

Reading Levels/Ability Grouping

Internet ruminations on the topic of reading levels/ability grouping:

From: Unidentified Source.

1) Reading - We believe that children begin to read when they are ready to.

By the end of kindergarten some are reading and some are not. In first grade we begin more formal instruction.

2) Ability grouping - In our early grades we group children, but more according to their needs than their ability. The groups are fluid and often change. Straight ability grouping is not appropriate for young children.

3) Retaining - We have a nursery school program that feeds our kindergarten. If a child is not developmentally ready for kindergarten we give him/her an extra year in pre-kindergarten. Retention in the grades is rarely done although it might be considered on an individual basis.

From: David Blanchard, Wellington School (OH)

a. We believe that the process begins at birth and that the parents play a major role in preparing children to read. Although our pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs include many reading-readiness activities, formal instruction in reading (a combination of phonics and whole-word instruction) should not begin until first grade.

b. We believe in achievement grouping rather than ability grouping. This grouping begins in kindergarten and is flexible based on the needs of the group and of the individual children comprising it. We use teacher observations along with assessments by the school psychologist in making the decisions each year.

c. In most instances we have found that it is better for a child to continue to move with his or her class. However, particularly with the kindergarten to first grade transition, we sometimes encounter developmental delays that are helped by a second year in kindergarten. We do have small group instructors on our staff, but our program is not appropriate for students who need small group instruction for more than one period each day or who need a resource room. If a student cannot function successfully in a large group setting, then we work with the parents to find more an appropriate placement.

From: AgnonRay@aol.com (Ray Levi, Agnon School, OH)

Quick response to reading poll--When formal instruction begins, depends on how you define formal instruction. Certainly, pre-kindergarten kids are ready for invitations to work with the printed page, literacy awareness activities. But, most of the research I've read suggests that this is not the age to be expecting kids to absorb formal group lessons. Again, kindergarten offers lots of opportunities for invitations and certainly there are kids ready to engage in formal reading, while others are writing in journals mainly with pictures or are reading patterned books they've memorized. There are lots of good books out there. Two that come to mind are Thomas Newkirk's *More than Stories* and Don Holdaway's *The Foundations of Literacy*. I have more at school and would be happy to talk with the Lower School head if s/he is interested. As for ability grouping, the research at present is supporting flexible groupings so that kids aren't in an identified reading group by achievement. Therefore, sometimes there is partner reading (two kids reading together, might be same ability, might be mixed ability), sometimes groups are heterogeneous (everyone reading a different version of *The Three Billy Goats*), and sometimes the groups are homogenous for a story/book by ability or to teach a skill that's needed. Again, lots of material out there with most of my material at school. Reggie Routman's *Invitations* is a good one, off the top of my head. Hope this is helpful. We don't have a retention policy; haven't been in a school that has one; have generally worked closely with our psychologist on this. We get more parent requests for an extra year of Pre-K than we get teacher retention recommendations. I'd be interested in policies if any school has one.

From: (Susan Cobin, Talmud Torah School, MN)

I think that the age when one begins reading instruction is a tough question. Developmental readiness is so dependent on the individual. Since much reading acquisition is not dependent on systematic instruction but on exposure, I think reading instruction should begin very early with exposure and more exposure. The exposure could include not just reading but also sounds in a non-pressure way. Reading failure is so frightening that I'd be reluctant to begin a systematic teaching before kindergarten when most children can begin to feel success in mastering the process. Those who are ready to learn earlier will by exposure. Also there's so much to learn earlier that I'd be worried to spend too much time on reading at the cost of developing social skills. I think that some ability level grouping is appropriate in order to give students what they need. Ideally you can weave in and out in ability levels by different criteria: skills, concepts, ability to explain to peers, etc. But the truth is there are simply some children who need lots of time to learn and lots of attention and others who don't. In fact they soar with a bit of encouragement. The question is how much of their time should be spent in explaining to others and how much of that is productive. I do struggle with this issue a lot and it is complicated by the status attached to achievement. I don't buy into the easy answer that it's always bad to ability group, however, because that implies that it's not okay to be slower or faster and to need your particular needs spoken to.

From: lhennelly@foxtrot.latin.pvt.k12.il.us (Linda Hennelly

The Latin School of Chicago)

This message is from Latin's Lower School. Your Instant Feedback Poll requires essay answers, not e-mail ones!!! Having said that:

a. Reading: When they are ready, showing comfort with all of the reading readiness predictors embedded in a good nursery/kindergarten program. Age isn't the key. There are volumes written and debated on this.

b. Ability Grouping: (This is like trying to give a synopsis of War and Peace) At Latin, we think it is occasionally useful. Who knows if it is appropriate, and who gets to decide? Most things we do are not ability grouped. Exceptions: First grade reading, which runs the spectrum from non-readers to children reading years above grade level; occasionally, selected mathematics groups, either for remediation or for enrichment. These tend to be additional programs, not the classroom mathematics experience.

c. Retention: We don't have a policy in the Lower School. We don't do it often, and only when over-placement is glaring. We handle each case as it arises. When it has happened, parents tend to decide on a new school placement.

These are huge issues, all of them. There are people here, and I am sure at the other schools you have contacted, who would be happy to have conversations or visits with people from the asking school, if that is helpful.

From: novello@po-1.aea9.k12.ia.us (Mike Novello, St. Katharine's St. Mark's School, IA)

1. Reading- Formal instruction should begin when the child is ready. In general, letter recognition in Pre K or earlier are fine. Formal sounds, vocabulary explanations in K.

2. Ability Grouping- Appropriate only in the extreme

3. Retention in grade- Only above 1st grade.

Author: ISACS Email Quick Survey, Fall '95