DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 429 CS 014 214

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| TITLE | Sizing Up and Organising for Instruction in the First Weeks of School. |
| PUB DATE | 2000-07-13 |
| NOTE | 20p.; Paper presented at the International Reading Association World Congress on Reading (18th, Auckland, NZ, July 11-14, 2000). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Academic Ability; *Classroom Environment; Classroom Research; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Interviews; *Literacy; Participant Observation; *Reading Instruction; Teacher Surveys; *Writing Instruction |
| IDENTIFIERS | Instructional Management; New Zealand; *Organizing Strategies |

ABSTRACT

Grouping of students for instruction is an organizational pattern that is commonplace in literacy instruction in classrooms. A debate exists, however, about whether instruction is more effective when groups are heterogeneous or homogeneous with regard to student ability. A study aimed to provide a description of the grouping practices of New Zealand teachers in reading and writing; in particular, how and when groups are formed, what information is used to guide the formation of groups, and what teachers' expectations are about ideal group characteristics. Data were derived from observations and interviews conducted by graduate students who were participating in the 1999 Diploma in Teaching (Primary) program at the University of Auckland. Out of 110 student teachers, 90 agreed to contribute their observations and interviews. These 90 teachers were placed in 30 schools representing a wide range of socioeconomic levels and all levels of primary school (Years 1-8). Apart from the four teachers who conducted individualized reading programs, every other teacher surveyed formed groups for reading and, as in a previous (2000) study by Wilkinson and Townsend, ability was the preeminent determinant of group membership for reading. This was not true for writing, however, where far fewer teachers formed groups and of those who did, many made their grouping decisions on a heterogeneous basis rather than creating homogeneous groups. A large number of teachers surveyed conducted whole class lessons as the basis for their written language teaching. For both reading and writing, instructional programs commenced early in the year. (Contains 8 tables of data and 24 references.) (NKA)

# SIZING UP AND ORGANISING FOR INSTRUCTION IN

# THE FIRST WEEKS OF SCHOOL

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Paper presented at 18th World Congress on Reading
International Reading Association
13 July 2000
Auckland
New Zealand

## SIZING UP AND ORGANISING FOR INSTRUCTION IN THE FIRST WEEKS OF SCHOOL

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary theorising in learning and development aims to understand how individual cognitive functioning is situated in cultural, historical and institutional settings. Research focuses on the contexts schools provide and how these relate to other contexts. Children's development of expertise in reading and writing can be seen in these settings, including the classroom, and in the ideas and actions of those involved within the settings.

A classroom is a culture with an established pattern of social interactions, groupings and rules and routines that guide exchanges. Members of a classroom come to share a common view of literacy through the arrangements and interactions in which they are involved (Rogoff, 1990). Valsiner (1987) describes ways in which those involved with children both provide opportunities for and place constraints on development. In classrooms, teachers set the parameters for engagement in an activity. Actions of the child may be promoted not only by direct means but also indirectly through organisation for learning and through the provision of resources and participation structures. Thus the activities and environments that teachers provide for developing readers and writers and the interaction these promote are part of the zones that channel development.

Children's learning in reading and writing can be viewed as an activity system according to McNaughton (1995). He presents a framework that outlines the dimensions of influence in the activity system. These include the ideas and goals of the participants, the tutorial types or configurations, the consequent interaction patterns and the materials and resources used to promote and support learning. In this paper certain aspects are fore-grounded, namely the organisational patterns in order to examine them in some detail.

