

Dedication

To all readers who have had moments of doubt  
and all teachers who turned those into moments of strength.

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# Equitable Reading Opportunities

“Reaching most students isn’t good enough. Small group instruction enables teachers to reach and teach all.”

**W**hen you are at the reading table with students, you have the opportunity to make a vital difference in children’s ability to read. At the reading table is when you balance reading instruction, because you in a sense tilt the scales for a group of students to ensure what you taught in a whole-group lesson is understood, and sticks. There are many purposes for gathering students in small groups; in this book the focus is on gathering learners of various backgrounds and abilities who require extra support. Generally, as one educator said it so well, these are the children who have been “unlucky in literacy.” They are not “high needs,” not “low literacy” but simply, those students who haven’t had the same access to opportunities that more advantaged students have.

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With this book, I show teachers how apply key reading research in a unique combination. I show them how to execute a strategic use of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), within small group time. Teachers need help in matching types of readers to types of small group lessons, and so I explicitly talk about **modeled**, **guided**, and **independent** types of lessons to make this match-up clear. Research has shown that emergent and early transitional readers will benefit from guided instruction (Clay, 2016). Fluent and engaged readers need independent work during small group time, with teachers more in a coaching role (Rasinski, 2006). Most importantly, I show teachers how to release sooner: This is the book’s call to action. We close the achievement gap when we know how to make every minute count.



At the reading table, the promise of equal access is realized through differentiated support.

## The Balance of a Small Group Table

At the reading table, the promise of equal access is realized through differentiated support (Tomlinson, 2000). Perhaps the best way to appreciate the power of small group reading instruction is to conjure the classic image of an American classroom in mid-century America, with students in rows, and many of them eagerly, desperately, waving their hand and hoping to be called upon by the teacher. It’s iconic as a Norman Rockwell painting, and yet heartbreaking when one contemplates the learners not confident enough to raise their hands, or even allowed in the room. Whole group instruction is focused on meeting the needs of most. It is for this reason that there has been a groundswell of professional conversation, research, and practice in recent decades around differentiated instruction in small groups, because reaching “most” isn’t good enough.

At the reading table, the promise of equal access is realized through differentiated support.

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When teachers invite three, four, five, or six learners to come together at the reading table, the promise of equal access is realized.  
—Adapted from Small Group Reading Instruction (Klein, Andrews, & Afflerbach, 2019)

The Benefits of Small Groups

Small group instruction is one of many ways teachers support learners on their way to independence. It’s an application of the theory of gradual release of responsibility, commonly known as the I Do/We Do/You Do model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), which operates with these principles:

- The teacher works from students’ strengths rather than deficits
- The teacher’s job is to know what students know in order to teach into their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), meaning when the task is challenging but not frustrating
- Instructional support means providing engaging interactions for concept development, quality feedback, and language modeling across the entire day in all content areas

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Too many students fall through the cracks in one-size-fits-all instruction, perpetuating the opportunity gap from one generation to another. In particular, children from diverse backgrounds, including Latino students, African American students, Indian students, Native American students, Hmong students, poor students and students learning English, are at risk because the general curriculum isn’t designed for their unique needs. All children deserve to have equal access to educational opportunities (Linton, 2011). When teachers expertly invite three, four, five, or six learners to come together at the reading table, the promise of equal access is realized. The teacher knows the unique needs of each child, and yet at that circular or rectangular table or spot on the rug, they are all together for the same purpose: to have their reading supported. They are equal in the classroom, receiving differentiated support.

Reading That Sticks

The beauty and potential of teaching students of diverse backgrounds is that while on the one hand we need to know their unique needs, on the other hand, teaching effectively in small-group settings often comes down to one thing that works for all kids: Active reading practice.

