Small-Group Reading Instruction: Lessons From the Field

Why are small groups more effective when children learn to read? Find out why, and how to implement best strategies for teaching beginning readers in this practical article that is based on current research.

Tara Wilson, Diana Nabors, Helen Berg, Cindy Simpson, and Kay Timme

A week before the school year began, Ms. Baffle, a kindergarten teacher, learned that all teachers in her school were to use small-group instruction when teaching reading. She began to wonder: "Why is small-group instruction so important? Why is whole-group instruction less effective? What will the other students do when I work with a small group? How many students should be in each group? How do I choose which children to place in each group? Should the groups stay the same all year long, or change?"

After she calmed down (a little) she discussed her concerns with the reading specialist, who explained to Ms. Baffle the whys, whats, and hows of small-group reading instruction. She paired Ms. Baffle with Mrs. Certainty, an experienced teacher.

Ms. Baffle soon realized that her questions were shared by many other teachers. During the year, her kindergarten classroom evolved from traditional, whole-group teaching into a focused, skill-embedded, multi-group format. She decided to pass on her new knowledge and enthusiasm to other teachers!

Why Small Groups?

Research shows that beginning readers benefit most from being taught explicit skills during intensive small-group instruction. The small-group, ***differentiated reading*** model enables teachers to focus on specific skills needed by varied groups of children (Tyner, 2003). (See Table 1 (pg 32) for definitions of terms in bold italics that are used throughout this article.)

Teachers can plan using ***research-based strategies*** in beginning reading instruction and ***developmental models*** that recognize the stages through which beginning readers progress. Differentiated small-group instruction is done by ***matching instruction*** to meet the needs of learners (Kosanovich, Ladinsky, Nelson, & Torgesen, 2007).

Teach explicit skills in intensive small groups.

In order to accommodate these needs, teachers plan ***reading centers*** for small groups that offer ample ***practice opportunities*** for children. Through ***small-group literacy lessons***, teachers explicitly teach students what they need to know about reading, and keep them engaged and motivated through ***hands-on word-work activities*** that promote inquiry and critical thinking (Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009).

By integrating strategy instruction into ***word-study lessons*** and engaging students in ***guided practice*** to use what they have learned, educators support students' early literacy learning. ***Active responses*** during small-group reading instruction increase student engagement and motivation to participate (Amendum, Li, & Creamer, 2009).

Active engagement of children during a small group word-study lesson might include providing each child with 10 magnetic letters (a, c, g, f, m, n, p, r, t, and v). As the teacher discusses rhyming words, each child could create the word "m-a-n". The teacher can then incorporate each child's knowledge of letter sounds to

Subjects & Predicates

Social interactions play a key role in helping students develop the wide array of complex cognitive abilities required for reading. A teacher having a conversation with five or fewer children can hear more questions, provide more direct feedback, hear more accurately, and attend to children's reactions in a more effective manner.

take-away the "m" and see what other words children can create using the "-an" word ending. Children actively create multiple words to demonstrate their understanding of rhyming words. Any child who attempts to create "g-a-n," for example, will show rhyming by creating nonsense words, thus demonstrating the rhyming rule is not based on word comprehension.

With five or fewer children in a group, teachers can focus needed attention on individual children and make sure that each child has opportunities to participate. Additionally, small-group time enables children to have access to ***high-quality interaction*** with their teachers (Wasik, 2008).

Teachers are able to observe students as they are learning and ***modify instruction***, clarify misconceptions, and discuss material to meet the specific learning needs of each child in a small group. Each group receives high-quality reading instruction and children can be engaged in meaningful tasks that are related to their specific instructional levels (Kiley, 2007).

Learning is social.

Learning Is Social

Small-group reading instruction is in alignment with the beliefs of Vygotsky, a sociocultural theorist, who believed that learning is inherently social and that children make sense of various school activities through observation, participation, and social interaction (Williams, et al., 2009).

Well-prepared teachers provide opportunities for children to participate in literacy activities, model ***literate behaviors***, and offer instructional support. Through social interaction and small-group learning activities, children begin to integrate and control specific knowledge and skills gradually, as they participate in meaningful, hands-on practice of those skills. Small-group reading instruction allows for this to happen with ease.

