

# Teaching Reading in Small Groups

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*Differentiated Instruction for Building  
Strategic, Independent Readers*

**Jennifer Serravallo**

Foreword by Lucy Calkins

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I've done everything I can think of to try to get my students reading. There are some who still just sit there during reading workshop.</li> <li>• My students do what I tell them in minilessons, but I don't think they really care that much for reading.</li> <li>• My students are fake reading and I don't know what to do about it.</li> <li>• My students need to figure out what they need instead of me just telling them all the time.</li> <li>• Some of my students feel like they aren't good at reading. I want to build their confidence.</li> <li>• Some of my students read below grade level, and none of the books in my classroom library appeals to them. Yet, they need to practice with these books if they ever expect to improve.</li> </ul>	Chapter 3
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared reading isn't right for all of my students, but I think that some could benefit from a small-group structure.</li> <li>• Some of my students have been stuck in a level for a while, and their fluency is holding them back.</li> <li>• I know the research about the value of rereading, but I can't get my students to do it.</li> </ul>	Chapter 6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When I look at my class assessment data, it seems like there are some students who are moving along at a regular pace and others who have been reading at the same level for a long time.</li> <li>• I find that most or all of my teaching is based on my unit of study. I'm not paying much attention to reading levels.</li> <li>• Some of my students read far below grade level and I want to help them to move through levels a little more quickly.</li> </ul>	Chapter 7
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# Beyond Reading Groups, Beyond Guided Reading

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CHAPTER

# 1



*Herbie Jones was an Apple. That was the name of the lowest reading group in Miss Pinkham's third grade class. Herbie hated the name. Margie Sherman suggested it the first week of school. Unfortunately, there were three girls and two boys in the Apples. The girls voted for Apples and the boys, Herbie and his best friend, Raymond, voted for Cobras. Miss Pinkham was pleased the Apples won.*

*Now it was March, and Herbie's group was still reading the red book (the one with the suitcase on the cover). His teacher said the stories were about people going places. Herbie didn't think his group was going anywhere.*

—Herbie Jones (Kline 1986, 7)

**M**y elementary reading experience was similar to Miss Pinkham's class. We were grouped according to reading ability and we read out of a textbook. Once you were in a group, you stayed there for the year. Our class' Apples couldn't read many of the words on their own, so in order to stand a chance at the comprehension questions at the end of the book, someone had to read the stories to them. Those students in my group, the "middle" group, could read the story and probably got most of the questions correct. This basal reader was most appropriate for us in terms of readability, but we had no choice in what we wanted to read, and many of the stories held little if any relevance.

It soon became clear that our sole purpose in the group was to read the story and answer the questions. But this assigning and assessing in place of reading instruction was not beneficial. As Durkin (1981) points out, we were tested, not taught. We were also largely bored. We finished our assigned reading in short order and at times didn't even read the passage as we learned that we could just look at the questions first, skim the story, and get the correct answer. So many of the questions were literal and required little if any thought.

When I was a student teacher, I worked with a wonderful fifth-grade teacher who taught an evolved version of those groups. Instead of basal readers, the students in her class read real trade books. She grouped students according to reading ability but also by interest, and children spent their meeting times reading, discussing, posing questions, and sometimes even acting out their favorite parts.

These groups were far better than my own experience learning to read. The groups offered ways for the children to respond to literature authentically, different books were assigned for different groups based on what students were able to read, and students read many more pages across the week than I ever did in my basal reader. As Richard Allington said, sheer volume of reading helps kids get better at reading (2000) so this element of this model benefited these kids. The problem with these groups, though, is that the instruction was about the book itself. It was devoid of explicit teaching about how to transfer what students had learned to other books or other situations. In other words, the students in the groups weren't learning much about being a reader—they were learning mostly about a book.

In the first years in my own classroom in New York City, I relied heavily on guided reading groups. I scoured Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell's many books and led groups by providing supportive book introductions, coaching students while they read,

and leading a brief discussion afterward. I balanced these guided reading groups with one-on-one conferences and book groups, as I'd done in my student teaching experience. These two structures constituted all of my individualized reading instruction.

At some point in my third year, I stepped back to ask myself this question: Is what I'm doing a benefit to the student, to myself (teacher), or to us both? I had always thought of myself as a purposeful teacher, but a close look at my small-group reading instruction made me take pause. When I thought critically about what I was doing, I found that I was *checking up* on their comprehension more than *teaching* comprehension (Durkin 1981). I did more teaching of the *book* than teaching the *reader*. I spent more of my teaching time in what Johnston (2004) calls “telling mode” than responding to what they needed as individual readers.