Recent research (Hattie and Yates, 2014) suggests that learning that is easy is more easily forgotten. Learning that is challenging, children remember. When I read this finding, I smiled, because the way I teach readers in small groups IS to throw them into the deep end of the pool sooner. It’s hard, but not frustrating, and it’s exhilarating for them. Specifically, in a 20-minute session, I like to do direct instruction for 10 minutes and then release—so children read for 10 minutes. Often what I see in classrooms are teachers using programs and instructional models that recommend they teach for far too long—I encourage you to move students through faster so there are more minutes for reading, with you right there to support them. In this sense, my model has a coaching layer built in.



Researcher Richard Allington recommends that students spend upwards of 90 minutes a day engaged in reading. It stands to reason then that children need to read during small group time. Teachers need to keep their modeling and talking brief.



No matter where you are in your teaching journey, find a colleague you have good rapport with and learn together. Sometimes embarking on a book study is a great start. To round up your knowledge of differentiated reading support, *What Are You Grouping For?* by Julie Wright and Barry Hoonan (2018) and *Small Group Reading Instruction* by Barbara Andrews, Adria F. Klein and Peter Afflerbach (2019) will give you a blend of Workshop and Comprehensive Literacy background.

Management Tips and Cheerleading

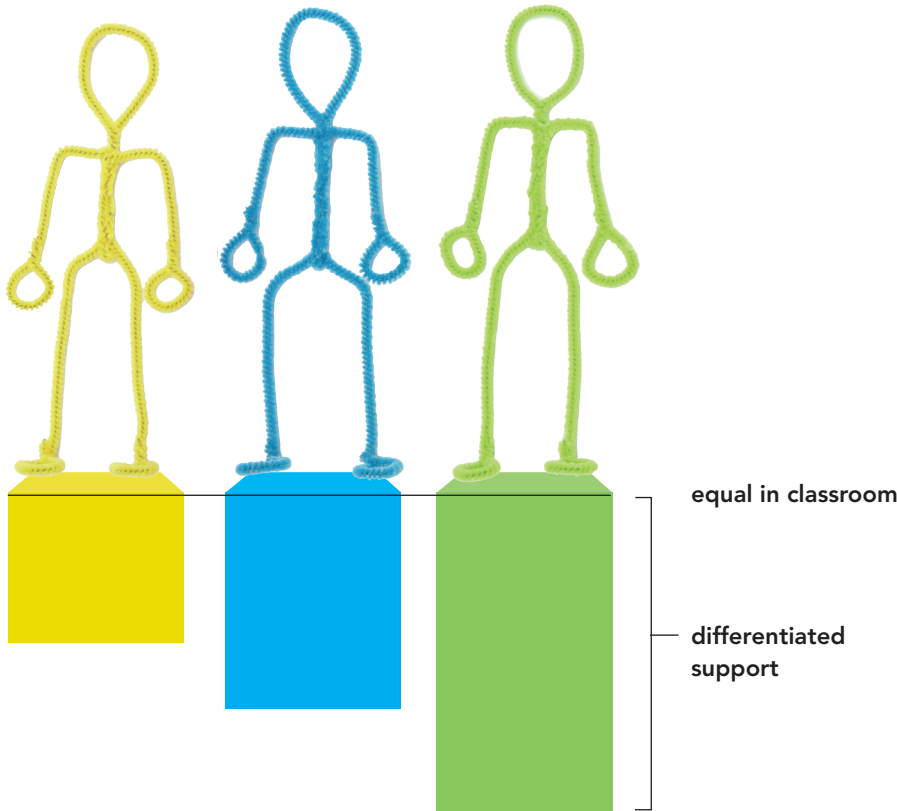
Not too long ago I was having coffee with a younger teacher colleague, and she asked me lots of questions about small group reading, and I could see she was trying to square what I was saying with other models she knew of. “I’m a marriage of reader’s workshop and direct instruction,” I offered, and even though I hadn’t quite articulated it for myself until then, it was totally spot on. So as you read this book, keep this hybrid of pedagogies in mind. In a nutshell, what this means is that I strongly believe that any implementation of workshop needs a strong direct instruction strand. And, that reading programs that are almost exclusively direct instruction short shrift all students in terms of cultivating the reading engagement and culture that leads to achievement. As tribute to this younger teacher who pushed me to clarify my beliefs, and in honor of all the collegial conversations we have, in each chapter you’ll find *We Can Do This!* sidebars devoted to management tips and generally cheerleading.

