

Grouping for Instruction

How do I group struggling readers for instruction to meet individual students' needs?

Grouping “can powerfully influence positively or negatively the levels of individual student engagement and hence academic progress.”

(Maheady, 1997, p. 325)

Small Groups

Research tells us the following:

- Small group instruction is an effective way to provide explicit instruction and to provide more practice for students who need it.
- Students enjoy working in a variety of grouping formats that change to reflect their knowledge, skills, interests, and progress.
- Small group instruction addresses a wide range of reading abilities.
- Students with reading difficulties who are taught in small groups learn more than students who are not instructed in small groups.
- Small groups are especially effective when teachers adapt materials and instruction according to the students' needs.

Small groups can consist of same-ability or mixed-ability groups of students. In small groups, students are given more opportunities to express what they know and receive immediate feedback from the teacher and other students. In same-ability groups, instruction targets specific students' needs, whereas in mixed-ability groups, the focus is on cooperative learning and social interaction.

Grouping Formats

- Whole Class: Whole class involves teaching a lesson to the entire group. Adaptations can be made to accommodate individual needs during whole class instruction.
 - Example of Whole Class Instruction

The teacher provides instruction in the lesson. Then, for those students who need adaptations to master the objective, the teacher (a) provides a follow-up on key ideas and concepts, (b) prompts participation, (c) answers questions, (d) checks for understanding, (e) reviews directions, and/or (f) reviews concepts and vocabulary or checks for understanding.

The teacher may have to provide a mini-lesson on a skill that is related to the main lesson (e.g., how to identify key characters and their unique and shared traits).

- **Small Groups:** Same-ability groups, of three to seven students, provide instruction that targets individual needs. Same-ability groups provide extensive opportunities for practice and feedback and for students to express what they know. Don't keep group membership static! Continually monitor progress and regroup to reflect the knowledge and skills of students. (see Flexible Grouping)

- Example of Small Group Instruction

Student grouping: Groups may be same-ability or mixed-ability, depending on the activity and purpose for grouping.

- Grouping suggestions:

Several groups may be mixed-ability, whereas one group is same-ability. The teacher can work with the same-ability group for the entire period.

Several small groups (e.g., groups of four or five, pairs) work on a variety of activities while the remaining groups work on activities that require adaptations. The teacher monitors progress and provides mini-lessons to individuals, pairs, or small groups of students.

Students work in small groups or pairs and the teacher monitors progress.

Pairs or Partners: Peer tutoring is a motivating way to engage students, meet individual needs, and free the teacher to work with a small group as students help each other. Student roles vary, with students taking turns helping each other. Peer tutoring involves a struggling reader paired with a more proficient reader.

One-on-One Instruction: The teacher working with one student at a time is a highly prized instructional procedure for struggling readers and allows for more attention and intensive instruction, one student at a time. For some struggling readers, this grouping format is essential. However, research shows few differences between small group instruction of two to three students and one-on-one instruction. In a recent study, English language learners and monolingual struggling readers made significant gains when taught one-on-one compared to groups of one teacher and 10 students. But in this same study, one-on-one groups did *not* make significant gains over students taught in groups of one teacher with *three* students. Knowing that teachers can provide effective instruction with three students as well as with one student should have a great impact on how schools provide reading instruction and interventions to struggling readers.

Flexible Grouping

- Flexible grouping provides opportunities for students to be members of more than one group. For example, a student may be grouped with one set of students during a reading lesson and grouped with another set of students during a word sorting activity.
- Flexible grouping appeals to students who prefer to work with a variety of classmates rather than with the same students all the time.

- Struggling readers receive the explicit, intensive instruction they need and enjoy opportunities for collaborative work with classmates who are more proficient readers.
- The key to successful flexible grouping is to monitor student progress.
- Group membership needs to be determined based on student skills, prior knowledge, and interests.

Planning for and Managing Groups

How do I use progress monitoring data to plan appropriate instruction for struggling readers?

- Examine progress monitoring data.
- Document students' progress and analyze data regularly.
- Group students and target instruction to meet students' needs.
- Change groups as needed to reflect students' abilities.

How do I manage more than one small group at a time?

- Provide opportunities for students to work independently in activities that relate to the text being read, or the skills instruction recently provided. These types of activities will provide the classroom management structure that allows you to provide instruction or assistance to small, needs-based groups.
 - In English/language arts classes, have students work on activities that supplement and enrich a theme, characterization, literacy element, and so forth from a novel, play, or poem.
 - In resource and reading classes, have students (a) work on activities that focus on building comprehension of text read, (b) use tape-assisted reading to build fluency, and (c) use technology to reinforce and practice word identification skills.
- Demonstrate activities in lessons before introducing them for small group work.
 - Provide guided practice of activities before students are asked to work on their own.
- Create easy-to-follow rules.
- Establish rotation procedures that allow you to work with a small group without interruption.

(Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Schumm, 2000; Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum, 2001; Vaughn, Thompson, Kouzekanani, Bryant, & Dickson, in review)