Reading and literacy lessons provide a social context in which teachers and students meet and closely interact (Amendum, et al., 2009). Social interactions play a key role in helping students develop the wide array of complex cognitive abilities required for reading (Rogoff, 1991).

Without a doubt, a teacher having a conversation with five or fewer children can hear more questions, provide more direct feedback, hear more accurately, and attend to children's reactions in a more effective manner. There are several cognitive and social/emotional benefits of small-group instruction.

Benefits of Small-Group Instruction

Whole-group lessons can often be too challenging for students with the least literacy knowledge—and too easy for students with the most literacy knowledge (Williams, et al., 2009). Therefore, the whole-group approach does not always meet students' needs, even in kindergarten.

The small-group approach, on the other hand, better enables teachers to meet the needs of each student. Small-group instruction is more effective than whole-group instruction because teachers can

- differentiate instruction to meet each student's needs,
- better match instruction to each student's level, and
- respond to children's reading more effectively (Amendum, et al., 2009).

Teachers who provide much of their reading instruction in a small-group format often cite that it is

Table 1. Glossary of Terms

Listed in the order in which they appear in the article

Differentiated reading	An approach to reading instruction that matches individual students to the teaching/learning approach, strategy, or level of learning content that best meets their needs. Children with similar needs in reading are taught specific skills in short lessons designed specifically for them.
Research-based strategies	Teaching techniques that have consistently led to the desired effect when used. Research and documentation support the conclusion that change in student outcomes or learning is a direct result of the identified teaching/learning strategy.
Developmental models	Guides to understanding how children develop and learn proposed by various learning theorists.
Matching instruction	Strategy in which the teacher combines knowledge—of each child, his/her level of understanding of the material, and the child's preferred learning style—to plan specific lessons to meet a child's needs.
Reading centers	Planned activities that provide hands-on experiences for children that target a specific reading skill. Reading centers may be designed for children to learn with or without teacher direction. Teacher–led reading centers enable teachers to scaffold children's learning while they are engaged in the activity. For example, the teacher might present a stack of picture cards and two buckets. One bucket is labeled with the letter "T" and one bucket is labeled with the symbol or words "Not T". The teacher may question and scaffold the children's learning as they sort the cards. Or children may play the game while the teacher works with other students.
Practice opportunities	Students learn best when they have multiple opportunities to practice the skills they are learning. Practice opportunities should vary to enable children to generalize learning information with different materials and in varied contexts.
Small-group literacy lessons	Learning experiences for small groups of children that are designed to focus on reading, writing, listening, or speaking skills.
Hands-on word-work activities	Learning experiences that are designed for children to manipulate letters and words to create understanding of literacy skills. Many word-work activities use letter tiles or letter stamps with which children create words.
Word-study lessons	Learning opportunities that focus on systematic instruction of phonics and spelling at the level of the children's understanding. Lessons are organized to help children understand word patterns and engage in purposeful word analysis.
Guided practice	A technique of scaffolding the children's learning from easy or familiar to new understandings. Teachers provide opportunities for children to practice a skill that they are learning while guiding and assisting children through the learning process.
Active responses	Times when children respond to learning in an active, involved manner.
High-quality interaction	When teachers are "in tune" to each child's needs. Teachers spend time listening and talking with children, as well as providing support and nurturance that enables children to develop at an optimal level.
Modify instruction	Teachers are decision makers who change instruction to meet children's immediate needs. Teachers observe and assess children's levels of understanding. They may review or change the delivery of content to help children make connections and understand the information.
Literate behaviors	Literacy skills that children demonstrate as they work with letters, words, and sounds while they are engaged in speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities.
Word knowledge	Understandings that children have about words, such as knowledge of the process of decoding and encoding symbols into words, rhyming, word families, chunking parts of words, vocabulary, recognizing high-frequency words, and recognizing familiar and unfamiliar words.
Decode	Children figure out what letters (symbols) represent as they attempt to read a word.
Multiple data sources	Teachers use many pieces of information about child development and early literacy skills as they design individually appropriate lessons.
Literacy work stations/ Literacy centers	Planned activities that provide hands-on experiences for children that target development of specific literacy skills. Literacy centers may be designed for children to engage in the learning with or without teacher direction.

easier and more efficient for them and their students than a whole-group format (Wasik, 2008). Having a small group enabled teachers to recognize struggling readers and attend to their needs. In addition, in this study, children learned more vocabulary words and comprehended the story better when the reading was done in small groups.

