

Tracking Students in the Elementary Classroom:

Bridges to be Burned

Jolene Reed, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, School of Teaching and Learning

Sam Houston State University

Abstract

Teachers and administrators can become fearful that struggling early readers may eventually contribute to their specific school being placed on academic probation. This study followed one school who opted to place struggling first grade readers into a classroom that was smaller in size but contained only students who were struggling in their attempts to learn to read. It was anticipated that, by the end of the school year, these students would be reading at the same level as other students in their same grade level. However, results showed that the children in the small, “struggling” class were not only unable to raise their reading levels to that of their peers, but also that struggling students who were placed into regular classrooms at the same school did raise their reading levels to that of their peers.

Jolene Reed is an assistant professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Sam Houston State University. She teaches in the reading program area. Her research interests include literacy and teacher preparation. Her email address is jreed@shsu.edu.

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Shortly after the bell rang, children began entering the classroom. Thirteen children—seven boys and six girls—started taking folders out of their backpacks and then hanging those backpacks on a row of pegs located along one wall of the room. One-by-one the students began sitting in chairs at round tables situated throughout the room, looking at their teacher in anticipation of what the day might hold. Other than the small number of students, an outsider looking in might not immediately notice anything out of the ordinary. However, this class is anything but ordinary. These students were specifically selected to be together in this first-grade classroom because their kindergarten teachers felt that these boys and girls had exhibited a lower level of literacy development than their peers while in kindergarten.

Background

Teachers gave varying responses when asked why they recommended students for this special class. Some students had not yet mastered the letters and sounds of the alphabet. Other students had “under-developed” oral language patterns. Still others were “too immature” for the rigors of first-grade. This “bridging” class was developed by teachers and administrators at Monroe Elementary (a pseudonym—as are all names in this paper) as a way to allow these children to experience first grade in a smaller setting in order to receive more attention from the classroom teacher. A classroom of this type—one comprised of students on similar developmental levels—was intended to meet the needs of the children while simultaneously helping other teachers working at the first-grade level.

Children in this bridging class would benefit because they would be with other children at their same ability level. The classroom teacher would be able to focus on their specific needs.

Consequently, it was anticipated that by the end of first grade their academic abilities would accelerate to the level of other children their age. The bridging classroom teacher's ability to target instruction to their specific level of academic development would cause this rapid rate of learning. These students would not have to suffer the stress of being in the same classroom with more capable peers whose higher achievement abilities might have negative consequences on the slower-learner's self-esteem. Teachers and children in other classrooms would not need to slow their instruction and learning to accommodate the needs of less capable classmates. To the school administrators and first grade teachers, it sounded like a win-win situation. However, this class did not result in better outcomes for the students.

The faculty at Monroe Elementary believed they had developed an innovative way to meet the needs of slower progress first-grade children in their school. However, bridging is simply a new name for the antiquated practice of tracking. Gamoran (1992) defined curriculum tracking as the "programmatic divisions that separate students for all academic subjects" (p. 11). While tracking is currently most prevalent at the middle and high school level, it does also occur in the elementary schools. The most common form of tracking in elementary schools is the use of "ability grouping" within classrooms. Ability groups are small homogeneous groups of students with similar perceived or measured performance levels in a particular subject matter—usually reading or math. This practice is utilized in most classrooms only during the instruction of a particular subject matter with the students being instructed in heterogeneous groups during instruction of other subjects.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was implemented to set expectations (among other things) that struggling readers make accelerated progress in their learning and eventually catch up to and maintain the progress of their peers. Under NCLB, attention was

focused upon the results achieved on end-of-year standardized testing that normally begins during the students' third-grade year of school. Schools failing to make adequate progress in student test scores could face harsh penalties such as firing of school staff or even state takeover of a failing school. NCLB was replaced in 2015 by the Every School Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA continued to enforce many of the sanctions of NCLB.

Implementation of the above-mentioned sanctions based upon school performance has caused many schools to resort to desperate measures in their attempts to keep from being placed on probationary status. Among these desperate measures has been the implementation of classes that track low-progress students beginning as early as first grade. These classes have many different names—bridging, step-up, and leveling—but their purpose is the same: to track low-progress students in a separate group from their more capable peers. These classes may serve as a pathway to retention or placement in special education. By so doing, the child's eventual mandatory performance on standardized testing can be postponed, adapted, or eliminated.

