

# Small-Group Reading: Making Reading Accessible for All Students

BY JUDY WALLIS, Ed.D.

## BACKGROUND

Research has shown that a variety of factors contribute to the growth of capable and confident readers. Curriculum, teacher quality, teaching practices, the amount of time devoted to reading, and access to high-quality reading materials make up some of these factors. In addition, there is wide agreement that differentiation in instruction is an essential ingredient. Students differ in their knowledge, skills, and cultural background. These individual differences can present challenges for both readers and teachers when unaddressed. Small-group instruction offers a way to differentiate instruction and support all readers.

## CHALLENGES IN SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION

One of the big challenges that may arise is the question of what the rest of the students do during the time a teacher is with a small group. For the teacher of young readers, this often presents a greater challenge. Older and more proficient readers are more independent during worktime in reading workshop. However, it is important that teachers establish procedures for tasks and model and demonstrate what students should do while the teacher meets with small groups. This ensures that students are engaging productively and using the time to grow as readers. To ensure quality of learning, teachers should consider learners' potential independence with a task and the probability that learners can transfer prior learning to a similar task (Cambourne, 2001).

Another challenge is selecting texts. Leveling systems offer a scaffold for teachers to narrow the text choices for a group. The teacher carefully considers both the needs of the group and the challenges within texts. Selecting a text not only involves choosing the level, but it also encompasses considering the content, language, and genre of the text. Teachers think about all of these factors when deciding how to match texts to learners during small-group reading instruction.



### JUDY WALLIS, Ed.D.

Judy Wallis has spent the past four decades as a teacher, literacy coach, university instructor, and staff developer. She served two large, diverse, Houston, Texas school districts as language arts director and provided leadership support to literacy coaches for 21 years. Her professional interests and work focus on reading comprehension, writing, and whole-school/district change through robust literacy instruction. She currently works with schools and districts across the country as a staff developer and educational consultant. Her work has focused on linking research and practice and bringing out the strengths in others.

## WHY SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION MATTERS

Whole-class instruction plays an important role in student learning, particularly when it actively engages students and the teacher models and demonstrates the skills and strategies that are beneficial to all students. However, there are many studies that show that teaching students in a small-group setting offers teachers greater opportunities to tailor instruction in ways that address the unique needs of readers (Taylor, 2013). Too often, in a large-group setting it is easy to miss subtle moves readers make. Though even in small groups there are some differences among students, the proximity of the teacher to the students allows time to listen in and coach readers within the performance of reading. Further, teachers can observe students, noting strengths and needs of individual readers. Formative assessment is essential in planning responsive teaching.

## FRAMEWORK FOR SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION

### A Common Sequence for Small Group Work

#### Launch

- I like to begin by complementing the group on the last skill or concept they did or learned. I try then to connect that past skill to the new skill.
- I clearly state the purpose of what the group will be doing. It is much like stating the agenda for a well-run meeting.

#### Introduce Text

- Sometimes I have all of the students in the group using the same text. I do a very quick introduction
- If I have the students practicing a strategy using different texts, I do a quick check to make sure that they have what they need.

#### Teach and Check

- I model or demonstrate using the skill. I help students understand how it will help them be better readers and writers.
- I have students look through their text and then we find opportunities to see where that skill can be helpful. I check for understanding.

#### Strategies

- Teaching strategies to master the skill is like giving a new cook a recipe. The strategies have specific steps to follow until they are confident in using the skill without even thinking about the steps.
- I work with the group to create anchor charts. This visual reminder serves as a support as students practice.

#### Word Study

- Focusing on individual words helps them keep foundational skills sharp. I point out roots that we can use to form new words, focus on an author's word choices, and make connections to other skills.
- I want my students to not only see the big picture and grasp the gist of the text, but to also look closely and learn from individual words. This is especially helpful to improving their writing.

#### Connections

- I end my small groups by making several connections. I connect what they have learned to becoming better readers and writers. I also connect to what their follow-up tasks are and how those tasks connect to what they have learned.
- Sending the students off with a compliment about something they did well during the small group time ends the lesson on a positive note.