Ways to Implement Small-Group Instruction

Teachers can use several strategies to improve the outcome of small group instruction including

- manage development of the group,
- rely on assessment to guide instruction,
- plan to rotate literacy centers, and
- select appropriate content for each method.

Form Small Groups

How a teacher sets up small groups is critical to insure that all children succeed. In developing the small group, teachers should keep in mind group size and children's abilities.

When a group is limited to a maximum of five children, each child has opportunities to talk and be engaged in the learning process. Young children need the opportunity to discuss their thinking (Wasik, 2008) because discussion helps to build vocabularies and enables children to more fully participate.

When groups are formed, membership should be based on ability (Ediger, 2002), a strategy called *homogenous grouping*. Choose neutral names to identify groups to help assure that each student is respected and accepted. Groups can be named A, B, C, and D or identified by shapes, colors, or animals, for example.

Another important factor in small-group instruction is selecting the appropriate content to be taught. An example of what to teach during small-group instruction can include guided reading activities using a book or other selected text. Integrating word study using high-frequency words into a guided reading lesson is often done in small groups. In a guided reading lesson, teachers…

- Discuss the illustrations in the text to assist students to further develop background information for reading.
- Choose texts that match the developmental level of each group. Both students and teachers ask story-related questions to be answered by anyone participating.
- Discuss unfamiliar vocabulary in the book reading to increase the children's oral vocabulary knowledge.
- Build children's literacy knowledge, depending on the needs of the group, with letter work, alphabet knowledge, word work, story comprehension, sequencing, focusing on the story details, and story extension activities. These lessons are fast paced, interactive, and targeted appropriately on critical skills for each reading group.

Small-group work can also integrate word study. This enables children to practice how to use their ***word knowledge*** in order to ***decode*** unfamiliar words while reading. Guided reading activities can also support each student's development of effective strategies for processing texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty.

Teachers may follow a pattern when implementing guided reading. For example,

- the teacher begins by selecting and introducing an appropriate text

Photo courtesy of the authors

Guided reading provides a context in which the teacher can monitor and guide the student's application of specific skills in decoding and comprehension to construct meaning while reading.

- children read and discuss the text
- the teacher introduces strategic activities to extend meaning and word work

The teacher's role is to provide support to the students (Kosanovich, et al., 2007). Teachers use an appropriate variety of strategies to identify words and construct meaning from the passage. Guided reading provides a context in which the teacher can monitor and guide each student's application of specific skills in decoding and comprehension to construct meaning while reading.

Assess students' strengths and needs.

Rely on Assessment

Assessment informs teachers about what students already know and what they need to learn (Williams, et al., 2009). Look at students' strengths and needs by using ***multiple data sources*** to help identify an instructional starting point (Haager, n.d.). Both district-wide assessments and teacher-made checklists can be valuable in gaining information about each child.

As the school year progresses, keep in mind that groups are meant to be flexible and their participants will vary. Alter the composition of small groups based on assessment of children's changing instructional needs (Kosanovich, et al., 2007).

Rotate Literacy Centers

Literacy work stations or literacy centers can be set up with various activities to engage children who are not in the one small group the teacher works with at a time. Literacy stations assist with classroom management. Plan for small-group time AND prepare meaningful activities for different stations. Table 2 includes some helpful hints for effective use of literacy stations.

Teachers are urged to develop a system to manage centers and small groups. An example of a well-managed system at the beginning of the year might be:

Group A	Teacher-directed small-group lesson
Group B	Station 1
Group C	Station 2
Group D	Station 3

After about 10 to 15 minutes, the groups rotate. Group D moves into the small-group lesson and all other groups move to new stations. With an hour each day for small groups and literacy stations, four groups can rotate through each station, including transition time. Later in the year, extend times as children attend to activities for longer times.

