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Ability Grouping in the Elementary Classroom and its Effects on Students'
Academic Lives

Introduction & Research Question:

Grouping a student into a specific academic level with his/her peers of that same academic ability has become a major concern in the educational system. Ability grouping, the name for this practice at the elementary level, separates students into different groups based upon their academic achievement levels in both reading and math. The students are grouped based upon test scores they receive in these two subjects. In the case of my study here in Hartford, the schools use the Connecticut Master Test (CMT) as a way of grouping them. While at first glance ability grouping may not seem like a problem because the students are grouped with their equals, it becomes an area of concern when these students do not receive the chance to grow as a student. Scholar Gary Reglin (1992) argues that ability grouping is detrimental because of this idea of segregating students. He asserts that students of the lower levels are deprived of the equal education they deserve and as a result receive poor teaching and a lower self-esteem.

Much of the research that has been done on ability grouping deems it to be a negative attribute in education and has an even greater impact toward the minority population. My study was conducted right here in Hartford and Hillside Elementary (pseudonym), my school for research, has a 98.2% minority population (Strategic School Profile 2004). This makes it difficult to pinpoint the treatment of minorities within the ability groups because each group has mainly minority students. Due to this situation I

went into my research asking, what is the perception of ability grouping among the students and their teachers? Also how does ability grouping shape instruction and classroom atmosphere for different groups? Hopefully this small study shed new light on the topic of ability grouping or followed what has already been concluded about ability grouping by scholars and the idea that ability has a negative effect on students' academic lives. Ability grouping is a major example of inequalities in the educational system and needs to continually be addressed.

Thesis Statement:

Through observing the classrooms in the sixth grade at Hillside Elementary and interviewing the teachers it is evident that in this particular case ability grouping puts the higher grouped students at an advantage, as compared to the lower grouped students. I have observed a large disparity in the classroom atmosphere and teaching techniques provided for each group of students. The teachers' perception of ability grouping is positive as they believe it is a good strategy for teaching. Students seem to understand that they are separated into specific groups but they do not really understand how and why they are separated.

Significance for Study:

The separation of students into groups and putting one group at an advantage and the other at a disadvantage is very common with ability grouping. I have had the opportunity to work in Hartford schools for the past three years and this topic always intrigued me as I have witnessed potentially smart young girls and boys be deprived of the educational opportunities they deserve and it is because they are separated into ability groups. These students are grouped based upon their academic levels in both areas of

reading and math. As mentioned before it is their test scores from the statewide Mastery test that places them in the proper group. Because the tests are taken each year the scores can move students from one group to another depending on the outcome. Hartford, in recent years, has had some of the worst scores within their district compared to the rest of the state. At Hillside Elementary alone, only 8.8% of the students in sixth grade met state goals in the reading portion of the CMT in 2005 compared to the state at 60% (School Profile 2004-05). Can grouping these students based on their ability be part of the problem of these abnormally low scores? This is an important question because scholars such as George Ansalone (2000), bases his arguments about ability grouping to lead to underachievement by students. My research about ability grouping has been a great experience and has brought me closer to the realization of the impact ability grouping has on students.

Literature Review

Many scholars have done research and written about the topic of tracking or ability grouping and my research has supported and disagreed with their ideas. Studying right here in Hartford where there is a majority minority population it was an ideal location to do research because many of the literature that has been written about ability grouping places minorities in a disadvantaged spot in the lower groups. This was a big part of motivating my research because there should be more equality in education and ability grouping and tracking defers that. Jeannie Oakes is probably one of the most popular and influential scholars who have done research studies on ability grouping and tracking. With three separate articles she has written there has been a common theme that she believes ability grouping does for students. In her article *Tracking: Can Schools*

Take a Different Route? (1988), she argues that tracking may benefit the higher ability students but has a direct opposite affect on the poor and minority students who tend to be placed in the lower tracks.

