



Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

Maximizing Student Learning With Flexible Grouping Practices

As a classroom educator, determining how to deliver instruction to ensure that all students are successfully engaged and making academic progress is a challenging, yet essential, task. The Pennsylvania Academic Standards act as the blueprint for your lesson plans and daily instructional practices. In addition, students should be grouped based on formative assessment data and needs.

Benefits of Flexible Grouping

Effective instruction includes the practice that all students have the opportunity to move among learning groups that best correspond to the instructional purpose and students' instructional needs. Curriculum materials and instructional programs should be research-validated and carefully matched to each student's needs. This instruction should be delivered in the least restrictive environment, based on the individual needs of each student.

Although many teachers may utilize small group instruction in their classrooms for reading and math on a regular basis, a true differentiated flexible grouping classroom

A teacher's grouping practices "provide a means for supporting effective instruction for all students, meeting the cultural and linguistic needs of all learners, and to learn for students with special needs."
— Sharon Vaughn

approach is characterized by specific content that is delivered within the consistent flow of whole-class, small-group, and individual opportunities. This allows students to have their strengths and needs met throughout the instructional cycle. Effective teachers realize that students vary and that small group instruction can be very beneficial for all students, especially students with learning needs, students who are English Language Learners, and students who would benefit from extension activities. Flexible instructional grouping is a thoughtful and deliberate match between students and their specific instructional needs; group membership should be based on individual assessment data. Group membership should not be static, but should change accordingly, based on students' skills, interests, and learning profile.

In flexible group settings, every learner, including struggling and advanced learners, enjoys opportunities for success. It is critical for teachers of older students to use small-group instruction to help teach the fundamental skills of literacy and numeracy that have not been mastered in the earlier grades. One of the benefits of flexible grouping is that it gives you, the teacher, the opportunity to compile

frequent, individualized assessment data on every student, which then serves as a guide for future instruction and for the opportunity to provide individual feedback on their strengths. It also allows for more precise scaffolding based on where students are achieving within their skill sets.

“Grouping is one of the alterable factors that can powerfully influence positively or negatively the levels of individual student engagement and hence academic progress, as well as a means by which we can address diversity in the classroom.”

—Larry Maheady

Consider Group Guidelines

Prior to instructing students in various group settings, keep in mind that students will need some direction and structure in order for their group time to be the most productive. Group guidelines and behavioral expectations should be taught ahead of time so that students have a clear understanding of what is allowable during group work. These behaviors can be explicitly taught to the students using “T-charts” to define what the behaviors “look like” and “sound like” (see Figure 1). Consider having students generate the lists of behaviors or group norms, and then model these behaviors for their peers. The T-chart should be displayed and referred to when necessary.

Figure 1. Example of a T-Chart Defining Expected Behaviors for Working in a Group

| Looks Like | Sounds Like |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Facing partners | Elaborating on comments |
| Completing work | Acknowledging |
| Cooperating | Asking clarifying questions |
| Sharing materials | Indoor voices |
| Eye contact to speaker | “I like how you solved that problem.” |
| On-task behaviors | “Let’s try it this way.” |

Active Engagement Strategies

Regardless of the type of flexible grouping strategies used, student engagement is a critical factor for successful instruction. If students are not engaged, they do not learn. Therefore, it is important that, as a classroom teacher, you incorporate as many active engagement strategies as possible into your daily instructional practices. By utilizing active engagement strategies on a regular basis in a formative assessment* manner, you will also gain an idea of your student’s level of understanding of the content.

Examples of Active Engagement

- **Verbal Responses:** (e.g., choral response, partner think-pair-share, sentence frame/starter to ensure that all students are comfortable with the language for discussion, randomly calling on students)
- **Action Responses:** (e.g., hand signals, response cards, acting out content, partners)
- **Written Responses:** (e.g., copying from the board, white boards/clickers, structured note-taking, writing in journal)

*For information about formative assessment, see *Teachers’ Desk Reference: Formative Assessment*.

Numerous routines and instructional practices can contribute to a teacher's effective use of whole-class instruction and implementation of alternative grouping practices (partner responses) to support active engagement throughout the instruction (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Flexible Grouping Practices for Effective Instruction in a Standards Aligned System

| Whole Group | | |
|---|--|--|
| Advantages | Instructional Purpose | Group Information |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engages teachers and students in shared grade-level learning experiences Ensures every student receives core instruction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To introduce new content and new strategies To provide common experiences as a shared basis for further exploration To model new information/strategies To engage students in read-alouds To teach a shared-writing activity | <p>Students are placed in classes according to school policies, teacher recommendations, and grade-level decisions</p> |
| Flexible Small Group (same ability) | | |
| Advantages | Instructional Purpose | Group Information |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides targeted instruction that is explicit and systematic to meet the needs of a small group Maximizes opportunity for engagement and immediate and corrective feedback Based on formative assessment and ongoing data collection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide small-group instruction directed to specific students' needs (content reinforcement or enrichment) To provide a tiered intervention To scaffold instruction so that students can practice skills with support in order to be successful | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are assigned to groups of three to eight based on assessment data and skill levels Group membership varies based on data |
| Flexible Small Group (mixed ability) | | |
| Advantages | Instructional Purpose | Group Information |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enables teachers to serve as a facilitators Allows for student self-choice Motivates students Addresses social needs Promotes language interactions for students who are English language learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To allow for and provide extension of what students have learned in content areas To allow students to access relevant center/station activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group membership is based on students' abilities or interests Groups can be student-led or cooperative |

continued . . .

Figure 2. Flexible Grouping Practices, continued

| Pairs/Partners | | |
|---|--|---|
| Advantages | Instructional Purpose | Group Information |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meets individual needs • Motivates students • Provides language and social interaction • Enhances student learning and engagement (e.g., think-pair-share) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support partner reading • To reinforce practice activities • To build language extensions • To structure peer tutoring opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are assigned partners based on assessment • Teachers can utilize a classroom ranking system to determine pairs, or can partner students based on random counting • Teachers monitor student progress to be sure all students benefit |
| One-on-One | | |
| Advantages | Instructional Purpose | Group Information |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meets individual needs • Proven in the research to be one of the most effective practices for improving outcomes for students with reading disabilities | To provide targeted instruction to meet the needs of each student | Students are assigned based on assessment and progress monitoring data |

Adapted from Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D., Texas Center for Reading and Language Arts, University of Texas at Austin.

As a classroom teacher, you decide the purpose of your instruction and then determine the type of grouping pattern you will use to meet the instructional goal. Mixed-ability groups (heterogeneous) include students with a range of skill levels and background knowledge. Same-ability groups (homogeneous) include students with similar

levels of skills and knowledge. Using and analyzing data on a consistent basis will allow for student movement between groups. Effective grouping practices, in addition to employing active engagement strategies, are important variables for you to keep in mind daily while delivering instruction.

Resources:

Archer, A.L. & Hughes, C.A. (2011). *Explicit instruction*. Guilford Press: New York, NY.

Maheady, L. (1997). *Preparing teachers for instructing multiple ability groups*. Teacher Education and Special Education.

Tomlinson, C.A. (2003). *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom*. ASCD: Alexandria, VA.

Vaughn, S., Hughes, M.T., Moody, S.W., & Elbaum, B. (2001). *Instructional grouping for reading for students with LD: Implications for practice*. Intervention in School and Clinic.

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