

# Differentiated Instruction: Using Small Groups in Upper Elementary Classrooms

---

Cindy Hammons

Texas Woman's University

Small group instruction has long been a practice used by elementary teachers to allow targeted instruction for students at varied reading levels. As students progress through the grade levels the practice of using small group instruction is often observed less and less. Many teachers will tell you it is not because the gap between students has decreased, but because that curriculum expectations and the available time can change dramatically as students advance in grade level. Intermediate grade level instruction is often pushed into a departmentalized format which can make finding time to incorporate small groups difficult. Once departmentalized, the number of students the teacher is responsible for can be doubled or tripled compared to the lower elementary classrooms. Therefore, managing small groups with such a large number of students seems to be at best a daunting task and at worst an unrealistic one. The purpose of this paper is to identify the core elements of small group instruction and then find methods of incorporating small group instruction into the departmentalized intermediate grade classrooms routine and schedule.

## **Trust**

One of the key elements of effective small group instruction is what Boushey and Moser (2006) label as trust. Teachers must trust that students will be responsible for their own learning while the students must trust that the teacher will be there to guide them if they encounter problems. Allington, Johnston, and Day (2002) found that exemplary teachers often developed a sense of personal responsibility in their students. The exemplary teachers' classrooms were more collaborative and allowed students to learn from each other. Group dynamics allow teachers to build a community in which students are hard working (Daniels, 2007). In order to establish this environment, authority must be distributed to the entire class and not centralized around the teacher (Allington, Johnston, Day, 2002; Allington 2005; Reutzler, 2011). In

establishing a well managed environment the teacher becomes a participant in reading (Reutzel, Clark, 1991). With the teacher as a participant in the classroom, responsibility moves solely from the teacher to being shared by all students. This encourages students to hold not only themselves, but others in the classroom to task. Therefore, the most important job for the teacher in implementing small group instruction is the ability to establish a learning environment that fosters building relationships based on trust.

### **Targeted Instruction**

The purpose of small group instruction is to allow teachers an opportunity to work with individuals or small groups in order to provide targeted instruction. Targeted instruction is not only identifying what objectives and skills a student demonstrates a weakness in, but also knowing what method of instruction will allow the most growth for the student. In order to provide targeted instruction a teacher needs to know their students as well as what each student struggles with as a reader (Allington, Johnston, Day, 2002; Reutzel, Clark, 2011; Wasik, 2008; Reutzel, 2011; Boushey, Moser, 2002). Teachers must find a way to connect with students. Exemplary fourth grade teachers were found to be able to personalize classroom talk (Allington, Johnston, Day, 2002). This demonstrates the need for building an environment of trust as well as developing personal knowledge of each student. Assessment and evaluation becomes an important tool for teachers establishing a small group environment (Allington, Johnston, Day, 2002; Boushey, Moser, 2002, Reutzel, 2011; Reutzel, Clark, 2011). To utilize small group instruction effectively, teachers must be assessing and evaluating students at every opportunity. However, just knowing what skill a student is struggling with is not enough. Teachers must know their students on a personal level while also understanding what each student needs on a professional level. Daniels (2007) suggests writing notes between the teacher and students as a

method of getting to know students as well as identifying instructional concerns. Allington (2005) identifies expert tutoring as one of the missing pillars from the National Reading Panel's five key areas of reading instruction. Expert tutoring can only be accomplished if the teacher knows not only what to teach, but how to engage each specific child. Therefore, the purpose of small group instruction is to implement expert tutoring that is focused and aligned to meet individual needs of students.

### **Classroom Management & Engagement**

Even though research appears to support small group instruction, it is not often seen outside of self-contained classrooms. Many teachers find it difficult to incorporate small groups for fear students outside the group will not remain on task (Reutzler & Clark, 2011; Kracl, 2012; Reutzler, 2011). Reutzler and Cooter (1991) explain that management of small group instruction needs to be designed so that it is flexible for both teachers and students. For that reason, teachers must establish methods of managing a classroom that allow students to self monitor, but also provide opportunity for teacher to assess student progress. One necessary element of classroom management is that students need to have received explicit instruction on procedures (Allington ,et all., 2002; Kracl, 2012; Reutzler, Clark, 2011; Reutzler & Cooter, 1991; Wasik, 2008; Boushey, Moser, 2006; Daniels, 2011; Reutzler, 2011). One method of providing explicit instruction is an I-statement chart which also allows students to work independently (Boushey, Moser, 2011;Kracl, 2012). Students should play some part in creating the statements to ensure a sense ownership. The statements are clearly defined expectations of the behavior required for each task assigned in the classroom. This method depends heavily on the teacher having developed a classroom environment which includes trust and personal responsibility. Another method is check-in which requires students to be self-reflective about their learning and their