I wanted to get better at differentiated reading instruction. I knew that to do this I needed to group children more flexibly and purposefully and to develop a repertoire of ways to meet their needs. I needed to find structures and methods that got at the heart of engaged, independent reading.

The small-group methods described in this book were developed, refined, and tweaked with the aim of supporting children as readers and thinkers and discussers of books. In contrast to the kind of instruction Herbie and the Apples group received, the small-group methods and structures I choose help children feel like they're going somewhere—specifically, small groups that will help children to:

- read with engagement and enthusiasm
- read strategically
- engage in meaningful, invigorating conversations about books
- read fluently and with expression
- read increasingly more challenging texts



#### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AND TO EXPLORE WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES

- ✓ What were your own school experiences with reading groups?
- ✓ What are the small-group structures you rely on most in your classroom to teach reading?
- ✓ What are your fundamental beliefs about teaching in general, and the teaching of reading specifically?

All of the small-group work in this book comes from my personal experiences. Much of this work is informed by the work at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP), by my work in schools where I serve as a literacy consultant, or from my own classroom teaching experiences. Much of the work has its roots in researchers and theorists from Pearson to Vygotsky to Marie Clay.

The schools, teachers, and children most frequently mentioned in this book are in New York City where I spend the majority of my time: PS 63 in the Lower East Side, a tiny school with large numbers of English language learners and receivers of free and reduced lunch; PS 158, which serves a largely middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhood of the Upper East Side; and PS 277 in one of the poorest congressional districts in the country, the South Bronx.

Although they have such diverse student makeups, these schools have a number of important things in common. First, they are strong communities of practice where teachers work, plan, and think together; constantly try to outgrow their best ideas; rely on research; and respond to children. The leaders and teachers of these schools believe strongly in professional development.

Second, they each have exemplary reading and writing workshops, conduct daily read-alouds, and use an assessment-based developmental word study program for phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. In concert, these balanced literacy structures support one another and create a well-rounded approach to literacy instruction.

Third, and perhaps most relevant to this book, is that all three schools are committed to small-group instruction, and these small groups have had powerful effects on their readers. At PS 277, the teachers had to order scores of new books for their classroom libraries because children were reading at higher levels than they ever had before. This year, their state English Language Arts exams results showed a 25 percent increase in one year for children performing at or above grade level. PS 63 also celebrated large gains. At PS 158, this year, they saw 98 percent of their students performing at or above grade-level standards on the same exam.

## Small-Group Instruction and The Five Reading Tenets

In my first book, *Conferring with Readers: Supporting Each Student's Growth and Independence* (2007), Gravity Goldberg and I described our beliefs about what reading instruction should look like and what it should accomplish. We distilled our beliefs to five tenets. We believe reading instruction should:

- ❑ match the individual reader
- ❑ teach toward independence
- ❑ teach strategies explicitly so that readers become proficient and skilled
- ❑ value time spent, volume, and variety of reading
- ❑ follow predictable structures and routines

We wrote that in a reader's workshop classroom, we are reading mentors, and conferences are an opportunity for us to model the kinds of reading habits and skills we use to support student readers to do the same in their own reading.

Small-group conferences accomplish, and complement, these same goals. Although the one-on-one conference is an important weekly meeting between a teacher and a student, we can supplement an individual conference with small-group conferences to work more efficiently. This efficiency is especially important in today's classrooms with higher benchmarks, larger class sizes, and increasing demands placed on students and teachers. Working in groups helps children because teachers can see more children in the same time it takes to do one individual conference.

One-on-one conferences address individual student needs and foster the close relationship between teacher and student. Group conferences have the added benefits of helping children build reading relationships with each other, as well as helping teachers work more efficiently.

When children are part of a group with a common goal, it makes it more likely that they will reach out to peers when they encounter difficulty. Small groups give children the chance to hear other students' thinking about their reading process and responses to texts. Children's voices can serve as a counterpoint to the teacher's language about comprehension. This kind of culture also contributes to a student's

motivation and engagement when learning new skills and strategies. Knowing that as readers they have tools to use to accomplish their goals helps students develop what Johnston calls *agency* (2004).

