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## The Most Effective Methods Of Small Group Reading Instruction In Upper Elementary Grades

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THE MOST EFFECTIVE METHODS OF SMALL GROUP READING  
INSTRUCTION IN UPPER ELEMENTARY GRADES

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Literacy Education.

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

(April 30, 2018)

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### **Introduction**

As a teacher, I can not count, or even guess, at the number of times after teaching a lesson that I have thought, or said out loud, “There are the haves and the have nots.” There are the students who just “get it” and the students who continue to struggle. Teaching a whole class lesson seems to be the most efficient considering the time demands on our schedules as teachers. In a whole class lesson every student hears the same thing. It seems as if everyone should be at the same level and learning the same skills and concepts, right? Apparently, this is not the case. What happens to the students who seem to get lost in the midst of a lesson? Do they get to think for themselves, or do they rely on the more apt students to cover for them? I have seen students just sit back waiting for someone else to answer a question. I see the sideways glances at other students’ work because they are not quite sure what to write or how to answer a question. They are passive recipients, but what are they receiving? Are they receiving the reinforcement that they do not quite measure up? Is there another way?

I believe there is another way, but have felt unsure of what that way is. For my capstone project I will be researching and examining the various ways to group students in small groups to provide the most effective instruction. I will be answering the question, what is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom? It is important to stop a moment and define what I mean when I use the word effective. Effectiveness to me, in the educational setting, means that I can see student learning and growth in a particular area based on decisions and interventions I

have used as a teacher. Basically, “Is what I’m doing working?” Student achievement is growing in measureable ways. This is the ultimate goal of teaching. There are several ways I have narrowed my topic to the effectiveness of grouping students for reading instruction, all stemming from my experience as a fifth grade teacher.

In this paper I will cover the rationale for choosing my capstone topic, beginning with my personal story, which includes the journey my district has been on the last few years. This particular journey has led me to many questions in regards to small group reading instruction as you will see laid out throughout my rationale. In addition to my own professional history, I will explore the complexity of the question I have about how to group students, share ideas for classroom management while students are not in teacher-led groups, as well as the amount of time needed to work with and assess students in order to regroup students according to best practices. I will conclude this chapter with the beliefs I currently bring with me in regards to grouping students for effective reading instruction and the areas of research I will explore through my capstone thesis. I will share my current thoughts on grouping students by both reading strategy and reading level, identifying advantages and disadvantages of each as I see them today.

**Rationale.** Two years ago, as a part of our district’s reading and language arts committee, we were tasked with the job of selecting a new reading curriculum. Our reading scores on our state standardized tests were not what, or where they should be. Our scores also got the attention of district administrators and put reading front and center as an area of needed improvement for our district. Many teachers use of our current curriculum was inconsistent and the curriculum was not aligned with the new common core standards. It was surmised that we needed a new curriculum; one that was



aligned with the standards and gave us a common language across the grade levels, beginning as early as preschool. By common language I mean that teachers district wide would be presenting information to students using the same vocabulary and instructional talk throughout all grade levels as a common textbook curriculum is used. One potential benefit of this is the ability to build upon what students learn from year to year. Thus began the research and piloting of two main curricular options. Those of us on the committee each chose a curriculum to pilot. While both curriculums offered teaching of the new reading and language arts standards, as a committee we selected the one that seemed to offer the most rigor. The thought was that this new reading curriculum was going to be the change we needed and would raise our reading test scores.

While we have seen an increase in the rigor and tasks associated with the new curriculum, and we do have a more unified language across the grade levels, several questions still seem to surface. One main question revolves around the need to incorporate small group reading instruction into our teaching. Administrators told us teachers that we needed to have guided reading groups implemented in some form during the 2015-2016 school year. This directive was followed up by purchasing copies of the book, *The Next Step in Guided Reading* (Richardson, 2009). While this book is certainly a valuable resource, there has been a lack of training in application of the ideas. We were also encouraged to attend a workshop put on by Jan Richardson herself. Like her book, this opportunity was worth giving up a Saturday to attend; however, the event left me with even more questions than before.

One of the questions that has heavily influenced the selection of my Capstone project idea, was stirred up by the Jan Richardson workshop. Richardson shared, and her

book reiterates, the benefit of grouping students based on reading strategies rather than reading level (Richardson, 2009). It is important to pause here and point out what is meant by reading strategies. An example of grouping by reading strategy would be identifying students who are struggling with finding main idea or understanding author's point of view, to list a couple, and then grouping those students with other students who are struggling with the same reading strategy. This idea was new to me, in that the reading curriculum that I piloted and helped select, provides leveled readers for guided reading groups. The leveled books are designed to be for groups of students at roughly the same measurable reading level, rather than for students either missing or needing guidance using a particular reading strategy. To me, these seem to be two significantly different modes for grouping students.

**Why group students?** What is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom? That is the question I want to answer; however, I believe we should first begin with asking the questions, "Why should we put students in small groups and what are the benefits and reasons for grouping students into smaller groups?" These questions bring me back to where I began. How are we as teachers meeting the needs of all of our students? Several of my current students come to mind as I think about that question. Not all of my students are actively engaged in a lesson when it is taught whole group. My whole class instruction is already interactive. Students are asked to read to self, read with a partner, turn and talk, and participate in class discussions; however, even with these pieces in place, I do not see the personal growth that every student should be making. I still see struggling students letting their partner contribute more, and I do not feel I am targeting the needs of my more

capable readers either. I cannot sit in on every partner discussion to help prompt and guide. I cannot readily see where I need to challenge students more while teaching the whole class. I have gotten a glimpse of how small groups could be used effectively, but feel I need some tools and support for how to group students in the most effective manner, as well as ways to structure activities for the students who are not in my teacher-led small group.

**What are the other students doing?** A teacher may have the most effective grouping of students and still struggle with effective instruction. One major factor to consider is what the students who are not in a teacher-led group are doing. Is this a time for independent reading? Should the time be filled with purposeful and directed activities? If so, what should those activities be? Will students be able to monitor their own behavior? If students work with partners or in groups, will they naturally be noisy? Due to the fact that small group instruction may also hinge on the behavior and tasks of the remaining students, exploring this issue will be an important part of my capstone as well.

**How much time should students be in teacher-led groups?** Establishing effective small group reading instruction may also depend on how often you meet with a particular group in a week. Currently, I only meet with each guided reading group once each week for twenty-five minutes. This is not enough time and another reason I am pursuing this topic as my capstone project. Most small group reading instruction involves modeling a strategy or skill, providing time to practice with support from the teacher as a group, or time to work with a partner, and also time to work on that strategy independently. These scaffolding stages cannot be completed in the time frame of one

small group meeting. My hope is to determine the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom, including the amount of time each group should receive for maximum benefit.

**Current beliefs.** I bring to my capstone project specific expectations and predictions about what I will learn by completing the research and exploring the grouping of students in small groups. I already believe that small group instruction can be an effective way to teach. With class sizes expanding in the upper elementary grades, there needs to be a way for teachers to differentiate their instruction and meet more individual student needs. Small group instruction can be one of those ways. Do I believe there is one perfect way to group students at all times? Right now I do not necessarily believe there is; however, I do believe that certain ways of grouping students may be more effective than others. I will be exploring the research behind grouping students according to reading strategy or by reading level.

Grouping students by strategy seems to make sense. Students would potentially be in groups with peers with varying reading levels, vocabulary acquisition skills, and cognitive abilities. This would provide more engaging discussions and dialogue for typically lower performing students, while still providing instruction in a strategy that each person in the group needs to practice. Groups would be dynamic, changing as needed, as students master strategies. This would allow students to work with a variety of peers and avoid the label or feeling of being in the “low” group. Potential problems of grouping students by strategy would mainly be in the process of identifying the strategies to best meet students’ needs. What assessment should be used? How often should the

teacher reassess students? These would be two important questions to be mindful of with this approach.

Not only are there advantages and disadvantages to grouping students by strategy deficit, there are likewise pros and cons to grouping students strictly by reading level. One major disadvantage is the label that seems to form when students are grouped by ability, even if groups change slightly through the year. Does grouping students this way feed into feeling inferior to classmates, or the other extreme, feeling smarter than others? Will this affect motivation? Not only could students feel labeled with a specific reading level, but also another possible drawback might be the lack of peer modeling. Leveled groups may lean more on teacher direction, whereas multileveled groups can often provide peer support. There seem to be some positive aspects of grouping students by reading level, however. One advantage to this kind of grouping is that it is easy to share a common text that is readable for all students within the group. Instruction can be targeted specifically at a reading level. Not only that, but many curriculums, like the one my district selected, provides leveled readers that make guided reading instruction easy to prepare. Clearly, I already have some assumptions about grouping students in multiple ways; however, I have chosen this particular Capstone topic to either confirm or reject my currently held ideas on grouping students.

**Summary.** As I begin my capstone project, I begin with many assumptions, but even more questions. These questions stem from the need for effective reading instruction in my district and my personal desire to meet the needs of all of my students. Differentiating instruction is important to me, and I want to do this in the most effective way. I will research effective ways to group students. In addition, I will consider what

students who are not in a teacher-led group should be doing, and I will determine the amount of time needed for each small group. It is my goal to provide the research to support effective instruction as well as provide specific examples of small group instruction used and the corresponding data to support my findings.

Chapter two of my capstone will inform the reader of what experts have to say about effective grouping of students for small group reading instruction. I will lay out the foundation of my research findings and present multiple experts on the topic, people who have a wealth of experience. These experts will speak to grouping students by both strategy need and according to reading level, offer independent work ideas, suggest how to use assessment for regrouping, and provide recommendations for the amount of time to spend in small group instruction. Using these components of a reading block, and the suggestions of experts in the field, I will be armed with what I need to fulfill the action research part of my Capstone thesis.

In chapter three I will explain the specifics of my capstone project, including the specific details of what I did and why. The setting in which I completed my project will be shared and the time frame in which it was completed. I will provide the rationale behind my choices, along with the methods for how the project was completed. Chapter four will share my results and the specific details of my research. Lastly, chapter five will provide the conclusions gathered from completing the capstone project and summarize my findings and where my research will lead me in the future.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### **Introduction**

As I completed my literature review, I found that experts have much to say about the effective grouping of students for small group reading instruction. In this chapter I clarified the foundation of my research findings and presented the voices of experts, many of whom agree on the key components of reading instruction. Using their beliefs and years of work with students, I answered the question, what is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom?

In my first section of this chapter I began by presenting the case for grouping students in small groups. Experts agree small groups are a powerful component of good reading instruction. I examined grouping students by both reading level and strategy need. The advantages and disadvantages of grouping students in these two ways were discussed from the lenses of various experts on the topic. In section two of this chapter I explored using assessment for regrouping, as well as presented recommendations of time needed with students in a small group setting to truly be effective. Experts vary in their approaches to assessment and the methods they use, and I shared different possibilities and the rationales from each. Section three of this chapter focuses on the recommendations for what students who are not meeting with a teacher could be doing and the challenges that come with independent work. There are many components to a reading block, and one crucial piece is management of the classroom. I offered the practical advice and suggestions I discovered while completing my research.

Chapter two will work as a bridge between my question that asks for the most effective ways to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary, to the development of my action research plan. Reeves (2008) shares that, while not all literacy experts agree, there is a consensus that certain instructional practices work to create both proficient readers and readers who read for the love of it. Among the list of proven literacy practices are included guided reading, independent reading, regular assessment, and extended time given to reading in the classroom. My plan is firmly grounded in research covering these topics.

### **Grouping Students**

Before getting into the specifics of how to group students, it is important to examine the reasons why small groups can be effective in the first place. One of the current grouping practices commonly employed by teachers, and supported by literacy experts such as Fountas and Pinnell (2012), and Richardson (2009), is guided reading. The basic understanding of guided reading is as simple as it sounds; it is reading instruction under the direct guidance and support of a teacher. This support is provided in a teacher-led group while other students in the class are working independently (Richardson, 2009). In exploring the purpose and intent behind guided reading, experts agree the goal is not to get rid of whole class instruction, but to offer a system and a place to tailor reading instruction to specific students who share a similar need. Richardson (2009) feels very strongly in the necessity and importance of guided reading. Richardson states:

Although whole-class instruction is one part of a balanced literacy program, it is not the best way to diversify instruction or scaffold students who need more



support. Guided reading is the small-group component that allows teachers an opportunity to assess students' strategic abilities and scaffold them so they can internalize reading strategies. (p. 19)

It makes sense that working with a small group focused on a specific strategy or skill would be an effective way to impact student reading. Any teacher can tell you, each student is uniquely and wonderfully different. These differences however, can pose challenges to reading instruction. These challenges then call for individualized instruction of which guided reading can play a large part. More of the specifics of guided reading are presented in my section on grouping students by reading level.

Regardless of how students are grouped, one thing seems clear and that is that small groups tailor instruction to specific students' needs, while providing active engagement, more on-task behaviors, and a greater sense of community in the classroom. One study of teacher and student behaviors during grade-level instructional grouping (Hollo & Hirn, 2015) found that elementary students did receive higher frequencies of small group instruction than high school students, but they also showed longer durations of passive engagement. The study concluded that teachers delivered significantly higher rates of individual and positive feedback to students during small-group instruction, and that as individual teacher-student interactions increased active engagement increased, passive engagement decreased. Not only that, but students struggling from attention disorders were more likely to be off-task in a whole class setting, while in a small group those same behaviors were significantly decreased. Miller (2014) also feels very strongly that students need to feel like they are a part of a community of readers. It is important that readers develop confidence through the relationships built in these communities. An

ideal reading workshop setting includes whole class, small group, and independent reading components, which allows time for sharing with others (Miller, 2014).

Many literacy scholars such as Routman (2012), Fountas (2012), Pinnell (2012), Douglas and Lynn Fuchs (2008), Richardson (2009), and Pressley (2007) agree that best practices in the area of literacy instruction include a small group component such as guided reading. They believe there needs to be a balance of whole-group and small group instruction in every classroom.

Not surprisingly, having almost all whole-group or almost all small-group instruction has not been found to be beneficial to students' overall reading growth. Too much whole-group instruction typically leads to high levels of passive student responding. Too much small-group instruction leads to large amounts of independent or partner "seatwork" time for students (D. Fuch et al. 2008, p. 19).

Fountas and Pinnell (2012) agree that guided reading provides the format for differentiated instruction. Routman (2012) points out that it is important to remember the gifted students as well. This is possible through differentiated small groups.

While every student deserves guided reading designed with his or her needs in mind, including gifted readers; it is our struggling readers for which guided reading is crucial. In a chapter discussing supplemental support for struggling readers, Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley (2007) say this about those readers:

Most of these children simply need closer and more explicit teaching than can be accomplished by a teacher with the responsibility for a classroom filled with 25

children. These children need, for instance, more guided reading opportunities and more high-success independent reading (p. 86).

The experts in literacy instruction agree that guided reading is vital to impacting student reading, especially for struggling readers.

Three more voices on the topic of small group reading instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012 & Serravallo, 2010) agree on the value of small group instruction. They support the idea that students need to be taught from where their skills are individually and that the discussions that happen when conferring in small groups are powerful for learning. They agree that routines should be predictable and move students toward independence. Students are able to receive common content in a small group, but with specific teacher, and even at times, peer modeling. The approach taken by these reading experts does vary, and at first glance may even seem contradictory; however, multiple points of common ground can be found. The ideas and thoughts of these literacy leaders are revisited in upcoming sections discussing the ways to group students.

