



Getting Started with Small-Group Reading Instruction in the Intermediate Grades

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Section I: Setting Up the Classroom	7
Classroom Structure	8
Scheduling	8
Routines and Procedures	11
Physical Setting	13
Room Arrangement	13
Ideas for Space.....	14
Making it Work	16
Regulation.....	16
Delegation	17
Section II: Establishing the Reading Instruction Block	21
Explicit Reading Instruction	22
Reading Mini-lessons.....	22
Interactive Read Aloud	23
Shared Reading	24
Guided and Independent Reading Practice	25
Small-Group Reading Instruction	25
Text Discussions	26
Partner Reading.....	28
Literacy Stations.....	29
Independent Reading	31
Reflection and Sharing.....	32
Response Journals.....	32
Graphic Organizers	33
Section III: Forming Small Reading Groups	37
Gathering Student Data	38
Reading Benchmarks	38
Informal Reading Inventory	39
Reading Observations	42
Forming Initial Reading Groups.....	46
Grouping for Strategy and Skill Instruction	46
Deciding What to Teach.....	48
The Reading Process	49
Section IV: Working with Small Reading Groups	53
Lesson Components	54
Strategy Instruction	54
Silent Reading	56
Response Activities	57
Discussion and Sharing	58
Assessment/Evaluation	58

Table of Contents

Scheduling and Rotating Groups	59
Frequency and Duration	59
Working with Multiple Groups	60
Putting It All Together	61
Conclusion	65
Appendices	69
References.....	81

INTRODUCTION

*Proficiency is our goal for children....
Consistent, continuous, excellent teaching makes it happen.*
—Saunders-Smith, 2003, p. 23

Intermediate-grade teachers face significant challenges. Students enter the classroom with many different experiences and abilities. The demands of the text increase, and the level of thinking required for comprehension becomes more difficult to reach. In addition, students must perform well on state-mandated tests; in some cases promotion to the next grade level depends on these test performances. Often teachers succumb to “teaching to the test” in order for students to meet grade-level expectations. While student performance on these tests is important, equally as important is fostering a desire to read that extends beyond the classroom. The relationship between reading time and reading achievement is clear: students who spend more time reading each day perform better than those who spend less time reading (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988). Classroom instruction provides a foundation on which students can build their own literate lives. While teachers may only have a limited amount of time to help students become more proficient readers, the time can be maximized by engaging students in reading experiences that help them build independence and develop the sophisticated thinking and skills necessary for them to grow as life-long readers.

Teachers aim to create learning communities that value each student’s unique learning needs. These needs form the basis for reading instruction and are met through a variety of experiences during whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction. The most effective way to teach the diverse learners within classrooms is to work in small, flexible instructional groups. Research states that the optimal group size for learning seems to be teams of 3 to 4, while those of 6 to 10 “did not

learn significantly more than students from ungrouped classes” (Lou et al., 1996, p. 448). Most teachers agree that working with small groups is ideal to address the needs of students and make the most of reading instruction. So, given that students learn best in a small group and that teachers feel more effective when working with a small group, why don’t more teachers work with small groups of students? The tasks of organizing, monitoring, and managing multiple groups within a classroom can be time-consuming and difficult. There are questions about how to start, when to meet, how to plan for instruction, and what the rest of the class will do while the teacher is working with a small group. Teachers want to make sure that all students receive the appropriate amount of instruction in the short time that is available to teach them. Although grouping students for literacy instruction is both challenging and complex, careful consideration of the needs of each student can allow the teacher to plan thoughtful and purposeful learning experiences for all students.

This resource offers suggestions for how to begin working with small instructional groups during the reading block. It offers practical ideas for grouping students, deciding what to teach within each group, managing and monitoring the processes and products of students, and creating an environment in which all students are engaged and working on meaningful activities. By examining the components of an effective reading instruction block and determining how small-group instruction fits into that model, *Getting Started with Small-Group Instruction in the Intermediate Grades* will demonstrate that working with small groups is not only manageable but also necessary for effective reading instruction.

SETTING UP THE CLASSROOM

Think about how order and beauty contribute to a feeling of calm and confidence in any environment. This principle is equally true of your classroom.

—Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 91

Forethought and planning are required to establish a classroom that is conducive for students to work in small groups. An organized and well-designed classroom ensures that both instructional time and student learning are maximized and enables the teacher to meet the students' needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). At the same time, the environment is continually adapted to meet the shifting social and instructional needs of the learning community. The way that a classroom is structured and managed is critical; a classroom's physical design greatly impacts classroom management (Morrow et al., 1999). Physical arrangement should allow students to access any resources and materials they need and provide large-group as well as small-group space for students to meet. In addition, the classroom should have designated areas for independent work. Equally important is the creation of routines and procedures. A consistent and predictable routine helps inform students what to expect, what is expected of them, and what is acceptable behavior. Also, students learn how to be responsible for their own learning community. If students are not aware of these expectations and do not understand how the classroom works, it will be difficult to create and monitor small groups. Setting up the classroom is the first step in creating an atmosphere in which both the teacher and students feel safe, valued, and successful. It is well worth the time spent to establish this type of environment as students begin to work both independently and cooperatively in groups.

CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

A structured classroom environment is essential to plan successful learning experiences. Each minute of the school day is purposeful and contributes to students' overall learning. Therefore, routines and procedures ensure that students can safely and comfortably interact and participate, while allowing the teacher to maintain order and efficiency. The following sections provide specific information on how to create a daily schedule and establish classroom routines and procedures.

Scheduling

Routines and Procedures

PHYSICAL SETTING

Classroom management is greatly affected by the physical arrangement of the classroom. A well-organized physical space allows for flexibility when a student is working independently, with a partner, in a small group, or with the entire class. The following sections focus on arranging the room for student success and offer suggestions for utilizing space.

Room Arrangement

Ideas for Space

MAKING IT WORK

In order for a classroom to be well managed, students must be held accountable for their own community. Delegating duties and creating a regulation system allow students to work with each other and with the teacher to become responsible for their environment.

Regulation

Delegation

ESTABLISHING THE READING INSTRUCTION BLOCK

It is through the use of a variety of grouping strategies that teachers address students' needs, skills, and motivations in learning literacy.

—Reutzel, 1999, p. 273

The reading instruction block encompasses a variety of literacy experiences, including whole-group lessons, small-group instruction with the teacher, small groups of students working together, and independent practice. Because reading instruction must be specific to students' needs, each experience is utilized to create the best learning environment for each student (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Students are provided with varying degrees of support from the teacher, as outlined in the Gradual Release Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). In this model (Figure 2-1), students are initially provided with a high level of teacher support through explicit instruction. This allows the teacher to directly teach and model a skill or strategy. Students begin to take more responsibility for their learning through guided practice with the teacher and other students. They use strategies and skills on their own as they read independently. In order for students to apply learning independently, effective teachers give "just enough support so students will experience success and feel confident but not so much support that they take over and disempower the learner" (Routman, 2000, p. 5). The following section outlines the different components in the reading instruction block as they relate to the Gradual Release Model.

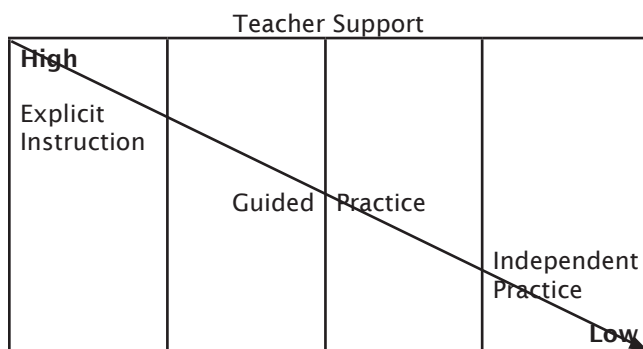


Figure 2-1. Gradual Release Model

EXPLICIT READING INSTRUCTION

Reading instruction is provided to all students through explicit teaching. A teacher demonstrates, models, and specifically explains how the information helps students learn. Students receive instruction that provides a basis for their guided and independent work. Explicit instruction is presented through the following.

Reading Mini-lessons
Interactive Read Aloud
Shared Reading

GUIDED AND INDEPENDENT READING PRACTICE

After students have received instruction from the teacher and understand the learning expectations for the lesson, they are provided with opportunities to practice the skills and concepts. There are several learning experiences that provide practice and reinforce concepts. These include working with the teacher, working with either a small group or a partner, and working independently. Guided and independent reading practice may be conducted through the following.

Small-Group Reading Instruction
Text Discussions
Partner Reading
Literacy Stations
Independent Reading

REFLECTION AND SHARING

The final stage in the reading instruction block allows students time to process what they have learned. They reflect on how the lesson helped them become better readers through writing or discussion. This provides closure to the lesson and offers the teacher a chance to determine which skills and concepts the students still need to develop. Reflection and sharing opportunities can be provided through the following.

