

Grouping for Reading: Improving Outcomes for Students with Reading Difficulties

Effective small-group instruction is essential, particularly for students reading at the lowest level.

Determining how to design materials and provide instruction to ensure that all children learn to read is a challenging yet essential task. Recently, considerable emphasis has been placed on *what* should be taught. This emphasis has resulted in the identification of essential elements in reading that could improve outcomes, particularly for students with reading difficulties. These essential elements include, but are not limited to, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, and writing. Good reading programs carefully consider these elements and construct lessons that thoughtfully and deliberately ensure that all students, including students who do not readily profit from reading instruction, are provided with the quality and type of reading instruction that will lead to reading success.

In addition to *what* needs to be taught, a good reading program also considers *how* reading is taught. The *how* of reading instruction involves many considerations, including pacing, monitoring student progress, and grouping. Grouping for reading is a fundamental issue in education (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985; Barr, 1989), and it is one of the few alterable features of instruction that “can powerfully influence positively or negatively the levels of individual student engagement and hence academic progress” (Maheady, 1997, p. 325).

Background on Grouping for Reading Instruction

Until the 1990s, students were grouped for reading instruction into relatively homogeneous ability groups based on teachers’ judgments, placement tests, and/or standardized test scores (Barr and Dreeben, 1991; Kulik and Kulik, 1984). Same-ability grouping occurred in several ways. Most teachers provided same-ability reading instruction within their classrooms by dividing students into three or four groups. In other cases, teachers grouped students with students from other same-grade classrooms or across grade levels with similar reading abilities and needs.

Since 1990, teachers have increasingly used whole-class instruction and heterogeneous groups for reading. This new trend in instruction occurred for several reasons. First, research revealed that the students in the lowest groups



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More and more researchers and teachers recognize the limitations of same-ability grouping for reading instruction.

received poor-quality instruction, which often focused on isolated skills and provided minimal time for reading connected text (Allington, 1980; Hiebert, 1983). Second, same-ability groups were very stable, providing little opportunity for students to move between levels (Oakes, Gamoran, and Page, 1992). Because students' peer relations are influenced considerably by the make-up of their reading groups, the stability of ability-based reading groups limited students' friendship opportunities (Hallinan and Sorenson, 1985). Finally, students' self-perceptions were influenced by the groups in which they were placed (Oakes et al., 1992). As a result, students who were always placed in the lowest reading groups developed negative perceptions of their reading abilities and low expectations of progress.

In response to these concerns, most classroom teachers now choose to use whole-class instruction, complemented at times with small, cooperative, mixed-ability groups (Schumm, Vaughn, and Elbaum, 1996). Unfortunately, whole-class instruction alone cannot meet the learning needs of many students. This is particularly true for students with severe reading difficulties.

This paper provides a review of what is known about grouping for reading instruction, particularly as it affects students who have extreme difficulty in reading. These students include, but are not limited to, students with reading disabilities, learning disabilities, or dyslexia. For purposes of this paper, I will use the term "students with reading difficulties" to refer to all students who experience severe difficulty in reading. I will present information on the types of grouping practices that are most effective for teaching reading and the size of groups that are associated with the greatest gains in reading skill, as well as an example of an effective small-group intervention for struggling readers.

Grouping Practices and Reading Outcomes for Students with Reading Difficulties

Several recent reviews have examined the effects of different grouping practices on reading outcomes:

- 1. Within-Class Grouping** (Lou et al., 1996)
- 2. Ability Grouping** (Barr and Dreeben, 1991; Kulik and Kulik, 1982; Slavin, 1987)
- 3. Student Pairing** (Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik, 1982; Scruggs, Mastropieri, and Richter, 1985; Scruggs and Richter, 1985)

Two recent meta-analyses (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, and Moody, 1999; 2000) and a controlled study of group size (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Kouzekanani, Bryant, Dickson, and Blozis, 2003) have also provided valuable information about the relation between grouping practices and reading outcomes for students with reading difficulties. There is now substantial empirical evidence that supports the value of teaching reading to students one-on-one, in pairs, and in small groups.

Student Pairs

Student pairing for reading instruction is a promising grouping format for two important reasons: (a) when students learn to work with a partner for a specific reading activity, they need little teacher direction; and (b) student pairing is highly suited to students with reading difficulties, since it is a means for providing additional directed time in reading. Pairing provides opportunities for students to be engaged in reading in ways that yield positive outcomes while freeing teachers to work with small groups of students.

A meta-analysis of several types of grouping practices (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, and Moody, 1999) provided additional information about the effects of pairing on students with reading disabilities. When students served as tutors of younger children, the tutors made significant progress but the tutees did not. This finding suggests that when students are involved in cross-age tutoring, the students who need the most reading practice should have ample opportunities to serve as tutors. The meta-analysis further revealed that when students were engaged in same-grade (peer) tutoring, the tutee made significant progress; the benefits to students who served in reciprocal roles as tutors and tutees were more modest.