Other literature such as *Beyond Tracking* (1986), she discusses the idea of educational inequality and the differing of student outcomes. A third and final idea that comes from Oakes is the topic of economic instability which has a direct effect on how the students are grouped. My research and findings at my school will have supported these statements as I studied the students in each group. I was able to get an understanding of academic achievement by talking to the teachers to back this up as well as getting an understanding of the economic status and social status in which these students live in. There are other important ideologies about tracking that will help my research and these topics have been studied and written about. They cover the segregation of students, parents' education and involvement, and students' efforts and achievements. Lastly, some suggested solutions will be analyzed.

It is obvious that ability grouping groups students into separate groups based upon academic ability. Gary Reglin (1992) argues that ability grouping is detrimental because of this idea of segregating students. He argues that the students in the lower levels are separated from the proper education they deserve and will receive poor teaching and a lower self-esteem. So why is it that these students are placed into different groups and deprived of their education? In an article taken from the *Sociology of Education* (1992), Elizabeth Useem discusses how the educational level of the students' parents have a direct effect on the grouping of their child. She states that parents who have a college education are more likely to intervene and put effort into making sure their student is in

the proper ability groups. These two points that are made were harder to find during my research because I did not have direct contact with parents and it was irrelevant to the question I was trying to answer. It is still an important part of ability grouping and that is why others have studied it.

The efforts and achievements of the students is the last area of study that has helped support my research about ability grouping. Ability grouping and tracking can be the major cause of underachievement of students and lack of effort. William Carbonaro (2005) and George Ansalone (2000) both write about the idea of underachievement by students because of how they are tracked or grouped. Both discovered that there is a clear difference in effort and achievement between the students that are put in the higher ability groups compared to those of the lower groups. Due to the experiences the students have within their group at earlier ages underachievement spills over and carries on through their education and that is why they continue to perform poorly. By observing the students' efforts in class my research supported this fact of underachievement. Even though I haven't been able to follow the students from when they were younger I was able to gain knowledge through the teacher.

There are some solutions that are presented by some scholars that deal with a change in curriculum or the way in which a classroom should be taught. Martin Lipton and Mike Ollerton both make these suggestions. Lipton (1992), states that a new curriculum should be created to give a more equal education to all students regardless of academic ability. Ollerton (1998), believes that a different style of teaching should be in place. He believes that a teacher should teach the class as one and once the students' ability level is recognized the teacher can then adjust accordingly with one-on-one help.

Methodology:

Throughout the semester I performed a qualitative study with participant observation at Hillside Elementary. I was part of the sixth grade and overlooked three teacher's classrooms. I attended the school two days a week for about 4 hours each day. This gave me a lot of time for field notes, which I recorded daily, and was able to engage in informal conversations with both students and teachers. As I observed the classrooms I took notes, focusing on interactions between students and teachers and between the students. This gave me a great opportunity to see if there were any differences in how students of one ability group behaved or were treated by the teacher as compared to the other group. I experienced some difficulties with observing and keeping track of notes because I didn't want to put my own opinions in my notes as I watched the classroom interactions. While in the classroom I made sure that I only wrote exactly what was happening and took the time to analyze my data and express my voice later.

In order to get the teachers' perspectives about ability grouping I set up 5 structured interviews. Three of these interviews were with the sixth grade teachers with whom I interacted with each day and the other two interviews were with administrators. The interviews lasted around 20 minutes as I wanted to ask them about their thoughts on ability grouping and to talk about their experiences with it. I brought to their attention what has been written about ability grouping and some of the negative aspects of it pertain. By doing this I was hoping to understand whether or not they may agree and how they defend ability grouping in their own classroom. I tried to make the interview like a conversation to make it more comfortable. I did not have access to a recorder for the

interviews so I attempted to write notes as we talked. I focused on trying to wait for the teacher to fully answer the question before I wrote anything down. I wanted to make sure I made eye contact to show them that I was listening to what they had to say. This technique had its pros and cons as it was hard for me to write everything and there is more room for error when writing. The administrators I interviewed were important in the research because at Hillside they run a reading program where it is completely based on ability grouping.