A sample literacy center planning form for children and teachers is found in Table 3.

Select Appropriate Content

Selecting the appropriate content for literacy stations and small groups is essential for them to be effective means of instruction. Strong literacy stations can ensure that children participate in self-directed learning. The main components of reading—phonological awareness, alphabetic principle decoding, word study, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary—should be developed in each of the literacy stations.

Several types of activities can be integrated into literacy stations.

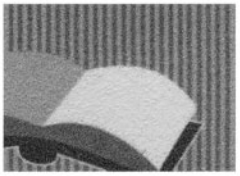
Table 2. Helpful Hints for Effective Literacy Stations

- Maximize students' independent participation while they practice different literacy skills.
- Place materials within the children's reach to increase the likelihood of independent success (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999).
- Structure the tasks to be challenging and yet enable children to be successful (Cooper, MacGregor, Smith, & Robinson, 2000).
- Clearly state directions and define physical space to aid student independence.
- Feature tasks that students can complete independently and with increasing proficiency (King, 2005).
- Consider the flow of students in and out of literacy stations.
- Make it clear if a final product is to be stored, collected, or if children keep the products with them.
- Monitor the completion of tasks at each station. This is important for accountability of student success and for the teacher's awareness of when tasks need to change.
- Teach students how to use and rotate through literacy stations for about a week. Practice the routine of engaging in literacy stations (King, 2005).

Table 3. Literacy Center Planning Form

This is a visual representation of the child's chosen centers (and not-visited centers) during the week.

Directions: Children receive the form at the beginning of each week. Represent each day of the week by a color (Monday = red, Tuesday = yellow, Wednesday = green, etc.). Children select the center they will work in and color a square next to the center with the day's color. The teacher can add comments to any space. Children color in the space for each center visited that day. Children may visit a center up to 3 times within a week. Time with the teacher is also recorded. The child has 6 opportunities during the week to work in small group with a teacher. (For a downloadable PDF of this chart, go to *Dimensions Extra*, Vol 40 #3 at www.southernearlychildhood.org "members-only".)

 **Small-Group Time With Teacher**				 **Writing**			
 **Read the Walls (Environmental Print)**				 **ABC Center**			
 **Library**				 **Computer**			
 **Magnetic Letters**				 **Private Space Individual Work**			
 **Post Office**				 **Listening/Story**			
 **Stamping Words**				 **Book Making**			

For example, kindergarteners could examine relationships between letters and sounds through hands-on activities like these.

- Literacy Station A—children match lower-case letters with upper-case letters.
- Literacy Station B—children match picture cards with letter cards for initial sounds of the words on the picture cards.
- Literacy Station C—children use magnetic letters to create different consonant, vowel, consonant (CVC) words.

Other stations might feature explorations like these:

- write in journals
- engage in an art activity related to the book being read that day
- listen to stories on tape
- form letters using modeling compound or other media

The key to successfully selecting content for literacy stations is to rely on assessment and ongoing monitoring to drive content selections. Through observation of children as they work in literacy stations, teachers can gauge when it is time to make content changes.

Daily progress monitoring is an essential ingredient of any reading program and serves as a key to accelerating student learning (Haager, n.d.). Progress monitoring includes frequently updating checklists of essential beginning literacy skills. Note when activities need to change, and more complex content is needed, or when more explicit instruction should occur (Opitz & Ford, 2004). When students make multiple errors or regularly disrupt learning, it may be time to change activities in the stations.

When some children are ready for more challenging work, while other students have not mastered the skills, modify tasks in some of the literacy stations to gear them to various levels. Some children may choose to attempt a more difficult activity with peer assistance or some may choose a less challenging activity and add their own challenge, such as timing themselves to see if they can complete the activity quickly.

Rotate literacy work stations.