Analysis of the Problem

At the surface level, use of bridging classrooms appeals to the logical minds of educators as being a simple solution to the complex needs of struggling students. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the reasons that bridging classrooms are implemented in schools and to determine whether these reasons are supported with evidence of success in practice and in research. Such a bridging class was implemented at one elementary school, Monroe Elementary, located in the Slate Canyon Public Schools in the Southwestern part of the United States. This paper will take a cursory look at the effect that classroom yielded.

Oakes (1985) listed four primary reasons why these types of leveling or tracking classrooms are implemented. First is the notion that students learn better in homogeneous

groupings such as these. The underlying assumption of this idea is that some students come to school with a reservoir of rich experiences that have placed them in superior positions of being able to learn and understand the curriculum of school. An unfortunate conclusion from this train of thought is that there are students at the other end of the learning spectrum who are not capable of attaining high levels of scholarship. This view is often referred to as the deficit model of learning. The implication is that students who are not progressing at the same rate as their peers have an inability to learn. At times this deficit is attributed to their socioeconomic status, their lack of preschool experiences, or even their race and ethnicity.

The second assumption is that slower students can maintain a higher level of self-esteem and hence maintain a better learning attitude without the presence of higher-achieving students as a constant reminder of their struggling status. Oakes (1986) elaborated by explaining that this assumption is not supported by the research. In fact, students placed in low-track curriculums have been found to have lower self-esteem, lower aspirations, increased behavior problems, and negative attitudes towards school. Oakes' work focuses primarily on high school students. If tracking results in such negative effects after four years of high school, the results of being placed on low curriculum tracks beginning at the start of elementary school would likely be compounded many times during a student's educational experience.

Third, the belief is that placement processes for classrooms such as these are accurate in their assessments and that past performances accurately predict future performances of students. The question becomes whether the assessments utilized actually measure what they claim to measure. Elementary schools often determine the placement of students based on tests of reading skills. In the primary grades, these tests are often comprised of measurements of phonemic awareness and phonetic understanding. Coles (2000) argues that these tasks reduce

reading to a level of skills that no longer involve reading and as such do not measure reading ability. Oakes (1985) also points out that white, middle-class children are most likely to perform well on placement tests because their language development and prior experiences are most compatible with the assessments used by schools. Lower socio-economic status and minority students are more likely to perform poorly indicating that such tests are culturally biased (Croizet & Detrevis, 2008).

The fourth reason discussed by Oakes is the belief that classrooms of homogeneous composition are easier to teach because the level of instruction is targeted at the student's level of current achievement, allowing the teacher to focus on a specific and narrow set of student needs. The assumption is that this focused teaching will allow the teacher to hone in on one level of academic instruction and allow the student to make greater academic gains. Oakes (1986) posited that tracking does not promote student achievement, but rather contributes to mediocre instruction for most students. She further stated that teaching is not made easier through the use of tracking because even within these tracks students still have a variety of cognitive styles, interests, and aptitudes. Most importantly, Oakes further pointed out that even if teaching were made easier through the tracking of students, that benefit would pale in importance when considering the irreparable damage caused to minority and low-socioeconomic students. Bigelow (1995) elaborated by explaining that one of the by-products of tracking is that low-tracked students begin to blame themselves for their low achievement. They view themselves as having an innate academic deficit instead of realizing that the educational system may have contributed greatly to their academic failures. This argument was substantiated by MacLeod (1987) and Lopez (2003) in their studies of low-socioeconomic high school students.

Ogbu (2003) stated that once students are placed in a course of academic tracking, they are left progressively behind their peers. The academic gap continues to widen rather than narrow because the instruction that these students receive never extends to the breadth and depth of peers who are placed in more accelerated tracks. Ogbu found that this began in the fifth grade of the community he studied. As disturbing as his results were, it is even more disturbing to think that future academic progress can be based on how an individual student performs in kindergarten. This may lead to the perpetuation of social and economic classes as minority and lower socioeconomic students are more likely to perform poorly on assessments.

