



*Strategy learning takes time and requires repeated demonstrations and repeated opportunities to practice with support. This is especially the case when the goal is for a learner to use the strategies with such automaticity that the learner can focus not on his or her ways of seeing but, rather, on that which is being seen.* —Lucy Calkins

## Using Strategy Groups to Meet the Literacy Needs of Diverse Learners

BY CHERIE BYROM

Ms. Walker (pseudonym) teaches third grade at Brown Elementary School. Shelby and Cierra are students in her class of 18. Both girls are reading below grade level and both struggle with phrasing and have a low fluency-reading rate. Sterling and Mark both read on grade level but have trouble inferring character's feelings and motivations in a text. Ashley, who is an avid reader and reads well above grade level experiences the same problem with making inferences. Although Sarah reads on grade level, her reading rate is comparable to that of Shelby and Cierra. On many occasions, teachers are faced with a diverse population of readers--students who are reading on various levels, reading on different levels and experiencing similar struggles, or reading at high levels of accuracy with low levels of comprehension and more. If our goal is to adapt our teaching to meet the needs of that diverse population, then we must examine sound instructional practices, like small strategy group work, that offer the best outcomes for student achievement.

### Strategy Groups

Most teachers are accustomed to using various modes of whole group instruction in their reading workshops. When considering a model that is highly effective in helping a group of readers develop more skill in using reading strategies across texts and contexts, Allington (2009) suggests that we look at small groups as a means of instruction and intervention that produces superior academic outcomes. According to Fountas and Pinnell (2001), small group work is particularly important for students who have difficulty learning to read. This focused teaching in small groups makes it

possible to provide appropriate instruction for a diverse class of learners. Plainly stated, the biggest reason to work with small groups is to tailor the teaching to the needs of the students (Calkins, 2010). This article will address balancing small group instruction, particularly the use of strategy groups, to provide targeted individualized instruction and meet the needs of all learners.

Strategy groups are small needs-based groups which are pulled together to focus on a specific skill or strategy. Students are grouped together, not because they are reading at the same level or reading the same book, but because they all need instruction using the same strategy (Duke and Pearson, 2002). This specific instruction not only assists students with their current text but also with future reading endeavors and brings them step-by-step to independence (Serravallo, 2010).

### The Basics of Strategy Groups

The ultimate goal is to provide instruction that matches each individual reader's needs. Strategy groups provide a simple way to meet with students and support them as they work to attain new learning. These groups also provide a structure to support readers/students as they transition to independent practice.

The teacher pulls a small group (3-4) of readers (across levels) together for ten to fifteen minutes of intense strategy work based on current assessment data and/or connected to the work they are currently doing in reading workshop. The text involved is

either a shared text or texts the students are reading independently. The teacher teaches the strategy, usually by demonstration and then scaffolds the readers as they try it on their own, moving quickly from one student to another coaching as needed.

The support offered in a strategy group is consistent with the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983). This instructional model (see Figure 1) requires the teacher to transition from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task . . . to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211).

Teachers are able to progress from providing heavy scaffolding or support to light scaffolding as learners become more proficient with the strategy or process being taught (Calkins, 2010). Planning instruction based on this model allows teachers to look at the developmental pathway the readers progress along as they learn a skill. Teachers set readers up for success by teaching with maximum support and gradually pulling that support away as a student moves more towards independence (Serravallo, 2020). This work is usually done in small cycles or a sequence of lessons with continual assessment along the way.

<p><b>Compliment/Name</b>—Notice what students are doing well. Let them know why they are gathered together. Compliments should relate to the teaching point. <i>I noticed that...</i></p>
<p><b>Teaching Point</b>—Name the strategy that you will teach. <i>Listen closely...today I'm going to teach you how to..., today you'll learn how to...</i></p>
<p><b>Teach</b>—Usually through demonstration. Present a clear strategy with precise steps. Strategy should match the reader. <i>Let me show you what it looks like..., Watch me as I show you how to do it...</i></p>