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Supports and Scaffolds

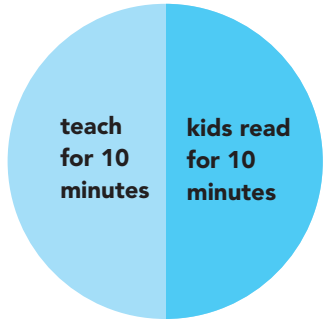
Equal access and equity are issues in education and society that are finally getting attention. Some students in our schools have been historically underserved, which means that they are part of a group of students whose educational needs have not been met over time (Fergus, 2016). This situation speaks loudly when looking at assessments that show the achievement gap. Students who are Black score lower than Latino, Asian and White students on national assessments. Likewise, students who come from poverty score lower on national assessments than students who do not. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Providing Scaffolded Support for Different Students’ Needs



10–10 Rule

During a 20-minute small group session:



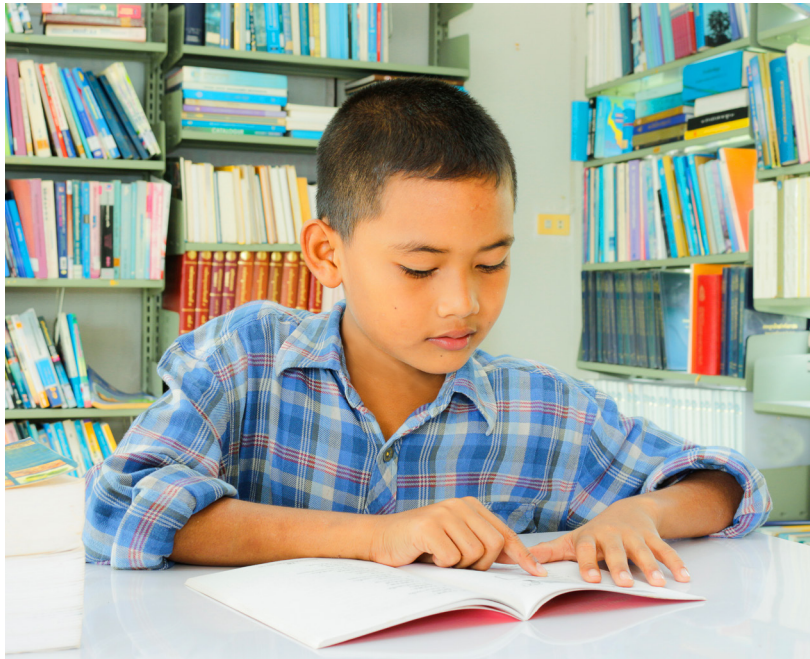


Equity for those who are historically underserved means knowing the different types of supports and scaffolds children need. It means doing more, and doing things differently, to ensure an equal outcome. It does not mean an equal application to all learners as some learners start in different places. This is equity. It is also a point where social justice can be practiced. Teaching all students to read, providing the supports and scaffolds each student needs, is a social justice issue.

Equity means looking for commonalities while embracing differences. It means looking beyond test scores or reading levels to see two or three students from dramatically different backgrounds who all love Harry Potter. Or biographies. Or Kwame Alexander books. Teaching striving readers in small groups is about attending to their needs, for sure, but that means thinking beyond skills and strategies to noting and building interests and curiosities, and social connections.

