What to Know About Classroom Reading Groups

Mounting evidence suggests that leveled reading groups don’t improve struggling students’ reading skills. These findings leave teachers and school leaders with a few big questions: Should they get rid of grouping altogether? If not, how do they group students if not by level? Here’s what reading experts say.

ALTERNATIVE: Skill-Based Reading Groups

Intention: Skill-based grouping seeks to pinpoint and address the specific challenges that students have. It can be effective if the practice focuses on discrete skills that students need to work on, not general comprehension instruction addressing multiple skills. Groups also must be flexible enough so that students can move once they have mastered those skills.

Sample scenario: A teacher groups students to work on a skill that some of their peers have already mastered, such as segmenting and blending sounds. Students might practice the /oi/ sound, for example.

TIPS FOR SMALL GROUP SUCCESS:

1. Create groups: Teachers use decoding inventories, fluency screeners, or other measures that pinpoint skill deficits.

2. Targeted activity: Small groups allow teachers to provide extra modeling and give students immediate feedback. Students use group time to practice specific, discrete skills—such as the /oi/ sound, for example.

3. Administrative logistics: Plan small group activity to occur when another adult can also be in the room—a reading specialist, or an English-learner teacher, for example. If there aren’t other adults available, students’ assignments should come with clear directions and some modeling.

4. Assessments: Short gauges of whether students are mastering skills in their current group.

5. Regroup: Teachers should reshape groups regularly based on this data, as frequently as every other week.

TIP ON TIME: Teachers might spend 15 minutes with each group in rotation to target a skill efficiently.

ALTERNATIVE: Mixed-Ability Groups

Intention: Mixed ability groups ensure all students have access to grade-level material no matter where their reading ability falls.

Sample scenario: A small group meets to discuss a read-aloud they experienced together as a whole class. Students in the group bring different perspectives, as well as a range of knowledge about vocabulary and language use, leading to a richer discussion.

What the research says: Targeted, skill-based grouping can be effective. A 2017 study found that students who were in personalized reading groups from 1st to 3rd grade outperformed their peers who were in traditional reading groups, gaining the equivalent of about two months of extra progress each year.

What the research says: Experimental studies suggest that weaker readers can benefit from reading complex texts, in part because it helps them further develop subject-matter knowledge—knowledge that can then, in turn, support their comprehension of future texts. Pairing weaker and stronger readers to read together as partners, specifically, is supported by studies, too.

Leveled Reading Groups

GROUP: Group kids with similar reading comprehension abilities. The teacher spends time with each group to monitor progress and offer strategies.

INTENTION: Meet students where they are, giving them enough challenge to grow their abilities, but not so much that the lesson becomes too difficult.

Why experts say it doesn’t work: Assessments used to determine kids’ levels aren’t reliable. One study found that data from these tests correctly predicted students’ reading ability only a little more than half of the time. Essentially, a level is only a measure of general comprehension, not a diagnosis of which component skills of reading students might struggle with. Leveling can also widen the gaps it’s designed to close. Students who start school in the lowest reading group are unlikely to catch up to students who start in the highest reading group.

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