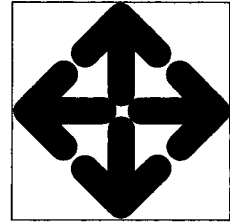


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# Keeping Flexible Groups Flexible: Grouping Options

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Grouping students for the teaching of reading and language arts is one of the most challenging tasks a teacher faces. Teachers who adjust to meet the needs of all students manipulate grouping options to maximize learning.

Teachers are well aware of the lack of flexibility and the questionable effects of the traditional three-block plan of ability grouping for students in low groups, such as less wait time, lower levels of questions asked, and slower pacing (see Chapter 1). Sometimes the temptation is to search for a clear alternative to the three-block plan. Unfortunately, it is not so simple. No single-faceted plan, whether it is peer tutoring, small groups for repeated reading practice, needs-based groups, or whole-class instruction, will meet the requirements of every student. As we move toward alternative grouping plans, we must be careful to avoid the rigidity that characterizes traditional ability grouping and offer students dynamic and flexible opportunities responsive to curricular goals and individual needs.

In this chapter we provide several grouping options along with some management suggestions. The grouping options are categorized as whole class, teacher-facilitated needs-based groups, cooperative groups, pairs, and individual teaching and learning. To plan for effective integration of grouping

options, it is helpful to consider the strengths and weaknesses of each. The options that follow should be viewed as ad hoc groups, formed and dissolved according to need—hence, the name “flexible grouping.” The use of these grouping options may apply not only to the reading/language arts period, but also to instruction in the content areas (Pardo & Raphael, 1991). Figure 2-1 suggests possible grouping options related to a list of typical classroom activities. Suggestions in the figure are explained throughout this chapter.

**FIGURE 2-1 Matching of Activities to Grouping Options**

Activities	Grouping Options*				
	Whole Class	Small Needs-Based Groups (Teacher-Facilitated)	Cooperative Groups	Pairs	Individuals
Teacher read-aloud	X	X			
Demonstrations/ modeling	X	X			
Repeated readings Choral/echo	X	X			
Readers’/Story Theater	X	X			
With taped story			X		X
“Mumble” reading					X
Buddy reading				X	
Second-tier guided reading for emergent and struggling readers		X			
Journals	X			X	X
Self-selected reading			X	X	X
Projects	X		X	X	X
Writing process Conferencing				X	X
Mini-lessons	X	X			
Author’s chair	X		X		
Status-of-the- class (Atwell, 1987)	X				
Learning centers			X	X	X
“Early bird”		X			

\*Grouping options not limited to those suggested.

## **WHOLE-CLASS INSTRUCTION**

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Whole-class instruction can meet several instructional goals, including: (a) introduction of new ideas and concepts, (b) review of recently taught skills or strategies, (c) development of a cross-curricular theme, (d) development of a common experience from which group discussion can emerge, and (e) direction for writing through Atwell's (1987) status-of-the-class meetings. As a result of the shared experience, whole-class instruction effectively puts children in touch with the social nature of reading while safety-netting the risks associated with this learning (Reutzel & Cooter, 1992).

With regard to specific literacy goals, whole-class instruction can accomplish several purposes. For example, to begin the reading assignment, whole-class grouping can be used for introducing new vocabulary; discussing background knowledge; and teacher modeling through reading aloud, making predictions, setting purposes for reading, and providing an audience, such as a student who reads to classmates through author's chair. After reading, the whole class can discuss, analyze, and extend the selection. These are all tasks that can be accomplished successfully by children across a range of performance levels. Whole-class organization can also be used for storytelling, dramatizing stories, sharing Big Books, sharing writing pieces, holding sustained silent reading and writing time, and creating language experience charts (Reutzel & Cooter, 1992). Whole-class instruction is most effective when successful completion of the task is possible without decoding fluency and when there is opportunity for discussion. Teachers report multi-ability groups generally create livelier, more interesting discussions.

Beyond literacy learning, whole-class instruction may yield positive benefits related to students' self-esteem. Students who view themselves as low achievers often develop more positive self-images when they have the opportunity to interact with their higher performing peers. Conversely, students who see themselves as "tops" can learn to appreciate the contributions of others.

Although there are many advantages to whole-class instruction, there are also disadvantages. Attention to individual needs is minimal; individual students may be less likely to participate; and instruction tends to be teacher-rather than student-centered, with less pupil/pupil interaction. Thus, overuse of whole-class instruction may prevent attainment of some important literacy goals. Particularly, it is difficult for teachers who rely too heavily on whole-group instruction to be good kidwatchers (Goodman, 1991): recognizing what each child can and can not do, and knowing which child is ready for a nudge and which child is not. Further, even if teachers were to observe specific needs, the whole-class framework simply does not allow teachers to direct a lesson to some students and not to others.

So, it is critical that whole-class teaching not take up the bulk of instructional time. “One big reading group” is not the idea. Rather, whole-class instruction should represent only one piece of the grouping puzzle. Its usefulness grows out of effective combination with other grouping options that better address individual needs.

