	**Change Present?**	**Improvement, disimprovement, or no change**
1	Some of the time	All of the time	Yes	Improvement
2	Some of the time	Most of the time	Yes	Improvement
3	All of the time	All of the time	No	No change
4	Most of the time	Most of the time	No	No change
5	All of the time	All of the time	No	No change
6	Some of the time	All of the time	Yes	Improvement
7	Some of the time	Some of the time	No	No change
8	Some of the time	Most of the time	Yes	Improvement
9	Most of the time	Most of the time	No	No change
10	Some of the time	All of the time	Yes	Improvement

Table 4.4 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 4 Results*

Table 4.5 describes the data for Question 5, Self-Esteem.

Student Survey Data Response 5				
Question 5 (Self-Esteem): I feel like my reading group classmates respect me. (Yes or No)				
Student	**Pre-research**	**Post-research**	**Change Present**	**Improvement, disimprovement, or no change**
1	Yes	Yes	No	No change
2	Yes	Sometimes (student elected to write in this answer)	Yes	Disimprovement
3	Yes	Yes	No	No change
4	Yes	Sometimes (student elected to write in this answer)	Yes	Disimprovement
5	Yes	Yes	No	No change
6	Sometimes (student elected to write in this answer)	Yes	Yes	Improvement
7	Yes	Yes	No	No change
8	Yes	Yes	No	No change
9	Yes	Yes	No	No change
10	Sometimes (student elected to write in this answer)	Yes	Yes	Improvement

Table 4.5 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 5 Results*

In terms of students feeling comfortable, happy, and respected in their reading groups,

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 display an improvement in these areas between the pre- and post-research

period for at least half of the students surveyed. Other students displayed no change in these

areas, but there were no disimprovements for any student surveyed. The results of Table 4.5 are

not as conclusive, as they display a variety of conclusions regarding whether or not students feel

respected by others in their reading groups. The most common finding was that there was no

change in student perception on this matter. However, this question had the highest amount of

negative change (disimprovement) as compared to any other question reported from the surveys.

Table 4.6 describes the data for Question 6, Motivation.

	Student Survey Data Response 6			
Question 6 (Motivation): I feel motivated to complete my reading group work with my best effort. (All the time, most of the time, some of the time, never)				
Student	**Pre-research**	**Post-research**	**Change Present?**	**Improvement, disimprovement, or no change**
1	Some of the time	Most of the time	Yes	Improvement
2	Most of the time	Some of the time	Yes	Disimprovement
3	All the time	All the time	No	No change
4	All the time	All the time	No	No change
5	All the time	All the time	No	No change
6	Some of the time	All the time	Yes	Improvement
7	Some of the time	Most of the time	Yes	Improvement

8	All the time	All the time	No	No change
9	All the time	All the time	No	No change
10	Never	All the time	Yes	Improvement

Table 4.6 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 6 Results*

Table 4.7 describes the data for Question 7, Motivation.

Student Survey Data Response 7		
Question 7 (Motivation): What makes you feel motivated in reading? (Open-answer)		
Student	**Pre-research**	**Post-research**
1	"Reading to myself."	"I get to be with other kids."
2	"Nothing, because it's hard to focus.	"When my teacher works with us."
3	"My friends."	"I love reading."
4	"A comfortable spot to read."	"A good reading group book."
5	"My friends helping me."	"I want to be a good student."
6	"My friends."	"My friends."
7	"Sometimes I feel like I can do it."	"I am with other people."
8	"Reading by myself."	"Reading to a teacher."
9	"Finding something I can read."	"Getting a long book done."
10	"When I can read it."	"When my teacher tells me I did good."

Table 4.7 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 7 Results*

Table 4.6 shows that most students started off the research period already motivated to complete their work to the best of their ability most or all of the time. This led to several students demonstrating no change in the post-survey answers, as they had already indicated that they are intrinsically motivated to do well in their groups before group meetings even began. Table 4.7 is not useful when trying to determine a concrete, evidence-based change in student attitude or opinion, but the results may be interpreted anecdotally.

Table 4.8 describes the data for Question 8, regarding family reading time.