In addition to changing the content of literacy stations, skilled teachers regularly reevaluate the membership of small groups and re-form them when it is appropriate. Rearranging students after each guided reading lesson to form word-study groups is cumbersome and time consuming (Williams, et al., 2009) and is not recommended.

Various assessments help teachers determine an individual student's strengths and needs for improvement. Using an investigative approach will provide an in-depth look at specific skills and behaviors. Try to understand underlying causes, and make good instructional decisions based on data.

By differentiating instruction in literacy stations and small groups, children's individual needs can be met. Some students will advance, while a few others will become less engaged with the literacy stations. Always offer a variety of instructional challenges to keep interest high. For example,

- set up a research station (children pick a topic and search for at least three facts)

Subjects & Predicates

Talk with other teachers about activities to enhance reading skills to build each other's repertoires of activities. Check with the resource staff, reading specialists, special education support staff, curriculum coaches, children's families, and community volunteers.

- encourage poetry writing
- ask children to write letters to future kindergartners
- make a word family book
- ask children to write sentences that have at least two sight words in them

Key Attributes of Small-Group Instruction

These are some of the most important points to remember when implementing small-group reading instruction.

Use Assessment to Guide Instruction

Observation of children's literacy knowledge helps teachers focus on which skills children use as they participate in classroom literacy activities. Checklists and other literacy assessments can be used to document specific skills that the child is proficient in using, is working on, and is not using at the time of assessment.

Using this knowledge is the key to making decisions based on the skills that enhance reading. Short, targeted instructional activities enable children to develop their reading skills. With each small group, teachers use their knowledge to adjust instruction.

Be sure to celebrate student success. Focus on specific skills so the new learning becomes evident, and then celebrate it. Success encourages children to continue practicing skills and try new learnings.

Work Collaboratively

Grade-level teams and support personnel are encouraged to work together to plan and implement instruction (Haager, n.d.). Talk with other teachers about activities to enhance reading skills and that build each other's repertoires of activities. Check with the resource staff, reading specialists, special education support staff, and curriculum coaches, too. Children's families and community volunteers may have even more ideas and be able to locate needed information.

Instead of re-creating each lesson, use what is working to develop activities for different groups. Each group needs different skill enhancements and different activities. Build a variety of activities that use the same skill so that children have multiple opportunities to practice the skill and incorporate it as they create their own knowledge.

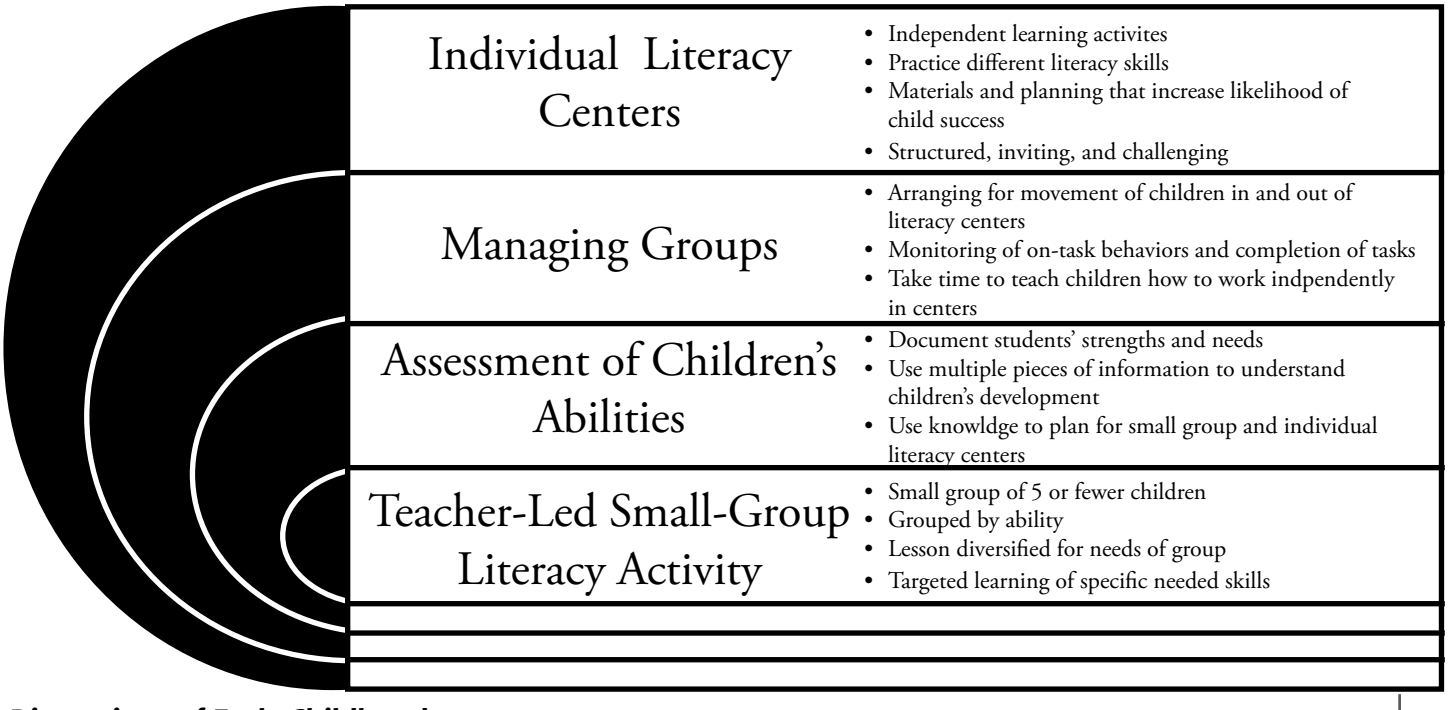
Share successes, strategies, and concerns with other professionals. Together everyone can celebrate and brainstorm to problem solve, opening up new opportunities.