In summary, whole-class instruction is particularly beneficial when when it meets the following goals:



- Developing background knowledge and interest in preparation for reading and writing
- Establishing meaning by teacher read-aloud of part or all of a text
- Building a common experience such as introduction to a cross-curricular theme
- Modeling the reading/writing process
- Reviewing or reminding students of previously taught skills or strategies
- Developing understanding of a text through postreading discussion

## TEACHER-FACILITATED NEEDS-BASED GROUPS

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Whereas whole-class instruction is designed specifically to create a shared experience, teacher-facilitated needs-based groups are intended to address diverse learning needs. Needs-based groups are based on Vygotsky’s (1978)



notion of scaffolding, where meeting students’ needs is not so much a matter of placing them in materials at a given level as of providing the scaffolding or instructional support necessary to help them achieve *beyond* that level. This notion has led teachers and researchers to explore ways of meeting students’ needs by changing the way teachers teach reading rather than by changing the material assigned (Paratore, 1991).

Teacher-facilitated needs-based groups are particularly beneficial when:



- A few individuals need additional instruction on an ad hoc basis in areas determined by teacher observation, student request, and/or testing
- Students with special needs or emergent readers require frequent, even daily, extra help
- Higher performing students need some direction or explanation in preparation for a cooperative or independent learning project

Needs-based groups may be interpreted by some to be traditional ability groups. We prefer to refer to them as “performance” rather than “abil-

ity" groups because the issue really is performance rather than an innate ability. These performance groups are more flexible than traditional ability groups, with students moving among different group types (e.g., skills, need, interest), rather than being restricted only to a performance group with other students at similar reading levels.

Needs-based groups are most often formed by the teacher, particularly early in the school year. Students are often able to make their own decisions, however, about the groups they wish to join. For example, in a school where one of the authors has taught, students routinely choose whether to work individually or in pairs, or whether to join the teacher in an extra help group.

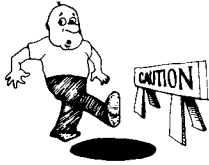
Although needs-based groups are often thought of as remedial or extra help groups, it is important to emphasize that such groups may be intended to meet the special needs of higher as well as lower performing students. Research supports the need of higher achievers to work together at times (Johnson & Johnson, 1992). In a meta-analysis of studies on ability grouping, Kulik and Kulik (1992) found that flexible grouping, combined with appropriate, differentiated instruction, led to academic gains for highly able students. Dooley (1993), however, reports that surveys of teachers and observations of gifted and average students reveal little differentiation in heterogeneous classrooms.

High achievers can benefit from curriculum compacting (Renzulli, 1977), a systematic process through which proficiency in the basic curriculum is assured, instructional pacing is appropriate, and time is made available for enrichment and acceleration. Thus, high achievers might participate in initial instruction as necessary, but may then proceed to extend class reading. For example, they may read an entire book when the basal includes only a chapter, or perform in-depth explorations of thematic units or personal interests. High achievers could also be given alternative assignments to replace routine practices (e.g., teacher read-alouds of a common selection) that are unlikely to benefit them. As is true for the special needs of any type of student, modifications for high achievers should encompass both content and process.

Needs-based groups may occur before, during, or after reading a selection, based on the instruction to be provided. Sometimes they are skill/strategy groups. For example, comprehension-building activities that occur after students read might well focus on clarifying ideas and events, or confirming predictions. Specific activities might help students understand particular parts of the selection, focus on the author's main ideas, or summarize the selection's major events.

Teachers might conduct mini-lessons (Atwell, 1987) based on their own observations, a formal curriculum guide, lessons in a basal, assessment information, or student request. These mini-lessons could be used to reinforce the strategy for those students who need additional instruction, or extend the strategy to more advanced applications (Strickland, 1992).

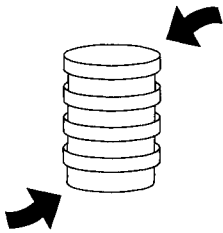
One risk of needs-based groups is the tendency for a few children to become permanent members. One way to maintain heterogeneity is to include visitors to the group. The visiting, or rotating, members benefit in different ways. For example, a shy child may join to learn to be more assertive or questioning in the group; another child may join strictly on the basis of interest; another may join to learn more about collaboration. One such plan is Cunningham and Allington's (1993) after-lunch bunch, a small group that meets for fifteen minutes to read easy books "just for fun." The membership changes daily, with the less proficient readers as frequent, but not every day, members. Every child is included during the week, the best readers only once each week. Keeping performance groups heterogeneous and using them as only one selection in a menu of grouping options helps avoid some of the problems common with traditional ability groups.



Finally, in almost every classroom, teachers have at least one or two students for whom no amount of stretching results in successful reading of grade-appropriate text. Teachers know they must *teach* these students to read, not just allow them to listen and respond to grade-appropriate text. For such students, many teachers have implemented a "two-tier" plan similar to the multilevel instruction described by Cunningham in Chapter 7.