Assessments Used

The reading assessment adopted for use by primary teachers in the Slate Canyon Public Schools was the *Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)*. The *DRA* involves reading texts at a gradient of difficulty until the highest level with a 90% accuracy or better is determined. The teacher records oral reading behaviors by using a running record during the task. The purpose of the text reading task is to determine an appropriate level of text difficulty and to record the child's physical and reading behaviors exhibited while reading continuous text.

The *DRA* is composed of small books that increase in gradients of reading difficulty as the levels increase. At the early levels (A-2) teachers note the presence of emergent reading behaviors and skills. These behaviors and skills include items such as the child's recognition that print and not the picture carries the message, understanding that reading incorporates the use of left to right directionality, utilizing a return sweep at the end of a written line, and recognizing that one spoken word corresponds to a word written on the page. Teachers can also note whether students are able to read text when given a supportive book introduction by the teacher in texts that use patterned language structures and supportive

illustrations. Students can succeed on these early levels of text if they control the above-mentioned early reading behaviors—it is not necessary for the student to do any conventional reading of text until approximately level 3.

DRA levels correlate to approximate grade level equivalents as follows:

Kindergarten: Levels A-2

Preprimer: Levels 3-8

Primer: Levels 10-12

First Grade: Levels 14-16

Kindergarten in Slate Canyon Public Schools

Kindergarten in the Slate Canyon Public School system was a half-day program. Teachers each had two separate classes—one that met in the morning and one that met in the afternoon. Each daily session lasted approximately two-and-a-half hours. The focus of the kindergarten curriculum was one of socialization—helping children to understand the expectations and rules of school. Children were expected to learn that there were appropriate times that they need to listen and appropriate times to talk. They learned to take turns, and they learned how to interact with other children in large and small group settings. Formal literacy instruction was limited to learning to appreciate stories read aloud by the teacher. As the teacher read from big books, they often ran their finger under the text. In this way, children became familiar with and developed emergent literacy behaviors such as left to right directionality with a return sweep and the ability to match one spoken word to one written word. They also began to anticipate the patterns of predictable text.

It is important to note that Slate Canyon Public Schools did not require that the *DRA* be administered to students until the beginning of their first-grade year in school. While some

kindergarten teachers did assess their students using the *DRA* during the second semester of kindergarten, administration of the *DRA* at the kindergarten level was not mandated by the district administration. As a result, use of the *DRA* at the kindergarten level was sporadic and occurred only at the discretion of individual kindergarten teachers.

Student Placement

The important question then became—on what basis were students selected for placement in the bridging class at the end of their kindergarten year? The process for student classroom placement for the next year's instruction was a decision made by the student's current classroom teacher, the school counselor, and the school administration. Obviously, the person most familiar with an individual student's performance was the classroom teacher. School counselors and administrators usually were only involved with individual students when a problem with a particular student arose that necessitated expertise or authority beyond that of the classroom teacher. Examples included severe or chronic behavior problems or social/emotional problems that required the involvement of professionals with expertise beyond that of a classroom teacher. Because the counselor and school administrators had limited contact with most students, the bulk of responsibility remained with the classroom teacher who had extended contact with the student and was most aware of an individual student's academic needs.

However, educators at times confuse academic and social behaviors. Most middle-class White children are socialized through home and preschool experiences for the behaviors that will be expected of them in school. These socially constructed experiences prepare these children to face the challenges that they will encounter when entering the experience of the classroom. They learn the language necessary to express themselves in ways that will meet teacher expectations. They come to school already understanding the hidden rules of the school's expectations. Their

parents have taught them the “importance” of sitting still, speaking only in turn, and giving answers that are expected by the teacher. Some educators misinterpret the absence of these White middle-class skills as evidence that the child has a learning deficit (Harry & Klingner, 2007). They sometimes infer that a student not exhibiting the desired social behaviors is academically learning disabled. As a result, some students may be labeled as having a learning disability when, in fact, their apparent difficulties with the structure of classroom learning are socially and culturally constructed.