These findings suggest that pairing students for instruction may lead to positive outcomes in reading, provided that teachers carefully monitor student progress to ensure that all students benefit from the activity. Student pairing is a particularly desirable grouping format for classroom teachers since it is both feasible for teachers to implement and enjoyable for students (Elbaum, Vaughn, and Schumm, 1997; Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, and Simmons, 1997; Vaughn, Moody, and Schumm, 1998). Furthermore, teachers report that students derive many social benefits from working in pairs (Lampton, 1982; Maheady, Harper, and Sacca, 1988; Mathes and Fuchs, 1994). As a final incentive, student pairing has been demonstrated to be effective for students with reading difficulties within both general and special education settings.

The following are suggestions for using student pairs in reading instruction:

1. **Have better readers partner with struggling readers** for fluency activities in which the better reader reads several paragraphs and then the struggling reader rereads those paragraphs.
2. **Have students with reading difficulties serve as reading monitors** for younger students.
3. **Partner students to check each other's work** when they are completing activities in centers.
4. **Ask pairs of students to answer comprehension questions** about a commonly read passage.
5. **Ask pairs of students to work with word cards.** One student reads the word, the other student writes the word, and then both students check the spelling of the written word.

Cross-age and peer tutoring can benefit the students who need the most reading help.

Small-Group Instruction

In a study that specifically examined outcomes in reading, Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) found that first- through third-grade teachers in more effective schools spent more than twice as much time in small-group reading instruction as teachers in less effective schools.

The question of how small the group needs to be to ensure adequate progress for struggling readers is important in that the answer influences the amount of resources needed to meet students' instructional needs and the amount of time in which students can be instructed in smaller groups. Most educators agree that the ideal group composition for providing instruction to students with reading problems or reading disabilities is one teacher with one student. If students make the same gains in larger group sizes, however, more students can be provided teacher support for longer periods of time.

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A supplemental intervention was conducted (Vaughn et al., 2003) by grouping second-grade students identified as having reading difficulties in three different teacher-to-student ratios: 1:1 (one teacher with one student), 1:3, and 1:10. The intervention included instruction in four key areas—fluent reading, phonemic awareness, comprehension of connected text, and word analysis/spelling. All groups made significant progress from pretest to posttest, but the largest gains were realized by students in the 1:1 and 1:3 groups. Out of seventy-seven students, seventeen made less than six-months' gain during the fourteen-week intervention on either word attack, word identification, or reading comprehension. Of the seventeen, two were in the 1:1 format, six were in the 1:3 format, and nine were in the 1:10 format.

These and other studies (e.g., Acalin, 1995; Evans, 1996; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Wotruba, and Algozzine, 1993) underline the positive effects of one-to-one and small-group instruction, particularly for students with reading difficulties. When teachers have large numbers of students who are reading below grade level, every effort should be made to provide them with daily instruction in a small-group format such as one-to-one, pairs, or groups of three or four.

How Can Teachers Organize Their Classrooms to Provide Small-Group Instruction?

Given the evidence described in the preceding sections, the question is no longer whether instruction in smaller-group formats is effective for struggling readers; rather, the question that needs to be addressed is how classrooms can be organized to provide such instruction. The following recommendations describe practices that have been used effectively by teachers to provide intensive instruction to a small number of students while ensuring that other students are engaged in productive activities.

1. **Develop a variety of purposeful learning activities** in which students can engage independently while you teach small groups of students.

In planning and implementing small-group instruction, teachers must develop worthwhile activities for other students in the class.

2. **Teach students how to use learning centers** and to work cooperatively within these centers.
3. **Identify community volunteers or parent helpers** who can guide small groups of students working in learning centers. Older students may also be able to serve in this role.
4. **Organize reading groups** so that the students who need the most help are in the smallest groups.
5. **Reorganize groups frequently** to reflect the learning needs and progress of students within the groups.
6. **Restructure personnel resources in the school** so that Title I and other educational personnel are available to provide additional classroom support during reading instruction.

Effective Practices for Small-Group Instruction

Plan Group Reading and Writing Activities

- Choose activities that help students understand, practice, and apply previously taught material.
- Select activities that teach concepts or skills related to previous instruction.
- Consider traffic flow, use of materials, and workspace.
- Prepare a variety of areas in which small groups can work throughout the classroom.
- Replenish materials and change activities regularly to maintain interest.