Student Survey Data Response 8		
Question 8: Does your family read together? (Yes or No)		
Student	**Pre-Research**	**Post-Research**
1	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	Yes
3	Sometimes	Yes
4	No	No
5	Yes	Yes
6	Sometimes	Sometimes
7	No	Yes
8	Yes	Yes
9	No	Yes
10	Yes	Yes

Table 4.8 *Student Reading Survey Research Question 8 Results*

The question in Table 4.8 was included to see if there was a change in families reading together at home over the course of the research period. In the pre-research survey, 7 out of 10 students indicated that they read with their families at home at least some of the time. In the post-research survey, 9 out of 10 students indicated that they read at home with their families at least some of the time. Obviously, the changes displayed in this table could be attributed to many factors, as the reasoning for the changes was not researched.

The following figures will display data based on student group discussions, retained and analyzed using an observational notes form (Appendix C) during student ability group sessions, as well as with live recordings of student comments. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 will display data based

on the incidences of positive and negative self-talk among group members, as well as verbal
encouragement and discouragement of members in the group other than themselves.

Ability Group Discussions By Week: Group 1 (Students 1-5)
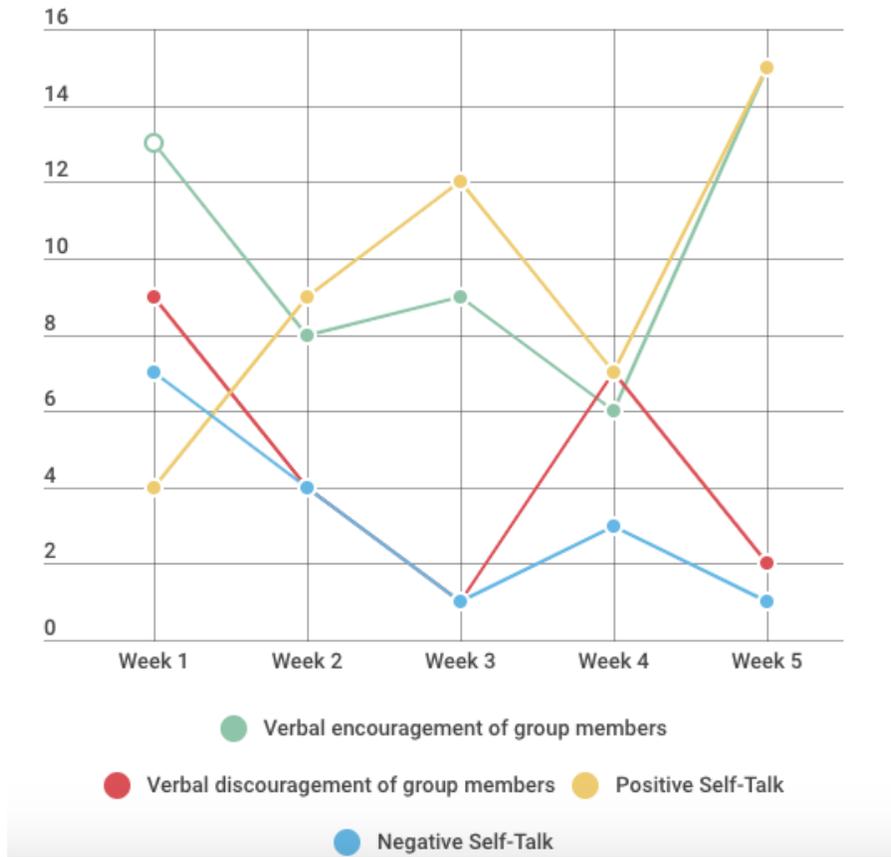
Figure 4.1 *Ability group 1 verbal discussion comments by week*

Figure 4.1 shows that positive self-talk among the students in group 1increased nearly
four-fold from week one to week five. Verbal encouragement in this group started out strong,
dipped between weeks two and four, but ultimately aligned with positive self-talk with 15
instances per week during week five. Additionally, verbal discouragement ended at an overall
decrease. However, the figure shows that an increase in verbal discouragement was paired with a
decrease in positive self-talk and and an increase in negative self-talk.

