

Success with Small Groups

If we could persuade every teacher to implement one technique in his or her classroom, it would be small group instruction - not only for language arts and reading, but every subject. Small group instruction can be provided easily by creating an individualized schedule based on students' standardized test scores and performance. The emphasis in the following entry is reading instruction.

In our class, small group instruction begins the first week of school. Before the first day, we review the students' nationally-normed standardized test scores and state criterion-referenced test scores. Based on that data, we place students in flexible groups. During the initial three weeks, we evaluate the students' interactions and their readiness level; the schedule is then revised, usually by the fourth week of school.

The students are assigned their own individualized "*stations*" schedule. Since we teach third grade, the term stations seems more sophisticated to the children than centers. The student schedules are unique because they are created based on individual needs and abilities. The student schedule, including the amount of direct instruction, is determined by the teacher based on a student's area of need. For example, students who are identified with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in reading may have a listening station while gifted readers may have an independent project or novel study. When receiving direct instruction, students are grouped homogeneously so they are naturally more willing to take risks. Additionally, the content is taught at the students' level and pace; consequently struggling students do not get lost and advanced students do not become bored. When teaching an advanced group, I usually need less instructional time and can teach a larger group. Conversely, for struggling readers, I increase the amount of instruction and limit the group size to three. When not receiving direct instruction, students are grouped heterogeneously as they advance through a variety of stations.

We change stations every twenty to thirty minutes. During certain times of the year, we may extend one station to accommodate struggling students and work on particular deficits. Because our students require movement, we dance to songs during our transitions. During our unit titled "*Home is Where the Habitat Is*," we dance to "Our House," "Sweet Home Alabama," and Motley Crue's "Home Sweet Home." "Rock Lobster," "We Will Rock You," and SpongeBob SquarePants' "Under my Rock," are tunes played during our unit "*Natural Resources Rock*." Movement helps children release energy before returning to work and can be used as a learning tool. After the song is paused, we ask the students to make connections from the words in the song to the content taught in the unit. As an extension, children are asked to listen for key words on the radio at home and make further connections. A few students have even contributed songs to enhance our repertoire. We've also purchased a disco ball for added enjoyment!

Assignments, including homework, are leveled based on student needs. The children develop confidence because they work at their own independent level. Leveled homework assignments include a reading passage along with comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar activities. To ease the teacher's workload, the homework for the entire year is copied on colored paper; students know to obtain either the yellow, pink, or orange worksheet to complete at home. Beginning in the 2008-09 academic year, homework was completed online.

Reading is the tested skill in third grade, so we usually have a station in science and social studies where students read nonfiction science or social studies leveled readers. Struggling students generally avoid reading, yet science texts are highly motivating so our children are more eager to read them. They also write a great deal of

nonfiction, as research indicates nonfiction writing has a direct correlation to increased test scores.

Making connections across the curriculum is the cornerstone to our model. After completing stations, children summarize the content and relate it to other areas of study. We type our connections in a blog, an on-line journal. The blog is written three times daily: after math, language arts, and social studies/science stations. We call it our “wrap-up” session. Students state the objective of station activities or games. For example, *Scrabble* is a game that applies spelling conventions. *Apples to Apples* is a game that requires the student to give examples of key vocabulary words. They also summarize what was learned at my station, which teaches reading skills. While the same skill is taught to each group, the level varies based on individual need. When teaching a small group, I choose important information I want in the blog. Enthusiastic students are eager to hear me whisper the skill or concept. During “wrap-up,” I’ll pose a question to each group, thus providing a review of key facts. Higher achieving students are able to explain more challenging concepts to the entire class. Children make connections from language arts to other subject areas. Most importantly, they can relate these concepts to their own lives.

The language arts block includes the following stations: general education teacher-directed, interrelated teacher-directed, “PlayStation” (i.e. language arts board games), grammar, listening, reading, novel study, independent study, interactive whiteboard, and computer. The interactive whiteboard incorporates varied activities, many of which are also included on my website, <http://worksheetless.com/>. We also use the computer for writing assignments, with the interrelated teacher acting as facilitator. In addition, students take all reading comprehension tests through either an online program or our district’s software.

Below are sample schedules. The schedules are easy for all students to read, and are placed on their clipboards for reference. The teachers maintain a master copy to assist students in following the schedule. Students move independently throughout the classroom reaping the benefit of varied, meaningful instruction.

