

Differentiated Small Group Practices for Split Classrooms

BY DR. LEE WRIGHT, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

The United States education system emerged from one-room schoolhouses made up of multi-age classrooms (Song, Sparadlin, and Plucker, 2009). Effectively teaching on-grade-level lessons in a classroom of students of multiple ages was challenging. Over time, because of this challenge, most schools became organized into same-age classrooms, which prevail today. Yet, modern variations of multi-age classrooms remain. Today, these kinds of classrooms are known as Combined, Blended, Multi-grade and/or Split classrooms, all of which include students from one or more consecutive grades being taught in the same classroom by the same teacher (Stone, 1998).

Today's teachers of modern multi-age classrooms face the same major challenge as those of the one-room schoolhouse: how to teach students, for example, of ages 5, 6, and 7, who range from Grade K to Grade 2, on-grade-level subject matter all at the same time (Miller, 1990). Fortunately, America's earliest teachers discovered that the best way to address this challenge was to cluster students with similar academic needs into small learning groups (Cox, J., *n.d.*). Doing so made it possible for one-room schoolhouse teachers to teach lessons tailored to the shared academic needs of small groups of students. Today we have come to know this method of teaching as differentiated small group instruction.

Differentiated small group instruction is based on the belief that in all classrooms, students' academic abilities, rates of learning, and progress, differ (Willis & Scott, 2000). Therefore, there is no such thing as "one-size-fits-all" lessons when it comes to effective teaching. Thanks to multiple scientific studies, we now know that differentiated small group instruction is scientifically established as an essential best practice for supporting mastery of academic skills. Moreover, it is recommended for use in all classrooms settings—single age and multi-age alike.

The degree to which a teacher should include differentiated small group instruction in his or her classroom depends largely on the range of his or her students' academic abilities. The greater the range of students' academic abilities, the more need there is for a teacher to include small group differentiated lessons aimed at meeting those varying needs. Multi-age



LEE WRIGHT, Ed.D.

began his career as a kindergarten teacher in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. He went on to occupy many different roles throughout his over 20 years in education. Some of these included being a Literacy Coach, Texas Statewide Staff Developer and Professor of Education. He earned his doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction in 2009. Lee's passions and expertise grew out of the joys and challenges he faced while working in Title 1 schools within large urban school districts throughout Texas. Today, he feels privileged to have the opportunity to train educators on topics that focus on the importance of effective classroom management, small-group instruction and early literacy.

classrooms, such as split classrooms, include students from two or more grade levels within a single room. This almost always results in a wide range of student academic abilities and therefore a wide range of student needs across the classroom. As such, split classrooms demand high degrees of differentiated small group instruction.

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How Can Split-Classroom Teachers Meet the Challenge of Teaching Children of Multiple Ages?

TIP 1: INVEST AS MUCH TIME AS POSSIBLE TEACHING IN SMALL GROUPS

It is common practice for single-grade-level teachers to organize their instructional day around a balance of teaching whole and small group lessons. Typically, on-grade-level lessons are taught in whole group and then students are provided with varying degrees of instructional differentiation via small group instruction. However, if split-classroom teachers try to organize their instructional day in the same manner, they quickly discover that this method is often poorly suited for supporting teaching the range—in other words the depth and breadth—of content matter they are responsible for teaching each day. Unlike single-grade-level teachers, split-classroom teachers are responsible for teaching multiple on-grade-level subject matters. This presents challenges. One major challenge is that there is simply not enough time during the school day

for split-classroom teachers to try to introduce all of the on-grade-level skills that their students require via whole group instruction.

For example, if a split-classroom teacher of Grades K-1 tries to teach all of her on-grade-level standards via whole group, she would need to teach two different whole group lessons, for each subject, each day. On average, whole group lessons are taught for longer periods of time (30–45 minutes) than small group lessons (15–20 minutes). If we consider the core content areas that most K-1 teachers are responsible for teaching (Reading, Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, etc.), a K-1 split-classroom teacher would need to teach at least 10 different whole group lessons per day. This equals roughly 5 to 7.5 hours of whole group instruction per day. This suggests that the makeup and degree of time devoted to whole and small group lessons in traditional classrooms simply does not work for split classrooms.

As such, teachers in split classrooms must consider different approaches for how best to organize their instructional time. Combining teaching two or more years’ worth of similar standards within a single whole group lesson is one way split-classroom teachers tackle the dilemma. This practice can be effectively used for teaching some content areas (Gilmore, *n.d.*). However, this method alone is insufficient to meet all of the content-area needs split-classroom teachers face. A highly effective alternative for organizing split-classroom instruction time is for teachers to invest as much of their daily instruction time as possible toward teaching 15-to-20 minute differentiated small group lessons.

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TIP 2: USE DATA FOR MAKING SMALL GROUP DECISIONS

As is true of all classrooms, determining students' academic needs in split classrooms should not be limited to solely focusing on teaching on-grade-level objectives. Rather, determining what to teach, and at what grade levels to teach it, especially in small groups, should foremost be based on the teacher's ongoing analysis of student data. After all, just because a student is in the second grade does not mean that he or she is academically performing at a second-grade level in every subject area.