ability to remain on task (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Check-in also provides the teacher an opportunity to reinforce procedures and expectations as well as verify students remained on task during self directed instruction. Although check-in and I-statements are not required to incorporate an effective small group program, it is necessary to develop some system in which students have been explicitly taught procedures and expectations and ensures students self-reflect on their ability to remain on task.

Student engagement is another important element of classroom management when incorporating small group instruction. Engagement of all students while the teacher is working with a small group is key to effective small group instruction (Allington, Johnston, Day, 2002; Brooks, Thurston, 2010; Wasik, 2008, Reutzler, Clark, 2011). This is actually more important in a departmentalized intermediate classroom since the time teachers have with students is reduced. Allowing students to select tasks and materials is one method of ensuring engagement. However, Allington, Johnston, & Day (2002) identified directed choice as a skill used by exemplary fourth grade teachers. Directed choice occurs when the teacher provides a student with a limited choice in which each choice has been specifically designed to meet the needs of that student. By offering choice, the student is able to take personal responsibility while also allowing the teacher to provide targeted instruction at the same time.

### **Group Size**

Group size during small group instruction also impacts student engagement (Wasik, 2008; Kracl, 2012; Allington et al., 2002). Group size during small group should be deliberate and be based on the purpose as well as student needs. Therefore, group size is flexible to meet the needs of both the student and teacher. However, Wasik (2008) cautions that individualized

instruction decreases in groups with more than 5 students. Another important finding is that engagement in small group and partners has shown to foster more academic language acquisition behaviors in English Language Learners (Brooks & Thurston, 2010). These findings need to be considered when developing instruction for students not working with a teacher in small group. Students need a combination of individual, partner, and small group work even if it is not directed solely by the teacher. When students are actively engaged, they will spend more time on academic tasks. Therefore, lessons must be deliberately and thoughtfully designed to engage students while also meeting student needs and providing opportunities for implementation of reading strategies.

### **Contradiction**

Boushey and Moser (2006) lay out a method of small group instruction that centers on 5 elements. Students read to self, read to someone, work on writing, work with words, or listen to reading. Although this program meets the 5 key requirements laid out by the National Reading Panel and Allington's (2005) additional 5 pillars, it requires 120 minutes to complete. Teachers and students in intermediate grades usually only receive 50 minutes. Reutzel and Cooter (1991) provide a scheme that requires 58-75 minutes based on 5 components: sharing time, mini-lessons, state-of-the-class, self-selected reading and response, and student sharing time. Again this scheme is supported by research, but it still requires more time than allowed in a departmentalized intermediate classroom schedule.

An additional contradiction is how curriculum demands would be met while also providing targeted instruction. Most methods of small group instruction allow for a brief whole class lesson of approximately 10 minutes before breaking into individual, partner, or small

groups. For this reason, management of small groups and demands of curriculum seem to be at odds for incorporating both effectively. Upper elementary teachers are often required to introduce new concepts which usually need more than 10 minutes to develop a complete understanding. Perhaps the lesson could be broken into increments over several days, but this might interfere with the district's scope and sequence. The fact that small group instruction is flexible provides some ability to work around such issues, but requires some planning and design by the classroom teacher.

### **Conclusion**

Using small group instruction in the intermediate grade classroom is possible even though research has established a need for 120 minutes which is not possible in some intermediate classroom schedules. Even though some intermediate classrooms only have 50 minutes available for instruction, it would be possible to modify some of the existing structures by adapting the rotations over a two day period versus meeting all the requirements in one day. More research would need to be completed to determine if this division would prove to be less effective. However, ensuring that all elements of best practices in small group instruction are followed would most likely follow the same results. The most important elements of small group instruction that need to be incorporated would include trust, targeted instruction, classroom management, engagement, and directed choice. These elements are the factors that drive the research not the time configuration.

