where have all the bluebirds gone?

how to SOAR with FLEXIBLE GROUPING

JoAnne Caldwell & Michael P. Ford
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Flexible Small-Group Instruction
Different Books and Different Purposes for Different Groups

What Is Flexible Small-Group Instruction?

In classrooms of increasingly diverse students, the most critical instruction must be tailored more closely to the students’ needs. One effective way to do this is to avoid an overreliance on whole-class experiences by balancing large-group instruction with the use of flexible small groups. Small groups can vary in size, age, materials, tasks, and purposes.

To accommodate all learners, the teacher uses continuous assessment to change the size and composition of the groups, the materials used with the groups, and the learning activities structured for the groups. When a group achieves the instructional goal, the teacher disbands it and creates a new group. In this way, the teacher better meets the needs of all readers. As well, students should continue to experience reading aloud, shared reading, and independent reading.

How Is This Different from the Small Groups Teachers Used in the Past?

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (1986), “Evidence from research indicates that static grouping patterns may be less effective than flexible grouping for specific purposes” (p. 112). Remember,
there is nothing inherently bad about the use of small groups during reading instruction—even the use of homogeneous small groups. It was the *inflexible use* of homogeneous small groups that caused the problems of the past. Just like the overuse of whole-group instruction can be problematic, so can the overuse of static small-group instruction.

We should also remind ourselves that the current use of small groups in reading instruction has been influenced by a philosophical and theoretical shift in our thinking. Previous use of small groups was driven by a skills-based model of reading. Groups became fixed according to perceived abilities, instruction followed a delivery model, questioning was defined by the teachers’ manual, follow-up meant workbook pages, and worksheets and assessment waited until the end of units. Today, small-group reading instruction is influenced by a constructivist view of reading. Groups are flexible according to observed performances, instruction is built through scaffolded experiences, strategic questions follow the reader’s lead, follow-up means practice with real reading and writing, and assessment is an ongoing, never-ending process.

The small groups in today’s classroom should not look, sound, or feel like the small groups of yesterday. If they do, then we need to stand back and rethink these practices. The use of flexible small groups for reading instruction allows students to work with classmates of various skills and interests, which parallels the natural variety in groups that students will work with throughout their lives. As well, flexible grouping is a more humane procedure than rigidly classifying students according to perceived ability. In particular, changing group membership and forming groups on a basis other than ability can alleviate the many problems encountered with an emphasis on ability grouping (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985).

**What Are the Purposes of Small-Group Instruction?**

Teachers can form groups based on students’ interests, their skill/strategy needs, and their ability to work together cooperatively and collaboratively. Certain small-group structures, including cooperative and collaborative learning, will be discussed in Chapter 5. For this chapter, we will focus on four primary purposes of small-group instruction in a reading program: to provide demonstrations, intervention, shared response for a common text and/or multiple texts, and shared inquiry. In any single reading lesson, the teacher may also plan for a combination of these purposes.
What Is the Benefit of Using Small-Group Instruction for Demonstrations?

If all demonstrations happen in large-group settings, many students—perhaps those that need them the most—may not get the specific instruction they need. As well, the teacher runs the risk of teaching both something some students do not need and something for which some students are not ready. Instead, teachers can use small groups to teach directly—demonstrate—critical procedures, literary elements, and/or skills and strategies that certain students need in a context that keeps them engaged in the instruction. For example, for students most in need of review, the teacher might use small groups to review something presented in a large group. The teacher could use another small group to introduce something for students who are ready for the new concept.

These small groups are usually formed by identifying students who have a similar need for the procedure, element, or strategy being demonstrated. This need has usually surfaced in the teacher’s assessment of the student throughout the reading program. However, membership in the group should be temporary, especially as the students show their ability to use the instruction away from the teacher.

What Is the Benefit of Using Small Groups for Interventions?

Currently, the most popular conceptualization of small-group reading instruction is called guided reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). It can be defined by five key elements. First, each group usually contains students who are more similar in their needs than they are different. An attempt is made to bring children reading at approximately the same level together for the instruction. Second, the purpose of the group is to provide students a meaning-focused, scaffolded form of instruction that acknowledges where the students are at, knows where the students need to head next, and builds a bridge between those two points. Third, the texts used for guided reading typically are at the students’
instructional level. The text is within their reach but not so easy or hard it provides little opportunity for problem solving. Fourth, the teacher helps the student use strategies to move toward increasing sophistication, comfort, and confidence with the reading process. This is usually accomplished through careful ongoing assessment of students as they read, and through strategic questioning as the students talk about their reading. Finally, guided reading depends on the learner being engaged in learning as the instruction is provided.

Small groups used for intervention are usually formed by identifying students who are at similar levels in their reading development. These levels are identified through a variety of assessment techniques. Again, membership in the group should be temporary as students show growth in their development.

Guided reading is a means to an end, not an end of itself (Routman, 1999). While it is typically used with younger students, interventions may be necessary with some older students. Techniques like retrospective miscue analysis (Goodman and Marek, 1996) may provide a useful framework for providing interventions with older students. Interventions may be less critical for students who have become fairly sophisticated, independent, strategic readers.

What Is the Benefit of Using Small Groups for Shared Response?

