

## Differentiated Instruction: Grouping for Reading Success

By  
**Dr. Vicki Gibson**  
*Longmire Learning Center, Inc.*  
*College Station, TX*



### Differentiated Instruction: Grouping for Reading Success

One of the questions most frequently asked by teachers is "What are the rest of the students doing while I am teaching a small group?" The answer to this question is found in a classroom management system. An effective management system includes four steps: 1) preparing the classroom environment; 2) assessing students' needs; 3) creating teaching tools for managing resources; and 4) developing a rotation chart that identifies group memberships and clarifies performance expectations, (i.e., where and when to participate).

Step One involves preparing the physical environment by arranging furniture to create learning centers or workstations where students can complete assignments or projects while working together. Desks may be pushed together or tables may be used for small-group activities. Students may work with a peer tutor or reading partner to reread text. Collaboration and peer tutoring are encouraged to enhance learning without interrupting the teacher, who may be working with another group.

Step Two involves the creation of the small groups. Students may be grouped homogeneously



(same ability) or heterogeneously (mixed ability), with memberships changing according to student achievement, type of activity, or resources (time, equipment, personnel). Developing small groups requires thinking about membership compatibility as well as academic needs. Group memberships are flexible and may be changed as often as needed. Teachers usually create three to four small groups with approximately 4–8 students per group. Smaller groups are preferred to allow more opportunities for participation, questions, and corrective feedback (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003; Vaughn et. al., 2001).

Step Three involves managing resources such as instructional time. Teachers adjust their daily schedules to alternate time periods for small-group and whole-group instruction. Most daily schedules begin with a 10- to 15-minute overview in which teachers introduce or review vocabulary words, or model, teach, and clarify expectations for performance. After the overview a 20-minute time period for small-group instruction begins. Every student participates in a preplanned activity selected by the teacher. Work Contracts help students organize their work, monitor their progress, and complete assignments. During a small-group time period, one group of students works with the teacher. The teacher decides

how the groups operate and when it is time to change activities. The order in which groups rotate is flexible. Students follow a rotation chart to determine which activities to do next.

Step Four involves creating a rotation chart that identifies small group memberships and communicates how the groups will participate at the workstations or learning centers. Teachers construct the rotation chart to reflect how many small groups will be formed and what activities are available. Most rotation charts include an area for small-group skills instruction with the teacher, workstations for small-group practice activities or homework, and desks for independent practice. Computers, language and literacy centers, and writing and spelling workstations are commonly used for small-group practice activities.

After each small group has attended a session with the teacher, a whole-group activity allows teachers to summarize the day, connect experiences, review vocabulary and key concepts, and answer questions. Teachers check for understanding to determine what instruction is needed for the next day and to determine if small groups need to be modified to accommodate needs for compatibility or changes in activities or skills.

In general, differentiated instruction includes:

- modifying teaching methods to accommodate variation in students' needs
- implementing data-informed whole-group and small-group instruction
- using leveled reading materials to enhance student learning
- using flexible grouping patterns that are sensitive to student achievement

Differentiated instruction creates successful learning for students. Beginning with assessment data to inform teachers about students' strengths and needs, the instruction is individualized and sensitive. Students are encouraged to collaborate and work in study

groups to understand concepts and apply skills. They talk about their work and share ideas to enhance comprehension. Small-group lessons allow students to ask questions and respond frequently. Differentiated instruction creates meaningful learning experiences.

### Biography

Vicki Gibson has been teaching students, training teachers, writing curriculum, and directing instruction since 1975. She is the owner and director of Longmire Learning Center, Inc. (LLC), a private educational facility serving families with children ages 2–8 years. She is also co-owner of What Works With Kids, a publishing company for instructional materials. Prior to opening LLC, Dr. Gibson owned two private pre-schools, taught and lectured for ten years at Texas A&M University, and spent ten years in public schools as a Kindergarten teacher, special education resource teacher, adaptive behavior specialist, and learning disability specialist. She received her B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. at Texas A&M University.

Dr. Gibson is a well-respected, nationally recognized author and speaker on early childhood curriculum design and methodology, classroom management, integrating and aligning assessment with instructional planning, and using

effective instructional strategies for emerging and low-performing students. She provides consultation and conducts workshops for parent groups, child-care providers, teachers, supervisors, and administrators. She authored *We Can!*, the comprehensive early childhood curriculum that was approved for the 2003 Pre-K adoption in Texas, which includes a classroom management video and a disciplinary program called *Two Choice Discipline*. She also authored a supplemental Language Arts program titled *Letter Sounds & Strokes*, and co-authored "Road to Reading, a Reading and Collaboration Training Program for Teachers of At-Risk Readers in Grades 3–8."

Differentiated instruction creates successful learning for students.

## References

- Gersten, R., Vaughn, S., Deshler, D., & Schiller, E. (1997). What we know about using research findings: Implications for improving special education practice. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 30*(5), 466–476.
- Lou, Y., Abrami, P. C., Spence, J. C., Poulsen, C., Chambers, B., & D'Appolonia, S. (1996). Within class grouping: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 66*(4), 423–458.
- Mathes, P. G., & Fuchs, L. S. (1994). Peer-mediated reading instruction in special education resource rooms. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 8*, 233–243.
- McIntosh, R., Vaughn, S., Schumm, J., Haager, D., & Lee, O. (1993). Observations of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms. *Exceptional Children, 60*(3), 249–261.
- Moody, S., Vaughn, S., & Schumm, J. (1997). Instructional grouping for reading: Teachers' views. *Remedial & Special Education, 18*(6), 347–356.
- Taylor, B. M., Pearson, P. D., Peterson, D. S., & Rodriguez, M. C. (2001). Looking inside classrooms: Reflecting on the "how" as well as the "what" in effective reading instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 56*(3), 270–279.
- Tomlinson, C., & Eidson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C., & Eidson, C. (2003). *Differentiation in practice: A resource guide for differentiating curriculum, Grades K–5*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- 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, 36*(3), 131–137.
- Vaughn, S., & Linan-Thompson, S. (2003). Group sizes and time allotted to intervention: Effects for students with reading difficulties. In B. Foorman (Ed.), *Preventing and remediating reading difficulties: Bringing science to scale*. Baltimore, MD: York Press.
- Vaughn, S., & Linan-Thompson, S. (2004). *Research-based methods of reading instruction, Grades K–3*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.



# Treasures



**Macmillan  
McGraw-Hill**