Additionally, meeting curriculum demands while also providing small group instruction requires teachers and administrators to work together to lay out clear and concise curriculum goals. Teachers would need to design a method of introducing new concepts that also allowed

students to break into small groups for targeted instruction. Administrators would need to align current curriculum expectations with the need to provide targeted instruction. Districts would need to ensure teachers were provided professional development that allowed them to balance both of these lofty demands.

### **Research Process**

Two texts provided the foundation for identifying resources in researching differentiated instruction through small group instruction in intermediate grades. Best practices in literacy instruction by Morrow and Gambrell (2011) and the daily 5: fostering literacy independence in the elementary grades by Boushey and Moser (2006) listed ample resources to begin my search. All articles used for this paper were accessed through the Texas Woman's University Library website. I used the Reading subject guide to begin my search, which included the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Professional Development Collection, Research Starters – Education. From these databases I performed Boolean searches using key words; small group, differentiated instruction, small group configurations, managing small groups. These searches resulted in locating articles from the following journals: Language Arts, The Reading Teacher, American Secondary Education, and Early Childhood Education. The articles include some research on the effects of small groups on ELLs and behavior of exemplary teachers. However, the majority of the articles and texts focus on incorporating an instructional method centered on best practices using a small group configuration.



## Annotated Bibliography

**Allington, R.L. (2005). The other five “pillars” of effective reading instruction. *Reading Today*, 22(6),3.**

Allington recognizes the 5 pillars identified by the National Reading Panel are core, but are not the only pillars that should be taught in classrooms. The five pillars laid out by the National Reading Panel include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In this article, Allington identifies 5 additional pillars; classroom organization, matching pupils to texts, access to interesting texts, writing and reading, and expert tutoring. Allington claims that without all ten of these elements present a program is not researched based.

**Allington, R. L., Johnston, P. H., & Day, J. (2002). Exemplary Fourth-Grade Teachers. *Language Arts*, 79(6), 462.**

In this case study Allington, Johnston, Day, and their research team observed 12 exemplary teachers identified through a nomination process. Cross-case analyses were performed, and coded based on key features. A content analysis was then completed to identify five broad focal points: classroom talk, curriculum materials, nature of instruction, student completed work, and the nature of evaluation.

Although this article does not directly discuss small group instruction, it is a feature used by the exemplary teachers observed. This study is listed as a reference in The Daily Five to support the structure of that program. The article includes elements like peer collaboration which is often present in effective small group instruction.

**Boushey, G., & Moser, J. (2006). *The daily 5, fostering literacy independence in the elementary grades*. (1 ed.). Portland, ME: Stenhouse Pub.**

This book lays out a management structure based on research that is student-driven. The method uses a 120 minute block format to implement best practices supported through trust, choice, community, sense of urgency, and stamina. The structure allows teachers and students 5-7 minutes of whole class instruction followed by a 20 minute student self selected independent study with the process repeating 5 times in one class period.

Although this method is based on a 120 minute block, it provides insight into a method that might possibly be adapted to fit a 50 minute class. Instead of meeting 5 times in one day the sessions could be shortened so the process could be completed in two days instead of one. The structure allows for the teacher to meet with students for individual conferences as well as small group instruction. The authors also point out how the method combines trust and explicit instruction to allow students to acquire skills needed to be independent learners.

**Brooks K, Thurston L. English language learner academic engagement and instructional grouping configurations. *American Secondary Education* [serial online]. Fall 2010;39(1):45-60. Available from: Academic Search Complete, Ipswich, MA. Accessed November 20, 2012.**

This study used an ethnography approach to study ELL engagement in the middle school classroom based on 4 different classroom configurations. The study included ten classrooms in two different middle schools located in an urban school district. ELL students counted for about 8% of the districts total population. The campuses selected for the study housed about 15%-20% of the districts ELL students. Researchers observed ELL students in 10 different classrooms for three levels of ELL student academic engagement. ESCRIBE, a computerized data collection and analysis system was used to record eco-behavioral data. In this study the researcher used a laptop computer to record data through momentary time sampling.