### Some Benefits of Small-Group Instruction

A small-group conference

- addresses instructional goals by matching student need with a purpose and method
- creates efficiency: more children can be seen more frequently for intervention or enrichment
- allows students to feel like part of team as they work on the same goal with other students
- builds in peer support as students mentor one another toward their goals

### ***Small-Group Instruction Should Match Individual Readers***

What I learned from Lucy Calkins (2000), Kathy Collins, Kathleen Tolan, and others at the Reading and Writing Project about strategy lessons (Collins 2004) “clicked.” It made perfect sense that sometimes we should pull a group of students together not because they were reading the same book or were reading at the same level, but instead because they would benefit from the same strategy (Duke and Pearson 2002). In these groups, students receive instruction in a strategy that is transferable to other books and contexts, not only instruction that would help them in the current book. Once I began using strategy lessons they became a foundational part of my reading workshop.

I find that teachers sometimes confuse *strategy lessons* with *guided reading*. Or, more commonly, some teachers call all kinds of small-group work “guided reading.” Strategy lessons differ from guided reading in a number of important ways: what children are reading, how the group is structured, what the group is learning, and how the teacher responds to students. For example, strategy lessons work with students on their own independent level, in self-chosen books. In guided reading, the teacher chooses books at the students’ instructional level and the students typically have little choice (see Figure 1.1 for more examples). More on strategy lessons can be found in Chapter 4.

Guided Reading	Both	Strategy Lessons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students practice in instructional-level texts.</li> <li>• Students practice in text chosen by teacher.</li> <li>• Structure often includes book introduction, reading with coaching, and teaching point(s) or discussion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small group of students works with the teacher.</li> <li>• Combination of explicit and supported instruction used.</li> <li>• Teachers coach.</li> <li>• Students respond.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students practice in independent-level texts.</li> <li>• Students practice in self-selected or teacher-assigned texts.</li> <li>• Structure includes connection, explicit teaching, active engagement, and a link to students' reading.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.1** Comparing Strategy Lessons and Guided Reading

Across the next years in my own classroom, and with teachers with whom I work in my current role as staff developer, I discovered that the strategy lesson is just one of many structures possible for small-group instruction that achieve the same essential goal of providing instruction that matches individual readers. Depending on the purpose, small groups might resemble another balanced literacy component like shared reading, or they might look more like a coaching conference that you would typically do one-on-one with readers. I ask myself, What am I helping the reader to learn about reading? and How much support does the student need from me to accomplish the task? My answers guide my decisions about structures and methods (Pearson and Gallagher 1983; Vygotsky 1978).

**SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION IN READING IS REALLY CONFERRING** To me, a well-run small group in reading seems more like a conference than anything else. I think of a conference as a structure that offers opportunities to meet with a student or students to support them as they work to acquire new learning and to support them as they transition to their own independent practice.

Even though children are grouped, I still need to see the students as individuals and differentiate my responses in the course of the small-group work to meet their needs. As Tomlinson (2001) teaches us, differentiation means that I need to

understand how children take in information, make sense of ideas, and express their learning. Differentiated instruction, she writes, needs to be student-centered, rooted in assessment, and dynamic—we need to constantly make adjustments to match learner to learning. This differentiation is something that happens naturally in a well-run individual conference, and is the hallmark of a good group conference as well.

Because I put so much emphasis on differentiation and the quality of conversation that I strive to maintain in small groups, all of the small-group work structures and methods I describe in this book can really be thought of as *group conferences*.

### ***Small-Group Instruction Should Teach Toward Independence***

When I work with children during small-group instruction, I keep in mind what it will take to support each individual reader toward independent success with a strategy. I consider what I know about balanced literacy to ensure a suitable balance between teacher support and student independent practice. I also make sure I choose strategies to teach that are within the learner's zone of proximal development, and release scaffolding at an appropriate pace.

#### **UNDERSTANDING HOW BALANCED LITERACY TEACHES TOWARD**

**INDEPENDENCE** The term *balanced literacy* appears throughout the literature in a number of different ways (Cunningham and Allington 1994; Cunningham and Hall 1998; Fitzgerald 1999; Dickinson and Neuman 2001; Pearson et al. 2007). Some use the term to refer to the *balance* in the children's literature chosen or the skills being taught; to others, *balance* is about instructional methods; to others, it is about taking a philosophical stance. Many would agree that the term *balanced literacy* originated during the whole language versus phonics debate. The term denounces the extremism on either side and instead offers a solution: a little of both (Pearson et al. 2007). Balance.

