

Using small groups and workstations: From chaotic to constructive

If you walk into my second grade classroom at any given moment, you might think it rather chaotic. You would see three or four students reciting poetry to each other at the back of the room, while others spell words orally into PVC pipes shaped like telephones. In other areas of the room, students are absorbed in enriching and meaningful activities with books or manipulatives. The noise level is acceptable, though you wouldn't be able to hear a cricket chirp or a pin drop. The walls echo with rich conversation, and the room bustles with movement and learning.

No, this is not free time in my classroom. (If you have free time in your classroom, *please* let me know where you teach.) Rather, this is my classroom where students work at their best at workstations.

Most important, you would see me engaging a small group of students at my table in a lesson prepared for and geared toward their unique needs. Teaching in small groups may seem daunting (I have to prepare HOW many lessons?), but I have found that it is very effective. In order to make this work in your classroom, for reading *and* math instruction and beyond, you need to consider these things: the small group, workstation grouping, workstation assignments, and transitions.

The small group

Teaching in small groups allows you to individualize instruction, provide meaningful and prompt feedback, and better evaluate student progress. While it may seem intimidating to teach a math lesson three or four times, it really is simple. More often than not, you will use the same materials and teach the same objectives, but you will differentiate instruction and/or the way students demonstrate their understanding of the material.

Actually, research shows that differentiated instruction yields positive results among a broad range of

students (Huebner 2010). Teaching a homogeneous group—that is, a group of students with similar skill levels—allows you to direct a lesson, and possible accommodations, to the abilities of the students you are working with. Whether you are teaching math or reading or working on any other skill, the lesson will include accommodations or extensions, depending on the abilities of your students.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION YIELDS POSITIVE RESULTS.

In the early childhood classroom you will carefully form small groups, each focusing on a specific skill and each consisting of students who display the same ability in that skill. Creating your groups to reflect similarities in your students “contributes positively to the learning experience” (Wasik 2008).

With a small group (four to six students is ideal), students learn more effectively than in large groups, and you have the opportunity to use more hands-on learning as well as give immediate feedback. Students can actually learn more vocabulary words and comprehend a read-aloud story better during small group instruction than during whole group instruction (Morrow and Smith 1990).

During my first year of teaching, I tried to teach a math lesson on double digit addition to the entire class, knowing that my students did not all perform at the same level. Some students understood the concept easily, while others stared at me blankly. And the math manipulatives I handed out quickly became building blocks and tempting projectiles.

The next week, I organized small groups and quickly found that I had more control over my students' behavior and could better reach both my struggling and gifted students.

Groups will not remain the same all year, or possibly even all month. Small groups are not fixed and will often change based on your observations and student performance. As students grow and learn, you may find that they will need to be more challenged or they need more support than you are giving the other students in their group. In this case, you need to adjust your grouping to meet children's needs.

Because moving students around fluidly can be confusing, try this:

1. Start with an open manila folder. Along the top, write the names of your groups (colors, animals, or whatever you decide to name your groups).
2. Using a pen and ruler, divide the manila folder into as many columns as groups you will have.
3. Write each student's name on a small sticky note.
4. Consider which students are most similar in skill level for a particular lesson or subject (you may have several folders for the different content areas) and place them in their respective groups.
5. As time goes on, move students around to other groups as needed.

To sum it up for small group lessons:

- Group students by ability.
- Adjust lessons and/or assessments to meet each group's needs.
- Provide hands-on learning and engaging lessons.
- Change groups based on students' needs.
- Use a visual representation of your groups, such as the manila folder mentioned above.

Workstation grouping

Using homogeneous grouping for small group instruction benefits the students and makes your job slightly easier. Knowing what the students in each small group need and teaching them on their level reduces the risk of boring a student with higher level abilities or overlooking a student who struggles.

But during workstation and centers time, when you are not directly involved in the students' learning, you can form heterogeneous groups—that is, groups of students with varying abilities. Depending on the task, you can call them cooperative learning groups. The heterogeneous grouping allows students

to interact with those they don't see in small groups and can increase understanding and learning.

Students support each other's learning. While more advanced students can serve as models for their peers and help them understand the learning objective, they are increasing their vocabulary by explaining the concept. These groups at workstations are formed "in order for children to examine specific questions," such as an experiment to see which objects float and which sink (Wasik 2008). With a specific focus, the workstation activity keeps students on task. Through their investigations and conversations, students learn from each other.

