Figure 1

A Typical Day in a Flexibly Grouped Classroom

- **Community Reading**
  - Time each day when children read (or listen to) grade-appropriate text
- **Just Right Reading**
  - Time each day when children receive instruction in text that will support the development of particular word level and comprehension strategies
- **On Your Own Reading**
  - Time each day when children read anything of their own choosing

Figure 2

Community Reading

- <u>Story Introduction (Whole Class)</u>
  - Preview text, develop background knowledge, make predictions
- <u>Reading the Selection (Needs-Based Groups)</u>

No Help	With Help (Teacher-led Group)
– Silent reading	– Read aloud by teacher
– Partner rereading	– Rereading with teacher or partner
– Partner response	– Group Response (oral)
– Individual response	– Individual Response (Written)

- <u>Responding to the Selection (Heterogeneous Groups)</u>
  - Book Club (Raphael & McMahon, 1997)

Figure 3

Just Right Reading

- **Supporting Struggling Readers**
  - Instruction in word level strategies using easy text
  - Reading and rereading of easy books
- **Supporting Average and Above Average Readers**
  - Instruction in word level and comprehension strategies using Community Reading Text
  - Reading beyond Community Reading Text
  - Serving as peer or cross-age tutor

Figure 4

On Your Own Reading

- Children read a book or text of their own choosing
- Children may read individually or in pairs
- Teacher may interview if child consistently or repeatedly chooses books too easy or too difficult

representation of Just Right Reading.

On Your Own Reading

On Your Own Reading (Figure 4) encompasses activities more widely known as Sustained Silent Reading (McCracken & McCracken, 1978) or Drop Everything and Read (Ziegler, 1993). It is the time of day when children choose to read any book or text of interest to them, and if they wish, to share their responses with the teacher and their peers. On average, teachers allocate about 15 minutes each day to student-selected reading of this type.

In summary, Community Reading might be considered the part of literacy instruction which is driven by the grade-level curriculum—the time when the focal text is important not only for the reading lessons that accompany it, but also for the language, concepts, and content lessons embedded within it. It is participation in Community Reading that protects lower- performing readers from being trapped in low-level reading materials that have historically denied them access to language, concepts, and vocabulary necessary for success at their grade level. Just Right Reading represents that part of literacy instruction that is driven by the teacher and his or her expert knowledge of each individual's reading needs. Consistent with the Vygotskian (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development, the teacher chooses text that is within each child's reach when working with a teacher or more expert other, that is, text that the child can read with effective and appropriate instruction and scaffolding. On Your Own Reading represents the part of the literacy program that is driven by the child and responds to evidence that motivation for reading and self-directedness comes, at least partially, from having the opportunity to make choices along the way (Guthrie, Alvermann, & Au, 1998; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999).

Managing a Flexibly-Grouped Literacy Classroom

As with any successful instructional practice, effective implementation of a flexibly-grouped reading program requires a knowledgeable and well prepared classroom teacher who (a) establishes reliable and consistent daily routines, (b) provides explicit instruction in strategies children will be expected

to use alone or with a partner, (c) creates centers where students can work productively when assignments are completed, and (d) closely monitors children's performance.

Consistent Daily Routines

In classrooms where flexible grouping is effective, day-to-day activities are highly structured and consistent, and children can largely predict what will happen each day. Children know, for example, that each day they will engage in reading and rereading of text, and if the tasks involve reading with a partner, they also have been told explicitly what is expected of them during this activity. While there are a number of ways to implement what has become widely known as buddy or partner reading, in many classrooms, children alternate pages and understand that while their partner is reading, they must follow along so that they can assist with unknown words. In addition, having learned from an expert first-grade teacher, I teach children to use their "three-step voice," a voice that I am unable to hear if I take three small steps away from them. This strategy has been effective in helping even very young children to lower their voices as they read aloud.

Similarly, children know that each day they will engage in written response to what they've read. They have reading journals readily accessible to them in their desks, and they know the routines for completing and submitting their work. In addition, they are fully aware of how to seek help from the teacher or a peer when they are unclear or confused about an assignment. And finally, children know what to do when they finish their work—how to check it, where to put it, and what to do next.