ELL students were more actively engaged and spent less time off task while working in small groups or with partners. Although a contradictory study is identified, Brooks & Thurston correlate explicit teacher instruction in small group engagement as a possible factor in the differences between the research studies. The conclusion found ELL students were more likely to be academically engaged within a small group or with a partner than in whole class or individual instruction. During individual instruction students were recorded to produce more nonverbal responses.

**Daniels, H. (2007). One teacher to one student with one powerful strategy. In G. Beers, R. Probst, & L. Rief (Eds.), *Adolescent literacy, turning promise into practice*. Portsmouth, NH:Heinemann.**

In this chapter the author describes some pitfalls of trying to meet the needs of small group instruction. The author discusses the need for teachers to find a personal balance that is manageable to the teacher while also meeting the needs of the students. Through the use of writing, teachers are able to confer with students, build relationships, and find a method of individualized instruction that is easily incorporated into a secondary classroom in which a teacher may have to communicate with over 100 students. The author specifically lays out two different methods of maintaining such correspondences.

**Kracl, C. L. (2012). MANAGING SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LITERACY WORK STATIONS. *International Journal Of Psychology: A Biopsychosocial Approach / Tarptautinis Psichologijos Zurnalas: Biopsichosocialinis Poziuris*, (10), 27-46.**

Using observations and interviews this case study looks at the implementation of Diller's literacy work stations and teacher management of small groups. One main point is that small group instruction needs to be designed with the teacher in mind. In order for small group to be effective it must be personalized to fit the teacher's style. Another point was the need for explicit instruction when implementing the small groups.

Although this study looked at first grade implementation of small groups, it provides important insight into the need for explicit instruction when incorporating small groups. Additional, an explanation of centers and stations is given to help the reader understand the difference between the two. Teacher training was also found to be an important component in establishing effective small group instruction.

**Morrow, L. M., Gambrell, L. B., & Gambrell, F. (2011). *Best practices in literacy instruction, fourth edition*. (4th Edition ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.**

This textbook identifies the complexities of managing a classroom in which a teacher differentiates literacy instruction. It points to creating a simple and manageable plan that will

build in complexity as the teacher learns to manage such a task. The author points to the importance of using a blend of configurations to best meet the variety of needs of students. The text describes a variety of groupings strategies. A five block schedule is laid out specifically identifying the purpose of each block with a designated time to be spent in each block.

**Reutzel, D., Cooter Jr., R. B. (1991). Organizing for effective instruction: The reading workshop. *Reading Teacher*, 44(8), 548.**

Based on research this article lays out a method of reading workshop that is completed in 58-75 minutes. This workshop is designed into 5 components: sharing time, mini-lessons, state-of-the-class, self-selected reading and response, and an additional sharing time. Reutzel and Cooter identify the reasons why such a method meets the requirements of best practices. Important factors include student ownership in the program and the ability to incorporate the basal. The authors explain a system that is flexible, but still based on research.

**Reutzel, D., Clark, S. (2011). Organizing Literacy Classrooms for Effective Instruction. *Reading Teacher*, 65(2), 96-109. doi:10.1002/TRTR.01013**

This article is presented in a question and answer format to aid new teachers in establishing best practices in a literacy rich classroom. It addresses topics from classroom organization, classroom management, analyzing student data, daily scheduling, planning effective small-group reading instruction, parent communication, and professional growth. The article not only explains why small-group instruction is necessary, but also provides three options: menu assigned whole-class activities, menu assigned independent activities, or learning centers for incorporating small-group instruction based on research. The article also explains the importance of explicit instruction of procedures for each method.

**Wasik, B. (2008). When Fewer Is More: Small Groups in Early Childhood Classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(6), 515-521. doi:10.1007/s10643-008-0245-4**

Although this article was not research and focused on early childhood, it provided a foundation for the use of effective small group instruction. This article explains the purpose and method for small group instruction in the preschool classroom. The purpose of the article is to identify the most beneficial configuration of small group by focusing on the number of students to engage in small group sessions. Groups should be designed with a purpose in mind and therefore, ideal group size depends heavily on the purpose of the task. However, the author cautions that groups larger than 5 decreases the quality of individualized instruction.