Grouping of students for instruction is an organisational pattern that is commonplace in literacy instruction in classrooms. Although commonplace, grouping is neither simple nor uncontested. For example, there is debate about whether instruction is more effective when groups are heterogeneous or homogeneous with regard to student ability. Some researchers have argued that reading groups formed on the basis of similar student ability may act as an impediment to learning, particularly for students in lower ability groups who receive less instructional time, or more repetitive and less challenging tasks (Collins, 1986; Eder, 1986; Hiebert, 1983). Such arguments have contributed to a decline in the use of ability grouping in the United States (see Wilkinson & Townsend, 2000). Yet there has been no such decline in New Zealand which, according to recent data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), had the highest incidence of ability grouping in the 32 participating countries (Wagemaker, 1993). At the Standard 3 level (Grade 4), approximately 85% of teachers in New Zealand group their students by ability for reading instruction. In the United States,

only half as many teachers (44%) group by ability at Grade 4 (Lundberg & Linnakyla, 1992).

Although contested, ability grouping may not be the cause for concern suggested by some reading educators. Because New Zealand has maintained relatively high levels of literacy among its students over several decades (Elley, 1992; Purves, 1973, 1979; Thorndike, 1973), it can be argued that its teachers capitalise on features of ability grouping to maximise the effectiveness of their instruction for students of diverse needs and backgrounds.

In an attempt to provide an in-depth description of how effective teachers in New Zealand organise their classrooms for reading instruction, Wilkinson and Townsend (2000) interviewed four best-practice teachers in the first week of school and every few weeks thereafter for an entire school year. The interviews addressed five questions: How do teachers assign children to groups; what factors determine the number, size and composition of groups; when and how do teachers regroup students; what assessment practices inform the decisions about changes to groups; and how do teachers work with groups? The interviews were supplemented by three sets of observations of instruction taken throughout the year. The classes included children from Year 1 (kindergarten) to Year 4 (Grade 3), included both single-level and composite (multigrade) structures, and children from affluent European areas and children from lower socioeconomic, multicultural areas. All classes contained approximately 30 children.

The results of the study suggested that these teachers used reading ability as the preeminent determinant of group membership, which was usually determined by the second week of the year following a great deal of informal teacher observation and assessment. The teachers regarded four or five groups, with membership no higher than eight students, as optimal. However, in practice the teachers usually worked with more than this number of groups to accommodate differences in reading skill, with the consequence that three of the teachers worked with groups as small as one or two children during all or some of the year. Changes to group membership were predominantly "upward" and resulted almost exclusively from differential rates of progress within the group, as judged by the teachers' informal observations and from running records of each child's accuracy and self-correction rates while reading aloud. Finally, grouping was just one of several organisational arrangements used by the teachers. They frequently worked with students in individual, paired, whole-class and other contexts.

In the study by Wilkinson and Townsend (2000) an experienced consultant teacher provided elaboration of the teacher responses within a broader framework of similar practices by other teachers. Nonetheless, the study is limited by the participation of only four carefully selected teachers. Would similar organisational practices be found in a larger sample of New Zealand teachers? Similarly, would similar results be found for other components of teachers' literacy programmes not explored by Wilkinson and Townsend (2000), such as writing?

The purpose of the current study was to provide a description of the grouping practices of New Zealand teachers in reading and writing. In particular, how and when are groups formed, what information is used to guide the formation of groups, and what are teachers' expectations about ideal group characteristics?

## METHOD

We derived the data for this study from observations and interviews conducted by graduate students who were participating in the 1999 Diploma in Teaching (Primary) programme at the University of Auckland. Student teachers in this programme are placed in schools from the first day of the school year, one student teacher per class. They work alongside experienced classroom teachers (called "associates") and are supervised by highly qualified senior teachers or deputy principals in each school (called "mentors"). The schools comprising the University of Auckland Schools Consortium are chosen to represent a wide array of socioeconomic levels, ethnic composition, size, and other characteristics.

Ninety student teachers agreed to contribute their observations and interviews to this study out of 110 student teachers who took part in the Diploma programme in 1999. These ninety student teachers were placed in thirty schools representing a wide range of socioeconomic levels (deciles 1 through to 10) and ethnic diversity. Of the ninety classes in which student teachers were placed, forty-nine classes comprised children of four ethnic groups or more whereas only four contained one ethnic group. There were twenty-one contributing primary schools, seven full primary schools, and two intermediate schools. The ninety classes represented all levels of primary school (Years 1 – 8). Forty of the classes were composites and one was a vertically grouped class (Years 4, 5, 6).

