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Brief 2 • July 2016

Instructional Grouping Practices in Reading

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Introduction

Instructional grouping practices in reading instruction are frequently a source of discussion and even debate, particularly when it comes to group size. Some may assume smaller groups are always better when it comes to reading instruction, but the evidence in the research varies across ages. For example, varying group size has been examined for first- and second-grade students (e.g., Iversen, Tunmer, & Chapman, 2005; Vaughn et al., 2003), with evidence indicating higher gains in reading outcomes for smaller groupings, but less is known about the optimal size for older students. Specifically, group size was not associated with differential outcomes in a study examining reading interventions in grades 7 and 8, which included groups of up to 10 to 15 students (Vaughn et al., 2010). Yet, Vaughn et al. (2012) grouped students with severe reading difficulties in groups from two to four for 50 minutes of a multicomponent (i.e., phonics, word reading, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) intervention to intensify instruction, which is often needed due to the nature of significant reading difficulties for secondary students. What is known is that students with severe reading difficulties progress more consistently when they have multiple opportunities to practice (Vaughn, Denton, & Fletcher, 2010), which more readily occurs in small groups.

This brief will describe instructional grouping practices and considerations, as well as recommendations and examples of how to maximize opportunities for students to improve their reading outcomes within group instruction by using flexible groupings guided by student data.

What It Is

Instructional grouping practices are related to the type of groups formed during instruction (e.g., group size, variability of student characteristics within a group).

Monitoring and modifying instructional group practices based on student data can be a mechanism for **intensifying or individualizing a student's reading instruction**. For example, reducing group size or creating groups with students of similar ability levels can be a way to intensify instruction for students with reading difficulties. Specifically, reducing the student-to-teacher ratio can increase the opportunities for direct instruction and increased opportunities to respond for each student.

What It Looks Like

Homogeneous grouping (e.g., grouping students with similar ability levels) can improve student outcomes because teachers can target instruction to common instructional needs.

Grouping structures should be flexible and decisions about how to group students should be **driven by student data** (e.g., screenings, progress monitoring). Groupings should change as students progress and develop new skills. Similarly, it may be appropriate to adjust groupings if student data indicate greater intensification is needed (e.g., by reducing the student-to-teacher ratio).

Benefits

Whole-group instruction is less likely to afford some of the benefits of small-group instruction. The benefits of small-group instruction include emphasis on peer learning and communication, flexibility in adjusting learning needs, and verbal activities such as orally rehearsing content or explaining content to others (Lou et al., 1996). Therefore, reducing group size has many benefits, such as more opportunities for students to receive corrective, immediate feedback.

Using student progress-monitoring data to inform decisions related to instructional grouping promotes targeted instruction and may intensify instruction for students who are not showing expected levels of progress.

What the Research Says

1. Brief or unplanned individualized instruction of certain types (e.g., a teacher working one-on-one with a student to provide specific feedback) is linked with improved student outcomes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). These types of instruction often occur more frequently when the student-to-teacher ratio is decreased.
2. Peer pair groupings can increase engagement when students take on roles such as peer mediation (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997) and when peer-assisted learning strategies are implemented (i.e., one student takes on the role of the "coach" and uses a script to guide the collaborative reading activity).
3. Several instructional practices associated with improved student outcomes have been identified, including teachers doing the following: (a) monitoring and checking for understanding as students learn new material, (b) providing specific feedback during practice activities to promote mastery of new skills, (c) supplying immediate error correction to reduce the time that students practice errors, and (d) providing multiple opportunities for students to practice and respond (Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014). Smaller instructional group sizes tend to create favorable conditions for teachers to implement these practices.

Types of Student Data to Guide Instructional Group Decisions

- Screening data administered to all students guide the creation of groups of students with similar ability levels for targeted interventions.
- Diagnostic data are used before learning to identify student skills (e.g., running record with error analysis).
- Formative data (e.g., oral reading fluency) can be used to guide and plan group instruction. For select measures that have evidence of validity and reliability, see **www.studentprogress.org**.
- Summative data are used after instruction to measure student learning (e.g., high-stakes tests, standardized tests).

Tips for Using Student Data to Guide Instructional Grouping Decisions

- Student screening data can be used to form homogeneous groups (i.e., groups of students with similar ability levels).
- Student data should guide decisions related to intervention intensification, such as duration, frequency, the interventionist (e.g., reading specialist, paraprofessional), and group size.

- If progress-monitoring data indicate that a student is not making adequate progress, decreasing the number of students in the intervention group can intensify instruction because it is easier to implement more direct instruction and increase opportunities for students to respond.

For more information regarding screening tool use and selection, see **www.intensiveintervention.org**.

Implications for Practice

- Work with administrators and other key personnel to develop schedules that allow for flexibility in grouping (e.g., movement of students between groups, changes in group size) so that student data guide grouping practices as much as possible.
- Ensure that teachers use student screening and progress-monitoring data to make instructional grouping changes. Establish routines for assessing student progress appropriately, as well as routines and procedures for moving students to more intense levels of instruction (including smaller group sizes).
- For remediation, use screening and progress-monitoring tools to form similar-ability groups to facilitate targeted instruction.

Conclusion

Instructional grouping practices can promote favorable conditions for improved student outcomes in reading.

Teachers are encouraged to be thoughtful about data-driven instructional grouping decisions and promoting instructional practices linked with improved student outcomes (e.g., increased opportunities to respond, immediate corrective feedback) regardless of group size. Student data derived from valid and reliable progress monitoring tools can guide instructional group decisions. Teachers need administration and ancillary staff support to establish routines and procedures for using student data to inform flexible instructional groups.

Sources

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