Ability Group Discussions by Week: Group 2 (Students 6-10)
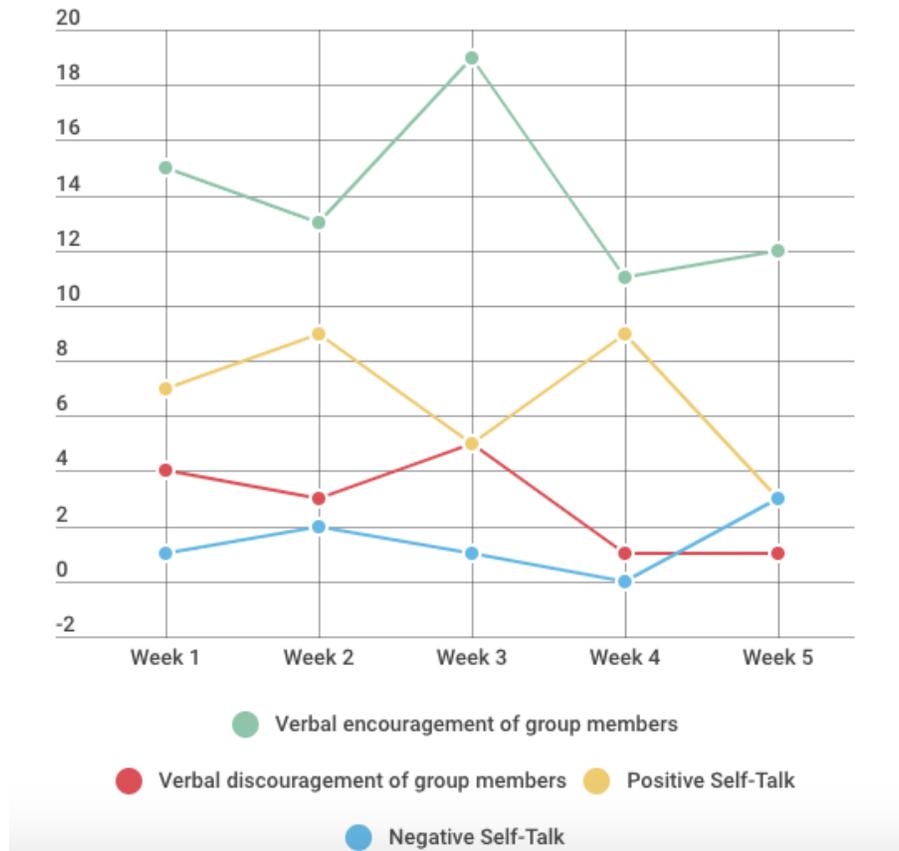
Figure 4.2: *Ability group 2 verbal discussion comments by week*

Figure 4.2 displays a high instance of verbal encouragement of group members, however negative self-talk increased overall by week five. Students in this group had relatively low instances of verbal discouragement of others, and varying instances of positive self-talk.

A final piece of student data that was analyzed was a record of missing and incomplete assignments given during the five weeks of the study. The following figures account for students in both groups. This data was retained in order to support conclusions regarding student

motivation in ability groups. Only assignments given within the reading ability groups were
included in the data.

Missing Ability Group Assignments by Week

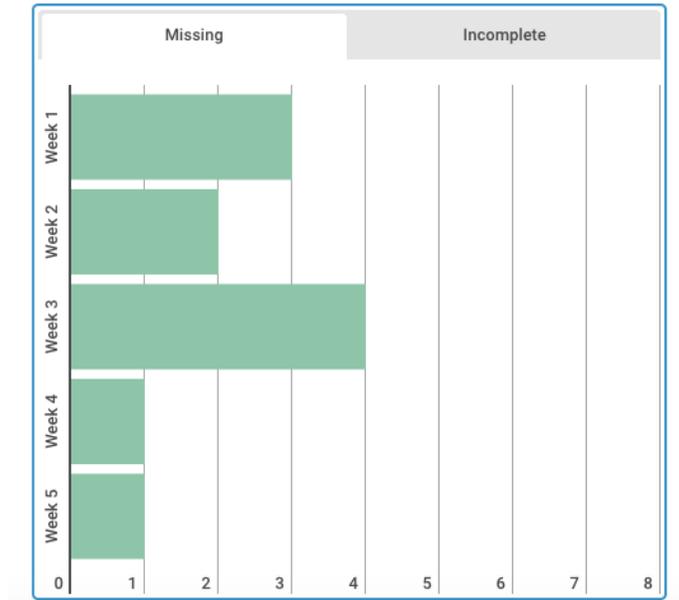Figure 4.3: *Missing reading group assignment data collected weeks 1-5*