**FIGURE 1** *Gradual Release of Responsibility Model* Adapted from Routman, 2003

<p><b>Compliment/Name</b>—Notice what students are doing well. Let them know why they are gathered together. Compliments should relate to the teaching point. <i>I noticed that...</i></p>
<p><b>Teaching Point</b>—Name the strategy that you will teach. <i>Listen closely...today I'm going to teach you how to..., today you'll learn how to...</i></p>
<p><b>Teach</b>—Usually through demonstration. Present a clear strategy with precise steps. Strategy should match the reader. <i>Let me show you what it looks like..., Watch me as I show you how to do it...</i></p>
<p><b>Active Engagement</b>—Give students a chance to try/practice with teacher support and coaching. Majority of the time spent here. Independent reading books or teacher-selected text. <i>Now I want you to give it a try...</i></p>
<p><b>Restate Teaching Point</b>—Strategy/steps that were taught. <i>Today I taught you...</i></p>
<p><b>Link</b>—Link the lesson to continued work or unit of study. Set the expectation of continued practice across several texts. <i>Whenever you're reading..., Remember that..., So anytime that you're reading...</i></p>

**FIGURE 2** *Strategy Group Lesson Plan Guide*

This predictable framework helps teachers plan and helps students understand their expected role in all parts of the lesson.

### Strategy Group Framework

There are various schools of thought about specific frameworks, structures, or even templates for small group instruction. However, the bottom line is teachers need to be able to determine the needs of the students and respond accordingly with a format that will maximize the learning in a short teaching session. This format should be somewhat predictable for the students and provide an opportunity for teachers to differentiate based on learning styles.

In most cases, a strategy group will look much like a mini-version of a lesson already taught. It usually begins with the teacher determining the text to use for the lesson. The teacher begins by connecting it to the ongoing work of the class. Next, he/she demonstrates what this strategy/skill looks like in a proficient reader (I do, you watch). The reader is then asked to try the strategy using his or her own text. However, the teacher is still there to give assistance or guidance when necessary (You do, I watch). During this coaching time, the teacher gives one-on-one attention to the student and makes the necessary adjustments based on the individual child's needs. As a closure to the lesson, the teacher may present a second teaching point or share a teachable moment from the interactions of that lesson. Finally, as the teacher links the lesson to the continued work, students continue using what they have learned in their independent reading. Because we are looking at the developmental pathway, teachers plan several strategy lessons over

time, decreasing the scaffolding little by little to reach the ultimate goal of independence (Calkins, 2010). The lesson plan guide (see Figure 2) provides a framework and language (in italics) for strategy groups.

### Strategy Groups or Guided Reading: What is the Difference?

In examining the purposes of our small group instruction, the question often arises of whether to use a strategy lesson or guided reading lesson. The question of what the difference between the two may be is also common. They are different in several ways including the text, the structure of the group, what the group is learning, and how often the lesson is repeated. The chart (see Figure 3) shows some common differences between the two types of instruction.

In both structures, teachers are explicitly teaching a small group of readers. In guided reading, the teaching point often gives readers effective strategies for processing as they read a variety of texts. As students read texts that are organized along a gradient of text difficulty, they are expanding their systems of strategic actions for increasingly complex text (Fountas and Pinnell, 2007). Teachers use the guided reading format for instruction in order to help students develop those strategic actions. More often than not, a teacher will use a strategy lesson to teach such comprehension skills as inferring a character's feelings, forming theories about a character, or determining importance

	STRATEGY LESSONS	GUIDED READING LESSONS
Text	<p>Children who would benefit from support with a similar strategy usually with an independent text</p> <p>The text is chosen based on the focus of the lesson. It could be a shared text or independent text. For example, if the strategy involves working on increasing reading rate, it might be an easy text.</p>	<p>Children are who are reading at about the same level of instructional text are gathered together</p> <p>The text is usually one that presents some challenges for the students at that level. Students read more challenging texts over time. Much of the instruction revolves around the characteristics of texts at specific levels.</p>
Structure	<p>The teacher begins the lesson by naming the strategy, teaching through demonstration, and allowing students to practice with support.</p>	<p>The lesson begins with a book introduction, proceeds with a text overview and teacher support for specific challenges of the text.</p>
Teaching Point	<p>The teacher begins the lesson with the teaching point/strategy in mind, teaches it and watches students use it, and then coaches as needed. The majority of time is devoted to guided practice</p>	<p>The teaching point is decided during the lesson as the teacher observes the children reading. It is not mentioned until the final moments of the lesson with little opportunity for further observation of its use.</p>