We asked the student teachers to write a report on the processes and procedures by which their associates made initial judgements about the literacy development of individual children and how they used this knowledge to organise their classes to cater for children's differing needs and abilities. The instructions given to the 1999 cohort of student teachers were based on our experience with the assignment in the previous year. First, we asked student teachers to describe the context of their placement: the school, the year level(s), the number of children in the class, and the ethnic composition of the class. Second, we asked student teachers to describe how their associate initially organised the class for reading and writing. We wanted student teachers to address the following questions:

- When classroom structures (e.g., reading groups) were established?
- What were the structures (e.g., groups, whole class)?

- What information did teachers use to make initial judgments of children's abilities and to make decisions about placing children in groups or other structures?
- What form did this information take (e.g., reading levels, colours on the colour wheel)?
- What importance did the teacher attach to the sources of information?
- How flexible were the structures?

Third, we asked them to discuss any factors, other than children's abilities, that may have influenced the way their associates organised their classes for reading or writing. As in the Wilkinson and Townsend's (2000) study, we were interested in seeing the extent to which organisational and management constraints (e.g., teachers' beliefs about desirable limits on the size and number of groups) might influence teachers' decisions about the formation of groups or other structures for reading and writing. However, we also asked student teachers to consider the influences of other factors on teachers' decision making: children's home languages, cultural backgrounds, gender, and social maturity, as well as whether the class was a single-level or composite class.

Student teachers recorded results of their interviews and observations as written reports for formal assessment by the course instructors. We emphasised that they should provide a comprehensive yet concrete account of all relevant issues relating to classroom organisation in the first six to eight weeks of school. We stressed, particularly, that we wanted them to articulate the rationale and reasoning underlying their associates' initial decisions.

The first author analysed the reports and coded the information into categories in consultation with the other authors. Coding categories were developed and refined in order to account for all relevant information in a report and to permit retrieval of the corresponding full narrative. Separate records were made for reading and writing.

## RESULTS

### Organising for Reading

#### Setting up

Twelve teachers (13.3%) placed children in reading groups as soon as the school year began using information they received from the previous year's teacher. Of the remaining teachers, the majority (56%) placed children in reading groups by the second or third week of the year. Most of the other teachers placed children in groups in the first week or by the fourth, fifth, or seventh week. Two teachers said they would wait until Term 2 before they placed children in reading groups.

Table 1 shows the frequency of number of groups formed. As can be seen, teachers typically formed children into four groups. Four teachers did not

form children into groups. Instead, they operated individualised programmes. One of these teachers taught a Year 4 class of 26 children, another taught a Year 4 class of 31 children. The other two of these teachers taught Year 7 students and were in the same school. There was no relationship between the number of groups formed and the year level of the class (correlation = -.01).

Table 1. Frequency of number of reading groups

| Number of groups | Number of classes |
|---|---|
| 1 | 4 |
| 2 | 3 |
| 3 | 16 |
| 4 | 30 |
| 5 | 20 |
| 6 | 5 |
| 7 | 4 |
| 8 | 2 |
| 9 | 1 |
| 10 | 1 |

Almost all teachers (91%) regarded groups formed at the beginning of the year as flexible. Only nine percent of teachers considered reading groups formed at the beginning of the year to be permanent.

Assessing children

To make decisions about placement of children, teachers used information about students' reading abilities supplied by teachers from the previous year (e.g., children's reading ages or reading levels), information from formal assessments of children's reading (e.g., running records and standardised tests), and information from their own informal observations. The nature of the formal and informal assessments and how teachers used information from all three sources seemed to vary depending on the year level of the class. So, in the rest of this section, we examine how teachers assessed children for reading for classes that included New Entrant children (Years 0 or 1), classes of children from Years 2 to 6, and classes that included intermediate level students (Years 7 or 8).

