

Ability grouping in elementary school hampers minority students' literacy

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African-American and Hispanic students placed in ability groups for reading instruction learned less compared to demographically similar minority students who weren't grouped by ability, a new study by a University of Illinois expert in the sociology of education found.

Christy Lleras, a professor of human and community development, says that ability grouping, a pedagogical tool for sorting [students](#) into different academic tracks based on their perceived academic ability, is a "net-loss" practice that not only impedes the literacy of lower-grouped minority students, but also doesn't substantially strengthen the reading ability of higher-grouped minority students.

"The argument in the past went, if higher-grouped kids are gaining from grouping," Lleras said, "then we should keep doing it no matter what the effect on lower-grouped students, because the higher-grouped students are actually benefiting from the practice."

But Lleras and her co-author, UI graduate student Claudia Rangel, found that higher-grouped African-American students "don't look that much different than non-grouped students in terms of their reading gains," while lower-grouped African-American students lose "tremendously" over time.

"Ability grouping turns out to be a double-whammy," Lleras said.

"The costs are larger than the benefits because not only do the lower-grouped students not learn as much, there were no significant differences between the higher-grouped students and the non-grouped students. From previous research, we know teachers group students not just on standardized test scores, but also on behavior, race and class. So by using ability grouping, we're creating larger achievement gaps among minority students, which exacerbates inequality."

As a practice, ability grouping is used in the majority of public schools in the United States. Ostensibly, ability grouping should promote academic success, Lleras said, noting that one of its advantages is that it allows teachers to tailor a lesson's difficulty to the specific ability level of the students in each group, allowing for better classroom

management.

The assumption behind ability grouping is that "it's going to be a rising tide that lifts all boats," Lleras said.

But that's not the case.

"We have too many students leaving elementary school who can't [read](#) at grade level, which clearly puts them at a disadvantage when they move to higher grades. They slide by to the next grade, and are lower-grouped there, and continue to fall further behind everyone else."

And if students fall behind in elementary school, "it's really hard for them to catch up in later grades, especially if they're struggling with reading," Lleras said. "We know from other research that early reading skills are very important in forming an attachment to school and for learning in later grades, so it's imperative that we put them on a path to success."

Lleras also faults the premise that students will learn better if they have instructional material adjusted to their reading level. In classrooms where students aren't grouped, Lleras said all students study the same materials, and the results are more equitable.

"Although the pace at which they work may vary, there isn't a two-tier system of materials or expectations."

But in classrooms that practice ability grouping, Lleras said that lower-grouped students are much more likely to be assigned lesson plans that emphasize rote memorization and routinized kinds of thinking, while higher-grouped students are assigned more challenging lessons that develop reading comprehension skills.

"Over time, the two groups aren't given the same kind of instructional material," Lleras said. "So they're learning at different rates, and the lower group never quite catches up. And if they're behind in the early grades, they continue to fall further behind in later grades over time."

Lleras sees academic achievement as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"If you set a high bar for students and you back it up with instructional quality, students learn," she said. "If the materials and expectations are lower, then that's what you'll get."

However much the practice of ability grouping has negative unintended consequences for minority students, Lleras said teachers aren't to blame for adopting the practice.

"It's not on the teachers," Lleras said. "Teachers not only have to deal with a wide disparity of ability levels in the lower grades - some students already know their ABCs walking into first grade, others don't - but they also have to contend with large class sizes, students with special needs, unfunded accountability mandates and cash-strapped school districts. It comes back to No Child Left Behind, which was a policy of unrealistic expectations coupled with low resources. It wasn't a serious effort to get kids reading."

If ability grouping doesn't work, what pedagogic practice will get minority students reading at grade level?

"We know that reading mentoring programs work," Lleras said. "But if you're a low-resource school, who are you going to get to do that for you? Parents are often working two or three jobs, they're not going to be able to come in and do that."

"We also know that phonemic awareness is very important, yet we

continue to teach whole languages in elementary school. That works well for middle-class students who enter first grade with huge vocabularies, but it's really not very effective for teaching low-income students."

"The early years of reading instruction are a critical period in a child's cognitive development," Lleras said. "If we know that low-income and racial minority students are more likely to be placed into these lower groups, and if we know that these groups are learning less over time, then not only are schools going to have a difficult time making adequate yearly progress, but minority students' educational problems will continue throughout the middle grades and high school."

More information: Lleras' findings were published in the February 2009 issue of the *American Journal of Education*.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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