### **Guided Reading - Grouping By Level**

In order for the true potential of guided reading to be seen, it is necessary to look at what guided reading is. “The goal of guided reading is not just to read “this book” or even to understand a single text. The goal of guided reading is to help students build their reading power – to build a network of strategic actions for processing texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, p. 272). Building these strategies and skills, as research claims, is possible through guided reading groups led by a teacher giving explicit instruction. Guided reading groups consist of small groups of students with a similar need and reading level. These groups are intended to change as new skills are assessed and changing needs are

determined. Guided reading sessions with a teacher typically follow a similar pattern which include a teacher selecting a text, students reading the text independently, but with prompting and support from the teacher. Explicit teaching points and discussion led by the teacher as a whole group follows, and then concludes with some word work or extension activities done by the student. Once an appropriate text is selected, guided reading begins with providing background to the text, which introduces the text in a way to provide support, but also leaves some challenge for students to encounter while a teacher is there to assist as needed (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). The bulk of the guided reading lesson is spent with students reading the text. Students read the text independently while the teacher moves from student to student to teach and reinforce strategies. “During reading teachers prompt students to use a flexible range of strategies that combine sources of information – meaning, language structure, and visual or letter-sound information. They prompt readers to monitor their reading and correct miscues” (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001, p. 122-123). While reading the text is a major part of a guided reading lesson, the discussion that happens after reading, is significant to student reading growth. “Teachers see more reading growth in their students when they ask challenging questions more often, questions such as those that get students to pause and think about before answering...” (D. Fuchs, L. Fuchs, and Vaughn, 2008, p. 13). The guided reading structure provides a place for a teacher to ask challenging questions and allow the space for students to think and share with others.

The definition, structure and purpose behind guided reading was presented and it is clear that many experts agree that guided reading has many positive effects and can be a valuable part of a literacy classroom. It is important to look at another side of guided

reading, and more specifically grouping students in common reading levels, as what is typical in a guided reading group. One negative effect of grouping students according to reading level is the effect on a student's morale, or self-esteem as a reader. Worthy (2009) lays out some remarkable findings in regards to grouping students at the sixth grade level into either a regular or honors class. One of the most striking finds of the study was the expectation that teachers came with to the various groups. It was concluded that teachers' expectations of the students earmarked for the regular class were much lower than for the honors group. This may seem like common sense, but when four specific teachers approached their regular classes with a positive approach, expecting students to work, favorable outcomes occurred. Worthy (2009) refers to work by Allington (1983) and Eder (1981) when it is found that studies of elementary reading groups determined the teachers differentiated their instruction for their low groups focused on decoding and other basic skills, rather than on reading for comprehension. While there is a need at times for decoding and basic skills to be taught, even in the upper elementary, struggling readers benefit when teachers expect more from them. It seemed that at times teachers expectations for students designated for lower ability grouping played a part in a student's motivation to do well. In the study of sixth grade students (Worthy, 2009) it revealed that according to teachers, students came to be defined by the group in which they were placed. Many of the negative characteristics of students in the regular classes became firmly established in the minds of both the teachers and the students themselves.

Richardson (2009) makes a very strong case for guided reading and has proven it to be very successful. Richardson suggests grouping students that are only one to two

alphabetic levels apart (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008), feeling it is very difficult to meet individual needs of students if their reading levels are too wide spread. Alphabetic levels, as used by Fountas and Pinnell, is a systematic individual assessment of students to assign a specific reading level to students using a letter of the alphabet. They have leveled texts that are used to determine a student's level. Richardson does go on to say that it is all right, and often common, to have students with different strengths in the same group. There are certainly some advantages to having students of similar reading levels in the same group. One advantage would be a shared text. Students could all be reading from the same text. This would create easy opportunities to discuss and make connections as a group regarding the chosen text. Students could also be partnered for shared reading, discussion, and responding. In addition, the teacher can target specific vocabulary within the given text, increasing the text's accessibility to students. Grouping students by level would also be easier to determine through assessment, as there are many tools for identifying reading levels like the Qualitative Reading Inventory (Leslie & Caldwell, 2005) or as Richardson (2009) points out, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment system, A-Z (2008). Assessments like this are covered in the section on assessment.

While many literacy leaders support guided reading instruction and grouping students by designated level, there are some who take a slightly different approach. In the book, "Teaching Reading in Small Groups," Serravallo (2010) shares the personal story of a journey from teaching guided reading to teaching reading by strategy. Serravallo found that by jumping "all in" to guided reading, there were limits to teaching to a particular text. Serravallo recognized that the targeted instruction was benefiting students,

but it was not transferrable. Students were not transferring the strategies they were be taught in a guided reading group or in their classroom in general, to their other reading, self-selected or otherwise (Miller, 2014). Students would only use the skill or strategy when working with their teacher, and not on their own or in a variety of settings. This was a disturbing finding for both Serravallo (2010) and Miller (2014) and led to their pursuits of other ways to teach reading, while still holding on to the value of small groups and the power of one on one and small group conferring. In an article about supplementing reading intervention for at-risk fourth grade students (Ritchey, Silverman, Montanaro, Speece, & Schatschneider, 2012) the authors point out:

In sum, designing an intervention for students in upper elementary grades is complex. It must include strategies for reading multisyllabic words, vocabulary instruction in context, and reading fluency practice. These can be combined with instruction on specific strategies for comprehending expository texts, while including components in the intervention to attend to the motivational needs of students who may have experienced repeated reading failure. (Pg. 320)

These authors speak to the need to consider how students feel when they continue to struggle with reading on into the upper elementary grades. Many still need help with some basic skills, but need these skills to be taught in conjunction with specific reading strategies that increase comprehension as well. When skills are taught with comprehension skills, students in the upper grades did find some success in the above-mentioned study. What the researchers found was that students receiving the intervention were able to apply their comprehension knowledge to a text not used during the intervention. The study did not conclude, however, that students showed the same level

of transfer for fluency or word level skills. While this study was targeting at-risk students, it is important to point out the importance of teaching reading strategies to all students in the upper elementary.

### **Grouping Students By Reading Strategy**

The main theme discovered from some in the literacy field, such as Serravallo (2010), Miller (2014), and Harvey & Goudvis (2007) is that teaching reading strategies is important. Richardson (2009), as indicated in the first chapter, also focuses on teaching reading strategies and trumpets them as a crucial part to literacy growth, but as shared in the first section of chapter three, Richardson does this in a way specific to a guided reading structure around a common, shared text with students grouped by reading level. In this section a different structure is presented to complement the process of teaching reading strategies. In the book, “The Reading Strategies Book,” Serravallo (2010) provides 300 different reading strategies that can be taught, breaking them down into thirteen overarching goals. Harvey & Goudvis (2007) take six chapters, each with one main strategy focus, to provide 56 different lessons to teach the various reading strategies they feel are most important for good readers to use. So what is a reading strategy? Serravallo (2010) states that, “Strategies are deliberate, effortful, intentional and purposeful actions a reader takes to accomplish a specific task or skill” (p. 11-12). Serravallo further refers to strategies like a recipe which provides step by step instructions. The teacher provides the steps until students are able to use them on their own. Once a skill is identified, such as determining key details in nonfiction, a teacher then selects from a variety of possible reading strategies that support the use of that particular skill.



Like teaching to reading levels, teaching according to reading strategy has structure to it as well. Serravallo (2010) lays out a four-part structure for leading a strategy session with a small group of readers. To begin the lesson, she starts by stating why the group has gathered. The name for this step is “connect and complement” (p. 99). Once the students know why they are there, the next step is to teach, which involves a brief demonstration by you as the teacher sharing the how of the strategy with an example or explanation. This is the time to model the specific strategy you want the students to learn to use. The bulk of the lesson then involves students practicing the strategy with their own self-selected reading books. This is one significant difference between guided reading and strategy lessons; often in a strategy lesson students will be reading different books that they have chosen themselves. There are times when a teacher may provide a common text for the group, or on an individual basis, if the book a student is reading will not provide the student the opportunity to practice the particular strategy that is being practiced that day. It is during this time of engagement in the independent practice that the teacher moves from student to student providing individual support and prompting.

Serravallo’s (2010) goal is to confer with each student at least two times during a small group session. This is an opportunity for individual conferring many experts find invaluable (Fountas and Pinnell, 2012; Miller, 2014; Richardson, 2009; Serravallo, 2010). This individual conferring and identifying what each student needs the most may prove to be the biggest challenge for a teacher. Teacher skill and knowledge could make this either more or less effective. The final component of the strategy lesson is providing a link by inviting students to continue their independent practice in multiple contexts as

they read. A link can be as simple as the strategy written on an index card that the students take with them or a directive to write down their thinking on a sticky note as they go back to their seat and continue using the strategy (Serravallo, 2010). The strategy lessons take place within the context of a reading workshop environment.

A reading workshop structure provides time for whole group mini lessons, individual and group conferring as happens within a strategy lesson small group, and independent reading practice as well. In section four the independent work students engage in is shared. It is important to note that, while teaching with a particular strategy in mind, and offering students choice in the texts they select, differs slightly from the guided reading format described earlier, the question of varied reading levels has not been fully discussed.

As mentioned previously, guided reading groups often include students within a close range of reading levels and tend to be truly grouped by reading level rather than a particular reading strategy focus. While strategy grouping advocates would propose looking at strategy focus first, they seem to agree that students at similar reading levels will often need the same kind of explicit teaching of certain reading strategies. Serravallo (2010) states,

The beauty of using this kind of small group as an alternative to guided reading is that we give students support with the next level while still allowing choice of book, and the support that is given is strategic in nature, not based on the specific vocabulary or plot of a specific book. Giving strategic support will likely help the child transfer this learning from book to book, because strategies generalize to other texts (p. 189).

One example explained is the act of moving one group of students to a level L from level K (Fountas and Pinnell, 2008), showing that often groups are designed by strategy, but often include students at a similar reading level.

Clearly, the literacy experts in the field today agree on many components and benefits of small group reading instruction. While the abilities of students within a classroom vary greatly, it seems that the traditional “high” and “low” groups of the past were set and left there are not encouraged. One common theme among the experts is that groups should be dynamic, changing as the needs of children change. “Teachers need to become experts in forming and reforming groups to allow for the differences in learning that are evident in students. Some students may not develop the same reading behaviors in the same order and at the same pace as others” (Fountas and Pinnell, 2013). What teachers observe during their instruction and students’ practice directly determines future instruction and how small groups are structured or restructured (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Richardson (2009) recommends reevaluating guided reading groups at least once a month. Serravallo (2010) illustrates the idea of flexible and ever-changing groups well by saying:

Remember that just because you begin with four students in a group, and plan to see that group for a few meetings, doesn’t mean that all four students will be in all of the meetings. As children demonstrate proficiency with the new learning, they can be phased out of a group. Also, if you notice a student could benefit from a group, you can add a student by keeping your groups flexible (p 219).

Keeping groups dynamic and flexible as discussed is important, not only for the morale of a child, but also to provide each student the instruction that they need when they need

it. This idea then leads to the question, how do we determine what a child needs and what group to put them in? The key is ongoing assessment. This topic of assessment is explored in the next section.

### **Assessment**

There is a strong need for ongoing assessment. The experts clearly agree that flexible grouping is best for students. The only way to know what skills students lack is to assess their current needs. There are many ways to assess students and several different aspects of the act of reading to assess. In upper elementary classrooms, most may assume that students are already fluent readers, meaning they can read or pronounce most words they find in texts. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Students advance through various stages as they learn to read. A student beginning to read would be considered a Pre-A, emerging, or an emergent reader, then moving on to the next stages are early reader, transitional reader, and finally a fluent reader (Richardson, 2009). Students in the upper elementary grades could fall into any of these categories, but most will be in the transitional or fluent reader stage. Within those stages, students have varying degrees of skills and use a variety of reading strategies to comprehend text.

Due to the varying degrees of each student's needs, a teacher's initial and ongoing task is figuring out each student's independent and instructional reading level. A student's independent reading level is the reading level in which they can comprehend a text on their own. They may encounter a few words they do not know, but they have the skills to determine meaning and comprehend the text (Leslie & Caldwell, 2005). A student's instructional level is a level that the student can comprehend with some support given by the teacher.

These assessments are administered one on one and help a teacher evaluate both fluency and comprehension. There are texts offered in both fiction and nonfiction texts and cover all stages of reading, even up to the high school level. Richardson (2009) also recommends the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System A-Z (2008) to determine student instructional levels. A negative to this type of assessment is the time in which it takes to administer it. One alternative is to assess one child per day (Hebert, 2004). Herbert suggests using a reading inventory approach, but also using running records every day.

Running records were introduced back in the 1970's by Dr. Marie Clay and involve listening to one student read a passage while the teacher makes simple notations about student miscues (Hubert, 2004). There seems to be a misconception Hubert says that running record data is valid for months at a time; however, she believes children's skills change extremely rapidly and may only be valid for one month. Assessing one child a day would ensure that you get to each child at least every four to six weeks. The types of assessment mentioned so far fall into the diagnostic category of assessments. They help provide a baseline understanding of a reader.

Diagnostic assessments are not the only tool available to teachers. Teachers implementing flexible groups often rely more often on formative assessments. These assessments are given on the go and are the ones relied on to change groups as students' growth changes (Serravallo, 2010). Types of formative assessment may include exit tickets, technology based questions and quizzes and questions during instruction, as well as a teacher's notes of observation (Abrams, Jackson, & Varier, 2016). Formative assessments tend to be informal in nature. They could include checklists, rubrics, and

listening to a conversation about books to determine comprehension skills being used (Serravallo, 2010).

In the age of high-stakes state assessments, it is important to note that these state tests along with other benchmarking marking tests do play a role in reading instruction. These tests most often find their role in grade level meetings where teachers meet to make recommendations to change a student's current programming or intervention and to determine how well a particular curriculum seems to meeting the state standards (Abrams, Jackson, & Varier, 2016). Serravallo (2010) sums up assessment needs best when she states:

It is important to have a repertoire of ways to assess reading. Standardized tests are not enough. A running record is not enough. A questionnaire about reading interests is not enough. It is through multiple assessment measures - formal and informal; quantitative and qualitative; diagnostic, formative, and summative - that we can begin to understand the complexity of a reader's process and offer appropriate instruction to meet the reader's needs (p. 19).

**Time allotment.** As noted, experts in the literacy field today seem to agree that assessment should be ongoing to allow for flexible grouping. In looking at assessment, one more factor needs to be considered. How many minutes should students be in a small group and how often should a group meet? Small group length seems to last anywhere from seven minutes (Serravallo, 2010) to fifteen minutes (Miller, 2014) to twenty minutes or more (Richardson, 2009). One thing is clear from all of these experts is that the structure of the group meeting is important, but the time frame may be flexible depending on what is most needed. Some groups will last longer than others; however,

groups are based on student need. Some teachers meet with each student daily in a small group, but that is not always feasible due to time constraints. Most will meet with a child individually at least once a week, but most often meet with children in small groups multiple times a week. “Keep in mind that what seems equitable isn’t always what’s fair to students. Some children will need more support than others at certain times of year or with certain types of new learning. It is important to keep in mind, however, that ample time to practice independently is an important component of making this work” (Serravallo, 2010).

### **Independent Work**

So far two different ways to group students have been covered, the assessment tools needed to implement these groups and time suggestions for these groups were shared, which now leaves the need to answer an important question. What are students who are not meeting with a teacher doing? This is a significant detail to consider and could determine the effectiveness of small group instruction. There are a number of suggestions literacy experts who engage in a reading workshop format in their classrooms recommend. What they all agree on is that students need to be taught to work independently. Richardson (2009) uses the first six weeks of school to gradually release students for independent work in varying lengths, with gradual release of support. “Children need to be taught how to be independent” (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 712). In their article on using centers to engage children during guided reading time Ford and Opitz (2002) stress the importance of the instruction away from the teacher being as powerful as the instruction with the teacher. They offer several ways to use centers. One of these ways involves students rotating through centers for a set amount of time and one

of the centers being a small group with a teacher. Another way of instituting centers would be by student choice where students stay until they have finished an activity and then move on to another, or choose to stay at one activity the whole time. Regardless of what students are doing when not in a group with a teacher expectations need to be clearly established.