Another popular conceptualization of small-group instruction in reading is to bring a group of readers together to share their response to a text. Sometimes the small group is focused on a single title that was read by all. At other times, the small group might be talking about a variety of titles read by members of the group. In this case, there may be a connection between these titles that focuses the discussion, or the titles may be unrelated and the discussion very open-ended. The use of small-group instruction to focus students on reading and responding to books in a social setting is at the heart of what teachers call literature circles (Daniels, 2001) or book clubs (Raphael and McMahon, 1997).

Literature circles can be composed of students who are all interested in reading and exploring the same selection or similar selections. Typically, the teacher introduces five or six books to the whole class by briefly discussing each title, author, and plot. As well, the teacher may read a brief excerpt and discuss the book’s structure and difficulty. Throughout the year, the teacher challenges the students to explore new genres and subjects and to use reading to move into unexplored territory. Students choose to be part of a literature circle for personal and social reasons. Some choose a book because of individual interest or because they feel they will be able to read it successfully. Others
choose a book because their friends are a part of the group and they feel comfortable sharing with them.

The membership of the literature circle may be comprised of students from mixed achievement levels. This makes it different from those groups set up for demonstrations and interventions. If students are sharing a response to a common text, the group may be more homogeneously grouped, since the chosen or assigned text may require a certain amount of reading skill. But if the shared response is structured across texts based on elements, genres, authors, topics, or themes, a more heterogeneous group may be formed. This may be one way to add flexibility to a teacher’s overall grouping alternatives so that the static nature of other uses of small groups can be shaken up a bit.

Whether the teacher is present or not, small-group instruction that is focused on shared response still demands that the learner stay engaged in the learning process to receive any benefits from it. To this end, teachers assist groups in planning activities that will keep all students engaged. Groups can structure participation and discussion according to their mutual interests, or the teacher may assume a more hands-on role in monitoring and guiding the conversations to move students to more sophisticated understandings of the text. For example, teachers might encourage students to study character motivation or plot development. Group members might examine elements of a specific genre, such as fantasy or realistic fiction. They may wish to center discussion on expanding their knowledge about a different culture. They might focus discussion on how the book is like or unlike other texts they have read on the same topic. Overall, these small-group experiences provide students with the benefits from learning to listen and respond to other people’s thoughts about a common reading experience.

Some would argue that this is still a form of guided reading although the teacher support is more indirect (Fawson and Reutzel, 2000). The teacher has guided the reading indirectly by assisting in the text selection, defining the response tasks, identifying the group membership, and helping the group decide how much time they will spend reading the book and how often the group will meet.

What Are the Benefits of Using Small Groups for Shared Inquiry?

Shared inquiry may be most compatible with thematic instruction. Small groups can be formed to study a theme or topic using various types of materials, including nonfiction, fiction, magazines, tapes, videos, maps, charts, diagrams,
FLEXIBLE SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION

CD-ROMs, and Internet selections. The emphasis is on learning how to learn as students increase their knowledge of the specific topic or expand their understanding of the chosen theme.

In this type of instruction, different groups may investigate specific areas related to a common topic. For example, if the topic is frogs, one group could read to learn about different types of frogs, while another might be focused on the life cycle of the frog. A third group might focus on where frogs live and what they eat. A fourth group might explore frogs in literature, such as Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* series. The groups would eventually report to the class using an agreed-upon format. As well, new groups might be formed as the research continues. For example, the group investigating the life cycle of the frog might agree to split into two groups in order to learn further about the enemies of the frog throughout the life span.

Whether the groups are investigating different aspects of a common topic or different topics, the use of small groups for shared inquiry allows students to probe a subject in depth. In addition, these groups allow individuals to draw on the talents and experiences of the classmates with whom they are working to reach beyond what they might have been able to learn on their own. Students develop creativity, self-expression, perseverance, and skill in peer interaction. They assume responsibility for their own learning as they utilize research skills for discovery and independence. They also assume responsibility for group learning as they actively contribute to group goals. The teacher provides and suggests multiple resources, explains evaluation procedures for the final projects, and gently guides students to explore new areas and perhaps discover hidden talents and unknown interests.

In summary, effective use of flexible small-group instruction depends on the purpose of the experience. When the teacher is demonstrating critical skills and strategies, small groups of students with similar needs are brought together. When the teacher is providing guided reading instruction to move students forward in their reading developments, students at similar stages of development are brought together. When the teacher believes students would benefit from an opportunity to read and respond to a common book or related titles, literature groups of mixed achievement levels are formed. When the teacher wants the students to investigate important topics more independently, shared inquiry groups of students able to contribute different talents and experiences are formed.

The key to effective flexible grouping is to reorganize, revise, and regroup based upon careful teacher assessment of student knowledge and performance.
Flexibility in grouping allows the teacher to enhance the self-esteem of all students and to promote interaction between diverse students. The small-group instruction methods mentioned in this chapter work well with the cooperative and collaborative structures we discuss later, as well as with more direct instruction approaches. It is vital to remember that the purpose of flexible small-group instruction is to meet the needs of the students. Therefore, groups should continually change to accommodate the interests, strengths, weaknesses, and abilities of each individual. The key to effective flexible grouping is to reorganize, revise, and regroup based upon careful teacher assessment of student knowledge and performance.
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