In this book, I use the term *balanced literacy* to describe methods and structures of teaching, and, more precisely, the amount of teacher support versus student independence expected in each method and structure of teaching. This view of balanced literacy captures reading's true complexity (Pearson et al. 2007).

In my concept of a balanced literacy classroom, there are opportunities for students to watch the teacher demonstrate, opportunities for the student to practice with teacher support, and opportunities to practice independently, offering a bridge to



the workshop, children work *by* themselves. They are expected to continue reading in their own spots, independently and for a sustained period of time, working to apply strategies they've learned.

In this book, I focus on the *with* part of this bridge—in particular, how I support students as they read, always moving students closer to independence. The theoretical underpinnings of this are discussed in the next section.

### A LEARNER'S ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT AND RELEASING

**SCAFFOLDING** During conferences—individual or group—I attempt to assess

*... then I decide on a teaching point that is a slight stretch beyond what the student can already do independently.*

what the individual student currently understands and then I decide on a teaching point that is a slight stretch beyond what the student can already do independently. This teaching decision is made to support the student working within his zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978).

Vygotsky called this “the distance between finding the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with capable peers” (86). Instead of assessing to find what the student can't do, and then teaching to a deficit, I find what the student is already able to do and I teach to move the student, always linking the new information with what is known.

Once a teaching decision is made, I then provide support to the student in this new learning. After all, if the student is able to do it independently already, then there is no point in teaching it! Vygotsky (1978) asserts that new learning occurs when the child accepts the challenge to take on new competencies, not repeat old ones. The supports that I put in place are commonly referred to as *scaffolding*, a metaphor first used in developmental literature by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) and later applied to educational contexts.

Just like the scaffolding around buildings under construction, there needs to be a plan for how to take it down. I used to make the mistake of providing excessive scaffolding—more support than the student needs—and held it constant rather than gradually removing it. I wouldn't see when my students were able to practice independently what I had taught them. I mistakenly referred to the children as “needy” and just kept putting more supports in place.

In fact, what I was missing was the gradual release of responsibility, or the slow takedown of the scaffolding, when planning for and executing conferences (Pearson and Gallagher 1983). I needed to teach toward the development of “inner control,” so the child no longer needs external support from me and can function independently with the new learning (Clay 1991).

The idea of scaffolding can be applied when looking at the balanced literacy model presented in the previous section. *To* and *with* are scaffolds to get to the *by*. On a more microlevel, though, it’s also important to study how we interact with students while engaged in a conference. Examining how we respond to student approximations, the amount of support we give through modeling and coaching, and the amount of time we spend supporting the student before she is expected to practice alone are all important aspects of scaffolded instruction. Balance, then, is not simply about the diverse structures we use, but the methods of teaching within each structure, the amount of support we give, and how we release that support, always in constant consideration of what readers need most.

### ***Small-Group Instruction Should Teach Strategies Explicitly***

When I first learned to draw figures in my high school art class, I had some trouble. My drawings usually ended up looking out of proportion. One day, the teacher taught me that in order to better proportion the people I was attempting to draw, I could sketch a series of ovals: one for the head, one for the neck, one for the body, three for each arm. Essentially, every segment of a person became an oval. He showed how after doing this, I could go back to over these light ovals and draw the body’s outline: the shapes of elbows and hands and clothing. When I used this strategy, I was able to create lifelike drawings of figures that were in proportion.

I practiced this technique for months, always starting out with the ovals and then tracing over, until one day I tried to draw a figure freehand. As it turns out, all of those months of drawing ovals had helped me internalize the proportions, and I was able to draw a figure that didn’t look distorted. The strategy—drawing ovals—became unnecessary. I was now *skilled* at drawing a human figure in proportion—without the scaffold of drawing the ovals.

In my community at the TCRWP, we believe that readers also need deliberate strategies to develop skilled performance. We believe that strategies are deliberate,

effortful, intentional, and purposeful actions a reader takes to accomplish a specific task or skill in reading. As readers grow more and more proficient, the consciousness with which they do these actions fades as the skilled performance becomes automatic. *The strategy gives way to a skill.* However, when a reader encounters a problem, that strategic set of actions resurfaces in his consciousness to problem solve. Strategies, then, are the step-by-step how-tos for internalizing skills such as determining importance, questioning, inferring, monitoring for meaning, activating prior knowledge, visualizing, and retelling/synthesizing.