In the seventeen classes that included New Entrant children, nine teachers used information from the previous year's teacher to group children (these were usually teachers of composite Year 1-2 classes). Most of the seventeen teachers also based their grouping decisions on formal assessments of children's alphabet or letter recognition knowledge, running records, knowledge of sight words, and children's performance on the School Entry Assessment (SEA) (see Table 2). Almost all teachers used information from informal

observations. These observation usually took the form of judgements of children's oral language abilities and their emergent reading behaviours (e.g., directionality, matching, concepts about print). To judge the relative importance teachers attached to the various sources of information in weighing up their decisions about grouping, we assigned a rank of 3 to the source given highest priority, a rank of 2 to the source given next priority, and a rank of 1 to the source given lowest priority. On average, those teachers that used information from the previous year's teacher as well as formal and informal assessments, attached slightly higher priority to their formal assessments and previous year's information (both with mean ranks = 2.1) than their informal assessments (1.8). For those teachers that simply used formal and informal assessments, we assigned a rank of 2 to the most important and a rank of 1 to the next. These teachers gave equal priority to information from formal and informal assessments (both with mean ranks =1.5).

Table 2. Frequency of use of formal assessments to group children in Years 0 to 1 (n=17)

| Assessment | Number of classes |
|---|---|
| Alphabet knowledge/letter recognition | 13 |
| Running record | 7 |
| Sight words | 7 |
| School Entry Assessment (SEA) | 6 |
| Concepts About Print | 2 |
| Phonemic knowledge | 2 |
| Checklist – Harry Hood | 1 |

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In the 57 Year 2 to 6 classes, almost all teachers (55) used information from the previous year's teachers in making grouping decisions. Table 3 shows the frequency of use of formal assessments. Information from formal assessments came primarily from running records or informal prose inventories and, to a lesser extent, from the Burt Word Recognition Test (ref) and the Progressive Achievement Tests of Reading (1991). Again, almost all teachers used information from their own informal observations. Teachers observed the nature of the books that students chose to read, the degree to which students seemed to comprehend what they read, their on-task behaviour during reading time, their decoding and fluency in oral reading, and their level of oral language. On average, teachers attached most importance to the information from their formal assessments (mostly running records) (mean rank = 2.2) and slightly less importance to information from informal observations and previous year's teachers (both 1.8). Of the two teachers that used only formal and informal assessments, again most importance was attached to formal (2) as opposed to informal assessment (1).

Table 3. Frequency of use of formal assessments to group children in Years 2 to 6 (n=57)

| Assessment | Number of classes |
|---|---|
| Running record/Informal prose inventory | 42 |
| Burt Word Recognition Test | 11 |
| Progressive Achievement Test(s) | 8 |
| Spelling test | 3 |
| Sight words | 2 |
| Blends test | 2 |
| Neale Analysis of Reading Ability | 1 |
| Schonell ..... | 1 |
| Alphabet knowledge | 1 |
| Phonemic knowledge | 1 |
| Writing skills | 1 |
| Reading test (school-based) | 1 |
| Peters Standardised Spelling Test | 1 |

In the 16 classes that included Year 7 or 8 children, 13 teachers used information from the previous year in making grouping decisions. Table 4 shows the frequency of use of formal assessments. Information from formal assessment came primarily from running records, the Progressive Achievement Test of Reading Comprehension (1991), and the GAP (1970). Twelve teachers used information from informal observations. These took the form of noting the choice of books students read, the degree to which students comprehended what they read, and their interaction and discussion in the classroom. Among teachers that used information from all three sources, on average, teachers attached most importance to information from formal and informal assessments (mean ranks of 2.3 and 2.4, respectively) and much less importance to information from the previous year's teacher (1.3). Among the three teachers that used only formal and informal assessments, all regarded information from the formal assessments (2) as more important than information from their informal assessments (1).