Incomplete Ability Group Assignments by Week

Figure 4.4: *Incomplete reading group assignment data collected week 1-5*

It is important to note that an assignment was classified as "missing" if student had not turned it in by the expected due date, whereas an assignment that was classified as "incomplete" was either turned in unfinished, or the student needed extensive assistance in finishing the assignment. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 demonstrate that there was an increase in both missing and incomplete assignments in weeks two and three, but they show an overall reduction in both missing and incomplete assignments from week one to week five of the study. Interestingly, as demonstrated in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, week three showed an increase in verbal encouragement of other group members for both student groups 1 and 2.

<u>Analyzing Teaching Staff Data</u>

In addition to student data collection, data from select teaching staff, all of whom conduct reading ability grouping practices in their classroom instruction routines, were also collected and analyzed. Beyond fifth grade, the ability grouping style of reading instruction sharply declines.Therefore, three elementary educators were chosen to be surveyed about the ability grouping practices that they have in place in their classrooms. Teachers were asked the same three questions. The following is a presentation of the three questions presented, and a summary of how each educator chose to respond.

<u>Question 1: When working with your reading ability groups, what do you notice regarding the self-esteem and motivation of low-level readers when in these groups?</u>

Teacher 1, a second-grade teacher, responded that in her experience, the low-level learners in her classroom appear to feel more comfortable and willing to volunteer thoughts and ideas, or to read aloud to their peers, because they are among others who also struggle with reading concepts. She notes that "students tend to encourage one another, which builds their own personal confidence". Teacher 1 also mentions that when challenged, many students in these

groups choose to "wait" and hope that Teacher 1 will provide them with the answer instead of attempting the challenge on their own.

Teacher 2, a fourth-grade teacher, and Teacher 3, a fifth-grade teacher, provided a different observation of low-level readers in ability groups than Teacher 1 supplied. Teacher 2 stated that overall, lower-level readers appear to have lower self-esteem and less motivation compared to the average or above-average readers in her class. She also provided an in-depth observation on how student self-esteem plays a role in lower-level reader's ability group experiences:

> I notice that lower level readers tend to 'give up' faster. I think that the lower-level readers have fewer strategies they feel comfortable trying during reading groups, so they more quickly abandon their effort. Sometimes they prefer to fail on their own terms rather than get a question wrong according to the teacher or in front of a peer. If a student knows that they are a lower-level reader, they can feel 'dumber' than the others which lowers their self-esteem.

In agreement, Teacher 3 asserts that the self-esteem and motivation of students in her lower-level reading groups can be reduced compared to the students in higher-level reading groups. She does add, however, that she has seen the opposite also be true: that a student in a higher-level reading group may put forth less effort than a student in a lower-level group. Teacher 3 believes student self-esteem and motivation are dependent upon the student, as well as the teacher's performance and investment in student relationships.

Teacher 1 expressed that she does consider student self-esteem, confidence, and motivation when planning reading instruction. She explained that depending on the student and/or the reading group, she may read aloud, ask students to read aloud, or do some combination of both. She said she differentiates by offering students the opportunity to pass, or to write their answers on a white board if they don't feel comfortable sharing out loud. Teacher 2 responded that she approaches her reading groups by trying to give students at every reading level a challenge and strategies to use, regardless of their ability. She notes that she does scaffold, but only slightly, as she feels that keeping tasks relatively similar prevents students from being so aware of "lower" or "higher" students in class. She said she prefers to use confidence-building activities and strategies with all students, not just lower-level readers. Teacher 3 answered similarly to Teacher 1, and noted that when selecting texts, she considers ability level, student interest, and reading strategies that she finds within the text.

Question 3: Do you agree with the concept of ability grouping for reading instruction? Why or why not?