Model Group Reading and Writing Activities

- Develop and teach easy-to-follow rules.
- Start slowly at the beginning of the year. Build on previous knowledge by adding new activities and choices.
- Model the procedures and routines used in the activities.
- Provide guided practice of new activities before initiating teacher-led small-group instruction.

Design a Small-Group Instructional Management System

- Group students for specific purposes, using data from informal and formal reading assessments.
- Plan instruction and select curriculum materials and learning activities.
- Develop a classroom management system that incorporates the daily schedule and a small-group management chart.
- Develop a daily schedule to plan and pace instruction.
- Develop a small-group management chart to direct students in small groups to learning activities.
- Monitor and evaluate student progress and regroup students for reading instruction.

Understand the Teacher's Role During Small-Group Instruction

- Design a group rotation plan to indicate where small groups go until all of the groups have worked with the teacher.
- Select and plan reading and writing activities. Model activities and check students' understanding before small-group instruction begins.
- Provide a variety of reading and writing activities that focus on practice of previously taught knowledge and skills.
- Assemble materials matched to students' needs.
- Organize instructional activities to include flexible groupings—such as peer tutoring, partner reading, small cooperative groups, or student-led groups—to practice and extend learning.
- Monitor student progress regularly to make instructional decisions, such as when and how to regroup and what concepts to target.
- Scan classroom and monitor activities of all students at all times.

Perhaps the most significant challenge for teachers is to establish and develop worthwhile and effective activities for other students while the teacher provides small-group instruction for students with reading difficulties. Depending on the age of the students, many independent activities can be a challenge. Teachers may use resources to provide activities for independent work (Morrow, 1997) or consider the following activities to meet the learning needs of students working independently:

1. **Organize literacy centers** that engage students in projects related to classroom activities. Provide specific guidelines and a sample of a completed project at each center so that students know what their end products should look like.
2. **Give students ample opportunities to reread** books, magazines, poetry, and other texts that they have previously read. Give them specific guidelines for how to
 - a. demonstrate how many times they have reread the text;
 - b. time themselves or other students in how quickly they read the text;
 - c. develop *who* and *what* questions about the text; and
 - d. report the main idea of what they've read to another student who read the same text.
3. **Provide tape recorders** so that students can
 - a. listen to audio versions of stories as they read;
 - b. record their readings of stories and listen to how they read;
 - c. summarize the key ideas in stories; and
 - d. conduct interviews with other students about what they are reading.
4. **Provide choices for centers** with specified outcomes and flexible times so that students can complete extended work. Each center can have an “expert” in the room (not always at the center) whose name is on the center and who is available to answer questions.
5. **Use the writing process activities** as ongoing activities. Students can write, revise, edit, confer with each other, and engage actively in the writing process individually, in pairs, and in small groups.

A Primary Teacher's Grouping Plan for Reading

Maria Alvarez is a second-grade teacher with twenty-six students. Ten of her students are on-level readers, nine students are above-level readers, and seven students are below-level readers (reading at first-grade level). Ms. Alvarez decided to find time during her reading instruction each day to work in a separate group with the students who demonstrated the most difficulty reading.

Her organizational plan for reading is as follows:

- 8:00–8:20** Teacher reads aloud a challenging text. (All students)
- 8:20–8:35** Students do oralcy activities for vocabulary and listening comprehension related to the read-aloud. The goal is to extend vocabulary and comprehension. (All students)
- 8:35–9:00** Teacher instructs and provides support to on-level readers (10 students). These students read chapter books in small groups

based on their interests and levels. Above-level and below-level readers engage in center activities, including reading and writing. Students rotate through centers in mixed-ability groups and can spend as much time at each center as they need to complete the activity, as long as all activities at each center are completed by the end of the week.

9:00–9:45 Teacher instructs and provides support to students who are below-level readers (7 students). On-level and above-level readers work at centers.

9:45–10:10 Teacher instructs and provides support to students who are above-level readers (9 students). On-level and below-level readers work at centers.

Ms. Alvarez values the time she spends every day with the struggling readers. She monitors their progress regularly and often has several of the students join the average group for some of the chapter books that interest them and that they are able to read. She also regroups students regularly and frequently mixes on-level and above-level students.

Conclusion

In the last few years, we have expanded the knowledge base on effective instruction for students with reading difficulties. The empirical research emphatically indicates that for students to make significant progress, they need systematic and intensive instruction that is tailored to their current instructional level. One of the most effective ways to provide this instruction is to group the lowest-level readers into the smallest instructional groups and to provide them with at least thirty minutes of uninterrupted small-group instruction each day from a highly qualified teacher. Most classroom teachers welcome the opportunity to provide focused instruction on a regular basis to a very small group of students. The ongoing challenge for teachers and schools is to ensure that teachers have the resources, materials, and instructional models they need to effectively teach students with reading difficulties.

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