For example, instead of telling a reader that he needs to envision as he reads, we might instead tell him to think about how the character might be feeling and think about how that feeling would look on his face and body in order to help the student better picture the character. Eventually, the reader won't need to so deliberately form a mental picture of the character, but for now the intentional use of that strategy will help, just as drawing ovals helped me.



#### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AND TO EXPLORE WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES

- ✓ How balanced is your literacy instruction? Is there a way to bring more balance to ensure a bridge to independence?
- ✓ When in your life have strategies helped you to acquire new learning?

### ***Small-Group Instruction Should Value Time Spent, Volume, and Variety of Reading***

Each of the small-group structures described in this book allow for quick practice with the strategy being taught. This allows children to spend more time reading, and to use less time listening to a teacher talk about reading.

Because I meet with students whose books are self-chosen, I am likely to need to support volume of reading. According to research, when students are allowed to choose their own reading materials, they tend to read more. Instead of assigning books as guided reading or reading groups do, most small-group conferences work with children's self-selected reading material (Allington 2000).

## ***Small-Group Instruction Should Follow Predictable Structures and Routines***

Although each chapter outlines small-group instruction options that are unique, all have a common structure. These predictable structures allow children to come to know what to expect. They are clear on their role within the group, as well as the teacher's role. The structure of these groups is firmly rooted in balanced literacy philosophies where there is an "I do it" part of the lesson and a "you do it" part of the lesson—a "to" and a "by" (Pearson and Gallagher 1983).

The groups begin with the teacher stating a purpose for the group and reinforcing a strength. In subsequent chapters, I refer to this part of the lesson as "connect and compliment." The teacher orients the children to why they've been gathered for the small group, and sets the agenda by stating the strategy. In this part of the lesson, the teacher also gives a compliment. This helps to foster a sense of agency: that the children *can* learn what is being presented because they already have strengths that preclude them to learning it (Johnston 2004).

The next part of each lesson is the "teach." In this portion of the lesson, the teacher quickly demonstrates, gives an example or explanation, acts as a proficient partner, or acts as a ghost partner. The teacher sets the children up to begin their practice, keeping in mind the amount of support, or scaffold, that the students need.

The most important part of the lesson is when the children practice. The students in the group are actively involved in trying the strategy that the teacher just set them up to try. I refer to this part as the "engage" section of the conference. The engage part of the small-group instruction described in this book is what makes small groups more similar to conferences than minilessons as each child is responded to as an individual. The teacher gives one-on-one attention and tailors the focus of the lesson to the individual's needs. The teacher also differentiates by changing *how* he interacts with each child and the type of output expected (Tomlinson 2001). For example, the teacher might vary his responses to student attempts at the strategy based on learning-style preferences. Verbal/linguistically oriented children might practice out loud, whereas kinesthetically oriented children might act out a part of their book when practicing the strategy, and spatial/visually oriented children might sketch.

The final part of each group conference is the “link.” This part links the work that students do in small groups to the work that they do at their independent work spots. The teacher reiterates what was taught and encourages the children to practice independently. This is an important, though quick, part of the conference because it is essential that children transfer what they’ve done in the ten-minute small group to their independent reading. It is through repeated practice in multiple contexts that children solidify new learning.

Although the structures remain the same, there is nuance in what happens in each type of small group. As you read each chapter, use the predictable common structures to focus your reading, and look to see how the differences support the goals of the group.

## The Last Word

There is nothing better than one-on-one conferring with readers. The impact these conversations have on our young readers is long lasting: the undivided attention we give our students and their reading benefits them personally and academically. Of course, in a class of thirty or more children, you can’t rely solely on one-on-one instruction to meet the diverse needs of the class. The next best thing is to get our small-group instruction as close to the motivational bonding that one-on-one instruction offers.

Differentiated reading instruction is best attained through flexible, purposeful groupings and with attention to the repertoire of ways to meet students’ needs. By holding firm to the five reading tenets of good reading instruction, I can ensure that I match individual readers’ needs; I teach toward independence; I teach strategies explicitly; I value time, volume, and variety of reading; and I follow predictable structures and routines. These tenets will be revisited at the close of Chapters 3–7 to reiterate how the specific methods and structures from the chapters align.

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