Many literacy experts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Miller, 2014; Richardson, 2009; Serravallo, 2010) stress the importance of students using their time away from the teacher for reading and responding to reading, not completing worksheets. It is not a time for busy work that students, or many teachers for that matter, do not value. Activities should be engaging and students should be reading in authentic ways. Richardson (2009) suggests buddy reading, word study stations, vocabulary work, written responses, reader's theater, and research related to other content areas. Serravallo (2010) keeps it more simple in that students, when they are not meeting with the teacher, are working on the specific strategy they are focused on at that day. They have book bags or bins with self-selected books to read. They are then responsible for reading in their books, possibly recording their thinking as they read, while the teacher is meeting with other students.

Technology can also play a part in the independent activities of students. Students in the upper grades could potentially be working on a project on an iPad or computer. It could be in response to their reading in other content areas. One study suggests renovating literacy centers for middle grades to increase motivation (Hodges & McTigue, 2014). They suggest activities from gallery walks that can be created with paper posters to activities that could be interactive using apps like Popplet or interactive whiteboards or other iPad apps. The main focus needs to be on reading and writing with a purpose.



Even with well-designed centers and engaging authentic activities, students still need training on how to use independent time. Some students naturally have more stamina for focusing on a specific task independently for a continuous period of time. Other students struggle with self-motivation and staying on task. One article speaks to the need to plan ahead for potential negative behaviors when students are working away from a teacher. Authors Chow and Gilmour (2016) suggest implementing group contingencies in the classroom to combat this issue. They define group contingencies as, “A peer-oriented program that focuses on preventing problem behavior by reinforcing appropriate behavior” (p. 137). These contingencies involve establishing expectations, directly teaching those expectations, and then reinforcing them. There seems to be a significant benefit for schools who operate with a model where special education students remain in the classroom and special education teachers or other support staff may come into the room to assist. The basic idea behind group contingencies is to explicitly teach students what is expected during each part of their classroom schedule. Once students have learned and practiced these behaviors, then groups can earn points in a variety of ways, working toward a preselected reward. Some teachers may award points when every student in the group exhibits the desired behaviors. Other teachers may award points to students individually as those students follow the predetermined expectations. In some cases, teachers may only reward points when certain students, those who typically struggle, choose to follow the expectations. These awarded points can then earn the group or class a certain reward that was determined ahead of time. Teachers also have the option to decide if a particular group can self-monitor and award points to themselves after a brief time of reflection. The issue of awarding points and rewards for maintaining

appropriate classroom behaviors could certainly be up for debate. Research was limited to support the offering of rewards, however experts do agree in explicitly teaching and modeling desired behavior before expecting students to exhibit those behaviors (Ford & Opitz, 2002; Miller, 2014; Richardson, 2009; Serravallo, 2010).

One other element to consider is the placement of where a teacher's small groups will be conducted. Positioning your group can be strategic. It is suggested to position a small group area, whether at a table or on the floor, in a place where you can see the room. If conflicts or distractions arise it is important to reflect on why interruptions are occurring in the first place (Serravallo, 2010). It is through this reflection you can often find a way to prevent those same distractions or conflicts from happening again. Just because issues arise during independent time, that does not mean a teacher should not conduct small groups. It simply means a teacher must determine what is causing the problem and then work to solve it.

### **Summary**

In conducting the literature review exploring the effective ways of grouping students for small group reading instruction in the upper elementary, there was a plethora of applicable articles and books written on the topic. There were clearly more similarities in thought and practice than differences, even though approaches come from differing perspectives. The experts consulted have spent years putting their research-based practices into effect and fine-tuning what has worked for their students. Chapter two began with the reason why teaching students in small groups is so important. It is worth noting that not only do small groups allow for individualized instruction, but they allow students to become more engaged in the reading process, gaining valuable motivation to

read, learn, and discuss with others. It is clear that class sizes are typically not shrinking. Many teachers are responsible for over twenty-five students at a time. As educators we know all of our students have varying levels of ability and motivation. We often have the same four or five students who actively, even passionately, raise their hand to answer every question we ask as teachers. They are listening and actively engaged in their learning. We also know that many of our students sit during whole class instruction only passively engaged at best. These are powerful reasons for to continue the pursuit of the effective ways to group students for small group reading instruction.

Not only were the reasons laid out for small group instruction, but we looked at two different ways of grouping students. One way was through grouping students for guided reading according to a student's reading level and another way was to group students by a reading strategy a group of students needs to work on. The purpose and structure of both ways of grouping were laid out, highlighting some advantages and disadvantages of each. The key component of both ways of grouping was to form flexible groups that changed often, targeting specific needs of specific students. It was also clear that students need ample time to practice applying strategies and skills learned in a small group setting. As noted in section three, assessment is also a significant piece of small group reading instruction. Through ongoing assessment it is possible to keep groups dynamic and flexible, recognizing what areas students need more support in and how to plan for their independent practice. Time suggestions were also offered to give a guide to how often and how long to meet with each group or individual student.

The final consideration in this chapter was that of how to continue student learning and practice away from the teacher and a small group. Ideas and suggestions

were given for possible centers and individual work. The potential challenges with independent work were also considered with a couple of suggestions to ward off any negative effects of a workshop environment. Research showed that the keys are preparation, planning, and explicit instruction in what is expected for students.

There is strong evidence that there are many benefits of small group reading instruction. I will pursue the areas covered by this literature review through action research. In chapter three, you will read the way in which I will be exploring my research question. I will describe the setting where I will conduct my research, the methods I will use to complete my research, and the various data I will collect, along with the projected time frame of my action research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I lay out the methods I used in conducting my action research. Action research means that I worked to answer a specific question by experimenting with various methods using participants from my own classroom. I pursued an answer the question, what is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom? The first part of this chapter explains the research paradigm I chose by providing a definition of the research method, as well as the rationale behind choosing this approach. Not only do I share the specifics of this method, but I also explain how I used this approach to research my particular question.

Following my research approach, I describe the setting where my research took place. I describe the participants and why they were chosen. I give the ways in which the identities of those participating were kept confidential and how I satisfied the Human Subjects Review Board's Policies in regards to participants and ethical considerations.

The third part of this chapter begins with an explanation of how students were prepared to participate in small groups. After that, I focus on the format of groups and the structure of the curriculum cycle, explaining in detail what types of instruction happened on particular days. In addition to the daily structure, this section covers what students who were not in a teacher-led group were doing and why they were doing it. My research spanned across five months and included both required district curriculum components and some targeted lessons that were included based on student need. All of these elements need to be explained in detail to present the scope of my research and the

rationale for changes made to my original plan. In this section I also lay out the time frame of the research I conducted.

In the fourth section of this chapter I explain the two specific ways students were grouped for small group instruction. In addition, I describe the curriculum, assessment tools, and data that I collected as I conducted my research. I conclude with what to expect in chapter four.

### **Research Paradigm**

**Mixed methods research.** I used a mixed methods research approach to answer the question, what is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom? It is important to first understand what the main methods of research are to fully present the reason I chose mixed methods research which involves a blending of the two main research methods. The two main methods are quantitative research and qualitative research. “Quantitative research is the collection and analysis of numerical data to describe, explain, predict, or control phenomena of interest” (Mills, 2012, p. 6). This approach tends to have little interaction with participants, a larger sample size of participants, and results may be able to be generalized over a larger population (Mills, 2012). Researchers approaching a study quantitatively generally have a fixed assumption as they enter their research (Creswell, 2014). While quantitative research does not at first glance fit with the main components of my action research plan, I collected specific numerical data on students as I assessed students’ reading levels. Due to this data collection, I used quantitative data that contributed to my mixed methods research (Creswell, 2014).

On the other hand, “Qualitative research uses narrative, descriptive approaches to data collection to understand the way things are and what the research means from the perspectives of the participants in the study” (Mills, 2012, p.6). This research method relies on a researcher’s notes, interviews, and other observational information. With a qualitative approach there is the ability for the researcher to make changes based on results. This does not mean that a researcher can change data gathered to fit the research to a previously desired outcome. Rather it means that as the researcher encounters data and makes observations, the researcher is allowed to make changes to best meet the needs of a student or change the process to better fulfill the goal of answering the guiding question of the thesis.

As I stated, I used a mixed methods approach, which is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative elements. I relied on some specific test data as students took assessments and receive quantitative scores, but I considered heavily my own notes and personal observations of student growth during my interactions with students during small group sessions. Students also completed a survey so I could find out individual student perspectives of the different reading small groups. See Appendix C1 for the survey questions and Appendix G1 for survey results. This survey fit under the umbrella of qualitative data (Mills, 2014). The use of both quantitative and qualitative components as I described, make my research follow the mixed methods research approach.

**Setting.** The elementary school that I conducted my research in is where I currently teach. It is located in a small, but growing farming community in central Minnesota. The town’s population is just over 2,500. Many families have lived in the area most, if not all, of their lives. Currently there are 510 students enrolled in early

childhood through fifth grade and one principal on staff. The student body is not very diverse, with over 94% of students being white, with the next largest percentage being Hispanic at 4%. Native American, black and Asian students comprise the rest of the student population, all less than 1% each. Only 7.35% of the population lives in poverty, based on free and reduced lunch enrollment. In 2016 just over 74% of students were proficient on the reading MCA tests. We have one ELL teacher that is shared among other buildings. We also have Title 1 reading teachers, however one small group reading intervention teaching position was just eliminated due to budget cuts. Our Title 1 teachers do not currently work with fifth grade.

**Participants.** The participants in my study were one of convenience (Creswell, 2014). I, along with a co-teacher, taught three different fifth grade sections of reading in the afternoon. Each section of students had 27 students in it. I conducted my research with these three varied fifth grade classes. Each group had a different main classroom teacher for other core subjects. One of the groups was my homeroom class.

My fifth grade homeroom class to which I taught math, language, and reading to was comprised of 28 students, 12 girls and 16 boys. One of my students had Downs Syndrome and was not in my classroom for reading instruction. Two more of my students were on Individual Education Plans (IEP's) for learning disabilities. An IEP is written for students qualifying for special education services. One student had an IEP due to an emotional behavior disorder, and one additional student in my classroom had a 504 plan for a learning disability related to reading and writing. A 504 plan is a legal plan to provide some accommodations for a student, who needs some help in a certain area, but does not qualify or need special education services. This homeroom class, which I just



described, was one of three classes that a co-teacher and I taught reading instruction to in the afternoons. The other two sections of fifth grade comprised the remaining two sections we taught reading to, and who participated in my research. One of these other fifth grade classes consisted of 28 students, 12 girls and 16 boys, and four students on IEP's for learning disabilities. This class as a whole struggled with motivation for learning and the ability to complete work assigned. The third class contained 27 students, 13 girls and 14 boys. Three of the students in this classroom were on IEP's for learning disabilities. This third group certainly had some students who struggled, and some significantly, but overall the class consisted of at grade level students. There were not any ELL (English Language Learners) students in any of the classes. In all, I taught reading to 82 fifth grade students. These students, with parental approval, participated in the research for my thesis, in which I sought to find the best way to group students for small group reading instruction in the upper elementary. Each reading block met for forty-five minutes daily. I structured each reading block in the same format. See Appendix A1 for an overview of a typical reading block schedule.

**Ethical considerations.** I used my own students for my action research, and I was obligated to protect the rights of each student in my classroom. A fundamental rule that guided my action research is one presented by Mills (2014) when he states, "Perhaps the fundamental ethical rule is that participants should not be harmed in any way, real or possible, in the name of science" (p. 31). One advantage for me is that my research is directly tied to discovering what is best for each student, tailoring and restructuring groups based on need. My research had my students' best interest at the heart of it. While I knew the names of each student participating, I do not share or report their identities in

any part of my research. I followed my school district's guidelines for requesting permission from all participants in regards to my specific plan (See Appendix L1 for the Permission Letter). Not only did I follow my district's rules for conducting research, I received approval from Hamline's Institutional Review Board as well.

### **Methods Plan**

**Preparation.** Before grouping students for the first time in any kind of small group, I needed to explicitly teach and model my expectations for a reading workshop setting. These expectations were taught gradually over the first five to six weeks of school, slowly releasing students to more and more independent tasks. At the beginning of the school year students often need to build stamina for reading and working independently. The early weeks of a new school year were spent establishing classroom routines, but also teaching lessons on making good selections for independent reading. The goal was to teach students transferable skills, and being able to self-select appropriate books was a number one priority for students (Miller, 2014). Students are successful at selecting an appropriate book if they can choose one that they can read independently and understand, as well as chose a book that interests them. Students also needed to know what their options were if they ran into a problem they could not solve on their own during independent work time. We discussed what students were to do if they got sick. Options were given to students if they forgot a classroom supply they needed. Many potential problems were avoided by clearly stating expectations. It was easy to want to jump right into small group instruction, but the groundwork laid at the beginning of the year is one of the main contributing factors to the success of any small group experience.

As teachers we work hard to convey, from the very first day of school, the important message that we will do high-quality work in our classrooms. We also work to convey the message that we will do this high-quality work in an atmosphere of support and collaboration. But this atmosphere does not just appear by our decree. It must be carefully constructed upon many small, but critical, building blocks, and the first six weeks of school is the time to do it (Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc., 2007).

Not only are expectations key, but also these early weeks were an important time for me to gather some initial data on my students. Students took a FAST (Formative Reading Assessment for Teachers) reading test (Weiss, 2005) as one quantitative measure of reading level. I also conducted a running record (Dynamic Measurement Group, 2007) and fluency assessment (NAEP, 2002) with each student to determine fluency score and ability to retell a grade level text. Once routines were in place and initial assessments were given, I explored the effectiveness of two specific ways to group students. Both ways, grouping students by reading level and by reading strategies, were explained in detail in my literature review in chapter two. I focused on each grouping method one at a time.

My research began September 18, 2017 and continued until February 28, 2018. The research took place within my classroom as the fifth grade students participating came to my classroom for instruction. These classes met for a total of 88 days during the time of my research. From November 7, 2017 to December 7, 2017 students were reading a shared novel and I was not actively grouping students for research at this time;

however, I can draw some conclusions about student participation and engagement during the novel study compared to lessons from our district's reading curriculum.

Once classroom routines were established and I had gotten to know my students a little better, I began gathering data. During the days of September 18, 2017 through September 22, 2017 the co-teacher and I began assessing students using running records and a retell rubric. See Appendix D1 for the text used for running records and Appendix D2 for the Retell Rubric. A running record is a tool that helps teachers to identify patterns in student reading behaviors. It measures fluency based on words read per minute, but also measure the ability of a student to recall and retell a particular passage, thus checking for comprehension. Once students reach fifth grade, fluency is less of an issue than comprehension, so more of an emphasis is given to a student's ability to retell the main details of a text in a logical way. The goal of completing a running record and scoring students participating in my research on both fluency and the ability to retell a passage was to help identify possible groupings of students. The passage used for this assessment was a fifth grade level text and so it was also helpful in identifying students who could or could not comprehend text at grade level. See Appendix D2 for the retell rubric. While each of these student assessed were very unique, there were commonalities that could be found among them. In the next section I will share how the groups were formatted.

**Format of groupings.** During the weeks of September 18, 2017 and November 2, 2017 our reading lessons were taught using our district selected reading curriculum, Reading Wonders (McGraw Hill, 2014). Each unit was separated into five weeks worth of lessons, typically taught over the course of five days. In past years, it had been difficult

to cover this amount of curriculum in that short of a time period. Before the school year began, I outlined a scope and sequence using the Reading Wonders curriculum (McGraw Hill, 2014) and matched specific lessons up to specific Minnesota State Standards for Reading Language arts (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010), taking note of standards that were taught multiple times throughout the six units of curriculum. From this list, I then selected specific units and weeks to be taught throughout the year to guarantee all standards would be covered in the upcoming year. This allowed me to eliminate certain weeks within units, as well as combine elements from others, to plot out a slower pace, but one that would provide more depth and chance of student mastery of reading strategies and skills.