In split classrooms, student data should be used to decide:

- Which students share common instructional needs?
- Which students should be assigned to a small group?
- How many small groups does the teacher need to prioritize teaching each day?
- What kinds of knowledge and skills should be taught within each small group?

Moreover, because all students academically advance at their own pace, each student's data will change at varying rates throughout the school year. This is important for teachers to keep in mind so that they carefully plan when and how to routinely and systematically collect and analyze their student data. Doing so will allow them to continually make the most effective ongoing decisions as to how to design small group instruction that is capable of advancing all of their students' academic needs.

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TIP 3: USE FLEXIBLE SMALL GROUP PRACTICES

Split-classroom teachers should be careful to routinely analyze the composition of their classroom's small group memberships. No one small group should contain the exact same students in the group for prolonged durations. Since small group lessons are designed to promote student growth and since students progress at their own pace, it is expected that some students within a small group will grow academically faster than others. This is why it is critical to continually assess each student's small group academic achievement. When a student's small group data indicate that he or she has mastered a particular small group's instructional aims, this student must be reassigned into a new small group aimed at meeting the student's new academic needs. As such, the members within all split-classroom small groups should continually change throughout the academic year. This practice is known as “Flexible Grouping.”

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TIP 4: TEACH A VARIETY OF SMALL GROUP LESSONS

In split classrooms, teachers should organize their day to include a variety of small group lessons aimed at meeting different instructional aims. Teachers can organize their day to ensure that they teach as many on-grade-level small group lessons as possible that include students who are all of the same age. In split

classrooms, small groups designed to teach on-grade-level instruction can ensure that teachers are providing standards-based instruction that aligns to their students' unique grade-level requirements. However, split-classroom teachers should also organize their day to include teaching small groups that perform on the same ability levels but who may not be of the same age. This kind of small group has a different instructional aim. It aims to meet students' individual academic needs, regardless of whether the students' needs correspond with their grade level. This kind of grouping is ideal for intervention and enrichment instruction.

TIP 5: DIFFERENTIATE THE DELIVERY OF SMALL GROUP LESSONS:

Student Practice

Because of the wide variance across the academic abilities of students in split classrooms, it is important that teachers also differentiate what occurs within each small group lesson. This includes ensuring to differentiate small group student practice opportunities. One way teachers can accomplish this is by assigning as much on-grade-level student practice as appropriate to students in mixed-grade-level small groups. This practice helps students to apply the skills they learn within a small group lesson at their appropriate grade-level requirements.

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Another way to differentiate small group practice is to require differentiation of the products and/or processes that students are expected to generate in small groups. For example, at the end of a small group lesson that involves reading a book and learning how

to draw conclusions, lower-grade, or lower-performing, students within the small group could be asked to find two examples of textual evidence that supports their conclusion. In contrast, students in higher grades, or performing at higher levels, within the small group could be asked to find at least four textual evidence examples to support their conclusions.

TIP 6: DIFFERENTIATE THE DELIVERY OF SMALL GROUP LESSONS:

Student Questions

Split-classroom teachers can also differentiate their small group instruction by posing questions about the content in study at varied levels of cognitive difficulty. This is best accomplished by referencing a Bloom's Taxonomy and/or Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) Cognitive Rigor Chart when planning for small group lessons. Teachers can differentiate their small group lessons by planning to ask students who are in higher grade levels, or who are performing at higher levels within a small group, questions that cause them to infer, judge, and/or evaluate. Such questions are aimed to promote higher levels of thinking and therefore are often best suited for higher-performing students and students in higher grade levels. Conversely, students in lower grade levels could be asked questions at mid-level or lower levels of cognitive complexity, such as to state, list, and/or compare and contrast concepts.

TIP 7: DIFFERENTIATE THE DELIVERY OF SMALL GROUP LESSONS:

Student Materials

Visual spatial learning styles, or intelligence, refer to a person's ability to perceive, analyze, and understand visual information in the world around them. Many enjoy activities such as art, drafting, shop, geometry, computer graphics, and computer assisted design. They often have excellent visual memory for details in print and in the environment. People with visual spatial learning styles are good at visual problem solving and visual estimation. According to experts, this group of students learns best when taught using written, modeled, or diagrammed instruction and visual media. Visually and spatially talented students have good visual memory for details.

The student materials and resources that a split-classroom teacher chooses to provide her students for use during a small group lesson should also be differentiated. For example, during a small group reading lesson, teachers should plan on assigning different reading materials to different members of the small group. These materials can be chosen and assigned based on the grade level that the student is assigned to or at each student's instructional reading level. In this way, all students can practice applying skills learned in a common small group lesson by using materials that are tailored to their individual abilities and/or needs.

Conclusion

Teaching in a split classroom is challenging! Yet the demands of having to teach students with vastly different needs can be addressed via increases in the uses of differentiated small group instruction. One differentiated teaching approach that can be particularly beneficial for split classrooms is small group instruction. Split-classroom teachers can increase their uses of small group instruction by grouping students based on common data-informed needs so that they can design small group lessons capable of addressing the wide range of standards they must teach. Differentiated small group instruction can help split-classroom teachers not only overcome the challenges of how to teach multiple sets of state standards but also how to continually meet each of their learner's individual needs.

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