Table 4. Frequency of use of formal assessments to group children in Years 7 to 8 (n=16)

| Assessment | Number of classes |
|---|---|
| Running record | 9 |
| Progressive Achievement Test(s) | 7 |
| GAP | 6 |
| TOSCA | 3 |
| Spelling test | 3 |
| Burt Word Recognition Test | 2 |
| Pretos Standardised Dictation Test | 1 |
| Individual conferences | 1 |
| Story telling | 1 |

Thinking about groups

Almost all teachers (89%) used reading ability as the primary factor for making decisions about grouping children for reading. However, a large number of teachers (83%) also considered organisational and management constraints when deciding on the number of groups to be formed and the number of children in each group. Most teachers (93%) preferred three to six groups, and having four groups in a class was most popular. Only two teachers were willing to work with more than six groups. We assume these preferences for certain numbers of groups arise because of the difficulty teachers experience in getting around all groups for instructional reading within the course of a day or a week (cf. Wilkinson & Townsend, 2000). Similarly, most teachers (74%) preferred to work with seven or fewer children in a group. Most popular was having six children in a group. We assume these preferences for groups of a certain size reflect teachers' concerns for maintaining children's engagement in a group (cf., Wilkinson & Townsend, 2000) as well as their attempts to ensure a degree of individualised instruction.

Further support for the notion that organisational and management constraints influenced teachers' thinking about how to form groups comes from examining factors that appear to relate to number of reading groups used. The number of groups formed by teachers correlated .56 with the teachers' preferences for the ideal number of groups. By contrast, number of groups correlated only .18 with class size and -.04 with the decile ranking of the school. These findings suggest that organisational and management constraints are an important, almost overriding, concern for teachers when they are trying to set up a programme to accommodate the diversity of instructional needs within their classrooms.

There were a number of other factors that teachers took into account when making decisions about placement of children in groups. With the wide diversity of ethnic groups present in most classrooms, it was not surprising that 21% of teachers said they considered the ethnicity of the children in their

classrooms when forming reading groups, although we do not know exactly how ethnicity figured in the teachers' thinking. Related to ethnicity, 33% of teachers said they considered the home language of the children when forming reading groups. Again, we do not know exactly how home language influenced teachers' groupings. However, some teachers would give children for whom English was not the home language some additional instruction whenever possible, and some more closely monitored these children's progress. Fifty-nine percent of teachers apparently took social factors into account when grouping children for reading. Group dynamics, the maturity of various individuals, and peer relationships were the main social factors mentioned. Twenty-two percent of teachers said they took gender into account in grouping, mostly with regard to ensuring that both genders were represented in each group. Finally, only 15% of teachers considered the fact that their class was composite or single level when forming their groups. The mean number of groups formed in composite classes (4.6) was only slightly greater than the mean number in single-level classes (4.1) (cf. Wilkinson & Hamilton, 2000).

## Organising for Writing

### Setting up

The picture for writing was rather different to that for reading where almost all teachers grouped their students and had well-understood methods for doing so. In writing just over one-third of teachers (36%) placed their students into groups. Where teachers did form groups they typically formed three groups. Table 5 shows the frequency of number of groups formed across the entire sample of classrooms. Five teachers operated individualised programmes in writing. All but four teachers engaged in whole class teaching where they often modelled writing for students (39% did this) before the children began writing themselves. All teachers who responded to a question concerning conferencing during writing, indicated that they engaged in this form of individual assistance for students. Many teachers (38) also used other forms of structures during their writing programmes. The most common of these (47%) was to form needs-based groups from time to time. Other structures used included having brainstorming groups, using a variety of group support and activities, and having the students work in pairs.

