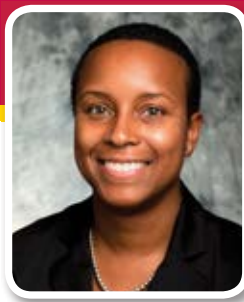Lada Kratky

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Orchestrating Instruction *by Lada Kratky and Jennifer D. Turner*

Our classrooms are made up of students with a variety of interests, strengths, and personalities. Some are shy while others are outspoken; some are afraid to take risks, while some are bold; some have been read to, others have never held a book. In the classroom, one of the challenges a teacher faces is grouping these diverse personalities in such a way that they will all flourish. It has been shown that small group instruction is more effective for students than simply doing whole group instruction during the entire day (Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole, 2000). And so, how do we group students?

We know that the best literacy teachers don't simply organize their instruction; they *orchestrate* learning within their classrooms (Turner, 2005). Heilman and his colleagues (2002) note that "Implementing reading instruction in a class requires careful orchestration of time, materials, and instruction to satisfy the needs of individual children" (p. 508). This means that teachers must be thoughtful and purposeful as they make grouping decisions.

Reading groups

Although there are many grouping formats that teachers may use for reading instruction in their classrooms, we focus on two primary types—homogeneous groups and heterogeneous groups. Homogeneous groups are formed when students of similar reading levels come together to read a text. The purpose of homogeneous reading groups is to provide explicit instruction to groups of four to six students at their instructional levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; 2001) and to scaffold students' understanding of texts (Frey & Fisher 2010). Importantly, homogeneous groups should not be static, or students will remain in the same reading group for the entire year (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Iaquinta, 2006). Rather, homogeneous groupings must be flexible and allow for individual growth and continued challenges.

Heterogeneous groups are formed with students of varying strengths, needs, and interests as readers. According to Heilman et al (2002), heterogeneous groups "have the potential to increase students' academic engaged time and achievement by promoting active learning, with students talking and working together rather than passively listening" (p. 502).

Which grouping format is best? A primary consideration for making this decision is identifying the task at hand, and the question becomes if students should be placed in homogenous or heterogeneous groups to provide the best setting for the given task.

When learning and practicing a skill, students will work best when grouped with others of similar skill levels. Instructional levels are determined by observation of student strengths. Reading means deriving meaning from print. To that end, teachers should be aware if students are purely decoding or if they are using phonics and language skills to arrive at meaning. Teachers of emergent readers, in addition, should be aware if students control concepts of print, have letter knowledge, and can identify High Frequency Words. The best tool for assessing student strengths in reading is the running record.

Running records

In *An Observation Survey,* Marie Clay (2000) states that running records help teacher in

- the evaluation of text difficulty
- the grouping of children
- the acceleration of a child
- monitoring the progress of children
- observing particular difficulties in particular children.

A running record of student performance can be carried out with any introduced text and at any time. It consists of following the student's reading by making markings, which will be used to analyze strengths and difficulties. The teacher jots down a tick, or check mark, for each word read correctly. A miscue is recorded. If a child corrects an error, the correction is recorded as well. A struggling reader should be observed frequently in order to track his or her progress and inform his or her instruction. On-level readers can be observed on a regular basis.
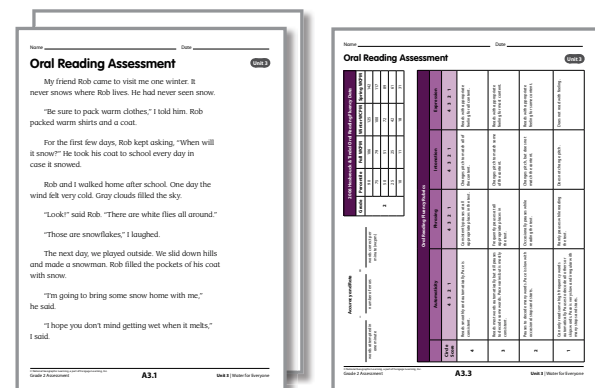
▲ Oral reading assessments provide running records of reading progress. Measures are provided for accuracy, rate, and comprehension.