Explicit Instruction

In a flexibly grouped classroom, children routinely spend some period of time working alone or in peer-led groups. In classrooms where children do so successfully, they are familiar with the strategies they have been asked to implement during these times. Typically, the teacher has systematically and explicitly taught the focal strategy, and used a gradual release model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), providing demonstration, guided practice, and independent application in

previous teacher-led, lessons. So, for example, if children are expected to meet with a group to compose a story summary, the teacher might have spent time with the whole group completing a story map on a shared story and using the story map to compose a group summary. Then, the teacher might have asked children to use the strategy on their own, and carefully monitored their products to ascertain their understanding and facility with the strategy. Having done so, the teacher can safely conclude that the children can apply the strategy on their own or within a student-led, group setting.

Monitoring Children's Performance

Effective implementation of flexible grouping requires that teachers engage in daily "kidwatching" (Goodman, 1982), observing children during all phases of the literacy program to make certain they are both supported and challenged. Monitoring strategies might include frequent running records (Clay, 1979) taken while reading with children individually or "behind their back" as they are partner reading. Retellings provide information about children's comprehension of the text, their ability to organize their recall, their oral language, and their ability to elaborate and clarify. Listening to children during book talks can also provide information about children's comprehension and oral language. In addition, eavesdropping on these conversations can provide teachers valuable information about children's group participation styles: how they get the floor, how they agree or disagree with their peers, how they justify their point of view, how they clarify confusion. Finally, children's written response to reading may provide information about phonemic awareness, spelling, comprehension of text, and grammatical understanding.

Learning Center Activities

Good teachers have long created learning centers where children work independently and with peers in cross-curricular projects. In flexibly grouped classrooms some children may finish particular assignments ahead of their peers, and in these cases, learning center activities provide interpeting and productive work for them.

Resources and Materials to Support Flexible Grouping

In classrooms where teachers are successful in the implementation of flexible groups, they have three important resources. The first resource teachers have is books—a substantial collection diverse in genre, in cultural representation, in topic, and in level of difficulty. Of particular importance is the availability of a large number of books that represent easy reading for children who are struggling. In addition to the size of the collection of books, the ways books are organized and displayed are also important. In many flexibly grouped classrooms, teachers arrange books by topic and level of difficulty and display them in strategically placed baskets, bins, and bookshelves. In the case of beginning readers, children keep several familiar and easy-to-read books in their desks, so that they can readily access them for reading and rereading at the teacher's suggestion or on their own initiative.

A second resource teachers have is time to teach reading. In classrooms where flexible grouping is effective, teachers allocate substantial instructional time to the teaching of reading. Most primary grade teachers report that a two-hour block of time is required for effective implementation of each of the elements of an effective literacy program.

The third resource teachers have is time to continue to learn about the teaching of reading. While we know a good deal about how children learn to read and write, on-going research and theory enable us to advance our understanding even further. In order for teachers to offer children the finest learning opportunities, they need many opportunities to extend their own knowledge about how children learn to read and write. 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.

Conclusion

It has now been over ten years since I started my work in flexible grouping, working mostly in urban schools where the very large majority of children are both culturally and linguistically diverse. I began this work because my review of the existing literature

convinced me that the practice of ability grouping was not providing our neediest children with the best opportunities to learn. My work has taught me that over time, the changes teachers have made have led to notable and important improvements in children's achievement in reading and writing—documented by increases in standardized test scores, in performance assessments, in daily classroom work, in children's attitudes toward literacy and learning, and in teachers' attitudes toward teaching (Paratore & Indrisano, 1994; Jackson et al., 1999). I continue this work because, although the evidence is positive, we are far from achieving our goal of literacy for every child. There is yet much to learn. Even as we make change, we must remain committed to keeping our eyes and minds open to a better way so that truly every child who walks through our classroom doors wanting to become a reader/writer walks out having become one.

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Jeanne R. Paratore is from Boston University.