This slower pace allowed for a six-day cycle to begin the year, which then became a seven-day cycle as the year continued. We found that a six day cycle still felt too rushed to give student ample time to practice their reading skills. A typical six to seven day cycle followed a very structured pattern and allowed for multiple opportunities to group students in various ways. For the sake of clarity, from this point on I will refer to what Reading Wonders (McGraw Hill, 2014) would call a week of lessons, as a chapter, since the material covered lasted longer than a typical five day school week.

Day one of a particular chapter always began with a whole class lesson ranging from 15-20 minutes. This lesson was an introduction to the essential question for the chapter, around which all texts read during the chapter would revolve. A typical introduction lesson would include a discussion starter with an intriguing picture, followed by a short video, and then conclude with a short teacher read aloud to model the particular reading skill the lessons would focus on. I always taught this lesson.

Following the introduction lesson, roughly half of the students would meet in a small group (one group with me and one group with my co-teacher Mrs. B.) while the rest of the students read independently in books of their own choosing. I must stop at this point and acknowledge the fact that a portion of my research plan was to determine the best use of time for students not meeting in a small group. According to information I read during my literature review, as well as personal experience, the best activity students can do in a reading class is read, and all too often, students are not given enough time to read independently books they are interested in (Miller, 2014). As I will address later on in my last chapter, one clear take away I have from my experiences teaching reading this year, is that students need more time to read books of their choice and that this plays a big part in student participation and motivation, which then lends itself to higher student engagement and achievement. Due to my discoveries and beliefs regarding independent reading, and in order to keep all things consistent for the sake of research, any time a student was not in a small group with a teacher, they were reading independently from a book they had chosen. Students who were in a group with a teacher for small group reading instruction were placed there for a variety of reasons. I will go into the rationale for group placement later on in this chapter.

Day two of a chapter followed the same format as day one, except the mini lesson focused on vocabulary instruction. The vocabulary lesson focused on the specific vocabulary words students would encounter in the various texts they would read during the chapter. All texts, typically two or three each chapter, contained the same-targeted vocabulary words for that particular chapter. The curriculum provided useful picture

vocabulary cards that allowed students to see and hear the words used in context, rather than just hear definitions without connecting the words to real-life application.

On day three of a chapter, the dynamics of our classroom structure changed. Students in each class had included in their IEP specific targeted minutes for reading intervention, so a small group of students participated in a group with Mrs. B. This small group reread a story they had read either on day one or two of our cycle and used it to further work on skills students needed, in particular drawing out details from the text and composing written responses. This small group was comprised of both students on IEP's for reading instruction, along with additional students performing below grade level. Each group contained between eight and ten students. Students not participating in this small group intervention remained with me in the classroom where we read a text from the students' Literature Anthology book (McGraw Hill, 2014). We read this text in a variety of ways. Sometimes the text was read aloud to students using an online tool provided by the textbook company. Other times students read the text with a partner or in a small group. Occasionally, students read the text independently. Regardless of how the text was read, students would use it for practicing a particular reading skill.

Day four began with another whole group mini lesson taught by myself, focusing on a particular vocabulary skill. This was not a lesson on the meaning of specific words, but a lesson to instruct students on various ways to determine their own meaning of new or challenging words. One such skill taught was to help students identify context clues, like a synonym or antonym that the author included to help a reader figure out the meaning of a new word. These were all skill-based lessons, often requiring students to highlight particular parts of a sentence or write a definition of an unknown word based on

sentence clues. These specific skills would always be included in the chapter assessments at the end of the six to seven day cycles. Upon conclusion of the mini lesson students were grouped again in a variety of small groups based on a particular need or focus.

Day five in this cycle was another day where the small group of eight to ten students would receive intense instruction from Mrs. B who they had met with on day three. I met with the remaining group where students completed written vocabulary work, worked on fluency by reading a text with a partner, or worked on comprehension-based activities.

Days six and seven were set aside for assessment using the chapter assessment that went with each chapter's focus and particular genre. The assessment included two separate stories with comprehension questions following each story. As students answered the questions, students were directed to highlight places in the texts where they found clues to the answer they selected. The second day of assessment was reserved for a written response question. The written responses required students to combine elements of both stories in their answer, citing specific text evidence from each individual story to support their answer. Text evidence is defined as specific examples of events or actions characters did or said from the texts. This was the most challenging aspect of this assessment for students. Many students wanted to write in generalities rather than specifics, and writing specific examples required students to reread and consult the text, which many students did not typically enjoy doing. This became an area of needed training and showing, through explicit examples, what we are expecting students to write. As students gained confidence in this skill, we began to see improvement in students' responses. The written responses were graded on a rubric specific to each particular



question. Later in this chapter I will address how these assessments were used in my research study.

Throughout my research study, students were grouped in a variety of ways. The main comparisons I intended to make through my research was the effectiveness of grouping students by a particular reading level as compared to grouping students based on a particular reading strategy need. Approximately four weeks of time, from September 25, 2017 to November 2, 2017 (allowing for a four day weekend in October), was spent with students in multi-leveled groups focused on a particular reading skill using a variety of strategies. During November 7, 2017 to December 7, 2017 we read the novel, “Hatchet” by Gary Paulsen (1987) as a whole class. During this time I taught students how to recognize eight fiction signposts (Beers & Probst, 2013).

Based on research from Beers & Probst (2013) these signposts are elements most authors include in novel. One example is a memory moment when a character relives a memory. Another example is the signpost contrasts and contradictions. This is when an author writes something that doesn’t quite seem to fit. Maybe a character is acting in a way that is unexpected. By identifying these signposts, students were engaging in deep discussion with peers and naturally going back to the text for examples. The teaching of these signposts did not factor directly into my research; however, they did help students comprehend at a deeper level.

From December 15, 2017 to December 22, 2017 the focus was specifically on students independent books. All lessons taught were taught in the format of “I do, we do, you do” (Fisher & Frey, 2007). The basic idea behind this format is that a teacher models a skill using a particular strategy. Students then practice that skill with support from a

partner, group, and teacher, and then conclude by practicing independently. During the time when students practiced independently, students used their own independent choice books. This was a highly motivating time for students, and felt quite satisfying as a teacher. I will go into the results of this time in greater detail in chapter five. This is also the time period when a colleague who was specifically looking for student engagement and participation observed my classroom. Her comments are included later in this chapter.

After a winter break, from January 3, 2018 to February 13, 2018 we returned to our seven day cycle using our reading curriculum, but this time with a focus on grouping students by their reading level and using leveled texts for small group reading instruction. Our daily routines stayed the same; however, when we grouped students, we placed them into groups or with partners who were reading the same text at a specific level. The same colleague who observed my classroom before, came back to observe again. Once again, her focus was to look for participation and engagement. The comments of this second observation will also be shared later in this chapter.

The above section laid out the format of our groups, from when they met and how each day and curriculum cycle was broken up. That structure remained the same during the weeks I was researching the question, “What is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary?” In the following section, I will explain how students were grouped.

**Grouping students by reading strategy.** Taking what I learned from my initial assessments, as well as from the early weeks of school and conversations I had with students about the books they were reading, I had a starting point for additional

instruction students needed. I felt strongly that I did not want my students to begin the year, tied to a particular reading level. I focused first on modeling ways students could select good books for individual reading. I taught students ideas like the five finger rule (Boushey, 2005). Students would read a page of text from a book they thought they wanted to read and would put up one finger for every word they did not know on the page. If they got to five fingers, the book was probably too difficult. I also taught students about the importance of selecting books they wanted to read and they were of interested to them. These lessons, and follow up conversations with students, gave me information about how to begin grouping students based on what they needed most. In some ways, I began with the most challenging way to group students. This took, in essence, “on the fly” instincts and some trial and error. I used suggestions and strategy lessons from Serravallo (2010 & 2015) and Beers and Prost (2013, 2016, 2017) as I taught these groups. Students came to their small group with various texts that they had chosen independently. I modeled a particular reading strategy with a teacher read aloud using a text I had selected that worked well to model the strategy. From there, students practiced the strategy with their own text while I prompted and supported students individually.

**Grouping students for guided reading.** The second way I grouped students was in groups based strictly on reading level. By beginning the year with varied groups of students with multiple reading levels in one group, students did not really realize how different this new grouping method was. They had already had conversations with peers and myself that supported them as individuals, so introducing a leveled reader in small groups where everyone in the group was reading the same text didn’t seem that unusual. I based my small group instruction on the strategies and guidelines laid out by Richardson

(2009) in her book, “The Next Step in Guided Reading”. I also relied on the guidance and instruction from our district’s reading curriculum (McGraw Hill, 2014).

**Assessment tools.** I used a variety of assessment tools with my students. It was important for me to know each student's basic reading level, fluency, and ability to recall details from a text. I administered a running record while I listened to each student read. A running record involves listening to a student read while recording that student’s miscues (errors). During the administration of running records, I also monitored comprehension as students attempted to retell the text they had read. I was able to determine a basic fluency level, which factors in rate of reading but also expression.

A second assessment tool I used was the completion of an online FAST (Weiss, 2005) test. This is a test required by my school that every student takes each fall, winter, and spring. It is used as a benchmark test to monitor growth with reading comprehension. This will be a data point I used to determine a student’s growth from fall to spring. I was not able to use the FAST (Weiss, 2005) to determine skills students were missing. There was not enough variation from student to student to offer any guidance in forming groups.

The third ongoing assessment tool that I used were the assessments that were a part of our reading curriculum. Our district uses the reading curriculum Reading Wonders (McGraw Hill, 2014). The curriculum provides weekly assessments throughout. The tests consisted of two different texts with ten multiple-choice questions to go with each text. They also included a written response that asked students to combine ideas from the different texts into an overall thought or concept. These assessments help when

determining strategies that students struggle with as the questions are labeled with a particular strategy or skill so it is simple to analyze where students have difficulty.

Not only did I rely on assessment results that provided specific scores, but I also leaned heavily on my teacher notes. One way that I took notes was to take notes on envelope labels. I was able to take notes on any student at any time and then transfer the labels to another page where I could organize them specifically by student. I taught three reading classes sequentially at the end of the school day, so I also made some daily notes immediately after dismissing my students for the day. These notes were mainly reflections on observations I had made or specific details I had noticed about a particular student. I also had a record-keeping sheet handy during my small groups (See Appendix B1 & B2) for making notes on particular groups or individuals. Along with teacher notes, I conducted a brief student survey after students had completed each type of small group situation. I asked students questions about which kind of group they liked best and why and which one they felt helped them more as a reader. (See Appendix C)

**Data Analysis Methods.** The following table shows the different assessments I used, along with each area they will provide information for.

Table 2. Triangulation Matrix (Mills, 2012)

<b>Research Themes</b>	<b>Data Source 1</b>	<b>Data Source 2</b>	<b>Data Source 3</b>	<b>Data Source 4</b>
<b>Reading Level</b>	Running Record/Fluency Scale	FAST Test	Student Survey	
<b>Reading Strategy</b>	Teacher Notes	FAST Test	Reading Wonders Chapter Tests	Student Survey

**Summary**

In this chapter I explained my action research plan. I conducted a mixed methods approach to research, utilizing the data collection included in quantitative research, along with the narrative format of qualitative research. As a proactive teacher, I set my students up for a successful small group experience with clearly modeled and taught expectations for both group and independent work. An overview of specific activities, grouping methods, and the days these activities were completed was given. I relied on various assessment resources to determine what my students needed most. Once needs were determined, I formed groups.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will lay out the specific details of my research and the results. During my capstone research, I have been working to answer the question, what is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom? I will begin the chapter by explaining how I laid the groundwork in my classroom for the completion of my research.

In the second section of chapter four, I will cover how students were grouped. I will break down the process of grouping students based on reading need for individual students, as well as grouping based on reading level. In addition, I will explain the results from two observations. A colleague observed my lessons with my own homeroom class at two separate times, so I will note the contrast of both lessons and the feedback I received from those observations.

In the third section, I will share specific information about the data that I collected. I will discuss how this data was interpreted and used to draw conclusions about student learning. My research was not heavily focused on quantitative data; however, it did play a part in my analysis. Qualitative data more heavily influenced decisions I made in student groupings, so therefore will be discussed in detail in the subsequent section. I relied most heavily on my observations as a teacher and the day-to-day achievement of my students. During my research, I also regularly consulted with the reading teacher I co-taught with and factored in her observations and insights. The quantitative data that I gathered was not used as I had planned, so I will share the reasons for this and the

conclusions I can draw from my research. The final section of this chapter will cover the themes and patterns that I discovered during my research.

### **Getting Started**

**Laying the groundwork.** The beginning of any school year is a time to establish classroom routines and expectations. Students need to understand how the daily routines and schedule works, from how attendance is taken to when it is okay to use the restroom or get a drink. Students accustomed to hours of unstructured time in the summer, find themselves back in a heavily structured environment. Students' attention can wander to what they would often rather be doing, and students who haven't cracked a book all summer, need to regain some stamina for reading. This year was no different from previous years in that regard.

### **Grouping Students**

**Grouping students by need.** When I originally set out on my pursuit to find the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary, I thought it would be easiest to begin my research grouping students by reading level. After further thought, and after the school year was underway, I changed my mind. There are several reasons for this change. The first reason was that I did not want my students to begin the year feeling like they were seen as a reader only based on their current reading level. Each class I taught contained both regular education students (students performing close to grade level or beyond) and special education students (students on an IEP). As I acknowledged earlier, I co-taught reading with another teacher. The teacher teaching with me was known as a special education teacher in the elementary school and several students had worked with her as special education students in past grades. We both felt



strongly that we wanted all students to work with both of us as reading teachers, regardless of reading ability. We wanted to avoid the stereotypes that often come when students work with a special education teacher. The main way to avoid having students feel they were locked into a specific reading group based on level, was to purposely, and often, change the dynamics of how and why we grouped students for small group reading instruction. We also made sure to have students meet in small groups with both teachers. Mrs. B. was fully supportive of my research goals and was an important part implementing small group activity.

The first decisions Mrs. B. and I made around how and why to group students stemmed from our observations as teachers. We looked at student performance using various reading strategies that we were teaching using our curriculum, as well as personal reading habits. Personal reading habits could include time spent reading outside of school, recording keeping of books or pages read, attitude toward reading, stamina for independent reading, or the ability to select books for a specific purpose (enjoyment, information, to meet a goal). Student performance using reading strategies would be considered formative assessments. As I explained in chapter two, formative assessments are informal in nature and could include checklists, rubrics or listening to student conversations about books (Serravallo, 2010). See Appendix E1 for sample formative assessments used to determine small group placement for students.

The goal of these first groups was to help students use a particular strategy to comprehend a variety of texts using a book the students had selected on their own. Most of the time students' personal books could be used to practice a given strategy. At times though adjustments needed to be made. We always had a text available that would meet

the characteristics needed to complete the task. Other times, adaptations were made to allow for differently structured books. One example of an adaptation was when we were teaching summarizing. The strategy being taught was called “Somebody Wanted But So” (Beers & Probst, 2016). This is a summarization tool that can be used to summarize an entire book or just a short section. While most will, not every smaller section of a book will have a character that wants something, but something gets in the character’s way (a problem), so that character then tries something(s) to solve the problem, and then something else results (the solution). Students whose book did not fit this format were given an alternative chart with the headings, “Who? Did What? Why?” This is a strategy that I came up with on my own for summarizing short sections or a specific chapter. Our experience showed that books fit nicely into one or the other framework. See Appendix F1 for examples of both charts.

Grouping students by reading need, while requiring constant observation and analysis of students’ reading behaviors, felt very rewarding as a teacher. In a survey conducted, almost 70% of students stated they enjoyed using their own independent choice book in class to practice reading skills using various strategies. 83% of students said they prefer to use their independent choice book when they meet in a small group with a teacher. 56% of students like when their small group changes regularly. See Appendix G1 for additional survey results. The survey results from students speak very clearly to what students prefer; however it is important to contrast that with grouping students by reading level before too many conclusions are drawn.