Response Journals
Graphic Organizers

FORMING SMALL READING GROUPS

Reading instruction must be specific to students' needs.
—Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 91

Today's classrooms are filled with diverse students, and instruction must be tailored to accommodate each one's unique needs. Teachers can meet these needs through differentiated instruction or by presenting information in various ways (Tomlinson, 1999). One effective way to differentiate learning is to balance large-group instruction with the use of small, flexible groups. Through small groups, teachers can accommodate all learners by varying the size, materials, tasks, purposes, and support level for each group.

The use of small groups is not a new concept. Many educators can remember using small, static reading groups and perhaps even participating in them. In the past, students were divided into groups based on reading ability, and they remained in these groups for the entire school year. It is not the use of small groups during reading instruction that is problematic; it is the inflexible use of homogeneous small groups (Caldwell & Ford, 2002). For groups to work effectively and for all students to achieve maximum growth, the groups must be flexible and change frequently to reflect the dynamic nature of learning.

Small-group instruction has many different purposes. A teacher can form a small heterogeneous group based on student interests through a book club or literature study. Students may work collaboratively on a specific task or project by participating in literacy stations or partner activities. Or a teacher can form a small, flexible homogeneous group based on students' skill and strategy needs or reading abilities. This section will focus on gathering student data, forming groups, and deciding what to teach for skill and strategy instruction.

GATHERING STUDENT DATA

To make informed instructional decisions, student data must be collected. This occurs by using a variety of assessments to determine student progress. A teacher uses diagnostic assessments to discover what students know and are able to do. The results provide information to enable the teacher to create instructional groups that best serve student needs. In addition to diagnostic assessments, formative assessments are used continually, allowing the teacher to modify and change each instructional group as needed. Student data is gathered in several ways.

Reading Benchmarks

Informal Reading Inventory

Reading Observations

FORMING INITIAL READING GROUPS

While whole-group instruction is designed to create an experience that is shared by all students, small-group instruction is intended to address diverse learning behaviors. After gathering data and determining the different needs that exist in the classroom, the next step is to form reading groups for students with similar reading behaviors. Teachers decide what to teach each group based on collected data and the instructional needs of each group.

Grouping for Strategy and Skill Instruction
Deciding What to Teach

The Reading Process

WORKING WITH SMALL READING GROUPS

We try to determine what is the best use of time for our students and how to create a schedule that allows us to facilitate their learning.

—Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2003, p. 67

Once a structured classroom environment has been established, data has been collected for each student, and initial small groups have been formed, the next step is to begin working with each small group. Often questions arise about the instructional content in small groups. While the content that is taught in each group is based on student needs, the structure and components of the lesson are consistent across all groups. Teachers make decisions about the pacing and duration of a lesson after meeting with each group. As the teacher begins to meet with multiple groups, it is important to establish a schedule and a rotation system to ensure that adequate time is provided for each group of students.

Managing several groups can be challenging. Effective classroom management is crucial to the success of working with small groups. In order for the teacher to devote attention to a small group, the rest of the class must be actively engaged in meaningful reading practice. Once the teacher feels comfortable with the reading instruction block and students are aware of expectations, both academic and behavioral, small-group instruction can take place. In *Section IV: Working with Small Reading Groups*, small-group lesson components will be presented, as well as ideas for scheduling, rotating, and monitoring small groups.

LESSON COMPONENTS

A small-group lesson looks much like a whole-group lesson. There is an objective that is taught by the teacher, time for students to practice, and an evaluation of how well the students applied the objective. This structure will vary based on time, content, and the needs of the students. The following components are part of a small-group lesson.

Strategy Instruction

Silent Reading

Response Activities

Discussion and Sharing

Assessment/Evaluation

SCHEDULING AND ROTATING GROUPS

While there is no formula for the number of days or length of time for small-group instruction, it is necessary to have a plan for meeting with students who need assistance. Teachers often have a limited amount of time to work with students, so it is easy to overlook or omit working with small groups in favor of teaching in whole-group settings. By determining a schedule for meeting with groups and remembering that small groups are flexible and may change at any time, a system for working with groups can be created that facilitates the learning of all students.

Frequency and Duration

Working with Multiple Groups

Putting It All Together

CONCLUSION

Communities function well when the members take on the many responsibilities involved and use them to learn from each other and to help each other learn.