FIGURE 3 *Strategy Lessons vs. Guided Reading*

in a nonfiction text. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) say simply, convene a small, needs-based group for a concept that some students need to learn and are ready to learn. If the concept is one explored across several different levels of text, the group will be more heterogeneous, thus more strategy based. If the concept is characteristic of a particular level of text or genre of text, the groups will be more homogenous, and the guided reading format more suitable.

*The whole goal of small-group teaching is responsiveness. It is critically important...to outgrow any feeling....to cling to one rigid template for small-group instruction. —Lucy Calkins*

### Planning for Strategy Groups

As teachers like Ms. Walker make instructional decisions and consider the task of balancing small group instruction, they form groups based on assessments to determine the needs of the students. In keeping with the recommendations of Fountas and Pinnell (2001), dynamic, flexible groups are formed with the notion that students do not remain in one group or at one level for extended periods of time. Instead,

teachers approach this planning by looking at student skill sets and where students are in relation to mastery of specific strategies or skills. For strategy groups, teachers plan a series of sequential lessons that allow development of proficiency leading to independence, with the appropriate amount of scaffolding based on the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model. Teachers use assessments to determine need in areas like word solving, fluency, and comprehension. It is not unusual for students to need strategy work in more than one area. When this is the case, it is essential that teachers balance the small group instruction with ample time for independent practice and close monitoring of student progress. The sample planning grid (see Figure 4) provides a look at what Ms. Walker’s class might look like as she plans her strategy groups.

### Some Final Thoughts on Strategy Groups

Successful strategy group instruction requires careful planning and thoughtful, responsive teaching. Students must have a clear understanding of strategies taught. Teachers must be explicit in the demonstration and provide ample support and time for practice to ensure a seamless transfer to independence. It is through this

SMALL GROUP PLANNING FORM-READING		WEEK OF _____
<b>Strategy:</b> Self-monitoring for comprehension  <b>Students:</b> Sarah–H* Paul–E Jaden–J	<b>Strategy:</b> Noticing character and making judgments and inferences  <b>Students:</b> Mark Sterling Jose Alicia	<b>Strategy:</b> Stopping and jotting your reaction to character’s action  <b>Students:</b> Will Grace Jack
<b>Strategy:</b> Goal setting for reading stamina and volume  <b>Students:</b> Renaë Sterling Anthony Jaden	<b>Strategy:</b> Fluency Work-use pausing to create phrase units that convey meaning  <b>Students:</b> Shelby Cierra James	<b>Strategy:</b> Retelling story using story elements  <b>Students:</b> Jan Cindy Peter Greg
<b>Strategy:</b> Directional Movement Left to right, top to bottom, return sweep  <b>Students:</b> Peter–E Paul–E Mary–F	<b>Strategy:</b> Self-correction—return to beginning of line, read on to end of line, repetition  <b>Students:</b> Michael Jermaine Janet	<b>Strategy:</b> Analyze words left to right using letters, letter clusters, word parts  <b>Students:</b> Shannon Macy Jack

\*Letters indicate Guided Reading Levels

**FIGURE 4** Sample Planning Grid

understanding that teachers will successfully meet the literacy needs of diverse learners in their reading classrooms.

Below are tips to consider as students are engaged in strategy groups.

- Choose teaching point based on student needs
- Use familiar texts for demonstration
- Select student texts that match the strategy being taught
- Be sure that what is taught is indeed a strategy
- Keep demonstrations short. Guided practice and coaching need more time
- Provide only the amount of coaching support needed
- Differentiate the coaching according to the child
- Follow up with groups and help members take next steps
- Use small groups flexibly

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