



Shanahan on Literacy

Seatwork that makes sense for reading

Teacher question:

I work with students in small groups daily and need the rest of the students to be engaged in meaningful practice of their new literacy skills. What types of activities would be best for this practice?

The benefits of small group instruction are obvious. Teachers can make the learning experience more apt and intense – the small numbers allow for more responsiveness, more vigilant monitoring, and fine tuning of the teaching.

The downside of small group instruction should be equally evident. While the teacher is working with one small group, the rest of the kids are on their own. Much more learning takes place with the teacher and, frankly, much less with the kids on their own.

There are some supports and approaches that can mitigate this problem, though their availability is uneven. For instance, some schools provide teacher's aides, and this assistance can allow productive activity with a couple of groups simultaneously. There may be parent volunteers who play that role. Some schools are close to a college and have access to preservice teachers. And, then there are those classrooms with multiple computers that allow students to work with research-proven programs.

Those situations exist, but there are many more teachers who are on their own trying to manage small groups. I suspect you are one of those.

Even in those cases, there are things a teacher can do to minimize the problem. For instance, in some schemes the teacher moves among groups. This takes various forms. In paired reading, the teacher goes from pair-to-pair to monitor progress, guide partners' responses, and add some teaching to the mix. I recommend that all the kids in a class work on fluency simultaneously, to make this as efficient as possible. Sometimes teachers alternate between two guided reading groups, interacting with one while the other reads. Cumbersome, perhaps, but workable. Another possibility is book club groups in which the kids play a big role in operating the group discussions; this allows the teacher to move profitably among even more groups.

Teachers can also have everyone in the class reading the same selection at the same time. What varies in this case is the amount of scaffolding, support, and extension that will be provided to some students. That increases the amount of teaching delivered to the lowest readers (they get more help) and decreases it for the best – which fits nicely with Carol Connor's research (2022) on what leads to the greatest learning for a class. (Connor found that the best readers could make real progress reading on their own and being engaged in more independent activities. She did not find the same benefits for the other students.)

In any event, I've long recommended that teachers minimize small group work. Often such work is unnecessary, engaged in only because the teachers are required by their district to do it. This leads to silly stuff like teachers delivering the same lesson multiple times.

While I try to avoid any more small group teaching than necessary, I would never ban the practice. It's just too valuable and classroom life too complicated to not have access to it – at least when it is used appropriately.

Let's say you use small group instruction strategically, to target learning needs of students and you need to know what kinds of activities to assign the other students. For that, all you need to do is turn your attention to the research on seatwork...

Except there is no body of research on seatwork (just one study as far as I can tell—and, though helpful, it doesn't even attempt to describe appropriate instruction in any kind of specific detail).

This is an issue without empirical data; Just lots of authoritative opinion.

So, let me add my advice to the mix.

Use activities that require a lot of accountable reading and writing. We want kids to read and write a lot. Some schemes aimed at doing that reduce instruction markedly to free up reading time. I'm not talking about that kind of thing, since studies haven't found those practices to be productive for most kids.

The accountability issue is big here. If students know that there will be some real follow up that will take them back through the text in detail it changes both their reading behavior and their learning. I'm not a big fan of one-on-one conferencing in reading because it increases the amount of time kids are away from the teacher and minimizes their accountability.

There are various ways of requiring reading during the time a teacher is busy with another group. The teacher might encourage students to attempt that day's selection on their own before they try to undertake it with the teacher's guidance. The same thing can be done, frankly, with a social studies or science chapter. That permits students to read such texts multiple times.

Another possibility is to teach a writing lesson just prior to starting with reading groups and to have the boys and girls working on their compositions or revisions while the teacher is elsewhere. The same can be done with vocabulary lessons.

However, if students have problems with the work tied to such lessons, the teacher will have to follow up – so it's important that the seatwork not be so demanding that children need teacher help. I've tried this with math, which would be fine if doing the problems wasn't such a big part of the math learning. Teachers really need to be available to take part in that classroom activity, so that pairing wasn't a good one.

Accountability means that the teacher is going to have to closely monitor student success. This can be done several ways – but usually through either follow up discussion (small group or whole class) or writing.

The best seatwork activities will guide students to engage the meaning of the text more deeply. I suspect this is as true for seatwork as for other pedagogical endeavors. That's why many worksheets and centers simply don't work very well. To complete them it usually isn't necessary to think much about the text.

What kinds of activities fit the bill? Here are a few that can be done with any texts that the students are trying to read. The key is to focus them on key parts of the text or language that you suspect will trip kids up.

1. Sentence reducing and sentence combining

Get students to dig into the meaning of sentences by recomposing them. For instance, have them turn these three sentences into one:

“Cities in many countries have special building laws. Buildings must be strong and flexible. That way, they won’t collapse during an earthquake.” ---->

To keep buildings from collapsing during an earthquake, cities in many countries have special laws that require the buildings to be strong and flexible.

Or, try breaking this sentence down into multiple sentences:

“So Hayleigh began drawing out her ideas to make charms that look like earrings.” ---->

Hayleigh draws out her ideas.

She makes charms.

The charms look like earrings.

2. Cohesion analysis

“When
disasters
such as
storms, floods, and earthquakes
strike an area,
people from all over the world
want to
help.

They
know that someday
they
may need
help
themselves.

They
also know that
it
is the right thing to do and that
it
is rewarding. I think that when people are in need it is important for
all of us
to find
a way to help out.”

3. Vocabulary and context

Lift some sentences from the text and have the students use the context to figure out the meaning of the underlined word and then have them replace the word with an appropriate synonym or phrase.

Buildings must be strong and flexible. That way, they won't collapse

during an earthquake.

Buildings must be strong and flexible. That way, they won't fall down

during an earthquake.

4. Text Comparisons

Have students write text comparisons. They can compare today's text with any other text that you have already had them read or that you have read to them. These comparisons might be of something quite specific such as comparing the characters from two stories, or it might be something more all-encompassing like comparing two social studies chapters (comparing two civilizations in grade 4, for instance).

Each of these exercises requires that students think deeply about the language of the text that they are trying to understand. These kinds of exercises can be done before or after the students have read the text.

Of course, if they are going to analyze text in those ways successfully, you cannot start out with a seatwork assignment. Initially, you'll need to do these with the boys and girls so that they learn how to do them. In one of Connor's studies on seatwork, this was one of the big take-aways. Kids often don't have any idea how to do the seatwork. Using similar activities throughout the year and preparing students to complete them will make a big difference.

References

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