A Look at One School—Monroe Elementary

In the case of the bridging class at Monroe Elementary, an analysis of the racial/ethnic composition indicated that racially and socially constructed elements were also at work. Monroe Elementary was composed of an almost equal percentage of Hispanic and White students. The first-grade class as a whole was composed of 47% White and 42% Hispanic students. A small population of Asian, Black, and Native American students comprised the other 11% of the population. Of the thirteen students in the bridging class, eight were Hispanic, four were White, and one was Native American. This made the racial/ethnic composition of the bridging class disproportionately Hispanic—with the Hispanic population of the classroom comprising 61% of the students, and the White population comprising 31% (See Table 1).

Placement into the bridging class was supposed to be based on teachers’ observations of low emergent literacy skills in kindergarten. While all students in the bridging class did test at a level A or 1 on the *DRA* at the beginning of the school year, an analysis of first-grade *DRA* scores from the beginning of the school year revealed that 48 other first-grade students also tested at these same levels, but were not targeted for the bridging class. Of these 48 students who tested at the same level but were not placed in the bridging class, 25 students or 52% were

White, and 20 students or 42% were Hispanic (See Table 1). The remaining three students were Black and Native American. This data indicated that Hispanic students exhibiting low levels of literacy skills at the end of the kindergarten year at school were more likely to be placed in the school's bridging class than were White students who tested at comparable levels.

Minority students were placed into the bridging class at a higher rate than their White counterparts. Therefore, it was important to examine whether the determination to place these students into the bridging class was a decision that reflected such items as racial/ethnic bias by the teachers and/or the curriculum. If so, the teachers were merely perpetuating social structures that schools are meant to deconstruct.

Table 1

Comparison of Racial/Ethnic Identity of First-Grade Students Placed in Bridging Class

Monroe Elementary		
	Hispanic	White
Bridging Students N=13	61%	31%
Non-Bridging Students Who Began the Year at the Same DRA level as the Bridging Students		

N=48	42%	52%
All First-Grade Students N=150	42%	47%

At the end of the third nine-week reporting period in mid-March, all first-grade students were again tested on the *DRA*. The targeted *DRA* score for first-grade students in March was levels 10-12. In March, the 13 students in the bridging class tested at levels ranging from a level A to a level 16. The average text level read by these students was a level 7.8. The average text level read by the 48 students who also began the school year at a text level A or 1, but placed into a non-bridging classroom ranged from a level 3 to a level 28 with an average of 11.8 (See Table 2). Based on this information, it does not appear that the bridging class was successful in accelerating the literacy learning of its students. In fact, evidence points to the contrary. The students placed into the bridging classroom appear to have had their rate of learning decreased by their placement on this lower curricular track. In contrast to the struggling students in the bridging class, the students who began first-grade at levels A-1 but were placed in the non-bridging classrooms were, as a group, able to advance to the expected level of literacy acquisition.

Table 2

Comparison of Students Beginning First-Grade at Low Levels of Literacy Acquisition

Monroe Elementary		
	Average DRA level	Average DRA level
	August	March
Bridging Students N=13	0.5	7.8
Non-Bridging Students Who Began the Year at the Same Level as the Bridging Students N=48	0.5	11.8

Another interesting point for comparison between the students who were placed in the bridging class and those that were not is the number of students that began the referral process for testing and placement into the district's special education program. In the Slate Canyon Public Schools, the process for placement into the special education program began with a referral to the Student Assistance Team (SAT). The purpose of meetings with the Student Assistance Team was to provide the classroom teacher with suggestions of interventions that the classroom teacher might try in an attempt to raise the student's performance in academic

skills. Two meetings with the Student Assistance Team were required before a child could be referred to a district diagnostician for learning disability testing and placement into the special education program. In the bridging classroom, eleven of the thirteen students or 85% had been through the SAT process and were on the road leading to special education placement. Of the forty-eight students in the non-bridging classroom who began the school year at the same *DRA* level as the bridging students, fifteen (31%) had begun the referral process. Therefore, it appears classroom teachers may have viewed the students' enrollment in the bridging classroom as a mere formality in the intervention process required by the SAT process before having a child tested and placed into a special education program.