Table 5. Frequency of number of writing groups

| Number of groups | Number of classes |
|---|---|
| 1 | 39 |
| 2 | 3 |
| 3 | 14 |
| 4 | 8 |
| 5 | 7 |
| 6 | 1 |
| 10 | 1 |

Twenty-eight teachers (39% of respondees) began their writing programmes in Week One on the basis of information received from the previous year's teachers as well as some initial personal assessment of the students. This is earlier than was the case for reading where teachers took more time to assess and place children. The majority of teachers had begun their writing programmes by Week Three (83%) and most of the other teachers began their writing programmes in Week Four. Two teachers said they would wait until Term 2 before beginning their writing programmes.

Assessing children

To make decisions about the students' writing levels and individual needs, teachers used information about students' writing abilities supplied by teachers from the previous year, information from their own formal assessments of children's writing (e.g. through examining writing samples) and information from their own observations. The information from the previous year's teacher usually took the form of a school writing profile and writing examples from the previous year. Almost alll teachers had their students complete some examples of their writing. The importance of the information to teachers, when looking at data from the previous year, their own formal assessments and their own observations, varied depending on the year level of the class. We examine how teachers assessed children for writing separately for classes that included New Entrant children (Years 0 and 1), classes of children from Year 2 to 6, and classes that included intermediate level students (Years 7 and 8).

In the seventeen classes that included New Entrant children, eight teachers used information from the previous year's teacher in implementing their class writing programmes (these were usually teachers of composite Year 1-2 classes). Most of the seventeen teachers also based their grouping decisions on their own assessments of children's writing. They considered aspects such as the children's letter/sound knowledge and their letter formation (see Table 6). Informal observations usually took the form of judgments of the children's independence and emergent writing behaviour (e.g. pencil grip, ability to write own name, and alphabet knowledge).

To judge the relative importance teachers attached to the various sources of information about children in making decisions about their writing programmes, we assigned a rank of 3 to the source given the highest priority, a rank of 2 to the source given next priority, and a rank of 1 to the source given lowest priority. For those teachers who used information from all three sources, i.e. the previous year's teacher, as well as formal and informal assessments, they attached higher priority to their own formal assessments (mean rank = 2.6) and observations (2.0) than to the previous year's information (1.4). For those teachers that simply used formal and informal assessments, we assigned a rank of 2 to the most important and a rank of 1 to the next. These teachers gave similar priority to the information gained from formal assessment (mean = 1.6) and informal assessment (1.4).

Table 6. Frequency of analysis criteria from formal assessments in Years 0 to 1 (n=17)

| Analysis criteria | Number of classes |
|---|---|
| Name | 3 |
| Alphabet knowledge | 3 |
| Letter/word formation | 5 |
| Letter/sound knowledge | 5 |
| Ideas | 1 |
| Meaning | 1 |
| Structure | 3 |
| Conventions | 1 |
| Level (pre-communicative, semi-phonetic) | 1 |
| Risk taking | 1 |
| CAP (Concepts about Print) | 1 |
| Word knowledge | 1 |

Most teachers in the Year 2 to 6 classes (65%) used information from the previous year's teachers in making decisions about their writing programmes. Information from formal assessments collected by almost all teachers at this level (93%), came from having the children complete examples of their writing. These were then analysed by the teachers most commonly for punctuation, spelling, coherence of ideas, grammar and sentence structure. However, there were wide variations in what constituted individual teacher analysis. (see Table 7). Slightly more teachers judged their students' writing abilities on one or two examples of their work (51%) than on three or more examples (49%). The information from informal assessments also took several forms. Teachers observed students' on-task behaviour during writing, their independence, the quantity of written work produced in a set period and their confidence to complete tasks. On average, teachers attached most importance to the information from their analysis of writing examples (mean rank 2.5), next priority to own observations (2.0) and least importance to the assessments of the previous year's teachers (1.5). Of the 16 teachers that used only formal and informal assessments, again most importance was attached to formal (1.8) as opposed to informal assessment (1.2).