All three teachers surveyed said they agree with ability grouping as an instructional practice. Teacher 1 explained that she believes ability grouping is helpful with building confidence, especially for low-level readers. However, she also expressed that there are certain situations where she prefers to have learning levels mixed for modeling purposes, such as with fluency work. Teacher 2 stated that she agrees with ability grouping for reading instruction because differently leveled readers "need different supports and strategies to be taught and worked with". She explains that she believes the most effective and efficient way she can meet

all learner's needs is to use small group instruction, determined by ability. However, she also notes that she believes it is important that ability groups be flexible, and that different students should be paired together intermittently in order to learn from each other. Teacher 3 stated that she believes students need to be reading texts that are catered to their level. She suggests that ability grouping allows for effective differentiation, and that lower-level readers can still benefit from more challenging skills being modeled by the teacher and occasionally in whole-group activities.

Summary

Results obtained through pre- and post-survey responses, anecdotal records and ability group observations, assignment records, and staff feedback were presented in this chapter. Data provided were collected over a five week period. When applicable, student data obtained at the beginning of the research period was compared to data from the end of the research period to display any trends or changes in how students perceive themselves as readers, as well as how they perceive their reading group members and their experiences in reading ability groups in general. Overall, the results showed that ability grouping either improved or had no effect on student confidence in reading. Additionally, results demonstrated that the majority of students' self-esteem was either improved by participating in their reading groups, or stayed the same within the five-week period of research. The only point of student self-esteem research that showed a notable decline was whether or not students felt that their peers respected them. Finally, in regards to student data, the research findings indicate that student motivation appears to shift from intrinsic to extrinsic, and most importantly, it shifts from a focus on self to a focus on working with a teacher or a group.

Furthermore, teaching staff feedback data demonstrated that teachers from a variety of elementary grade levels generally believe that lower-level reading students have lower self-esteem, confidence, and motivation within their reading groups, or that these students are less likely to embrace challenges that require the use of higher-level reading skills. Teaching staff also maintained that they take student self-esteem, confidence and motivation into consideration when planning reading instruction, and that they differentiate their instruction with these needs in mind. Finally, staff surveyed believe that ability grouping in reading is an effective and efficient practice for all students, and they will continue to utilize this practice as part of their literacy instruction.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

All teachers want the best for their students, both academically and emotionally. They strive to provide the most effective, efficient, and research-based practices possible in their classrooms, all while supporting each student in their overall well-being. In all subjects, reading included, teachers work to differentiate their practices in order to assist all students and implement curriculum with fidelity. As mentioned in Chapter 2, ability grouping has become increasingly common in classrooms, especially at the elementary level. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of this practice on low-level readers' self-esteem, confidence, and motivation during reading. Student well-being is at the forefront of all other successes in the classroom; if a student is suffering emotionally, he or she will not be prepared to learn academically. Additionally, most teachers are concerned about how to best support students who are considered low-achieving. This chapter will include any limitations that should be considered when reviewing the outcomes of the study. An interpretation of the research results will follow, along with implications for students and teachers based on the results.

Limitations

Before the results of this study can be considered, it is important to review any limitations that may be present. The first limitation is that as the teacher-researcher, my classroom practices were going through some reconstruction at the beginning of the study. Although I had

implemented the ability grouping practice in my reading instruction prior to this study, my co-teacher, the building reading specialist, and I were entering a new phase of practice known to our district as "push-in" literacy instruction. This practice involves a reading specialist coming into the classroom to allow for a more blended literacy instruction block, rather than Tier 3 readers exiting the classroom to receive literacy instruction in isolation, as had been done in the past. I had no prior experience using this method of literacy instruction, so therefore I drew on my own professional judgment and experiences, and depended on the assistance of my colleagues, to both meet my students' needs and collect accurate research.

A second limitation that presents itself is the sampling of students used for this study. The students chosen for the study were from the same grade level and the same classroom. All students were under the care and supervision of the same three literacy teachers throughout the research period. The sampling was not random, and the research does not take place within any setting other than my fourth-grade classroom. Therefore, the findings from this research are only relevant to a similar student population and setting.

The final limitation is that the research was conducted over a period of only five weeks. The average school year spans an average of 39 to 41 weeks. This means that the majority of the school year will have taken place without this research monitoring and reporting. Students, teachers, and practices can vary greatly throughout such a time period. Those considering the research should recognize that the study could potentially have a different outcome if the study had spanned the entire school year instead of just over half a term.