Flexible grouping

Using running record scores and other measures, the teacher will create homogeneous reading groups. Reading groups are formed to provide explicit instruction to a group of four to six students at their instructional levels. These groupings must be flexible and allow for individual growth and continued challenges.

The most important and continual consideration has to be that groupings are flexible. Students grow at different speeds. Flexible groupings are essential to avoid frustration and keep kids engaged by keeping them appropriately challenged and meeting individual needs. Running records and conferences must become part of routine and constant observations of each student's growth, which will guide continual and necessary adjustments between groups.

As Iaquinta (2006) observes, flexible groups "avoid the traditional problems of grouping, because teachers change the composition of groups regularly to accommodate the different learning paths of readers" (p. 414). In order to maintain flexibly, it is necessary to assess students' strengths and needs on an ongoing basis. Thus, constant observation of each student's growth, as well as periodic adjustments within groups, are vital in order to allow each student to advance at his or her own rate.

▲ Leveled books provide opportunities for students to explore science and social studies content and apply reading skills and strategies at their individual instructional levels.

Once groups are formed, there are a variety of different instructional approaches that classrooms take to implement small group reading. Guided reading involves teacher-supported discussions in small groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Literature circles are heterogeneous, student-lead groups of four or six children who read the same book. They prepare for discussion by taking on particular role e.g. Discussion Director, Connector, Illustrator. (Daniels, 2002). Many other reading routines exist and can be effective once groups are formed. Regardless of the format used, homogeneous group reading is just a first step in reading. It's also important to have students share and extend learning through heterogeneous group discussions.

After students work with texts at their level, *Reach for Reading* provides the opportunity for all students to share the knowledge gained about the different stories and informational texts they have read through heterogeneous group discussions. The "Connect Across Texts" part of the small group and leveled reading routines provides opportunities for all learners to transform facts and ideas gleaned from their books into knowledge, ideas, and opinions about the core content topics and questions that form the center of each unit.

Selecting the right book

Among the many baskets of books that are made available in a classroom, students will find books that are easy for them, those that are at instructional level, and those that are difficult. It is important to know which books are appropriate for each learner. Fountas and Pinnell say, "Easy readers…allow children to focus on the meaning and enjoy humor and suspense. [They] give children "mileage" as readers and build confidence." However, it is not enough for children to just read easy texts.

Instructional-level books are those that allow readers to learn more and progress little steps at a time. They provide practice of known strategies and go a step beyond, allowing for fluent reading and opportunities to problem solve. Hard texts will more than likely discourage the reader. The reading will be choppy, punctuation will be ignored, perhaps there will be sounding out of individual letters, all of which will result in little or no comprehension and the message that reading is difficult and frustrating.

Reach for Reading provides a large range of texts to meet the diverse levels of today's heterogeneous classrooms for every one of the

- 32 content-based decodable readers are provided in the primary grades
- over 100 thematically-connected trade books carefully selected to span across the range of below-level, on-level, and above-level readers
- 64 Explorer Books featuring articles from *National Geographic Explorer* magazine written at two different reading levels.

Grouping for cooperative learning

Generally speaking, when involved in cooperative learning activities, heterogeneous groupings will engage students most effectively. These groups mix language abilities as well as personalities in order to combine talkers with non-talkers, the shy with the bold. The purpose of this type of grouping is to share ideas, discuss, talk, brainstorm, or build together. By having heterogeneous grouping, talkers become role models, and non-speakers slowly build up enough confidence to speak. These activities allow students to learn from each other as they work together.

The teacher is the most informed person with regards to student strengths in language and participation and is the best person to match up different students for mutual benefit and growth. *National Geographic Reach for Reading* offers a wide range of cooperative learning activities. An example of such an activity is "Corners." Each of the four corners of the classroom is assigned one aspect of a discussion. At their seats, students think and write about one of those aspects. Then they go to the corresponding corner to discuss their ideas. At the end, one student from each group shares the thoughts of the group with the class.

