Grouping for Reading: Improving Outcomes for Students with Reading Difficulties

How can we help struggling readers achieve great gains in reading skills?

Precisely how to design materials and provide instruction to assure that all children learn to read is a very challenging, yet essential, task. Recently, considerable emphasis has been placed on what should be taught. This emphasis—particularly for students with reading difficulties—has resulted in the identification of essential elements in reading associated with improved outcomes. 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 weave well-designed and well-constructed lessons that thoughtfully and deliberately assure that all students, including students who do not readily profit from reading instruction, are provided with the quality and types of reading instruction that will shape their success as readers.

In addition to what needs to be taught, a good reading program also considers how reading is taught. The how of reading instruction considers many features of reading, including pacing, monitoring student progress, and grouping for reading instruction. 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 their students with those from other same-grade classrooms or cross-grade classrooms to assure that students with similar reading abilities and needs were placed into the same group.

Since 1990 there has been an increasing trend toward whole-class instruction and heterogeneous groups for reading. This has occurred for several reasons. First, research revealed that the instruction provided to students in the lowest
groups was of poor quality, often focusing on isolated skills and providing 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 groups (Oakes, Gamoran, and Page, 1992). Because students’ peer relations are influenced considerably by the make-up of their reading groups, stable ability-based reading groups limited students’ friendship opportunities (Hallinan and Sorensen, 1985). Finally, students’ self-perceptions were also influenced by the groups in which they were placed (Oakes et al., 1992), such that 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 chose to use whole-class instruction, at times complemented with small, cooperative, mixed-ability groups (Schumm, Vaughn, and Elbaum, 1996). Unfortunately, whole-class instruction for reading cannot by itself meet the learning needs of many students. This is particularly true for students with severe reading difficulties.

This article provides a review of what is known about grouping for reading instruction, particularly for students who have extreme difficulty in reading. These students include, but are not limited to, children with reading difficulties, reading disabilities, learning disabilities, or dyslexia. For purposes of this paper, we will use the term students with reading difficulties to refer to all students who experience severe difficulty in reading. Information will be presented on the types of grouping practices that are most effective for teaching reading and on the sizes of groups that are associated with the greatest gains in reading skills. An example of an effective small-group intervention for struggling readers will be provided, as well as multiple suggestions for planning, implementing, and managing small group activities.

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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)

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) also have 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 grouping format that warrants additional consideration for two important reasons: (a) when students learn to work with a partner for a specific reading activity, it involves little teacher direction; and (b) pairing is highly suited to students with reading difficulties, since it can provide additional directed time in reading. Thus, pairing represents a grouping format that provides opportunities for students to be engaged in reading in ways that yield positive outcomes and yet frees teachers to work with small groups of students.

A meta-analysis of several types of grouping practices (student pairs, small groups, multiple grouping formats; Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, and Moody, 1999) provided additional information on student pairing for reading instruction for students with reading disabilities. When students served as tutors of younger children (cross-age tutoring), the tutors made significant progress, whereas the tutees did not. This suggests that when students are working in a cross-age tutoring model, students who need the most practice in reading should have ample opportunities to serve in the role of tutor. 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 can be associated with 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, Schumm, and Vaughn, 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 (Lamport, 1982; Maheady, Harper, and Sacca, 1988; Mathes and Fuchs, 1994).

Following are suggestions for how teachers might use student pairs during reading:

1. Have more-proficient readers partner with less-proficient readers for fluency activities in which the better reader reads several paragraphs, and then the less-able 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 students to work in pairs to answer comprehension questions about a commonly read passage.
5. Ask students to work in pairs using word cards. One student reads the word, the other student writes the word, and then both students check the spelling of the written word.
In sum, student pairing has been demonstrated to be effective for students with reading difficulties within both general and special education settings.

**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 dedicated more than twice as much time to small-group reading instruction as did teachers at those grades in less-effective schools.

The question of how small the group needs to be to ensure adequate progress for struggling readers is important, as the answer influences the amount of resources needed to meet students’ instructional needs and/or the amount of time that 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. However, if students make the same gains in groups containing more than one student, then either more students can be provided support or the support can be extended.

A supplemental intervention was conducted (Vaughn et al., 2003) with second-grade students identified as having reading difficulties to determine whether the effect of the intervention differed across three group sizes, expressed here as teacher/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 students in the 1:1 and 1:3 groups realized the largest gains. Out of 77 students, 17 made less than six-months’ gain during the fourteen-week intervention on either word attack, word identification, or reading comprehension. Of those 17, two were in the 1:1 format, six were in the 1:3 format, and nine were in the 1:10 format.

The aforementioned studies, as well as others (e.g., Acalin, 1995; Evans, 1996; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Wotruba, and Algozzine, 1993), underscore 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 students with daily instruction in a smaller 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 as opportunities to provide
Figure 1. How to plan and organize activities effectively for other students while teaching a small group.

### Plan Group Reading and Writing Activities
- Choose activities that help students understand, practice, and apply previously taught concepts or skills.
- Develop the activities to include previously taught materials.
- Set up a variety of areas for small groups to work throughout the classroom.
- Consider traffic flow, use of materials, and work space.
- 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 appropriate 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.

### 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 the classroom and monitor the activities of all students at all times.
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 that students can engage in independently while you teach small groups of students.

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 also may 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 educators and other personnel are available to provide additional classroom support during reading instruction.

Perhaps the most significant challenge for teachers is to establish and develop effective practices for other students to be engaged in while the teacher is providing small group instruction for students with reading difficulties. Depending on the age of the students, many independent activities often present challenges. Teachers may use resources to provide activities for independent work (Morrow, 1997) or consider the following as they develop activities to meet the learning needs of students working independently while the teachers work with small groups:

1. Organize literacy centers that engage students in projects that are related to classroom activities and require more extensive time to complete. Provide specific guidelines and a sample of a completed project at the 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;
   d. report the main idea of what they’ve read to another student who read the same text.

3. Use recording devices so that students can
   a. listen to stories while reading along;
   b. record their readings of stories and then listen to how they read;
   c. summarize the key ideas in stories;
   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 for ongoing learning. Students can write, revise, edit, conference 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 reading on-level, nine students are reading above-level, and seven students are reading below-level (first-grade level). Maria decided that, as challenging as it might be to implement, she would find time during her reading instruction each day to teach students who demonstrate the most difficulty reading. The following is her organizational plan for reading:

- **8:00–8:20** Teacher reads aloud a challenging text. (All students)
- **8:20–8:35** Students participate in an oral activity on 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 ten students who are on-level readers. Students read chapter books in small groups based on their selected interests and levels. Above-level readers and below-level readers engage in center activities including reading and writing. Students rotate through centers in mixed-ability groups and are able to spend as much time at each center as they need to complete each activity, as long as all activities at each center are completed by the end of the week.
- **9:15–9:45** Teacher instructs and provides support to seven students who are below-level readers. On-level and above-level readers work at centers.
- **9:45–10:10** Teacher instructs and provides support to nine students who are above-level readers. On-level and below-level readers work at centers.

Maria Alvarez holds as precious the time she spends every day with the struggling readers. She monitors their progress regularly and often has several of the students join the on-level group for some of the chapter books that they are interested in and are able to read. She also regroups students regularly and often mixes students who are on-level and above-level.
**Conclusion**

In the last few years we have expanded the knowledge base on effective instruction for students with reading difficulties. A strong theme running through the empirical research is that for students to make significant progress, systematic and intensive instruction tailored to these students’ current instructional level is needed. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is to group students who are 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 by a highly qualified teacher. Most classroom teachers would 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 in order to effectively teach students with reading difficulties.
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