I feel that the most helpful and important part to my methods in this research project was having informal conversations with the teachers and the students while I attended Hillside Elementary. People speak more freely when they engage in a conversation and their real opinions usually come out. Teachers seem to love to mumble on the side about specific students or experiences in the classroom. I didn't opt to interview the students individually because just talking to them made it more comfortable for them. Also it was hard to get permission slips for them and the return on them did not help.

Setting

The atmosphere in which these students both live in each day and attempt to learn in is crucial to their education. The neighborhood in which Hillside Elementary is located is not very good. Stores and buildings surround the school with bars on their windows and heavy duty locks on their doors. The newest implementation at Hillside is that they lock the front door ten minutes after the school day begins so visitors have to ring a door bell and wait to be acknowledged by someone in the office to open the door. This shows the possible threats that can occur in and around the school. The street alone

is very busy as I have witnessed when I park my car and attempt to cross the street. I also noticed when going to the school in the morning that many of the students get dropped off by their parents or guardians. This can mean that the parents don't feel safe sending their children on the bus or maybe it is convenient and safer for the parent to drop them off in the morning before work. The rundown and unsafe neighborhoods do not create the proper environment for students to learn and become educated.

Inside the school is a totally different experience though as it has feeling of warmth and self worth. The huge welcome sign as I walked in and the very nice and respectful women in the main office made my welcome very pleasing. When I walked to my classroom each day I couldn't look straight ahead while I walked because I had to observe the hangings of students' work on the walls. Around every classroom the students had their writing and illustrations all over the walls. This gives them a sense of motivation and accomplishment. If there weren't any classrooms to fill up the walls they were covered in posters. Many of these posters that were all over the school stressed the idea of respect and being part of a community and teamwork. Creating the right kind of student that respects others and is well disciplined and a hard worker seems to be the goal of the school. Doing all this should hopefully motivate the students to do well in school and therefore will result in better academic achievement.

The racial, social, and economical makeup of the school population is also a vital characteristic to understand the school environment. Hillside Elementary consists of a population of 434 total students. 88.7 percent of these students are Hispanic and 9 percent are black. This gives the school a 97 percent minority population which is just an eye-opening number. There are only nine white students in the entire school. Not having

a diverse population can lead to educational inequalities in the classroom. Not only are most of the students Hispanic but about a third of them are speaking English as a second language and Spanish is spoken at home and with peers. The economical statistic is no is also extreme as 73 percent of the students are eligible for a free or reduced lunch which means many of these students are living in households that fight to survive on a daily basis. All these statistics came from Hillside School Strategic Profile which can be found on Connecticut's Department of Education website. This is the type of environment that I conducted my study and my findings can in a way reflect some of these larger issues.

Analysis and Interpretation of Primary Data:

Jose (pseudonym) is a student in Hillside's sixth grade and caught my eye from day one. It started with him raising his hand every time the teacher asked a question to the class. What makes Jose special for my research is that he is in two different ability groups in math and reading. In reading he is in the highest level and in math he is in the lowest. I had the freedom at Hillside to observe any class and all the teachers were accepting of my research project. Jose gave me the opportunity to observe each ability group and specifically look at his interactions with the students and the teachers. I observed Jose in these two classes and in his case it seemed that it was his surroundings that influenced his academic performance. On October 18th I followed Jose to both his reading and his math class. I sat next to him and worked with him in each class for a significant amount of time.

In the reading class Jose was very well behaved and paid attention and respected his teacher and his peers (notes 10/18). The class consisted of two sections. The first

part of class we all gathered around the teacher on the carpet to read and discuss the book they were reading at the time. The second part of class was group work to answer questions about the book. Jose, as did the rest of the class, behaved well on the carpet and there were limited distractions or interruptions. It isn't easy to get an entire class to sit quietly on the carpet and do the work properly but this higher leveled group was very good. The students then did a combination of working as a group and also as an individual at their desks. The desks were arranged in groups of four to begin with so each group worked together. This was the highest level and Jose seemed to fit right in as his interactions with the students and the teacher was very good. Like Mr. Ferris (pseudonym) said when I interviewed him about ability grouping, "There is a big difference between the students in each group when it comes to their behavior and effort." The students in this highest level had more respect for the teacher and the students and were very mature about it. Being able to have a class that is like this is one reason why the teachers agree that ability grouping is a good thing. This may be true for the teachers and it may make their job easier for that particular class but it is the children that are being educated and their futures are the ones that are at stake here. The difference in behavior was noticeable as I moved onto the lower grouped class with Jose next.