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Educators Julie Wright and Barry Hoonan reconceptualize small groups as “meeting places for thinking about and appreciating texts.” (Wright & Hoonan, 2018). They make the point that small group instruction is best thought of as small group learning experiences. And like me, they encourage teachers to grab the reins of the Gradual Release Model to steer students to what makes sense on any given school day: “Sometimes teachers need to lead small group experiences. Sometimes they need to be nearby. And sometimes they need to get out of the students’ way. In each instance, the teacher is supporting students to just the right extent. Teachers know how to position themselves at any given time to move kids forward.” (Wright and Hoonan, 2018)



Each reader in a small group goes on to independent reading. Each teacher, then, needs to think beyond the gathering to how she/he can support each reader to open a book and succeed.



In yoga practice there is a gazing technique called *drishti* that I have found powerful for observing students. *Drishti* helps us to control and direct our attention, so we can see things clearly as they are. It works because when we control and direct the focus of our eyes, our attention follows. *Here is how to give it a try:* Focus on a striving student in your classroom; look at the student and notice the student, how he or she interacts, his or her “place” in the classroom, how the other students interact with him or her. What do you see? What can you learn from what you see? How can you make a change to increase the support or circumstance in your classroom to provide support? Gaze and see what is going on in your classroom and then make a move to deepen your teaching practice.

Further Reading

Equity and culturally responsive teaching resources that can help you:

- *Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators*, second edition, by Jean Moule
- *How to Teach Students That Don't Look Like You: Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies*, second edition, by Bonnie Davis
- *Culturally Proficient Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach* by Kikanza Nuri-Robins, Delores Lindsay, Randall Lindsay, and Raymond Terrell

Understanding Ourselves as Reading Teachers

So what does it mean to do things differently to ensure equity? The instruction you provide at the reading table will be ramped up for some students. We have to consider our own values, biases and beliefs about the children we are serving, however, before we focus on the instruction (Gay, 2018). To best work with children who differ from you, you need to consider three things.

- The first step is to examine how we, as teachers, address issues of diversity in our teaching (Nuri-Robbins et al., 2012). You can begin this journey by recognizing and developing an understanding of who you are, as a reading teacher. You need to know yourself, your strengths and your weaknesses as you deepen your teaching practice.
- Second, you need to understand your students. They may differ in background, ethnicity, cultural beliefs, socio-economic status, educational background and lifestyle. You need to know them and who they are. It's not easy for any of us to be dispassionate about our own cultural background in order to fully know and embrace other cultural histories, but it is imperative that we do.
- Third, you need to know how your students receive you and the reading instruction you are providing. See the checklist on the facing page. The underlying beliefs you have can affect your teaching in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. When you are honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses, biases and beliefs, you will be more open to understanding your students, and also perceiving how they are receiving instruction. We could be providing lots of help in reading, but saying it in a way that feels patronizing to students, or is a cultural mismatch (Gay, 2018).

In the next chapter we will explore where students are in their reading development, but we can't do that effectively until we take stock of who children are as people.

✓ SELF-REFLECTION CHECKLIST

STEP	ASK YOURSELF:
1	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Who am I as a reading teacher?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Am I comfortable teaching students in small groups?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Am I comfortable teaching phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension at the reading table?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Do I know what to do to help students who need extra support?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Do I know what to do to help students who need reading extension?</div>
2	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Who are my students?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> What cultural backgrounds are my students from?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> How can I learn about their cultural background if it is different than mine?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> What is each child's life story?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> What brings them here to my reading table for reading instruction, support, or extension?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Do I use texts that reflect their lives?</div>
3	<div><input type="checkbox"/> How am I relating with my students?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Am I talking down to students?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Do I talk to my students with respect and care?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Am I exasperated or expansive and supportive in my comments and attitude when working with students at the reading table?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Am I culturally aware of the communication styles of my students and respectful of these communication styles?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> When I am talking with another adult, do I talk about students in front of them as if they were not there, or do I show respect?</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Do I label students when talking to colleagues, or put students in boxes (<i>this one needs help, that one needs more vocabulary work...</i>) or do I understand their personal stories and how their strengths and needs develop from who they are and their lived experiences?</div>