Vary Instructional Strategies

When a new skill/objective is introduced, perhaps whole-group instruction is still a wise choice (Ediger, 2002). Although small groups are highly focused on specific skills, in some schools all students may still receive daily whole-class instruction in phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as some phonemic awareness activities from the comprehensive reading program (Kosanovich, et al., 2007).

Large-group instruction allows for interaction of children with various knowledge levels. Children who have

Effectively Implementing Small-Group Instruction



some knowledge of the concept can enhance and validate their understandings, while children with little knowledge may improve some skills. Modeling a reading skill can be a part of the discussion of the skill development. Exposure to a new skill sets a foundation for later learning.

Engage All Children

Providing high-quality, engaging activities for children who are not in small-group time is a must. As they create and problem solve on their own, they grow toward independence. During the 10- to 15-minute small-group teaching time, visually scan the room from time to time to monitor the other children.

Suggest that children ask a friend or classroom volunteer a question before asking the teacher, so they learn to solve their own problems. Children can rely on each other or sometimes even wait for assistance until the teacher completes work with the small group.

Teach children that small-group time is important so that they value their interactions when they are in small group. Set limits about when it is appropriate for children to interrupt a small group, such as when a material is broken or a child is hurt physically or emotionally.

After completing time with small groups, teachers check with children in other activities before beginning the next small group. How teachers plan for and use small-group time determines the impact the group experience has on both students' learning and assessment of it (Wasik, 2008).

* * *

Ms. Baffle was very excited by everything she learned from other teachers, the reading specialist, and all the research she studied. She wrote pages of notes and used her school's diagnostic tools to determine how to set up her kindergarten groups and form her literacy stations.

As a result, her students were able to move forward in their learning journey. The students grew as they encountered new and exciting literacy-rich activities in every literacy center they visited.

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Online Resources

Instructional Strategies
Saskatoon Public Schools
http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/guided/guided.html
Step-by-step instructions on how to establish small groups, definitions of key terms, and a vast array of information.

Teacher Resources
Tucson Unified School District
http://www.tusd1.org/resources/literacy/links.asp
Several links to helpful resources to aid teachers with small-group reading instruction, including a book list, comprehension strategies, fluency probes, and phonics lessons.

Reading Lady
http://www.readinglady.com/
Helpful teacher resources and research articles on reading instruction. Includes a blog for teachers about reading instruction.