The second class we went to was Jose's math class which was a very interesting experience compared to his previous class. Jose was part of the lowest level of math which was a completely different class. The class only consisted of 12 students and we were in a very small classroom and there were twice as many girls as boys. My observations with Jose in this class were very different. He had a very hard time staying

relaxed and focused and respecting the classroom rules which are posted all over the place (notes 10/18). These behaviors by the students in the math class directly relate to the teaching techniques used for them. Mrs. Smith (pseudonym) treated the students in math completely different than Mr. Ferris in his reading class. She constantly raised her voice and let every little distraction interrupt the class. As I observed the class she lost valuable time that could have spent teaching the students math but instead she was disciplining them. Another big part of teaching that I noticed in the two classes is that the reading class was much more by the book and structured than the math class. When Mrs. Smith was teaching the math skills she did it in a way where not all the students were involved in the class. Even though it is the lowest group there are still some students that are bright and understand the material. The poor teaching technique came into play when she would only let the smartest ones do all the work. This example agrees with what scholars say about ability grouping and how it may shape the instruction in the classroom. Mr. Ferris knew he was dealing with the highest level and was able to move quickly and efficiently through the lesson plan for the day. Mrs. Smith adjusted the way she taught and got through the lesson by letting just a couple students do all the work and letting the rest of the class fall behind.

Jose loves to answer questions both of these classes and raises his hand and is very active in the class. His behavior changed drastically from one class to another and I wrote a conclusion at the end of my field notes that day.

I don't know what the explanation is for his behavior change. Variables such as the classroom atmosphere, my presence, the teacher, or the other students all play a role. When I worked one on one he was perfect but teachers can't do that with every student. The students in his reading class were much better behaved so I think that is a factor. I'm interested in seeing his progress (10/18).

This day of observations can be looked at in different ways. In a way it can be analyzed that Jose was giving me his perspective and perceptions of ability grouping as he was very respectful and attentive in his higher level reading class, but rude, disrespectful, and as the teachers put it “off task” in his math class. Can it possibly be that his behavior was a form of resistance or revolt against the idea of having the lower level group educated the way they are. I also got his perspective as I spoke to him about his two classes informally. I joked with him and asked him why math class is so different compared to his reading class. Through simple conversations like this his responses basically said that he knew the students in his math class were not smart and behaved poorly because they didn’t care as much as students in his reading class (notes 10/20). This attitude shows that the students are aware of the grouping and who is in which one. It also reflects on the students’ efforts in class when Jose said the students didn’t care.

The size of the classroom and the students in it were major factors when it came to the behavior of Jose. The students whom he was interacting with had the biggest impact on him because the first group was so well behaved and the second group was the opposite. The behavior correlates with the effort given by the students in the classroom. Scholars such as William Carbonaro (2005) and George Ansalone (2000) argue that the achievement disparity stems directly from the effort given by each group of students. I would have to ask now whether or not Jose would be better off in a higher level math group? If he can do well with the higher leveled students in one class then why wouldn’t he be able to do the same in another group? If in fact it is the behavior from the rest of the class that affects Jose, then if he was in a higher level math class, his academic

performance and behavior might be different. Once again this reiterates the disparity of effort in the classroom between the two groups of students and the inappropriate atmosphere it creates to learn. This atmosphere is created because they grouped the students this way and it leads to possible underachievement by the lower groups as well as putting them at a disadvantage.