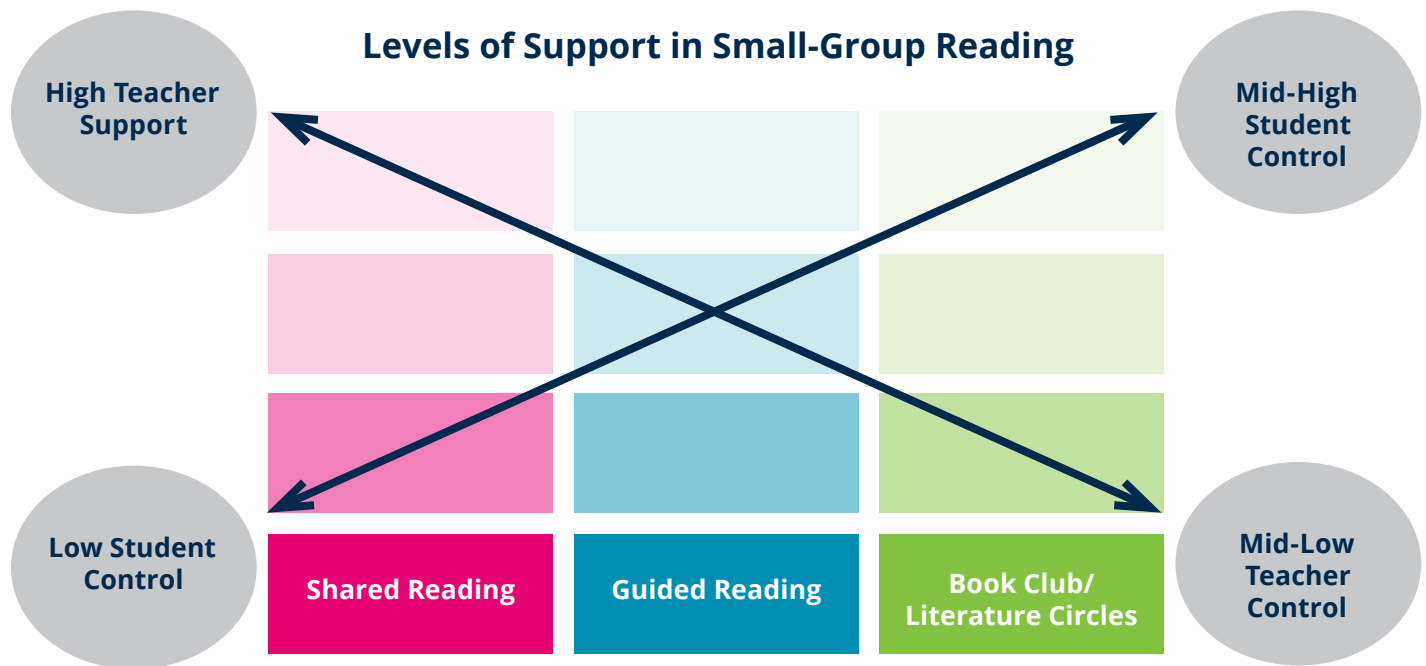
“Teaching students in a small-group setting offers teachers greater opportunities to tailor instruction in ways that address the unique needs of readers.”

## DIFFERENTIATION IN SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION

Teachers differentiate in three important ways in small-group instruction. They decide on the level of support readers need. Small group may take the form of shared reading (high support) or guided reading (mid-level support), or it may look more like a book club or literature circle (mid-to-low support). In general, striving readers need a higher level of scaffolding, but all readers need support when encountering complex texts or unfamiliar genres/text structures.

Text selection is another important way in which teachers differentiate in small groups. They select texts based upon a group's readiness for a text. Levels provide a useful way of selecting texts so that readers engage in reading that has an appropriate level of challenge. Too often, striving readers encounter a steady diet of difficult texts (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). High-success reading is characterized when readers read with both accuracy and comprehension.

A third way teachers differentiate is in the amount of time students spend with the teacher. Striving readers need to meet daily with the teacher, while more proficient readers generally need additional time to read between small-group meetings. The beauty of small-group instruction is that it is flexible—both in terms of the groups we establish and in how we schedule groups of readers.



*Adapted from Fountas & Pinnell, 2017*

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#### SELECTING TEXTS FOR SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION

Leveling systems have been devised to support the choices teachers make in selecting texts for students. The use of a leveling system helps teachers carefully match students with texts that are right for them. While there is no precise way in which a reader progresses, levels provide a gradient of difficulty teachers can use in making text choices for small-group instruction.

Since young children and striving readers are more sensitive to the small incremental changes in text, teachers should consider the demands of the text to ensure there is a balance in decoding and comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). When decoding takes too much cognitive energy, students are unable to think about big ideas and meaning. What we know about reading is that the more

students engage in reading accessible text, the better readers they become. Texts that are closely matched to students' needs provide the best way to help them grow and develop as readers. As teachers, we keep in mind that leveling systems are designed not as labels for children but rather as scaffolds for us as educators. While leveling systems account for various text characteristics, it is also important for teachers to note other characteristics that may impact a reader's success. These factors include genre, content, and text structure. Because reading success may not transfer between different genres (Duke & Roberts, 2010), students should have supported experiences with familiar genres.

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## RESPONSIVE TEACHING: THE ROLE OF OBSERVATION AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Teachers find that small-group instruction offers a dynamic way to make ongoing assessment a part of every small-group lesson. Assessment data gathered through observation while students are reading play an important role in planning the next instructional steps. Because of the proximity of students, teachers gain insights about readers' development. As teachers observe how readers use a variety of decoding and meaning-making strategies *while* students are reading, they are able to consider the next instructional steps. They consider readers' use of strategies: decoding, problem-solving, fluency, and comprehension. Unlike other assessment practices, this kind of assessment provides an immediate opportunity, when appropriate, to responsively teach a student.

While each part of the reading workshop offers unique and important opportunities for both students and teachers, small-group instruction might be considered the "heart" of the workshop because it . . .

- Focuses on small, flexible groups to address all students' needs
- Provides time to practice in a supportive setting
- Deepens and enhances whole-group learning
- Differentiates students' needs for appropriate text, support, and time
- Reinforces strategies for reading and managing text
- Makes learning and teaching more productive

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