The effect of the bridging classroom at Monroe was the opposite of what it was intended to be. Teachers and administrators had anticipated that placement of the lowest performing students into a classroom with fewer students of the same developmental level would enhance their learning and accelerate their progress. Instead, those students began a downward spiral in their academic careers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

DRA testing indicates that the quality of education received by students in the bridging class at Monroe was inferior to that received by their peers in the heterogeneously grouped classrooms. This was contrary to the wishes of teachers and administrators at the school. Additionally, minority students were tracked into this classroom at a higher rate than were White students. This occurred even though there was no automatic placement of minority students into the bridging class or of White students into the regular classrooms.

The differences in the *DRA* testing results in March of their first-grade year occurred even though the bridging classroom was taught by a highly-qualified classroom teacher. This

teacher had many years of classroom teaching experience and had been recognized for her expertise in teaching students to read. The teacher also held a reading endorsement from the state department of education and she also had previously received training in Reading Recovery—a year-long program of intensive training that involved teaching struggling readers through the use of thirty-minute one-on-one tutoring sessions. This high level of expertise was apparently insufficient in overcoming the obstacles of a low-level tracking classroom. Contrary to the best of intentions, students in the bridging class were unable to make the same progress as those students who had entered first-grade with similar amounts of literacy learning.

As a social institution, schools send covert messages to students beginning at a very young age. The message sent to these bridging students appeared to state that they were inferior to those students in the regular classrooms. However, the lower academic achievements attained by these students was not the fault of either the students or their families. Rather, the data indicates the blame was really on the school. This school appears to have been oblivious to the fact that they contributed to the poor performance of these students (Oakes, 1985).

Spring (1998) asserted that schools operate as sorting machines to ensure the availability of workers for all levels of employment in the adult work force. Children in bridging classes may learn at a young age that they are not as competent as their peers. Students are socialized beginning in the early years of school to assume employment in jobs involving menial labor and low-levels of critical thought and analysis. By the time they are adults, they do not perceive themselves capable of the higher levels of thought necessary for professional and managerial occupations. Bowles and Gintis (1976) stated that the types of experiences received in school are an important contribution to ensuring that an individual's career aspirations are in line with a person's future employment. A student who experiences frequent failure in school will become

convinced that they cannot achieve employment with a higher level of social status. By experiencing defeat in the school system, individuals reconcile themselves to menial positions in the work force. Anyon (1980) further explained that schools work to reproduce the social class of the students they educate through the type of curriculum and instruction they implement. Schools in working class neighborhoods call for responses from students that are mechanical in nature. Learning involves rote memorization and regurgitation of facts without the opportunity for analytic or critical behavior from student populations. Children are taught to follow directions without questioning them or deviating from them. The emphasis is on understanding the procedure of the task without questioning the process by which it occurs. In this way, schools may perpetuate the social class status of low-socioeconomic students and, thus, the social stratification of society in general.

Too often schools attempt to solve the complex problems of education through the use of simple solutions (Oakes, 1985). Some of the solutions commonly utilized by school systems to solve the problems of struggling learners have been retention, tracking, and placement into the special education program. However, it is becoming apparent that the complex problems of education will need complex solutions. Schools should begin by recognizing that a curriculum that values only the background knowledge and experiences of the White middle-class student and neglects the culture and experiences of students from lower socioeconomic and minority families will continue to perpetuate the social stratification of society. Practices that hinder the progress of certain segments of their population should be abandoned, while practices that allow the ultimate success of all learning groups should be incorporated. This can be accomplished through the heterogeneous grouping of all classrooms that will allow all students to have equal access to a quality curriculum. Schools also need to recognize and value the prior experiences

and backgrounds of all cultures. Curriculum, materials, and assessments need to be examined to expose biases that value one culture over other cultures.

Equal access by all students to a quality curriculum is a vital component of academic success. Wheelock (1992) observed that students perceived by teachers to be more capable were asked questions requiring a higher level of thought and analysis than were students that were perceived as being low-achievers. In order to ensure that all students have access to higher-level teacher expectations, homogeneous ability grouping of students within the school must be abandoned and replaced by heterogeneously grouped classrooms. All students could be better served through being allowed to learn in heterogeneously grouped classrooms.

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