Interpretation of the Results

Results of the study were obtained through a variety of measures: student pre- and post-research surveys, teacher anecdotal records and observations, consideration of missing and

incomplete student group assignments, and teacher staff survey feedback. The results from the

pre- and post-research surveys were valuable in determining if ability grouping had an effect on

student self-esteem, motivation, and confidence. Although the time period was short, many of

the tables conveying research findings show an overall positive trend in student self-esteem,

confidence, and motivation in reading after engaging in ability grouping practices.

For example, the student question displayed in Table 4.1 asked students to rate their

feelings on practicing reading in a group. 80% of students had a more favorable view of

participating in a reading group after the study than they did before the study. The other 20%

surveyed had the same view as they did before the study. Additionally, Table 4.2 shows that 60%

of students felt more confident reading out loud to their ability group after the research period

than they did before. 40% felt no different about reading in front of their group than they did

previously. The results of this table demonstrate that ability grouping had a mostly positive

impact on student confidence, although some students remained neutral in their attitude toward

participating in reading groups.

In Tables 4.3 and 4.4, half of all students participating showed increased self-esteem and

overall comfortability within their reading groups than they did before the study began. The

other half of participating students showed no change in their self-esteem. Table 4.5, in regards

to whether or not students felt that their ability group members respected them, revealed the

scenario with the highest amount of negative feedback. There was no explanation given to

students as to what "respect" meant in this capacity, but 30% of students felt that their peers

respected them less at the end of the study than they did at the beginning. These findings prove

to be a bit difficult in terms of making a concrete determination; however, with half of

participants showing growth in self-esteem and comfortability within their groups, it is realistic

and satisfactory to conclude that ability grouping has at least some positive effect on student self-esteem. However, it would be prudent for educators to monitor respectful behavior when conducting this practice, as with any classroom procedure.

Table 4.6, which displays dating regarding student motivation to complete their reading group work, had the widest range of data. Some students showed improvement in this area, some students showed no change, and one student showed disimprovement in this area. This data is difficult to process in terms of making a concrete conclusion about ability grouping and student motivation. However, the next table is more conclusive in this area.

In Table 4.7, the answers provided by Students 1 and 7 show a shift from a focus on self during reading to a focus on being with others in a group. This could be interpreted by an educator as a positive indication that these students enjoy working with others during reading class, and that this serves as a motivator for them. Student 2 moves from indicating no positive reading motivations in the pre-research survey, to indicating that teacher time is a motivator in the post-survey; Students 8 and 10 identify a similar motivator. One could make the conclusion that these students may like working with a teacher one-on-one, but they may also enjoy working in a small group as long as a teacher is present, which would always be the case for elementary-age ability groups. Students 3, 5, and 6 shared in the pre-survey that their friends are their greatest motivator in reading groups. In the post-survey, Student 6 maintained this answer, but Students 3 and 5 changed their answers to more thoughtful, emotion-based responses, one stating that they now love to read and the other stating that they want to be a good student. These answers may translate to an educator as a positive response to working closely with a teacher and other similar-ability students. Finally, Student 9 shifts from revealing that their motivator is simply being able to find something they can read, to finishing a long book as their motivator. To

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an educator, this would likely signal a huge amount of growth in a short time for this particular student, with reading ability groups most likely being a factor in that growth. Overall, the differences in feedback displayed in Table 4.7 prove that ability grouping did have a positive impact on student motivation.

The final table provided in Chapter 4, Table 4.8, showed an increase in instances of students reading at home with their families. In the pre-research survey, 70% of students responded either "yes" or "sometimes" when asked if they read together with their families. In the post-research survey, 90% of students said, "yes" or "sometimes" to this question. Interestingly, ability grouping and ability group assignments may have increased motivation to read even beyond the classroom, and extended this practice into the home environment as well.

When studying Figures 4.1 and 4.2, it is obvious that there was a significant increase in positive self-talk among all students participating from week one to week five. Verbal encouragement of group members also ended up increasing from beginning to end, although showed both increases and decreases in the middle weeks of the study in both figures. Verbal discouragement of group members was decreased overall from week one to week five. Negative self-talk decreased from beginning to end in Group 1 (Students 1-5), but was increased in Group 2 (Students 6-10) from beginning to end. Although the results are somewhat scattered, these figures can still be useful in determining overall student comfortability in ability groups. For example, students may use encouragement or discouragement of others as a way to convey their own personal confidence or insecurity. Additionally, recording instances of positive and negative self-talk can give a more accurate view of how ability groups affect student self-esteem.