—Graves, 1991, p. 34

Picture an intermediate classroom where it is time for reading instruction that promotes quality learning. Students gather together as a community of learners in a classroom area where they sit on the floor or at their desks with a clear view of the teacher. She asks the students to think about their favorite story and what makes it special to them. Several students share story titles. The teacher explains that often favorite stories have a message that can be applied in life, called the story's theme. She recalls previous stories that the class has read, and together the class talks about the different themes of each one. As an interactive read aloud, the teacher has chosen *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson. A Two-Column Chart is on the easel next to the teacher with the columns labeled "Theme" and "Text Evidence." As the teacher reads, she stops when appropriate to discuss the text and has students help her complete the chart about the theme of the story. When she is finished reading, the teacher discusses the chart with the students. She tells them to try and determine the author's story message as they read today, working independently and in groups.

The teacher refers students to the work board at the front of the room. They look to see whether they will work with the teacher in a small group, with a partner in a literacy station, or with their text-discussion groups. Students quietly return to their desks to collect the materials they need for their assigned group. Two students assigned to the computer station walk to the computer, put on their headphones, and follow the instructions listed on the screen. They have used this reading program before with the teacher in the computer lab, so they know how to com-

plete the activity. In the drama station, students locate a play from the folder labeled "Scripts" and begin reading to decide which part they would like to perform. The students working at the buddy reading station and the listening station find comfortable places to meet. Then they look in crates filled with pairs of books, books recorded on tapes, and tape players to locate a text that they would like to read. The teacher has shown them how to use the materials, and they are aware of behavior expectations as they work with their partner. One text-discussion group is already seated at a group of desks and begins talking about the new novel they are reading. They decide that in order to prepare for their meeting with the teacher tomorrow, they should read the first chapter and use sticky notes to record questions they have as they read. They will spend the rest of their meeting time reading as a group. The members of the other text-discussion group are in different places around the classroom; at their meeting yesterday they decided that they would prefer to finish reading the next chapter independently and meet as a group when finished.

As these students move around the classroom and start to work, the teacher begins working with four students in a small group. Since she knows that her time with the group will pass quickly, she already has all the materials that she needs at the small-group table. Each student has come to the group with their reading notebook and is given a copy of the novel *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen. This group is comprised of students who are reading below grade level and meets with the teacher four times a week. The teacher chose this novel because it is a high-interest book, and

also because the length and text structure require the students to receive support as they apply their reading strategies to comprehend the text. She begins the lesson by reviewing the chapter the group read the day before. Next, she tells the students that since they are over halfway through the novel, they should begin to identify some themes in the story. The focus lesson for the small group today is to analyze the text to determine the author's message. The teacher chooses to review the skill that was presented in the interactive read aloud because she wants to make sure the students understand the major themes in the novel. She gives them each a copy of the Two-Column Chart that was used in the interactive read aloud and asks them to complete the chart during or after reading today's chapter. As the students begin reading silently, the teacher pulls her chair behind one student and quietly asks him to turn his chair around and read aloud from his place in the text. During his oral reading, she makes notes on his fluency and listens to see if there is a teaching point she needs to make with him. She notices that the student is not pausing when he sees a period at the end of a sentence. She knows that this could affect his comprehension of the story because Gary Paulsen uses short, choppy sentences as a writing technique to create drama and to emphasize key ideas. After addressing this point with the student, the teacher observes the rest of the students in the group and sees that they are actively engaged in reading and completing their charts. Therefore, she uses this opportunity to walk around the classroom to monitor the students working at literacy stations and in text-discussion groups.

In one of the discussion groups, the teacher notices that one of the students is not following along with the group members as they read the chapter together. The teacher stops to question the student. Together they decide that it is more productive for

the student to sit at a separate desk and finish reading and then return to the group for discussion. The teacher continues around the classroom and praises the students in the computer station and buddy reading station for their attention to their tasks. The students at the drama station are very animated with the play they are performing, and the teacher reminds them to lower their voices because the other students are working. The teacher returns to the small group just as the students finish their chapter and complete their charts. The group has ideas about the theme of the story and concludes with a discussion of possible themes using support from the story. The teacher announces to the class that it is time to complete their activities and move to the next group. The students know that they have one minute to return materials to their proper place, find their name and next rotation on the work board, and move to the appropriate area. Rotation 2 begins, and the teacher meets with another small group of students.

It is obvious that this teacher has spent a great deal of time planning each learning experience and teaching the students how to act responsibly while working with other students. The classroom is organized for whole-group, small-group, and individual reading activities. The teacher provides quality instruction in each setting and uses a variety of teaching strategies to meet the needs of each student in the classroom.

The teaching methods and suggestions included in *Getting Started with Small-Group Reading Instruction in the Intermediate Grades* provide a basis for working with small groups of students. As teachers increase their knowledge of an experience with these practices, they become even more well-informed and highly effective, and students have a bright future as life-long readers.