The second part of my qualitative study was interviewing the faculty in order to get their perceptions about ability grouping. I interviewed the three teachers in the sixth grade and two administrators who run a reading program where ability grouping is a big part of the program. All the teachers had similar ideas and feelings about ability grouping as Mrs. Smith said, “ability grouping is good for the students and the teacher because we can teach and the students can learn at the same pace.”¹ This concept seemed to be a common theme between the teachers. My observations in the classrooms validate this statement because the pace at which each teacher teaches is different for each group. The teachers were trying to create the best possible learning environment for the students, and they believe that ability grouping creates changes in teaching techniques. Mr. Ferris told me in an interview that, “you have to teach at a rate that the students can absorb and retain the proper information to do well in the class.”² It was apparent in the classrooms that the teachers in the lower grouped classes moved much slower through lessons compared to the higher leveled groups. This may seem like the right thing to do for the students but some of them are being put at a disadvantage. This technique doesn’t seem to challenge the students as much to work harder and strive to learn more. In this case ability does put the lower leveled students at a disadvantage due to the improper teaching

¹ Interview Mrs. Smith 11/17

² Interview Mr. Ferris 11/17

techniques by the teachers. This problem with ability grouping could be part of the reason why Hillside has some of the lowest test scores in Connecticut.

Two administrators I interviewed ran a reading program at Hillside Elementary and is solely based on ability grouping. The program is a one hour program each morning and the students all move to different classes with their proper reading group. In Jose's reading class that I was in had a large mix of students. There were students in sixth, fifth, and there was even a girl who was in third grade. All these students read at the same level though. Their reasoning for why ability grouping is necessary was summed up in an interview with Mr. Mounds when he said, "Making the students feel comfortable in the classroom with their peers of the same learning ability is important."³ He went on to explain that they feel that the students will have more confidence in the class because they know that each student in the room is just like them. Mounds repeatedly stated that the students need to feel that they can and have the ability to do well in school and be a good student. I had to bring to his attention that I spent time in a sixth grade class that had a third grader in it. This means that the third grader is already at a sixth grade reading level but will be in that same level for the next three years because she can't move onto seventh grade. When I asked him about this student he had no reaction at first which tells me that this is the downside to ability grouping. It would be very interesting to follow a student like this in the next couple of years to see the approach the school takes on this situation.

The last area that has been shown in both my observations and interviews with teachers is the idea that ability grouping creates an atmosphere that puts the lower leveled groups at a disadvantage and the opposite for the higher levels. The atmosphere is

³ Interview Mr. Mounds 11/17

situated around students' behavior, effort, and interactions between the students and the teachers and also with their peers. Behavior and discipline issues were a daily experience in the lower grouped classes. When interviewing Mrs. Smith she said, "There is a big difference between the students in each group when it comes to behavior and effort."⁴ She went on to also say that, "When there are distractions I usually just send the student out of the room for a while."⁵ These quotes clearly show the disparity between higher and lower groups of students. During my daily observations there was a consistent routine of students being sent out of the room to cool down. The teachers at Hillside use the term they call "being off task". When a student started to act up the teacher would remind them that they are off task and if they are really bad the teacher will send them out of the room or call security. These behaviors were not seen as much when I was in the higher leveled groups. Therefore ability grouping creates this type of chaotic atmosphere where it becomes difficult to have a productive classroom structure.

In summary, my research has proven that ability grouping does put students at a disadvantage by placing the students into different groups based upon their academic level. Teachers in my research perceive this educational tool as a good way to create the best possible environment for the students to learn at their proper pace to gain the education they deserve. The teachers' perceptions contradict what most scholars have studied about ability grouping but my observations agree with them. It was hard to determine exactly how well the students' academic achievement will be affected by the ability grouping because of the length of my study but through other research and examples it has been established that students in the lower groups tend to put forth less

⁴ Interview Mrs. Smith 11/17

⁵ Ibid

effort and due to the atmosphere in which they are in and the teaching techniques used to teach them, their academic achievements will be limited. I feel it would be beneficial to my research if I would be able to follow or track the students next year to see if or how they progressed. Ability grouping needs to be more thoroughly studied and examined because there are a lot of students that may be losing out on the equal and proper education that they deserve.

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