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show an overall decrease in both missing and incomplete assignments from the beginning of the study to the end. However, the results of this part of the study are

relatively inconsistent. This is an instance where one of the above-mentioned limitations, time, may be able to provide a more conclusive answer in regards to student motivation to complete and turn in reading group assignments. It is difficult to tell if ability grouping made an impact on these two factors. Additionally, another limitation presents itself here: the study does not take into account any student work habits or personality traits, which most certainly would impact this data along with their experiences in a reading ability group.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study is the disconnect between how teachers think low-level learners are impacted by reading groups, versus how these low-level learners are actually impacted. When staff were asked what they noticed about the motivation, confidence, and self-esteem of their low-level readers, two-thirds of those responding said that they believe their low-level reading students have lower self-esteem, less motivation and reduced confidence in comparison to students not considered low-level in reading. One-third of staff surveyed expressed that these students are less likely to rise to a challenge out of their own accord. However, this staff member also noted that she noticed students in these groups do encourage one another, even if they don't necessarily apply that encouragement to themselves. Although staff appeared to believe that low-level students show low self-esteem, motivation, and confidence in reading, they still agreed with the practice of ability grouping as an instructional tool and all surveyed maintained that they would continue utilizing this practice in their classrooms. All staff also mentioned that they do take student self-esteem, motivation, and confidence into consideration when planning their ability group activities.

However, at least based on the results of this study, it would appear that teacher opinions about lower-level students' self-esteem, confidence, and motivation in reading groups are at least partially untrue. As mentioned, student self-esteem and confidence actually increased overall

throughout the study, and student motivational factors made a shift from a focus on self to a focus on working together with others in the group, or working in a group with a teacher.

Implications for Student Learning and Teaching Practices

It has been demonstrated by this research that ability grouping practices can have a positive effect on low-level students' self-esteem, motivation, and confidence in reading. This is significant because many educators are turning to this method of practice with the hope of efficiently and effectively reaching all students, while at the same time supporting their students' emotional needs and well-being. In order to achieve this, teachers using this practice should take into consideration certain implications when applying this practice to their teaching.

Teachers should regularly monitor students' perceptions of themselves as readers, as well as of their reading group experiences. One finding of this research is that teachers may speculate about how their practices affect students, but speculations are not always factual. The first example of this is regarding my hypothesis of the research outcomes before the study began. My hypothesis stated that I believed ability grouping would have a negative effect on low-level students' self-esteem, confidence, and motivation in reading. The data from the study has proven that to be mostly untrue. The second example of this was the opinions given by the teachers who were surveyed about ability grouping practices. All of them assumed that in at least some capacity, their low-level readers showed a lack of motivation, self-esteem, and confidence while participating in reading groups. The data showed that participating in a reading ability group actually promoted self-esteem and confidence in low-level readers, and produced a shift in motivation from working independently to working in a group or receiving assistance from a teacher. Many teachers, myself included, do not consider asking students for feedback about classroom practices, because after all, we are the adults! However, it would appear that this

process is crucial in determining what methods are appropriate and beneficial for both student learning and well-being. Additionally, listening to how students feel about themselves as readers and learners can also provide a wealth of information that is useful to teachers. This information can aid teachers in building relationships with students, choosing appropriate classroom practices, and fostering confidence, motivation, and self-esteem in all areas of learning.

Student ability groups should serve as safe and comfortable discussion spaces. Teachers should work diligently to encourage and support students in an ability group setting, especially those who may already feel like they are inferior readers or learners. Meeting students at their level and providing the guidance they need, both academically and emotionally, will most certainly provide a more positive outcome in terms of emotional health. I believe fostering a positive, respectful, goal-oriented environment among my ability groups played a large role in the positive data that resulted from this study. Creating group commitments, and holding all group members to abiding by those commitments, can help foster an environment of respect and growth.