### TWO-TIERED INSTRUCTION

Pull from top of tube  
with grade-level materials



Push bottom of tube  
with comfort-level materials

In one tier, students may interact with the grade-appropriate text(s)—listening to a read-aloud, learning concepts with classmates, contributing to story discussion, and writing in response. This enables them to maintain "citizenship" in the classroom community. In addition, however, they receive regular instruction and practice in easier texts, and on specific strategies and skills. A useful metaphor is that of a child stuck in a tube (S. Fields, personal communication, March 1, 1993). While you pull from the top with grade-level material, you must also

push from the bottom, with comfort-level text. The comfort-level text can be predictable language books that children "zoom through with joyous familiarity" (Bill Martin in Cullinan, Greene, & Jaggard, 1990, p. 753). It may come from general trade books (individual titles available from any bookstore, and not written specifically for school curricula) and/or student-authored books. Use of lower level basals as easy reading is not recom-

mended because of the possible negative impact on the child's self-esteem and motivation. If the class is reading from a single selection, it is helpful if the easier-tier material is thematically or otherwise related to it.

The use of an easier set of materials is particularly necessary for emergent readers. Routman (1991), for example, recommends that, at the beginning of first grade, teachers meet students in homogeneous groups as part of their instruction to help students move through books of gradually decreasing levels of predictability. Fields (S. Fields, personal communication, March 1, 1993) provides a strategy for using predictable books with homogeneous groups when multiple copies are not available. The teacher reads a few different titles and provides some guided reading instruction to the group of less proficient readers. Then, pairs of students become custodians of one of the books, which they read to each other. The teacher might package each book in a ziplock bag that also includes sight words for the pair to study. See Cunningham (1991) and Cunningham and Hall (1991) for examples of successful use of multilevel non-ability-grouped instruction with low achieving first graders.

When scheduling time for a second tier of instruction for low achievers, teachers may wish to excuse students from other assignments. These might include selection follow-ups too difficult for students significantly below level, even if completed in cooperative groups.

Following are examples of before-, during-, and after-reading strategies and practices that are particularly suited to small groups.

### ***Teacher-Assisted Before-Reading Activities***

Teacher-assisted before-reading activities can make the language and concepts more familiar through a read-aloud; make vocabulary more automatic through previewing, explicit instruction, and practice; or make events and their relationships more comprehensible through prereading discussion.

One widely used practice is the formation of an "early bird" group. This needs-based group may meet a day or two before the rest of the class

begins the common selection. During this time, members may participate in a read-aloud and initial discussion and practice of vocabulary essential to reading and understanding the selection. This group might be led by the classroom teacher, a special teacher (e.g., Special Education, Chapter 1), or a volunteer or aide. "Early bird" grouping represents a way of being proactive—intervening to

prevent, rather than to remediate, failure. The result: Students who often struggle to keep up may now actually outshine their otherwise higher performing peers. Teachers who try early bird grouping enthusiastically tell us, "It works!"



### ***Teacher-Assisted During-Reading Activities***

Teachers typically conduct the first reading in different ways depending on the nature of the group. If most students can read the selection alone, but a few cannot, the teacher might conduct a “whisper club” (S. Fields, personal communication, March 1, 1993), reading a class selection to a group of less-proficient readers while others read it to themselves. One teacher adapted this by having strong readers do the whispering. If most students cannot read the selection alone, the teacher might read it to the group while higher achievers use earphones at a computer or listening-station activity, work in a quiet part of the room, or go to the school library.

### ***Teacher-Assisted After-Reading Activities***

Teacher-assisted activities for needs-based groups can also occur after reading. Among the most useful practices is repeated readings of passages about one hundred words long with an emphasis on speed more than accuracy (Samuels, Schermer, & Reinking, 1992). Use of repeated readings has received extensive support in the professional literature. A wide range of studies (Chomsky, 1978; Koskinen & Blum, 1984; McGuinan, 1968; O’Shea, Sindelar, & O’Shea, 1985; Samuels, 1979; Spring, Blunden, & Gatheral, 1981) indicates that even one rereading can increase both fluency and comprehension. Additional readings increase them further. Three to five practice readings appear to be optimal for the development of fluency, even with below-average readers.

Teachers using repeated readings should provide multiple purposes for the reading. These can include confirming predictions; identifying the most exciting, scariest, or funniest parts of a book; or developing expression in reading dialogue, perhaps during a play or puppet production of the text (Strickland, 1992).

Teachers may read selections aloud to a class or group, perhaps taping themselves in the process to provide rereading material for a listening center. Other alternatives include teachers dividing up selections to record, or asking high performing readers to do the recording. Other repeated reading activities that can be teacher-directed and are easy to use as initial rereadings include:

- Various forms of choral reading
- Echo reading, with the length of the chunks progressing throughout the year, perhaps from phrases to sentences or sentence clusters (Morris & Nelson, 1992)
- Assigning groups to each character in story theater and readers’ theater