**Grouping students by reading level.** The second way students were grouped in small groups was by reading level. Throughout a chapter students were grouped in a

small group using a shared text. Some students were given the option to listen to a text online (below grade level group) while following along. Others read independently in leveled readers either at an approaching level (below grade level), on level, or above level. Due to the nature of these groups it was actually harder to see variance in reading ability and the grasping of concepts. It seems when everyone in a particular group functions at about the same level, students contributions to the group and work produced were very similar. Group lessons were more teacher-directed, with students completing tasks requiring the same skills. The leveled readers used came from the Reading Wonders curriculum (McGraw Hill, 2014) and were scripted in such a way to allow students to practice a certain reading strategy. Students were reading the texts independently to themselves (except for the lowest readers who listened to the text); however the activities, and the student work, were more similar. See Appendix H1 for samples of student work using these leveled readers. One advantage of grouping students this way with a shared text was that it was easier to have a group discussion and closure upon the conclusion of a lesson.

**Observation.** As mentioned in my introduction to this chapter, a colleague observed me on two different occasions. The purpose of these observations was for the teacher to take note of student engagement and participation. The reason I wanted to focus on these factors is that I was wondering if the effectiveness of a particular small group method could be tied to student engagement. While this particular component did not tie directly into my research question, I thought the observational notes might prove valuable. One observation took place while students were using an independent choice book to practice a particular reading strategy that was taught. The lesson taught was on

how to use the “Somebody Wanted But So” summarization strategy (Beers & Probst, 2016). Following the whole-class lesson, students were to use the strategy to summarize a short section of their independent choice book. The second observation took place while students were using leveled readers. I first taught a lesson on how to take notes on things characters do or say and then what results from those actions or words. The goal was to use the story details to determine the theme of a story. Students were then asked to practice this strategy and take notes while reading a leveled reader.

While I was hoping for a clear and definitive answer as to when students were most engaged and motivated, that is not what resulted. Comments from the first observation included: “Students did great reading and didn’t seem distracted by [the] door opening or your conversations with students” (Bruns, High School Teacher). Comments from the second observation were similarly themed and included: “All participated in expected activity. All students were actively reading. Amazing how they stayed focused so near end of day” (Bruns). It is important to note that both observations were done observing the same class at the same time of day. Due to time constraints of the observing teacher, only one of the three classes I taught reading to was observed. It would have been interesting to compare comments on all classes, but that was not an option I had. I was pleased that my students were engaged in both lessons and activities, even though it did not help me find any direct contrast between the two styles of grouping. I do feel that the result of the observations does factor significantly into conclusions I have drawn from my research that I will expound on in chapter five. While this observation and the resulting notes and comments provides some data, the next

section will go into greater detail about the different types of data I collected and how it was used.

## **Data**

This section will be an explanation of the data I intended to use and the data I actually used. As with many research ideas, changes are made along the way. I was naïve in thinking that the assessments I chose to use would line up with my grouping exploration. Teaching reading is not as black and white as it seems. While it is true you can determine the basic reading level of a student, such as a student's level of fluency and ability to retell a text, there are many components that are more challenging to quantify. Motivation is key in determining the engagement a student has with a text, and therefore is directly tied to the effort put forth and sustained, even when reading becomes challenging. Beers and Probst in their book, *Reading Nonfiction* wrote:

Interest is about something out there, out in the world. The video is interesting.

The photographs are interesting. Interest is often fleeting, lasting about as long as the video clip we provided for kids to watch. Relevance, by contrast, is always personal. Relevance is about what matters to you. It starts with observing something in the world, but then it shifts to a thought or a feeling inside of you.

Something that is relevant is inherently interesting; but something that is interesting isn't always relevant. In short, getting kids' attention is about creating interest; keeping their attention is all about relevance (2016, p. 45).

You may be wondering what the above quote is doing in a section about data. It is my belief that the results of data are tied very closely with the mindset in which students come to a task at hand, whether that be an assessment or daily practice. I base this belief

on the insights of Beers and Probst (2016) and my own observations throughout my years of teaching.

When I look at the data I have collected on students, I see growth. I see students making gains. I see students reading more independently outside of school. What I don't see is a direct tie in as to why. Have my students shown growth because we grouped them based on need or reading skill? Have my students shown growth because we grouped them by reading level? Honestly, I don't know. I think the answer is yes to both. I will explain these conclusions more in chapter five.

I know that my students began the year reading very little outside of school, finishing only 86 books over the course of four weeks stretching between September and October, with some students (10) completing zero books. I also know that during a similar time frame stretching between January and February those same students completed 125 books, with only a few students (3) completing zero books. That's an increase of 39 books read. The question becomes, "Why are students reading more outside of school?" I don't think it has to do with how I have grouped students. I do believe it has to do with the conversations that we had with students about books and the books they were reading. That did factor into what I have concluded constitutes effective teaching practices. Again, more expanded thoughts on this question in chapter five.

One method of assessment I planned on using was the students' scores on the chapter tests from the Reading Wonders curriculum (McGraw Hill, 2014). These assessments have been a useful tool, but not in the way I anticipated. Each separate test tested a separate reading and vocabulary skill. Each assessment is an entity of its own. It cannot be used to show how effective grouping students have been. It can be used to

determine if a student has mastered a certain skill such as identify theme or using context clues to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. The assessments were helpful identifying students who needed more help in those specific areas. In addition, we were able to identify students who struggled with the written response question on these assessments. We used this information to model, and explicitly teach, how to find and write down specific examples from a text to support an answer. We scored these written responses separately from the multiple-choice questions on the assessments using a rubric, making the results less subjective. This information directly impacted the choices we made regarding future instruction.

An additional assessment I intended to use was the FAST test (Weiss, 2005). This is an assessment given in the fall, winter, and spring. During my research students took the fall and winter assessment. The assessment was able to show skills students either had mastered or were developing in four areas: Concepts of Print, Phonological/Phonemic Awareness, Vocabulary, and Comprehension. Individual skills were listed for each student. I did not find enough variance among students to be helpful in determining student grouping. See Appendix I1 for an example of the only variance between the two lists. Since this test was only administered once in September and once in January it was not helpful in answering my thesis question about effective ways to group students in the upper elementary for reading instruction.

One helpful initial assessment Mrs. B and I administered in the fall was the completion of a running record on each student. This allowed us to make notes on each student's level of fluency and their ability to retell a particular text. See Appendixes D2 and D3 for the fluency and retell scales used. See Appendix D1 for the running record

text used. See also Appendix J1 for sample notes taken on students. These notes helped when placing students in small groups when grouped by reading need instead of reading level. Listening to students read, whether on an assessment such as a running record, or listening to them read in a small group or one on one, seemed to be the most powerful and telling way to determine what a student is excelling or struggling with.

**Themes and Patterns.** One theme I clearly saw was the increased motivation when students were able to read their own independent choice books in class. While there were some limits to this as mentioned above, overall students preferred using their own books in class. Students also liked variety. On one hand, the variety kept things new, and they were exposed to the different ways their classmates think. Even when students were reading the same text, students were more engaged when working in a small group. One of the most important results that came from my research, and that agreed with many experts I consulted as a part of my literature review in chapter two, was the fact that the conversations that students have about text is important (Pinnell, 2012 & Serravallo, 2010).

Not only were the conversations important, but the feeling of being a part of a reading community was also key (Miller, 2014). As we talked with students about new books, and asked them about what they were reading and what they enjoyed, students began to increase the level of reading they did personally outside of school. Many students have a list of books they want to read next. See Appendix K1 for an example of a student's plan of what to read in the future.

Another benefit to a small group setting was students moved from being passive listeners in a whole group, to active participants in a small group (Fuch, 2008). I certainly



saw this first hand in all three classes of fifth graders. Not only was it harder to hide (not participate) in a small group, it was almost impossible to not do what was asked. It was also easier for some students to share in a smaller group, particularly when that group was targeting a skill aimed at the reader's level.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I explained the format of the two main grouping methods and observation results from each. Types of assessment data were also presented, acknowledging data that informed my thesis and data that was not used as originally intended. I shared conclusions I drew about the effectiveness of grouping students by reading need and reading level. I also highlighted some limiting factors to my research. The end of this chapter concluded with some themes and patterns I saw from my research, and how some of my conclusions tie into ideas shared in my literature review.

In chapter five I will share my conclusions from my thesis research. I will explain what I have learned through the capstone process. There was learning that both surprised and confirmed what I was thinking as I began my research. Included in chapter five will also be a visit back to ideas presented in my literature review and experts who most heavily influenced my approach. I did encounter two additional experts in the area of reading instruction that influenced specific lessons that I taught while conducting my research. I will share some of their thoughts and ideas that affected my lessons, and will likely guide my future exploration in this area. I am certainly not done examining the best ways to group students for reading instruction; however, my focus will have a slightly different approach moving forward. I will share my new thoughts and next steps for myself as an educator, as well as offer some recommendations to others.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusions

#### **Introduction**

I began my capstone thesis by describing students as falling into one of two categories, the haves and the have nots, students who just “get it” and the ones who struggle. At the completion of my research, I can still say that I still have some students who fall into one of these two extremes. Teaching three very different classes of fifth graders confirms this fact even more. It seems there will always be students who struggle more than others. There will be children sitting in my classroom who will not have someone at home to help when they get stuck. There will also be children who seem to glide through school, hardly taking the time to think at all. The common thread linking these seemingly opposite groups together is that both groups of students need support.

I set out to answer the question, “What is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom?” I researched two different ways to group students, thinking one way might provide a better structure with more definitive learning in students shown. What I discovered, however, is that just as students are varied in their needs, so are the ways in which we must meet those needs. If my research question was multiple choice, I feel the correct answer would not be A or B, but C, “All of the above.”

In this chapter I begin by analyzing the effectiveness of grouping students by both multi-level and one-level groups. Next, I share the limiting factors I encountered during the research process. After that, I describe what I learned through the research process. I certainly learned right along with my students. I feel it is important to acknowledge that

there were elements of my plan that did not work out in the classroom as I had anticipated. There were several reasons for why my plan was altered along the way and I will explain those reasons in the first part of chapter five.

Not only is it important to share what I learned, but also it is also helpful to connect my learning with what the experts who have gone before me said. I found much of what I shared in my literature review to be true, such as the importance of meeting with students in small groups. There are some additional resources I encountered while completing my research, and I will share those in the second section of chapter five. In addition, I will explain how my data either did or did not fit with the findings shared in my literature review.

Where I go moving on past my capstone thesis will not only be important for me as an educator, but also for my future students. In the last section of chapter five I will share where my findings, thoughts, and ideas will take me next. In doing that, I will explain three vital areas I believe are essential in the area of reading instruction. Those three elements include engaging students, then equipping them, and finally empowering them to put into practice what they have learned. I will explain what I mean by engaging equipping, and empowering students as I conclude my capstone thesis.

### **Effectiveness of Grouping**

**Multi-level Grouping.** During the time period students were grouped based on a particular reading need, students were often grouped with others not reading at their own reading level. One definite advantage to this type of grouping was the opportunity for discussion. Students served as valuable peer models as they talked about their books and how they interpreted a particular text. The times in which students were in a small group

with various reading levels represented and students were all reading the same text from our reading curriculum, the online listening component allowed the text to be accessible to all students. A few students could listen to the text read aloud, while other students read silently to themselves. Any note taking, practice of a particular reading strategy, or group discussion was all the same. This proved to be a very powerful tool for these particular small groups.

**One-level Grouping.** When students were in a small group with students reading at the same reading level and reading the same text the text was accessible to all students, meaning they were all able to read the text independently. The main drawback to this type of grouping was that the texts were often more formula driven and less engaging to students. A group discussion was easier to have when everyone was reading the same text; however, I found there was less variety in thought and contribution to the group from students.

**Limiting Factors.** Regardless of the way students were grouped, there were some limiting factors that need to be noted. Each class period was only 45 minutes long, which only left 20 to 30 minutes daily for small group instruction, once the whole class lesson was finished. This resulted in most students being in a small group approximately twice a week. Students who met with Mrs. B. were in a small group an additional two times during a six to seven day cycle. Another limiting factor had to do with the students themselves. Each class contained a small number of students who came ill-prepared for class often. Students were directed to always have a self-selected book with them in class everyday. This did not always happen. At times we would need to stop and help a student find a book to use or help a student problem solve a particular situation because they

were not prepared for class. In addition, when students were using self-selected books in class they were often in very drastically different places in their book than other students. This, at times, made it more difficult for students to complete the task at hand. Students who were just beginning a book for example, would have little knowledge about the book, therefore making it difficult for them to practice some of the skills. Other times students books would not work for the skill they were supposed to be using. In those cases, we would have to make adjustments or provide students with a text we knew would easily provide students with adequate content. Throughout the various grouping of students, and with the limiting factors in mind, there were some themes and patterns that emerged.

### **Personal Learning**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter one particular factor I learned can be very limiting was that time constraints can be a significant challenge. Before I began my research, I had grand ideas about meeting with every student, everyday and taking detailed, diagnostic notes on each group I met with daily and each student I conferred with at least weekly. While I did take notes on both groups and individual students, it was not as often as I had planned and there simply was not enough time to meet with each student in a small group daily. Originally, I thought I would begin class with a whole group lesson, lasting 15-20 minutes and then finishing with two rotations of small groups. Two groups met with me, and two groups with Mrs. B. Our total class period was only 45 minutes, so that meant our groups needed to switch after 12 minutes. At times, depending on the focus of the group, 12 minutes could be enough time; however, more often than not that amount of time was insufficient. One other factor was the ability of students to

transition quickly. The second group we planned to meet with seemed to consistently get short-changed on time. I feel time constraints can be one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. We need to constantly ask ourselves if we are using our time in the most productive way possible.

After a couple of weeks feeling rushed, we switched to meeting with a total of two groups a day, one group with me and one group with Mrs. B. Not only did this lessen the pressure we felt to move at a rushed pace, but it allowed time at the end of the class period to meet with a few students one on one or in groups of two or three. In these meetings we were able to discuss something relevant to those individuals. Also, if students showed mastery of a concept being taught in a small group, they were excused from the group to go practice independently. In addition, students were able to get more independent reading time with the new schedule.

Not only did the schedule pose a challenge and need to change, but also the ability to tie a particular assessment tool and subsequent results to the way I grouped students challenged me. I do not feel I can use most of my assessment results to prove the answer to the question, “What is the most effective way to group students for small group reading instruction in the upper elementary?” There are several reasons for the lack of connection between my students’ small group participation and their scores on specific assessments. One reason is that the FAST test (Weiss, 2005) my students took in the fall (September) and the winter (January) did not line up with the specific small group trials. While most students showed growth from fall to winter on this assessment, it is not possible to tie that growth into any one grouping method. The longer I teach reading, the more I realize that using an assessment that analyzes a student’s overall reading

achievement has limitations. Reading requires the implementation of multiple reading skills using a variety of reading strategies. Each skill can be assessed separately. In order to see skills students have mastered or need more practice with, an assessment needs to provide specific details on each skill, not just provide an overall score.

The other core assessments I thought I would be able to use were the chapter tests that were a part of the Reading Wonders curriculum (McGraw Hill, 2014). Each chapter assessment focused on a different reading skill. One chapter might focus on finding the theme of a story, the next one on sequential events in a story, and yet another on main idea and details. Each test also had stories and texts from a wide variety of genres, or text types. For example, one test could have a nonfiction, informational text, and then the next test could be on tall tales, which are very unrealistic. Each genre follows a typical structure and students who are comfortable and used to reading texts in a certain genre perform better on assessments in that genre. Students may be able to identify events in a sequence, but struggle to identify main ideas and supporting details.