Corners

1's   3's

2's   4's
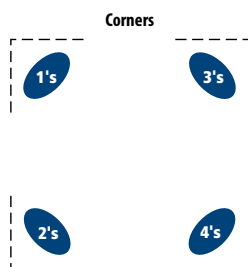
Cooperation, discussions, listening to others' opinions and sharing of ideas are behaviors that are desirable and have to be learned. When students work together in heterogeneous groups, those behaviors can be nurtured and made to develop.

Independent reading

In addition to selecting texts according to students' reading levels, teachers should also select texts based on students' interests and preferences. For example, students generally choose the book that they would like to read during independent reading time. Teachers may also encourage students to select topics of interest in science and social studies and support students in using a wide range of informational texts, which promotes content learning and literacy development (Bergoff & Egawa, 1991). Finally, recent research suggests that students respond enthusiastically to texts that mirror their cultural, linguistic, or ethnic backgrounds, and teachers should select books which are relevant to students' lives and interests outside of school (Louie, 2006; Turner & Kim, 2005).
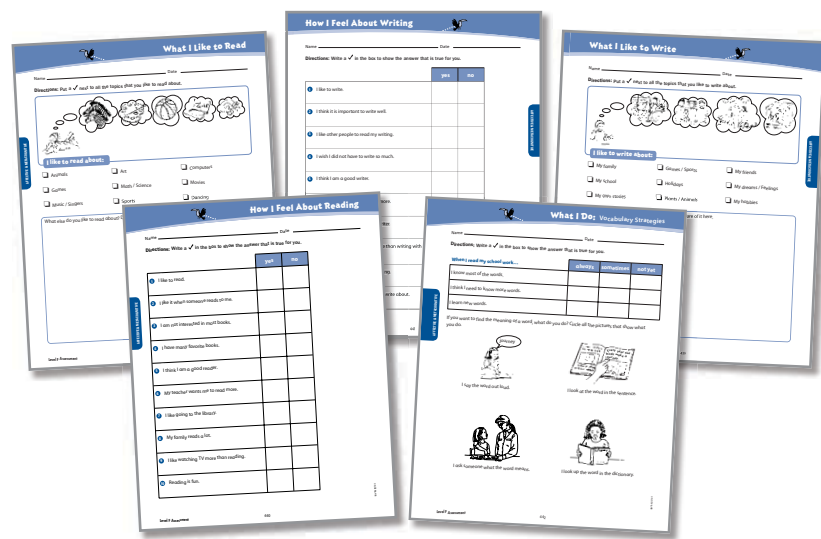
▲ Affective and metacognitive assessments are provided at NGReach.com.

Independent reading time is a time in the day for readers just to explore reading. Whereas leveled reading takes place in homogeneous groups and texts are selected primarily for their appropriate instructional level, independent reading can happen when students are grouped heterogeneously and texts are selected based on personal interests of the reader. Book baskets are leveled, so students can select easy or instructional-level texts and read to each other. In addition, students can explore book baskets that might contain selections to entice diverse interests. These might be catalogs, how-to manuals, magazines on motorcycles, cars or airplanes, cookbooks, or any other type of texts that might not otherwise be available to students. It is exploration time, a time readers confirm the fact that reading is fun.

Conclusion

Small group instruction has been proven to be most effective when teaching students of different backgrounds and strengths. In activities where the focus is learning a skill, such as reading, homogeneous groups are more efficient because they group students by ability and instruction is aimed at each specific ability level. Constant observation of student participation and progress is required for teachers to be informed about their students. Finally, it is important for teachers to remember that small group instruction is critical, but it is just one part of a balanced literacy program. Small group instruction provides opportunities for students to work closely with their peers and with texts, yet it should not be the only instructional feature of the literacy block. Participating in small instructional groups, as well as accessing literacy events within the whole community (e.g., read alouds, shared writing experiences) and opportunities to read independently, enhance children's development as critical readers, writers, talkers, and thinkers.