Student ability groups should remain flexible. Ability grouping should be a practice with constantly moving parts. Honoring student progress by allowing them to move flexibly through ability groups demonstrates to students that teachers are truly paying attention. When teachers support students, whether it's through a challenge or scaling back on the material for more review, students develop self-esteem, confidence, and motivation in their work. This in turn supports their growth, both academically and emotionally. When conducting ability groups, teachers should consistently monitor student progress using a variety of methods. When students show signs of growth, teachers should rearrange their groups accordingly. If students show signs

of regression, it is a signal to the teacher that they should revise their practices and transition students into a more appropriate group setting.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated that ability grouping can positively affect low-level students' self-esteem, confidence, and motivation in reading. My main goal in selecting this research question was to study how to create a more positive, nurturing space for low-achieving readers, while still meeting their academic needs. Low-achieving students can thrive emotionally in ability groups if teachers take the correct steps to conduct their groups in a respectful, inclusive, and flexible manner.

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APPENDIX A
PRE-RESEARCH READING SURVEY

Name: _____

1. **On a scale from 1-10, how much do you like reading in a group? (1 = not at all, 5= I kind of like it, 10 = I love it!)**

    _____

    Why is this your rating?

    _____

    _____

2. **I feel confident when asked to read aloud in my reading group.**
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Sometimes

3. **I feel confident when asked to read aloud to just my teacher.**
    a. Yes
    b. No

4. **I feel confident when I read my reading group books to myself. I know most of the words and I understand what the book is trying to tell me.**
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Sometimes

5. **I feel comfortable participating in my reading group and sharing ideas with my group members.**
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Sometimes

    Explain your answer.

    _____

    _____

6. I feel like I belong in my reading group.
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Sometimes

   Explain your answer.

   _____

   _____

7. I am happy and comfortable during reading class and in my reading group.
   a. All of the time
   b. Most of the time
   c. Some of the time
   d. Never

   Explain your answer.

   _____

   _____

8. I feel like my reading classmates respect me.
   a. Yes
   b. No

9. I feel motivated to complete my reading group work with my best effort.
   a. All of the time
   b. Most of the time
   c. Some of the time
   d. Never

   Explain your answer.

   _____

   _____

10. What makes you feel motivated in reading class?

_____

_____

_____

11. Do people at your house read?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, who?

   _____

12. Does your family read together?
   c. Yes
   d. No

APPENDIX B
POST-RESEARCH READING SURVEY

Name: _____

1. **On a scale from 1-10, how much do you like reading in a group? (1 = not at all, 5= I kind of like it, 10 = I love it!)**

   _____

   Why is this your rating?

   _____

   _____

2. **I feel confident when asked to read aloud in my reading group.**
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Sometimes

3. **I feel confident when asked to read aloud to just my teacher.**
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. **I feel confident when I read my reading group books to myself. I know most of the words and I understand what the book is trying to tell me.**
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Sometimes

5. **I feel comfortable participating in my reading group and sharing ideas with my group members.**
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Sometimes

   Explain your answer.

   _____

   _____

6. I feel like I belong in my reading group.
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Sometimes

   Explain your answer.

   _____

   _____

7. I am happy and comfortable during reading class and in my reading group.
   a. All of the time
   b. Most of the time
   c. Some of the time
   d. Never

   Explain your answer.

   _____

   _____

8. I feel like my reading classmates respect me.
   a. Yes
   b. No

9. I feel motivated to complete my reading group work with my best effort.
   a. All of the time
   b. Most of the time
   c. Some of the time
   d. Never

   Explain your answer.

   _____

   _____

10. What motivates you in reading class?

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX C
ANECDOTAL NOTES RECORD

Date	Student	Comments	Initials

APPENDIX D
TEACHING STAFF ABILITY GROUPING SURVEY

When working within your reading ability groups, what do you notice regarding the self-esteem and motivation of low-level readers when in these groups? (Self-esteem = student volunteer rate, confidence in work and reading abilities, willingness to participate; Motivation = quality of work, group participation and interaction, attitude toward group sessions.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Do you approach reading group instruction with student self-esteem, confidence, and/or motivation in mind? If yes, how is that conveyed in your instruction?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Do you agree with the concept of ability grouping for reading instruction? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____