Not only did each assessment focus on a different reading skill, but it also assessed a particular vocabulary skill. Students learned a variety of ways to use context clues to figure out an unknown word. One of the ways students practiced this was to find another word in the sentence that was either a synonym (word with a similar meaning) or an antonym (word with an opposite meaning). Another vocabulary skill was identifying the meaning of smaller parts of a word that come from Greek and Latin roots. These two vocabulary skills are different and require a different strategy from students. A student who can spot a synonym or antonym may not be able to determine a word's meaning based on its Greek or Latin root. These assessments were very good at identifying skills

students have mastered, were still developing, or were struggling with; however, these chapter assessments were not good at determining the effectiveness of small groups. The information was usable for determining new groupings of students based on a student's individual need, and so therefore, was effective, but just not in the way I had intended.

One example of using the results of a chapter test comes from a chapter test on point of view. It was evident that many students were struggling identifying an author's point of view and providing supporting details to show how they knew what the author thought. Mrs. B. and I were able to group students for more practice based on the results of the end of chapter test. We even decided to spend a couple of extra days on this skill rather than continue on into the next chapter.

The most useful lesson I learned was that often it is our observations as teachers and our interactions with students that give us the most helpful information. I found the survey I gave students helpful, along with conversations with students about the types of groups and lessons taught. One of the most valuable observations I made was that conversations about books with students are powerful. Not only that, but having access to a wide variety of books within my own classroom was invaluable. I have just fewer than 1,000 books in my classroom library in a wide variety of genres. When I brought in about 25 new titles in December and held them up and talked just briefly about each one, by the end of the day there were only 6 books left that did not get checked out. Those titles, along with a few more that have been added, continued to circulate among my students. The motivation to read was increased when students saw a demand for books.

One example of this increased motivation is particularly evident in one of my students. In the first few months of school this student did not read one book on her own



outside of class, not one. Since January, this student has finished seven books on her own. The reason I know how many books she has read, is that our school participates in a program called Accelerated Reader. This program provides comprehension questions on many titles students read. Students take an online test on the books they read and they earn points for each book they read. Possible points earned are determined based on book difficulty and length. Students can earn all possible points or partial points depending on how well they perform on the book quiz. As a teacher, I can see how many books my students have read and how many points they have earned. This is one tool for tracking how much my students are reading independently. I do not place a large emphasis on this in my classroom because I want students reading for the enjoyment of reading, not to earn a certain number of points. Through this program I was able to see the seven books this student read and how well she answered the comprehension questions. More importantly than the test record for me, was watching this student's motivation and confidence level increase. She went out of her way to talk to me about her books and to tell me how much she had read. Not only that, she was able to know when she needed to abandon a book because she was not enjoying it, knowing she would not keep reading if she didn't like the book. This is just one example of what I have seen in students this year.

Now the question really becomes, "Why did this student's motivation and capacity for reading change?" Was it because of the small group reading structure? Was it because of specific guided reading lessons? What is the reason? These questions lead me into the next section of my thesis. In the next section I will connect elements from my literature review in chapter two to my own findings as I completed my research.

## Connections

As I began my capstone thesis, I read what many experts had to say about reading instruction, specifically about ways to group students for reading instruction. Throughout my research, I continually found places that my results agreed with their thoughts, ideas, and practices. Overall, I found there to be a need for a balance between both whole group and small group instruction, that there are benefits from a shared, common text at times, and that there is a need to instill skills in students that can be transferred from text to text and situation to situation. I feel I have just begun to explore the many facets of small group reading instruction and have a variety of pursuits in my future. In this next section I will address the connections I have made between my research and the experts, as well as, provide where I will go next in my study of the best practices for reading instruction.

One area that the experts and I agree on is the need for our classrooms to be a community of readers and for students to receive positive, individual feedback (Hollo & Hirn, 2015 & Miller, 2014). During my research, I found this to be true as well. I can remember a student coming up to me after class after students had been pulled into a variety of small groups that day, and saying sadly, “You didn’t meet with me today.” She was disappointed it had not been her turn. I noted that she was a student who was on track with what we were working on at the moment. Also, she and I had set up a plan earlier in the week for a particular book she was reading. That didn’t matter to her. She still wanted that one on one attention and connection with her teacher. While not all students love to read, most students do want to talk with their teacher and receive the feedback they need that is specific to them. I found that this connection was often what led to the most motivation, engagement, and on-task behavior.

Another area where experts who trumpet guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012 & Richardson, 2009) and I agreed was that there are benefits to having a shared text in a small group setting. Our reading curriculum provided an online resource that allowed students to listen to a text being read out loud to them. This element was a wonderful component in our small groups when we had students with different reading abilities represented in a particular group and we weren't using their own self-selected books. For example, if we had a group of seven students that included two or three students not reading at grade level, students reading below grade level were able to listen to the text, but still respond in writing with notes and participate in the group discussion in the same way as on level readers.

Limitations to this option could be if you had students who did not want to appear different than their peers and did not want to show a need by listening to the text. Mrs. B. and I did not find this to be an issue for our students. The students who used this option seem relieved to be able to listen to the text, and they were confident and contributed equally to group discussions as compared to students who read the text independently. This is certainly an option that may need to be altered if it seemed to pose negative consequences, but that was not apparent with my students.

The main objection of my research was to find the most effective way to group students for small group reading instruction in the upper elementary. Upon the conclusion of my research, I would like to alter the definition I provided in chapter one for the word effective. In chapter one I stated, "Effectiveness to me, in the educational setting, means that I can see student learning and growth in a particular area based on decisions and interventions I have used as a teacher." While I still agree with this definition, it has more

meaning to me now having concluded my research. Now I would say that effectiveness does include student learning and growth (increase in reading skills), but it also means that my students can transfer what they have learned to a variety of texts and experiences, and that they have learned to engage a text in a new way and have an increased appreciation for reading for a variety of purposes.

In my literature review I shared the insights from Serravallo (2010) and Miller (2014) and how their experiences drove them to find a different way to groups students from reading instruction than the traditional guided reading format. They wanted to see their students transfer skills from text to text (especially text they chose themselves), not just exhibit a particular skill when working on a specific text in a controlled setting with a teacher.

During the months of my research, I came across the works of two more experts in the field of reading instruction. I attended a one-day workshop led by these experts, and then subsequently read three of their books. The books I read were: *Disrupting Thinking, Why How We Read Matters* (Beers & Probst, 2017), *Notice and Note, Strategies for Close Reading* (Beers & Probst, 2013) and *Reading Nonfiction, Note and Notice Stances, Signposts, and Strategies* (Beers & Probst, 2016). The concepts in these books were researched and practiced in classrooms across the country and seem to connect so much of what I felt to be true with what I discovered as I conducted my research. I believe one significant goal of reading instruction is to create a life long reader, a reader who is able to apply what he or she learned in school, reading a variety of texts in a variety of ways, to what he or she will read in the future and the impact that

student can make on the world. I have come to this conclusion by reading authors such as Miller (2014) and Seravallo (2010 & 2015). Beers and Probst (2017) state:

The reader we hope will graduate from our schools is one who is open to the possibility of change. To read with a commitment to remaining untouched, unmoved, unchanged is simply to waste one's time. New information, new arguments, new perspectives should offer the reader the possibility of sharpening and improving his thinking. This seems to be true whether that reader is thinking about the issues fiction often addresses – courage, loss, love, hate, and all of the others – or about the issues that nonfiction often raises – climate change, race relations, bullying, poverty, and all the others (p. 50).

I implemented some of the ideas presented in the works of Beers and Probst and found students more engaged and willing to reread a text to dig deeper into the text's meaning. During the time in my research when students were practicing skills with their own independent choice books, students were asked to engage with their text in ways that allowed them to get details from the book, but also reflect on what they thought in their head as they read, and what they felt in their heart in response. Students used the framework, Book, Head, Heart (Beers and Probst, 2017). Students found this framework easy to use and I noticed increased engagement in students. It took what they were reading and made it relevant to their lives.

Based on my observations and conversations with students, as well as the formative assessment (reading responses in small group settings) I have come to the conclusion that there are three main components to good, research based reading instruction. These components don't stress one way of grouping students over the other,

but what they do is offer guidelines for what matters most in seeing growth in students as readers. As a teacher of readers, I believe I need to first engage students, then equip students, and lastly empower students.

First of all, students need to be engaged. This does not mean that students need to be entertained. It does mean that students need to want to read. At the workshop I attended by Beers and Probst (Minnesota Council of Teachers of English Workshop, October 23, 2017), they discussed rigor as it relates to engagement. They shared it's not the level, but the motivation and engagement that makes a text rigorous. They said that, "Rigor resides in the energy and attention given to the text, not in the text itself" (Beers & Probst, 2017). During my research I found this to be true. Students, who approached a text with more interest and motivation to read, were the students who came away with the deepest insights and often the interest to pursue additional answers to questions they still had after reading. This engagement can also be found in making connections with a teacher or another student about a particular book. These connections led to more reading, and therefore more practice of reading skills.

Engagement is the first important component. Equipping students is the second crucial element. Students can be highly motivated, but still lack the necessary skills to be successful. Equipping students with new skills is best done in a small group setting or during one on one conferring, where the focus is on what each individual needs. I found this can be done with both a traditional guided reading model, or while students read independent choice books in multi-leveled groups. The important factor that seems to determine success and learning is that the skill is tailored to what each student needs.

Once students are engaged and equipped with a new strategy for practicing a reading skill, students need to be empowered to put this skill into practice. Students need to be able to apply a reading skill to a variety of texts and in varying circumstances that involve independent practice. It's in this independent practice students show their independence. At times students will need repeated instruction on a particular skill, but when students show what they can do independently, they gain confidence. Students will increase their reading skills if instruction is tailored to what they specifically need.

### **Conclusion**

That last statement in the previous paragraph is a bold one. Students will increase their reading skills if instruction is tailored to what they specifically need. This makes sense, but also leaves a great deal of responsibility with the teacher. While I have laid out ways to determine what students need in the area of reading instruction, one thing I know to be true after having tried to determine the needs of 82 students, is that it is not an easy task. It takes practice as a teacher. It takes research and some trial and error to figure out what will work best. Learning to interpret a student's need "on the fly" is a skill learned over time. I believe every year I teach reading; I will continue to become a better reading teacher.

One way to continue to improve my abilities as a reading teacher is to continue to research and explore ways of teaching reading. I have a number of topics I plan to pursue based on my research learning. One specific area I want to look into is the area of running records and a reading benchmarking system. Currently, our district does not have a specific system for determining a student's reading level and growth on a more consistent and timely basis. The testing done in the fall, winter, and spring does not translate into

much useable data to use in the classroom on a week to week, or even a monthly basis. In addition, I want to look at our current schedule and look for ways to improve the format, allowing for more independent reading time and opportunities for one to one conferring. I will also continue to explore more of the concepts provided by the experts I consulted while conducting my research.

My research findings will be shared in a couple of ways. One way they will be shared will be online in the Hamline archives, where students' capstone theses and projects are posted. My thesis will be available to anyone searching for information in the area of small group reading instruction. Additionally, I will share my thesis with the grade level teachers in my district and my building principal. I feel it is important for teachers, as well as my principal, to know how my research worked, what worked well, and recommendations I found in the area of reading instruction. I conducted my research on behalf of their students, as well as my own. They have a vested interest in my findings.

### **Summary**

Chapter five has been a place to summarize my capstone thesis research and what the results mean to me. I began by giving an overview of the chapter, followed by three specific sections. In section one I laid out the advantages and disadvantages I saw in grouping students in both multi-level grouping and one-level grouping. Next, I revealed some significant limits to my research. Rarely do our plans go exactly as we expect and I discovered areas that impacted my research in ways I did not predict. In the next section, I shared my personal learning in relationship to my research. There were some things I learned along the way, and elements of my plan that did not work out exactly as I had



anticipated. After explaining my personal learning, I connected what I learned during my research with what the experts had to say. I explained the connections between experts I consulted before I began my research and experts I encountered as I conducted my research. My focus moving forward will center on engaging students, equipping them, and then empowering them as readers. These ideas were shared following the section on connections. Chapter five ended with my plan moving forward from here. Although I did not find a definitive answer to the question, What is the most effective way to group students for small group reading instruction in the upper elementary? I did uncover many reading strategies that benefit student learning and found elements of reading instruction I can further explore.

### Appendix A1. Typical Reading Block Schedule for Small Groups

<b>5th Grade Reading Block</b>	<b>15 Minutes Whole Class</b>	<b>20-30 Minutes Group with Teacher</b>
<b>Day 1</b>	Mini-lesson: Build Background	Groups A & B
<b>Day 2</b>	Mini-lesson: Vocabulary	Groups C & D
<b>Day 4</b>	Mini-lesson: Context Clues	Groups A, B, C, & D

\* All groups were flexible and changed regularly based on need or reading level. Student names were posted in the classroom as groups changed.

#### **Days 3 and 5**

Students were divided into 2 totally different groups than listed in the above chart (approximately one group of 18 and one group of 10). The smaller group received instruction at a slower pace with more guided practice. The larger group read an on-level text and worked on fluency and comprehension.

#### **Days 6 and 7**

These days were used for assessment using end of chapter reading tests. Students would read two texts and answer 20 multiple choice questions the first day. The second day of assessment students would complete the written response portion of the test.


#### **Independent Reading**

Each day, students typically had time (10-15 min.) for independent reading in books they had chosen for themselves.



**Appendix B2. Record Keeping Page – Small Group Record (Boushey & Moser, 2009)**

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 **Strategy Groups and Instruction**

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Names</b>	<b>Touch Points</b>
<b>Date</b>	<b>Lesson</b>		
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Names</b>	<b>Touch Points</b>
<b>Date</b>	<b>Lesson</b>		
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Names</b>	<b>Touch Points</b>
<b>Date</b>	<b>Lesson</b>		

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## C1. Student Survey Questions

### Reading Survey #1

Instruction based on individual choice books.

\* Required

**1. Check the box that describes you best: \***

*Check all that apply*

- I Love to read and read regularly outside of school.
- I Love to read, but struggle to read outside of school.
- I kind of like reading if I can find the right book.
- I don't really like reading, but I still read outside of school because I am supposed to.
- I don't like reading and I don't read much outside of school.
- I don't like reading and I try to avoid reading both at school and home.

**2. We get enough time to read independently at school. \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- True
- False

**3. I wish we got time EVERYDAY to read independently at school. \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

**4. I feel like I know how to pick out good fit books by myself. \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

5. Lately, after a reading lesson you have been practicing a skill or strategy with your own AR book. Do you like using a book that you have chosen yourself for these activities? \*

Mark only one oval.

- Yes  
 No  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Check the box that describes you best: \*

Check all that apply.

- I like meeting in small groups with a teacher.  
 I don't like meeting in small groups with a teacher.

7. Check the box that describes you best: \*

Check all that apply.

- I like when the small group I'm in with a teacher has the same students in it every time.  
 I like when the students in the small group I'm in with a teacher change often.

8. Check the box that describes you best: \*

Check all that apply.

- I like when I get to use my AR book in my reading small group.  
 I like it when everyone in my small group is reading the same book.

9. Which of the following strategies do you like the best? \*

Check all that apply.

- Noticing and Noting the 6 Signposts (Contrasts & Contradictions, Aha Moment, Tough Questions, Memory Moment, and Words of the Wiser, Again and Again)  
 Asking the 3 Questions (What surprises me?/What did the author think I knew?/What challenged or confirmed?)  
 Somebody Wanted But So and Then

10. What is your favorite thing about the Book, Head, Heart thinking as you read? Make sure you add why you like this. \*

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## Appendix D1. Running Record Passage – Teacher Scoring Page (Dynamic Measurement Group, 2007)

**Benchmark 1.1  
DIBELS® Oral Reading Fluency**

**Something's Missing!**

Missy couldn't believe that the day she had been looking forward to had arrived at last. She and her father were leaving on a bus to visit Aunt Martha's farm. Missy looked forward to seeing her aunt, but she was especially excited about seeing her favorite cousin, Ralph.