Guided Reading in the Primary Classroom
Scholastic
http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4343
Many articles on small-group reading instruction. Lists grade-level-appropriate books to purchase.

Assessment Tools
Los Angeles County Office of Education
http://teams.lacoe.edu/reading/assessments/assessments.html
Information on assessing readers. Also has a few video clips showing teachers in action.

Wasik, B. (2008). When fewer is more: Small groups in early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Educational Journal, 35*(1), 515-521.
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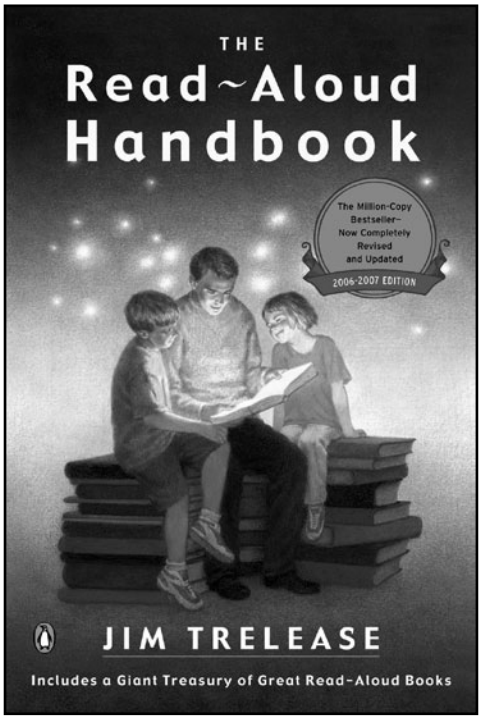
Kay Timme, M.Ed., is Adjunct Instructor at Sam Houston State University. Timme has served as a school district administrator and university instructor in early literacy, where she provided professional development for pre-service and in-service early childhood educators on planning and delivering small group instruction, and creating and using literacy centers/work stations.

Extend These Ideas With a Professional Book

Connect Small-Group Reading Instruction With a Professional Book

Keri Law



The Read-Aloud Handbook

By Jim Trelease. (2006). 342 pp. $16. New York: Penguin.

Trelease is well known for his advocacy of reading aloud to children throughout their school years. His popular book, now in its sixth edition, explains why it is important for children to grow up as readers, and how families and educators can aid in accomplishing that goal.

The first part of the book provides specific information on the effects of reading aloud and sustained and silent reading (SSR). Trelease indicates that one of the most important reasons to read to children is to help them associate reading with pleasure. He notes, "If a child is old enough to talk to, she's old enough to read to" (p. 23).

As children grow older, families and teachers can still read aloud with them. Trelease provides information on the developmental stages of children's reading. His useful tips for reading aloud include read as often as you and the child have time for, allow children to insert their own commentary on the book, don't overwhelm the listener, and choose stories you enjoy.

Trelease believes that there should be many high-interest books at home and in school. At home, he suggests placing books in multiple rooms so that reading material surrounds children. He recommends that children visit a library periodically, have their own library card, and join group read-alouds. Trelease notes that Oprah Winfrey's book club motivated people to read and made TV into a "pro-reading" experience. One lesson from Oprah that he mentions is, "More talk, less writing; more open discussion without right or wrong answers" (p. 139).

The Internet is a great resource for reading, but it cannot replace books. Book recordings are beneficial. "The recorded book is a perfect example of how technology can be used to make this a more literate nation" (p. 171).

The final portion of the book is a *Treasury of Read-Alouds* that includes details on how to use the resource. These are books for adults to read-aloud to children, so Trelease provides the "listening level" for each book rather than the reading level.

Trelease's book is highly recommended because it has many strengths. It is easy to read, with well-organized chapters and headings. Each heading is posed in the form of a question that is answered within the text. Trelease features inspiring anecdotes that reflect on the value of being read to as a child. He incorporates his own life experiences as well as the read-aloud experiences of others.

Although Jim Trelease may have never been a classroom teacher, his reading experiences and creative writing have led to an informative manual for families and educators who are interested in children's literature and cognitive development.

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