Table 7 Frequency of analysis criteria from formal assessments in Years 2 to 6 (n=57)

| Analysis criteria | Number of Classes |
|---|---|
| Handwriting | 6 |
| Vocabulary | 6 |
| Skill level | 1 |
| Ability | 6 |
| Sentence structure | 3 |
| Descriptive language | 1 |
| Punctuation | 11 |
| Grammar | 7 |
| Sentence structure | 7 |
| Spelling test | 1 |
| Reading level | 1 |
| Spelling | 8 |
| Coherence/clarity of ideas | 8 |
| Quantity | 4 |
| Linking ideas | 2 |
| Quality of expression | 3 |
| Story plan/format | 4 |
| Interest level | 1 |
| Error rate | 1 |
| Effort | 2 |
| Editing/ proofreading | 4 |
| Publishing | 1 |
| Sentence beginnings | 2 |
| Creativity | 2 |
| Dictionary use | 2 |
| Pencil grip | 1 |
| Handedness | 1 |
| Letter/ sound | 2 |
| Reading choices | 1 |
| Emotion | 1 |
| Paragraphing | 1 |

In the 16 classes that included Year 7 or 8 children, 10 teachers used information from the previous year in making decisions about their writing programmes. Information from formal assessments collected by 15 teachers came from having the children complete examples of their writing. These were then analysed by the teachers, most commonly for sentence structure, coherence, originality of ideas, punctuation, spelling and grammar. At this level, teachers also used other forms of formal assessment such as TOSCA (1981) or a standardised spelling test (see Table 8). However, there was a wide range of differing elements considered by individual teachers. More teachers (71%) judged their students' writing abilities on three or more examples than on less. Ten teachers used informal assessments of the

students' writing although only two teachers indicated what this comprised (looking at the quantity of work produced and considering the social maturity and on-task behaviour of the students). Among teachers that used information from all three sources, on average, teachers attached most importance to information from formal (mean rank = 2.4) assessments and less importance to information from the previous year's teacher (1.8) and informal assessments (1.7). Among the six teachers that used only formal and informal assessments, only one teacher regarded observations (mean rank = 1.2) as being more important than the formal assessments (1.8).

Table 8. Frequency of analysis criteria from formal assessments in Years 7 to 8 (n=16)

| Analysis criteria | Number of Classes |
|---|---|
| Quality of ideas | 1 |
| Fluency | 1 |
| Coherence of ideas | 3 |
| Punctuation | 4 |
| Vocabulary | 2 |
| Grammar | 4 |
| Understanding of genres | 1 |
| Editing | 3 |
| Publishing | 3 |
| Sentence structure | 6 |
| Dictionary use | 1 |
| Topic choice | 1 |
| Paragraphs | 2 |
| Handwriting | 2 |
| Creativity | 1 |
| Flow of language | 1 |
| Spelling | 3 |

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Thinking about writing programmes

A majority of teachers (70%) used writing ability as the primary factor for making decisions about grouping children for writing and in preparing writing programmes. However, there were a number of other factors that teachers took into account when making decisions about their writing programmes. Social factors were considered by 53% of the teachers when preparing for their writing programmes. This meant that teachers considered group dynamics, peer relationships, and ensuring a range of maturity in seating groups. Whilst organisational and management constraints were considered by a number of teachers (41%) in organising their writing programmes, these factors were not so important as they were in forming reading groups. This was probably because far fewer teachers grouped their children for writing than for reading. Other factors that teachers took into account when

designing their writing programmes included cultural factors (19%), home language (11%) and gender (17%). Cultural factors generally meant that teachers were careful to include writing topics that were culturally meaningful to the students. Similarly, home language included a consideration of home background and experiences. Teachers frequently ensured that their writing programmes were designed in such a way as to allow extra individual assistance for students whose first language was not English, particularly those who were recent immigrants. As regards gender, many teachers liked to ensure that seating groups and ability groups included both boys and girls. This was particularly true where only one of a particular gender may have been in a group.