Although the bus was crowded, Missy and her father found seats together near the front. Her father suggested that Missy sit next to the window, and she eagerly scrambled into her seat. She put her backpack on the floor in front of her and began looking out the window. Right below her, workers were busy unloading suitcases from a large pushcart and tossing them into the bus.

As soon as the bus jerked into motion, Missy reached for her backpack and got out her science book. She knew that if she didn't do her homework before they arrived at the farm, she would have less time to spend with Ralph. She got out a sheet of paper and began busily writing the answers to the questions at the end of the chapter. As she worked, the hum of the motor and the gentle rocking motion of the bus made her feel very drowsy.

"I'm going to splash some water on my face," she said to her father as she put her book on the floor.

A few minutes later, Missy returned to her seat, refreshed and ready to work. However, when she reached for her science book, she discovered that it was gone. Alarmed, she began looking all around for it. The book wasn't under the seat in front

**Something's Missing! (Continued)**

of her or in her backpack. Then Missy looked at her father, who was reading a newspaper, and noticed that the corners of his mouth were turned slightly upward.

"All right, Dad, hand it over," she said. Smiling, her father reached under his newspaper, slowly pulled out Missy's science book, and handed it to her with a smile.

"I just want to make sure that you have an exciting trip to the farm," he said, laughing.

Total words: \_\_\_\_\_ – errors: \_\_\_\_\_ = words correct: \_\_\_\_\_

Retell: \_\_\_\_\_ ORF Total: \_\_\_\_\_

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50
51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75
76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94						

Retell Total: \_\_\_\_\_

**Notes:**

## Appendix D2. Retelling Rubric

### Retelling Rubric – Narrative Text

For use with Rigby Benchmark Assessments and other retelling assessments

Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate and precise information</li> <li>• Describes character motivation/behavior</li> <li>• Infers author’s meaning</li> <li>• Uses precise and accurate vocabulary that exceed expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate and sequential information</li> <li>• Provides information about characters</li> <li>• Some inference regarding author’s meaning</li> <li>• Accurate language and vocabulary used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relates details only</li> <li>• Limited information about characters</li> <li>• No reference to author’s meaning</li> <li>• Limited vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides little or no information related to the text</li> </ul>

### Retelling Rubric – Informational Text

For use with Rigby Benchmark Assessments and other retelling assessments

Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate and precise information used to introduce topic</li> <li>• Main ideas clearly stated</li> <li>• Precise ideas and details using key vocabulary used that exceed expectations</li> <li>• Draws conclusions and generalizes beyond the text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate information used to introduce topic</li> <li>• Main ideas of text stated accurately and sequentially</li> <li>• States main ideas and details using appropriate vocabulary</li> <li>• May draw conclusions or generalizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few details and vague information provided on topic</li> <li>• Main ideas not stated</li> <li>• Does not use appropriate vocabulary</li> <li>• Retelling not sequential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little or no information provided on topic</li> <li>• Details may not be related to the text</li> <li>• Does not use appropriate vocabulary</li> <li>• Does not provide a retelling</li> </ul>



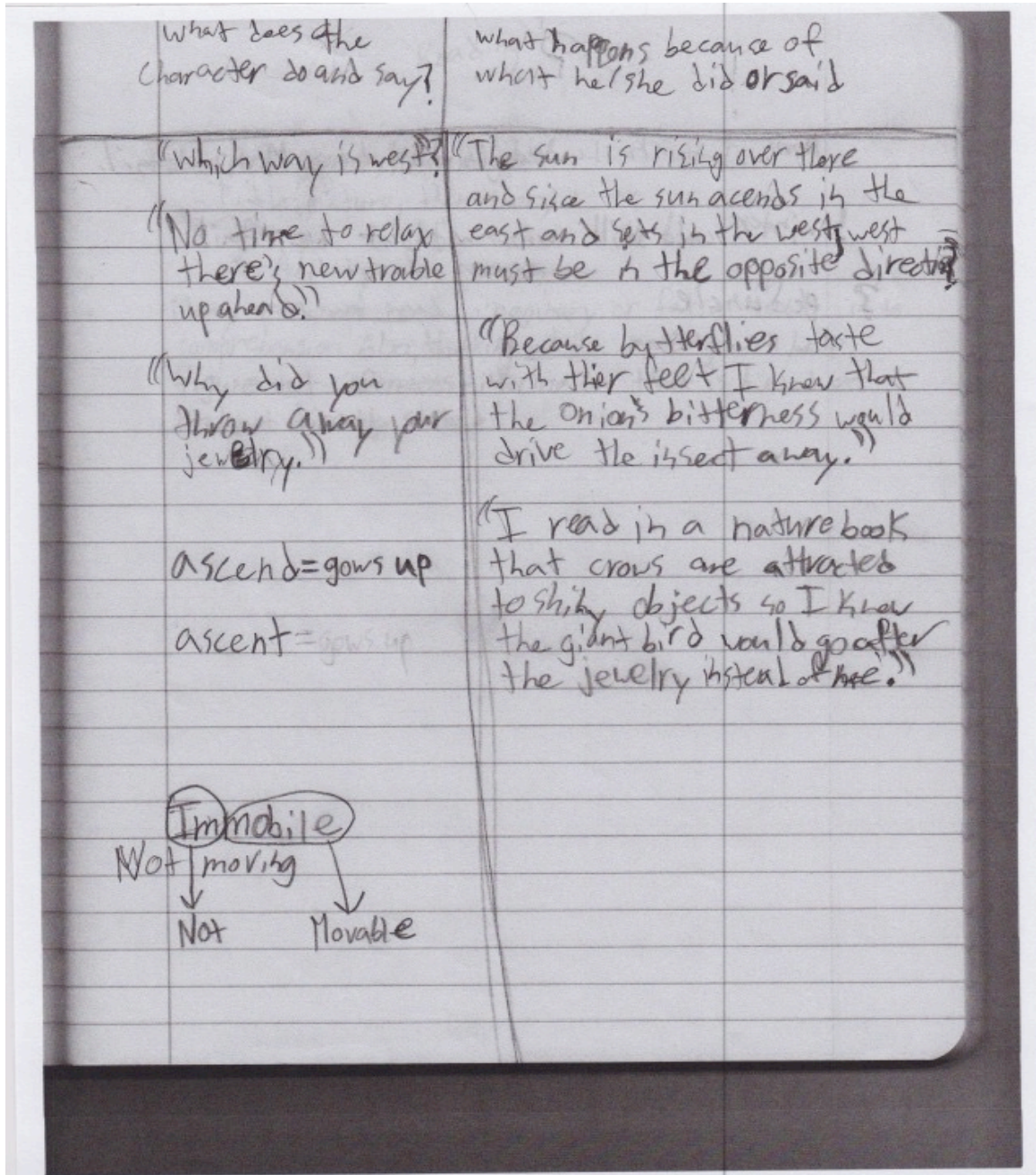
**Appendix D3. Fluency Scale**

National Assessment of Educational Progress <b>NAEP's Oral Reading Fluency Scale</b>
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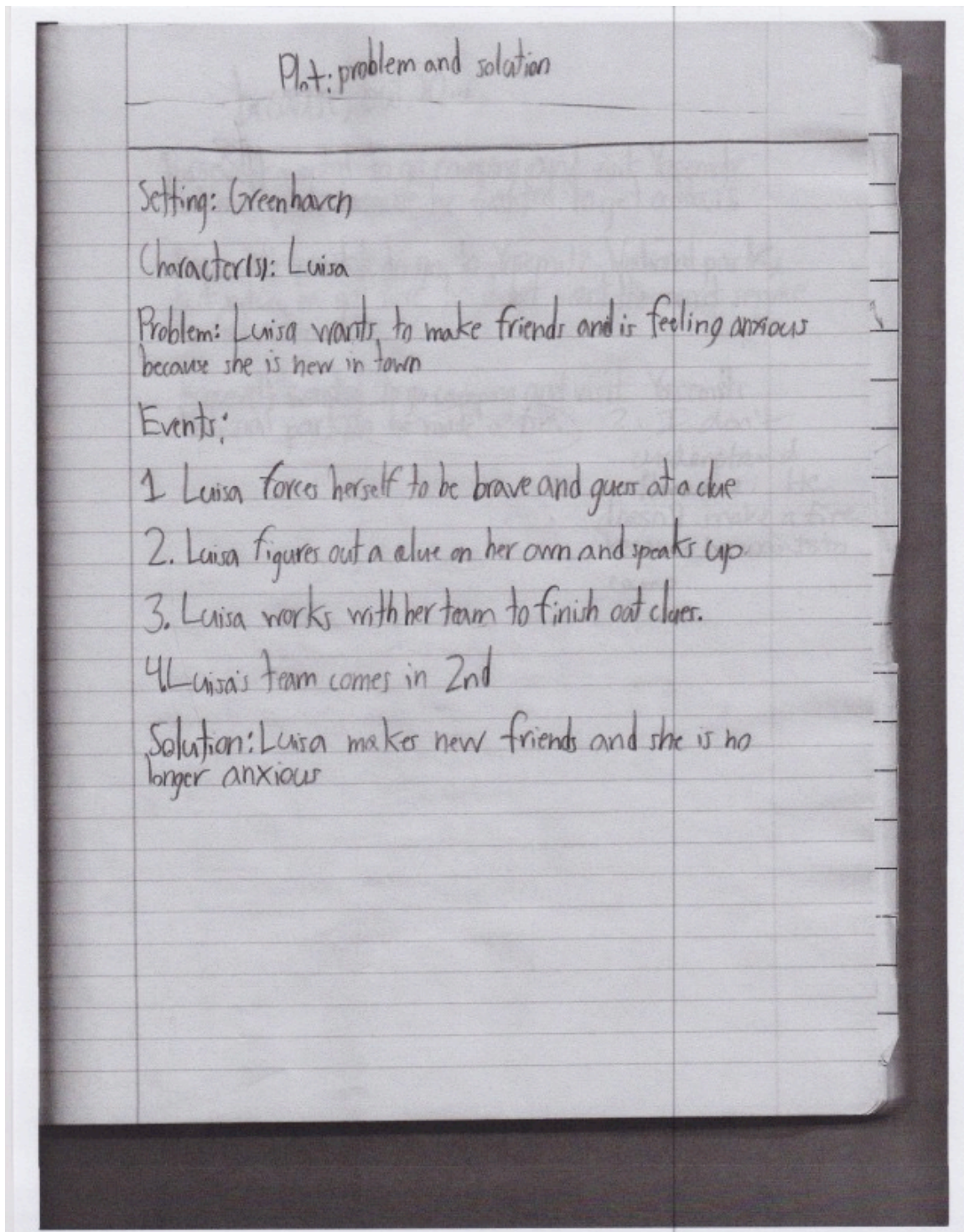
<b>Level 4</b>
<p>Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions and deviations from text may be present, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author's syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation.</p>
<b>Level 3</b>
<p>Reads primarily in three – or four – word phrase groups. Some smaller groupings may be present. However, the majority of phrasing seems appropriate and preserves the syntax of the author. Little or no expressive interpretation is present.</p>
<b>Level 2</b>
<p>Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three – or four – word groupings. Some word-by-word reading may be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to larger context of sentence or passage.</p>
<b>Level 1</b>
<p>Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two-word or three-word phrases may occur – but these are infrequent and/or they do not reserve meaningful syntax.</p>

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2002 Oral Reading Study.

## E1. Sample Formative Assessments



This student was taking notes on characters and what they said or did which then led to a specific result. Students then used those notes to identify a theme. Some vocabulary work is also shown as the student was trying to determine the meaning of the word immobile.



**Identifying elements of plot, specifically events in a story leading up to a solution.**

<p>Traditional Cinderella</p> <p>Fairy godmother - grants wishes</p> <p>Evil step-sisters</p> <p>Prince</p> <p>Cinderella - girl</p> <p>Animals - talking mice</p> <p>Pumpkin patch</p> <p>C. wants to go to a Royal Ball (dance)</p> <p>Prince falls in love with C.</p> <p>C. = poor, treated like a servant</p> <p>Midnight C. goes back to rags,</p> <p>Losses glass slipper</p> <p>Prince finds it - looks for her</p> <p>gets married</p> <p>HEA.</p>	<p>Both</p> <p>They both lose a shoe</p> <p>The shoe only fits C.</p> <p>Searches the kingdom</p> <p>They get worried as the day goes on.</p> <p>They both hide Cinderella</p> <p>Prince</p>	<p>A Modern Cinderella</p> <p>Prince plays video games</p> <p>Dancing for a TV show</p> <p>In C's presents he gets a feeling</p> <p>The Prince searches internet to find C.</p> <p>The prince rides his electric skate board to search for C.</p> <p>They texted HEA.</p>
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Compare and Contrast of Two Versions of the Same Story

Who?	Did What?	Why?
Pierce Alfonso	Makes a promise to go someplace in 3 years.	so his father could be cured
Pierce Alfonso	left	he could honor his promise
Pierce Alfonso	gave his chain to the eagle	so he could get across the gorge or raise the cause he
Eagle	flew the promise over because of the chain.	

Using the strategy of answering the questions: Who? Did what? And Why? Used to show comprehension of short sections of text.

**F1. Somebody Wanted But So Example** (Chart has been altered in size to fit page)**SWBSaT (Somebody Wanted But So and Then) Chapter Notes**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Somebody</b>	<b>Wanted</b>	<b>But</b>	<b>So</b>	<b>and Then</b>

**F1. (Continued) Who? Did What? Why? Example** (Chart has been altered in size to fit page)**Who? Did What? Why? Chapter Notes**

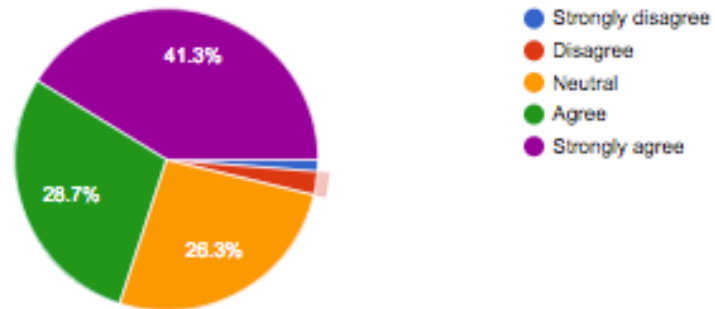
Name: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Who?</b>	<b>Did What?</b>	<b>Why?</b>

## G1. Survey Results

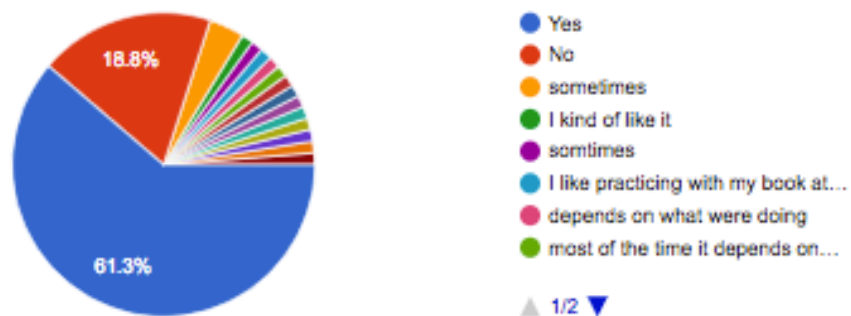
I wish we got time EVERYDAY to read independently at school.

80 responses



Lately, after a reading lesson you have been practicing a skill or strategy with your own AR book. Do you like using a book that you have chosen yourself for these activities?