THE KEY IS TO **KNOW YOUR STUDENTS.**

In the dramatic play center, for example, you might pair a quiet student with a more talkative child to encourage the quiet one to engage with other children socially. Similarly, in the art or block center, you can group students who can support one another in different ways. More independent children might help those who need guidance. And those who need guidance might be more creative than the others and can engage their peers' imaginations through conversation.

The key is to know the children, decide what you want them to learn or do, and pair them with someone who will complement their personality and help them reach learning and developmental goals.

In my classroom, I opt for smaller groups at workstations (three maximum) to allow for more intimate conversation and learning. I also prefer smaller groups to decrease unwanted behaviors. As the number of students in a group grows, off-task behavior increases.

Workstation grouping in a nutshell:

- Keep groups small (two or three students).
- Group students with those they don't normally interact with during small group lessons.
- When grouping students, be mindful of their abilities. Try to mix and match students.
- Display groups for workstations clearly.

Workstation assignments

When trying to engage students in a self-directed activity, consider their needs, interests, and abilities. The workstation assignment or activity needs to be engaging, self-correcting, and meaningful. Be sure to provide clear, concise, and developmentally appropriate instructions for each activity. This will increase on-task behavior and make way for learning because students will not waste their time wondering what to do. When students are on task and know what to do, you can expect less disruption from students who might be otherwise confused.

In creative centers such as art or blocks, offer students a few choices of projects to work on. When they have some guidance, they are more likely to work or play rather than wondering what to do. More important, connect these activities with objectives being taught in class simultaneously. For example, if you are reading about farm animals in small group lessons, encourage students to build a farm out of blocks, provide moldable materials for them to make three-dimensional animals in the art center, or offer props that might be used at a farm in the dramatic play center.

With a focus, students will stay on task, make connections between content areas, and use creative outlets to demonstrate understanding of objectives.

If you have a teacher's aide or parent volunteer, get that person to work! Try to plan a small group lesson at a time when someone else can be in your classroom to help monitor the students. You may not need the aide all year long, but it will help to have another adult around until students get adjusted.

In my classroom, each station has a laminated instruction sheet with clear, concise directions (usually with illustrations). When possible, I provide a sample product by a fictitious student named Paco from a neighboring school who "enjoys coming to our classroom late at night to do all the work in our workstations." This story intrigues my students and motivates them to complete their work as Paco has done.

In the event a student finds the instructions confusing, I always encourage students to "ask three before me," so they will ask their peers for help instead of interrupting my precious small group time.

To wrap up:

- Provide interesting, meaningful assignments.
- Make tasks self-correcting.

- Connect activities and tasks with classroom objectives.
- Display clear, concise directions for the desired task or activity.
- Provide a sample assignment.
- Have students "Ask three before me."

Transitions

To ensure a smooth transition between workstations and to and from small groups, it is crucial to have a system for showing students where they are expected to be, whether at your small group lesson or at a workstation. In my classroom, I opt for a clearly visible pocket chart that displays stations and student names.

In your early childhood classroom, you can set up a pocket chart with the daily schedule across the top, and pockets under each time period. Place cards for small group lessons in appropriate pockets (bluebird group in the 9:30-10 a.m. slot, for example, redbird group in the 10-10:30 slot, and so on). Place cards or craft sticks (with students' photos glued onto the card or stick) in other pockets to indicate which students or cooperative learning groups go to the different centers.

Inform students how the system works at the outset, and allow time for practice. Taking the time to teach them how it works in the beginning will prevent problems later on. Ideally students will know where to go and what to do without coaching or reminders from you.

Make your expectations clear and communicate them to students. Set rules, reinforce them daily, and review and discuss them periodically (Buck 1999). For example, my students have one minute to stop their work, clean their station, and move to the next activity. A simple bell denotes the end of one workstation and the beginning of the next. Oftentimes students move quickly and in an orderly manner, trying to beat the bell. The smoother the transition between stations, the more time there is for instruction to take place.

Most important, don't forget to model a smooth transition, acknowledge students exhibiting the desired behavior, and make it quick and fun!

Ideas for transition activities include the following:

- Sing a simple song or chant (students must be at their next station before the song or chant is finished).

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- Use a timer.
 - Designate symbols for specific transitions.

Small groups: Start tomorrow

Teaching in small groups means reaching students at their level, interacting with them more personally, understanding their needs and meeting them, and engaging them more than you could in a whole group setting.

Using workstations or learning centers lets your students take responsibility for their learning in a controlled environment and teaches them independence. With these practical tips you can transform small groups and workstations from chaos to constructive.

References

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