Sample Daily Schedule 1

Math
1 Interactive whiteboard OR computers
2 PlayStation (chess, strategy games)
3 Teacher 1
Language Arts
1 Teacher 2 - writing – computer 6
2 Independent reading
3 Listening
4 Teacher 1 – reading skills
Social Studies & Science
1 Computers (vocabulary games, research, writing nonfiction)
2 Teacher 1 – experiments
3 Teacher 2 – science/social studies – reading nonfiction
4 Interactive whiteboard (skill games, WebQuests)

Sample Daily Schedule 2

Math		
A	8:00-8:15	PlayStation
B	8:15-8:30	Interactive whiteboard
C	8:30-8:45	Computer
D	8:45-9:00	Teacher 1
wrap-up	9:00-9:15	wrap-up
Language Arts		
E	9:15-9:45	Grammar
F	9:45-10:12	Computer
Activity	10:15-10:55	
Recess	10:55-11:10	
G	11:15-11:45	PlayStation
H	11:45-12:10	Teacher 1
wrap-up	12:10-12:15	wrap-up
Lunch	12:19-12:40	
Science and Social Studies		
I	1:00-1:15	Interactive whiteboard
J	1:15-1:30	Computer
K	1:30-1:45	Teacher 1
L	1:45-2:00	Teacher 2
wrap-up	2:00-2:15	wrap-up

Sample Weekly Schedule 1

Math		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
A	8:00-8:20	Teacher 2	Teacher 2	Teacher 2	Teacher 2	Teacher 2
B	8:20-8:35	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	Teacher 1
C	8:35-8:50	PlayStation	Interactive whiteboard	Teacher 1	PlayStation	Teacher 1
D	8:50-9:05	Computer	PlayStation	PlayStation w/KG	Interactive whiteboard	computer
clean up & wrap up	9:05-9:15	your desk	your desk	your desk	your desk	your desk

Language Arts		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
E	9:15-9:35	writing on computer 1	writing on computer 1	writing on computer 1	writing on computer 1	writing on computer 1
F	9:35-9:50	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	listening	Teacher 1
G	9:50-10:12	Independent reading	Independent reading	Independent reading	Independent reading	Independent reading
Activity	10:15-10:50					
Recess	10:55-11:10					
H	11:15-11:45	Grammar	grammar	grammar	grammar	grammar
I	11:45-12:10	PlayStation	Interactive whiteboard	PlayStation	Interactive whiteboard	PlayStation
clean up & wrap up	12:10-12:15	your desk	your desk	your desk	your desk	your desk

Science & Social Studies		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
J	1:00-1:15	Computer	computer	computer	computer	Computer
K	1:15-1:30	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	Teacher 1	Teacher 1
L	1:30-1:45	Teacher 2	Teacher 2	Teacher 2	Teacher 2	Teacher 2
M	1:45-2:00	Interactive whiteboard	Interactive whiteboard	Interactive whiteboard	Interactive whiteboard	Interactive whiteboard
clean up, pack up, & wrap up	2:05-2:15	your desk	your desk	your desk	your desk	your desk

Small group instruction is highly successful. We use the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) program, which is a set of standardized, individually administered one-minute measures of fluency. This running record can be downloaded at <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>. Reading groups are changed throughout the year based on fluency.

The 2nd grade standard found in the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) states, "The student demonstrates the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy, and expression. The student reads second-grade texts at a target rate of 90 words correct per minute." The third grade standard explains, "The student demonstrates the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy, and expression. The student reads third-grade text at a target rate of 120 words correct per minute."

In our third grade class, both the special education and gifted students made significant gains in fluency. Data listed below from the Accelerated Reader (AR) program further supports student achievement. Third grade students are encouraged to

earn 50 points, yet our students became intrinsically motivated this year, keeping track of the data shown in DIBELS and AR scores. They were motivated by quantitative results and strived to advance their scores.

Student	Disability	DIBELS 8/06	DIBELS 12/06	DIBELS 5/07	Lowest DIBELS	Highest DIBELS	May # AR points**	May # AR books passed	May AR percent
1	Gifted	151	164	177	58	198	80.3	156	85.6
2	SLD	36	62	57	34	68	62.5	131	70.6
3	Gifted	176	201	220	145	234	109.3	179	84.5
4	Gifted	161	182	203	150	225	124.0	160	91.5
5		59	178	154	59	209	347.3	165	86.9
6	SLD, speech	46	65	107	37	107	69.3	137	86.8
7	OHI	100	151	164	89	185	66.8	104	88.8
8	SLD, speech	64	73	107	52	123	112.9	251	79.1
9	EBD, speech	62	82	105	59	125	52	114	80
10		89	116	121	76	149	63.6	129	83.5
11	gifted, speech	131	211	235	131	255	333.3	291	92.2
12	OHI, speech	83	70	85	60	107	58.3	133	70
13	Gifted	115	172	206	115	234	108.8	172	87.5
14	Gifted	87	103	143	87	148	105.8	216	91.1
15	SLD, EBD	107	147	179	107	201	132.8	175	75.4
16	SLD, speech	45	72	110	40	124	96.9	201	75.4
17	SLD	66	83	116	48	130	58.5	85	82.1
18	Gifted	93	119	151	93	155	71.9	153	78

Simply Stated: Small group instruction leads to successful students.