80 responses

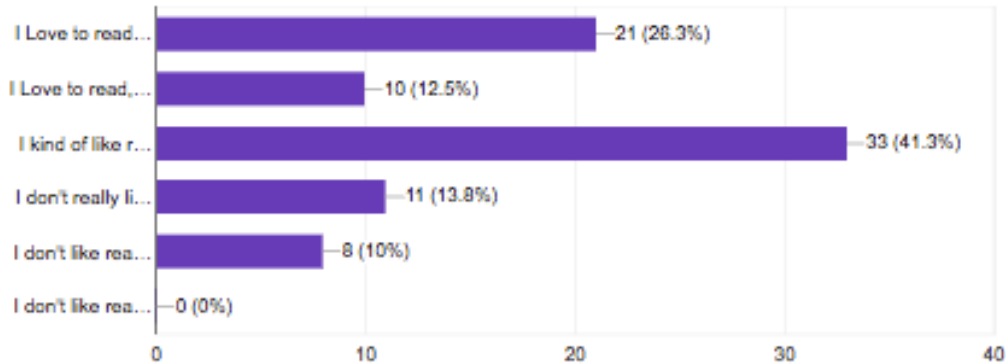


Students had the option to write in other answers for the question represented directly above.



### Check the box that describes you best:

80 responses



### The choices on the above graph are, from top to bottom:

I love to read and read regularly outside of school.

I love to read, but struggle to find the right book.

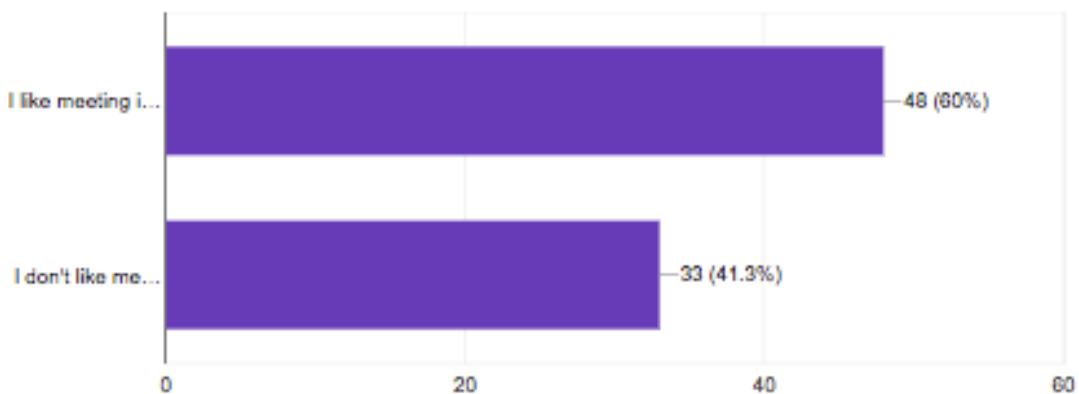
I kind of like reading, but I still read outside of school because I am supposed to.

I don't like reading and I don't read much outside of school.

I don't like reading and I try to avoid reading both at school and home.

### Check the box that describes you best:

80 responses



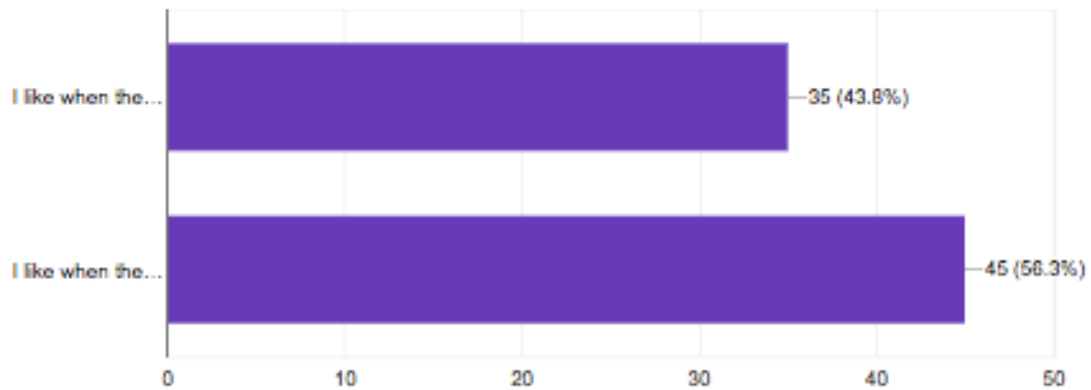
### The above choices on the above graph are, from top to bottom:

I like meeting in small groups with a teacher.

I don't like meeting in small groups with a teacher.

### Check the box that describes you best:

80 responses



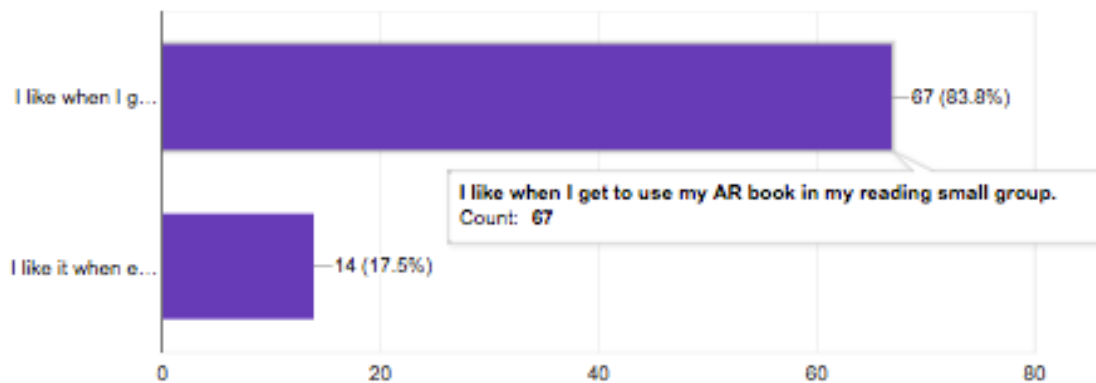
#### The above choices on the above graph are, from top to bottom:

I like when the small group I'm in with a teacher has the same students in it every time.

I like when the students in the small group I'm in with a teacher change often.

### Check the box that describes you best:

80 responses



#### The above choices on the above graph are, from top to bottom:

I like when I get to use my AR book (independent choice book) in my reading small group.

I like it when everyone in my small group is reading the same book.

## H1. Student Samples from Leveled Reader Work

Cause	Effect
Roosevelt read Mr. Muir's book	Roosevelt wants to learn from Mr. Muir
Not going to talk politics	Reporters leave disappointed
Beautiful view	Roosevelt was speechless
Reporters come back	his laws strip shut
Snowfalls	He's excited
people were following them	Charlie tells them to leave
his trip to Yosemite	He promises to help protect the land

# Character Sketch

A *trait* is a word or phrase that describes the character's personality. Choose an important character and select three traits that fit him or her. Give evidence from the text: the character's words, thoughts, and actions.

Book title Perfect Season Character Troy

This character is really ...

**1. Trait**  
**Athletic**

**Actions**  
throws passes to his friends

**Thoughts**  
will my offense line will protect me

**Words**  
He likes to play football

**2. Trait**  
**Curious**

**Actions**  
wonders if his team will do good

**Thoughts**  
is my team going to do better than last year

**Words**  
He is wondering what is going to happen in the game

**3. Trait**  
**active**

**Actions**  
plays football with his football team

**Thoughts**  
I'm going to run the ball

**Words**  
He is always playing football

Theme: A good plan sometimes includes teamwork

A. The blower puffed up his cheeks and he blew the women back toward the tree so then the runner could get the bottle of water.

B. The eater completed one of the King's tasks by finishing the table of food.

C. The thrower woke up the runner by grabbing a rock and breaking a branch from the tree.

**II. FAST Results Showing Variance between top and bottom students in grade level.**

Developing Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find short vowel sounds in nonsense words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discriminate among different middle sounds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Finish a rhyme scheme of a poem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify irregularly-spelled ending sounds</li> </ul>
<b>Vocabulary</b>				
<b>Mastered skills 6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use the correct form of a noun</li> <li>Use the correct adjective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use graphophonics to complete a sentence</li> <li>Use the correct verb tense</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group words in the same category</li> <li>Match a picture to a word</li> </ul>	
Developing Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to finish a sentence</li> <li>Identify homophones</li> <li>Use a homophone in a sentence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Add the correct prefix to a word</li> <li>Add the correct suffix to a word</li> <li>Complete an analogy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to identify synonyms</li> <li>Use context to identify antonyms</li> <li>Use context to define a word</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to finish a paragraph</li> </ul>
<b>Comprehension</b>				
<b>Mastered skills 7</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose a sentence to complete a passage</li> <li>Put story events in order</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify nonsense statements</li> <li>Match a picture to informational text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put events in order in informational text</li> <li>Match a picture to a story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify a character's feelings</li> </ul>
Developing Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose a phrase to complete the text</li> <li>Infer a phrase's meaning</li> <li>Locate literal information</li> <li>Identify what the author is conveying</li> <li>Make predictions when reading</li> <li>Put poems into categories</li> <li>Infer a character's motives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to define a made-up word</li> <li>Compare characters in text</li> <li>Compare two different texts</li> <li>Distinguish fact from opinion</li> <li>Draw conclusions using details</li> <li>Evaluate how an author supports a claim</li> <li>Give a title to a passage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify cause/effect relationships</li> <li>Summarize text in one sentence</li> <li>Use text information to make inferences</li> <li>Add a sentence to support the main idea</li> <li>Combine two sentences</li> <li>Delete an unnecessary sentence</li> <li>Evaluate the author's viewpoint</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Synthesize facts from the text</li> <li>Analyze character traits</li> <li>Examine the author's tone</li> <li>Identify a story's theme</li> <li>Identify the main idea of a story</li> <li>Infer an author's purpose</li> </ul>
National norms are based on the aggregated data from FAST users. They do not necessarily conform to the demographic distribution in the census.				

Vocabulary				
Mastered skills 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to define a word</li> <li>Use the correct form of a noun</li> <li>Use the correct adjective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Add the correct suffix to a word</li> <li>Use graphophonics to complete a sentence</li> <li>Add the correct prefix to a word</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use the correct verb tense</li> <li>Group words in the same category</li> <li>Match a picture to a word</li> </ul>	
Developing Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to finish a sentence</li> <li>Identify homophones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use a homophone in a sentence</li> <li>Complete an analogy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to identify synonyms</li> <li>Use context to identify antonyms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use context to finish a paragraph</li> </ul>
Comprehension				
Mastered skills 17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Add a sentence to support the main idea</li> <li>Evaluate the author's viewpoint</li> <li>Synthesize facts from the text</li> <li>Combine two sentences</li> <li>Delete an unnecessary sentence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Infer a character's motives</li> <li>Use context to define a made-up word</li> <li>Choose a sentence to complete a passage</li> <li>Match a picture to informational text</li> <li>Locate literal information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put story events in order</li> <li>Infer a phrase's meaning</li> <li>Choose a phrase to complete the text</li> <li>Put events in order in informational text</li> <li>Identify nonsense statements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Match a picture to a story</li> <li>Identify a character's feelings</li> </ul>
Developing Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify what the author is conveying</li> <li>Make predictions when reading</li> <li>Put poems into categories</li> <li>Compare characters in text</li> <li>Compare two different texts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distinguish fact from opinion</li> <li>Draw conclusions using details</li> <li>Evaluate how an author supports a claim</li> <li>Give a title to a passage</li> <li>Identify cause/effect relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarize text in one sentence</li> <li>Use text information to make inferences</li> <li>Analyze character traits</li> <li>Examine the author's tone</li> <li>Identify a story's theme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the main idea of a story</li> <li>Infer an author's purpose</li> </ul>
National norms are based on the aggregated data from FAST users. They do not necessarily conform to the demographic distribution in the census.				

**J1. Sample Notes Taken on Students** (numbers in upper right hand corners indicate notes on one particular student)

- lacks expression
  - strong character sketch
  - good problem + solution
  - can spot idioms
- how to challenge more? 3

- slow, methodical reader
  - inaccurate retell details
  - Can identify problem + solution
- 4

- Great expression + retell
  - Jumps to conclusions too quickly
  - Trouble identifying problem + steps to solve; Fixed w/ prompt
- 5

- Repeats words when reading
  - Solid retell
  - Struggles to read outside of school → set 30 night goal
  - Needs confidence + motivation
  - Can identify problem + solution
- 6

- skipped whole line; error w/ premise of story in retell
  - difficulty identifying character traits (sad/football) w/ evidence of support.
- 7

- Phrasing hit + miss; some good expression but at times word by word.
  - Retell lacks details.
  - Struggled w/ character traits + describing character; Did not know where to reread to find help.
  - okay problem + solution
- 9



- Rarely reads outside of school 19
- Rushes; jumps to conclusions
- Need to fix prob. + sol. + events
- Good at identifying character traits; harder to find support



- lacks expression, but very fluent 13
- struggled w/ character traits and finding support ("action" vs. "thoughts" vs. "words"); caught on w/ prompts
- likes sport books
- Good + problem + solution

- uses finger to track 14
- difficult time sticking w/ independent choice book; grabs 1st book that looks interesting.

- slow, methodical; needed prompt to retell 11
- lacks stamina
- Good at identifying character traits + finding support.

- slow start on retell, but good once going (maybe needs strategy to get started - SUBS?); picked up on "smirk" 16
- strong character sketch

**K1. Sample Student Plan of What to Read Next**

 **Books I Plan to Read** 

Title	Author	Check When Completed
Danger on Panther Peak		
Wonder	RJ Palacio	✓
Brins Hunt	Gary Paulson	
Brins Return	Gary Paulson	
Fire Girl		
Auggie and Me	RJ Palacio	✓

**L1. Permission Letter Given to Parents of Participants**

Parents/Guardians,

September 5, 2017

You are receiving this letter because your child is a student in my reading class this year. I I am currently working to complete my master's degree in literacy from Hamline University in St. Paul. As a part of this degree program, I will be conducting research that will be included in my final thesis paper. I will be researching and examining the various ways to group students in small groups to provide the most effective reading instruction. I will be working to answer the question, what is the most effective way to group students for reading instruction in the upper elementary classroom?

By participating in my research, students will be placed into a variety of small groups to receive instruction with reading skills and strategies. The groups will change often based on students' needs and will provide students with the advantage of working with various peers. The main task students will participate in will be reading. Students will read both fiction and nonfiction books of various lengths and characteristics, working on increasing their individual reading levels as the school year progresses. I will collect students' scores on various reading assessments in order to determine their reading growth. These assessments are already a natural part of our curriculum and district policies. While I will know the names of each student participating, I will not be sharing or reporting students' identities in any part of my research. Your child's name will never be used in print or tied to any of my reported documents. Any of the data gathered from your child will either be listed without identification or grouped together as group averages.

I will be teaching reading in this way for the entire 2017-2018 school year, however I will only be collecting information on students from September 2017 through December 2017. There will not be any risks to student learning as they participate in my class as I conduct my research. Working in small groups is a natural part of an elementary classroom. Students who do not enjoy working in groups may feel uncomfortable at times reading so close to their peers, however even when in a small group, students will be working on individual skills. Students will receive instruction from me to their whole small group, but will then be practicing independently with me close by as a guide.

I am confident your child will experience benefits from my research as I work to determine each student's individual needs as a reader. My research will be directly tied to discovering what is best for each student, tailoring and restructuring reading groups based on need. My research will have my students' best interest at the heart of it.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact me. Participation in this research is voluntary, and if you do not want your child to participate, please sign and return the back page of this letter. There will be no penalties given to your child if you choose to opt him/her out of this study. In addition, I have included the contact information for the Internal Review Board at Hamline University if needed.

Sincerely,

Nicole Snoberger

Nicole Snoberger, 5th Grade Teacher  
[nsnoberger@district745.org](mailto:nsnoberger@district745.org)  
(320) 845-2171  
Institutional Review Board, Hamline University, St. Paul, MN  
Matthew Olson, chair  
[mholson@hamline.edu](mailto:mholson@hamline.edu)

**Please indicate your choice, sign and return.**

By signing and dating below I agree that I have read the letter explaining the thesis project being conducted in Nicole Snoberger's classroom.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for my child's data to be used in the report knowing his/her name will never be used.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not want my child's data to be used in the report.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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