## DISCUSSION

With regard to the results for reading, the findings of the current study are broadly consistent with the case studies documented by Wilkinson and Townsend (2000). Apart from the four teachers who conducted individualised reading programmes, every other teacher surveyed for this investigation formed groups for reading and, as in the study of Wilkinson and Townsend (2000), ability was the pre-eminent determinant of group membership for reading. This was not true for writing, however, where far fewer teachers formed groups and of those who did, many made their grouping decisions on a heterogeneous basis rather than creating homogeneous groups. A large number of the teachers surveyed conducted whole class lessons as the basis for their written language teaching.

Wilkinson and Townsend (2000) reported that in reading, teachers considered four or five groups with eight or less students in each as being optimal although in practice they often worked with more. The results of the current study reinforced this ideal and found teachers mostly creating between three and five actual groups, but often providing a larger number of instructional programmes to cater for the needs of their students.

For both reading and writing, instructional programmes commenced early in the year; certainly by Week Three for both literacy areas the majority of teachers had implemented their programmes. Notably, the writing programmes generally began even earlier than those in reading. This was possibly because teachers appear to have a clear understanding of the expected strategies to be used in the formation of reading groups and the implementation of classroom reading programmes. Most followed quite similar patterns of referring to the records of the previous teacher, completing their own running records and conducting a range of observations of the children. The information thus gained and articulated by teachers was remarkably similar across the sample of classrooms. This data was used as the basis for making grouping decisions. However, there were some differences in the relative importance teachers attached to the assessment sources of information for grouping compared with the study by Wilkinson and Townsend (2000). The teachers in this study seemed to place greater importance on the information from formal assessments and gave less weight

to their own informal assessments. Standardised tests, in particular, seemed to be used more than in the previous study, particularly with older students. As well, information from the previous year's teachers seemed to play a greater role than had been predicted.

In writing, though, teachers did not have such a standard range of procedures for assessing their students. Standardised testing was only used to a limited degree, mainly at the intermediate level, and the tests used were not specifically designed to assess writing. Teachers at all age levels regarded their own assessments of the students' writing as of primary importance in planning their programmes but the components that teachers used to determine quality writing varied enormously.

When considering group formation, factors other than children's reading abilities and organisational and management constraints seemed to be used to some extent. Again, this was inconsistent with the study of Wilkinson and Townsend (2000). Some teachers appear to have given some consideration to children's ethnicity, home language, social factors, gender and whether the class was single level or composite. Nevertheless teachers were far more concerned about children's ability than their age in forming instructional programmes. Organisational and management constraints such as how many children teachers judged they could work with effectively, seating arrangements and timing were all regarded as important by teachers. Social factors, too, such as which children would work well together or provided a measure of peer support, were also taken into account. Many teachers endeavoured to ensure a gender balance albeit in an instructional or seating group. The diversity of ethnicity and language which was prevalent in most classrooms surveyed was considered by many teachers when formulating their groupings and their instructional programmes. Teachers made an effort to include ethnically relevant texts in their classrooms and often ensured that grouping allowed time for additional support for children for whom English was their second language.

The methodology of the current investigation allowed for the collection of a wide range of data across a diversity of classrooms in the Auckland area. The evidence gathered related to reading serves to reinforce that collected by Wilkinson and Townsend (2000) despite some discrepancies. There are various explanations for these. One could be that the information provided by the student teachers' interviews and observations were not as sensitive to some of the more subtle issues than was the information from the earlier study. Another could be that the larger sample size in the present study has enabled us to see a broader spectrum of practices. Yet another explanation could be that the current findings are not restricted to "best practice" as were those from Wilkinson and Townsend's (2000) earlier study.

Nevertheless this study provides a useful description of how New Zealand teachers organise for their reading and writing programmes. The data provide clear evidence that while teachers appear to have firm structures and understandings about forming groups for reading and using these to provide maximum benefit for children in the teaching of reading, the same is not true

for writing. Future studies could investigate best practice in the teaching of writing and thence provide clear guidelines to teachers for the implementation of effective writing programmes for their students.

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