Optimizing Reading Instruction through Flexible Grouping Practices

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Abstract

This study investigated the teachers' perceptions and effectiveness of various grouping practices in reading instruction within school classrooms. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis with three participating school teachers. These multi methods not only enrich the data but also strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of findings to explore complex phenomena of grouping providing depth, contextual understanding and systematic data collection. Thematic analysis, involving coding, categorizing and identifying themes, was used to analyze the data. The study revealed key insights regarding the implementation and perceived effectiveness of grouping including increased student engagement, targeted skill development and opportunities for collaboration. However, challenges were also identified, such as time constraints, the need for adapting instruction within groups and managing student behaviour during group work. Therefore, careful planning and implementation are crucial to address potential challenges. Further research can provide educators with a more comprehensive understanding of the potential and limitations of flexible grouping in fostering successful reading development.

Keywords: Whole-class, small-group, pairs, one-on-one, benefits, challenges

Introduction

Effective reading instruction is a crucial aspect of school education as it lays the foundation of academic success. Classrooms are inherently diverse, with students displaying a range of reading abilities and learning styles (Dhakal, 2021). This raises the challenge for educators to provide targeted and differentiated instruction that caters to each student's individual needs. Effective reading instruction is essential for

student success in all academic domains. One promising approach that has gained significant attention in addressing this challenge is instructional grouping to respond to students' needs (Tomlinson, 2014).

Grouping for reading instruction is a pedagogical strategy that involves organizing students into various groups based on certain criteria such as ability, interest, or instructional need (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). It can take various forms, including whole group, small group, pair, and individual instruction (Dhakal, 2021; Tomlinson, 2014). Each format has its own set of advantages and challenges, and the effectiveness of each can depend on the specific educational context and student needs.

Grouping is employed for various reasons, as evidenced from the literature. One reason is the potential for improved reading outcomes (Serravallo, 2010). Teachers can adapt their teaching methods, materials, and pacing to better meet the diverse needs of their students by organizing students into groups (Tomlinson, 2014). This personalized approach can lead to improved reading comprehension, fluency, and overall literacy development (Deunk et al., 2018).

Homogeneous grouping, where students are grouped by ability, has been associated with slightly higher reading growth, particularly when considering students' initial reading skills and group placement (Patrick, 2020). Moreover, grouping can foster a sense of community and peer support within the classroom. When students are grouped with peers of similar abilities, they can engage in collaborative learning activities, share strategies, and provide feedback to one another (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This collaborative environment can significantly enhance the learning experience and promote a positive attitude towards reading. Similarly, alternative grouping formats, such as student pairs and small groups, have shown positive effects on reading outcomes for students (Serravallo, 2010). Moreover, smaller group sizes are highly effective for supplemental reading instruction (Vaughn, 2003). The choice between them may depend on specific educational goals and classroom dynamics. While small group instruction may excel in providing differentiated support and fostering collaboration among multiple students; paired reading offers personalized peer support that can boost confidence and enhance communication skills through direct interaction between two students. Additionally, differentiated instruction based on students' interests, learning styles, and grouping orientation significantly improved reading comprehension and engagement (Tomlinson, 2017).

It is important to note that the implementation of grouping for reading instruction requires careful consideration and planning. Educators need to ensure that the grouping process is based on accurate and ongoing assessment of student

performance, and that the groups remain flexible and adaptable to accommodate changes in student needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Additionally, teachers must be mindful of potential issues, such as the stigmatization of lower-performing groups or the lack of exposure to higher-level content for advanced readers (Deunk et al., 2018). Paired reading may tend to reduce stigma by providing a more personalized learning experience. Success of grouping strategies may also depend on the degree of teacher autonomy and the ability to differentiate instruction (Reeve, 2006). The literature suggests that grouping can be a beneficial instructional strategy when implemented with consideration of students' individual characteristics and educational contexts (Tomlinson, 2014).

Recently, scholars (Cash, 2018; Serravallo, 2010; Tomlinson, 2017) advise educators to employ flexible grouping, which is a dynamic instructional strategy where students are placed in temporary groups based on specific learning objectives, needs, or interests. This stands in contrast to static grouping arrangements, where students remain in the same group for extended periods, often based solely on grade level or ability. While the potential benefits of different grouping strategies in reading instruction have been acknowledged, a comprehensive understanding of its implementation and perceived effectiveness in the classroom context remains under-explored.

Despite the growing body of research on grouping in elementary classrooms, there is a gap in our understanding of how secondary teachers utilize grouping practices within their reading instruction. This study addresses this gap in knowledge by employing a qualitative case study approach to investigate the implementation and effectiveness of various grouping strategies in reading instruction within school classrooms in Nepal. Cultural factors such as ethnic diversity, communication styles, educational attitudes, teachers training, and community values all play significant roles in shaping the effectiveness of grouping strategies in classrooms. Through the analysis of data collected from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis with three participating teachers, this study aims to unveil various grouping strategies in reading instruction. By exploring teacher perspectives and experiences, this research aims to inform instructional practices and contribute to the ongoing dialogue about effective strategies for promoting reading success in secondary classrooms. The findings presented in this article contribute to existing research by illuminating the lived experiences of educators implementing varied grouping formats and offer valuable insights for further research and practice because teacher perspectives play a crucial role in implementation of grouping strategies within classrooms. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do teachers group students for reading instruction?

2. What are the perceived benefits of grouping for reading instruction?
3. What are the challenges associated with grouping for reading instruction?

Literature Review

Effective reading instruction is essential for student success across all academic domains. However, classrooms are inherently diverse, with students displaying a range of reading abilities and learning styles (Allington, 2018). This presents a significant challenge for educators who require to provide instruction that caters to each student's individual needs (Tomlinson, 2017). Addressing student diversity in Nepal involves navigating a complex landscape of linguistic differences, socioeconomic disparities, cultural stigmatization, curriculum limitations, teacher preparedness, geographic barriers, and gender inequality.

One promising approach to address this challenge is grouping for reading instruction. While research acknowledges the potential benefits of grouping in reading instruction, including increased engagement and targeted skill development (Vaughn et al., 2000), a comprehensive understanding of its implementation and perceived effectiveness in the classroom context remains under-explored. Grouping can take various formats including whole class group, small groups, pairs, and individualized instruction. In the context of Nepal, these strategies reflect a blend of traditional practices and emerging pedagogical approaches aimed at addressing student diversity.

Whole class grouping is a common practice where the teacher leads the instruction and students are expected to engage collectively. It is often used for introducing new concepts or providing instruction to all students simultaneously. Research on whole class grouping for reading instruction has been explored in various studies, with a focus on its effectiveness, particularly for students with disabilities. Efficacy of whole group instruction compared to other grouping formats is debated (Albaum et al., 1999). The dominance of whole class instruction in many educational settings is influenced by its efficiency, ease of management, cultural relevance, traditional preferences, resource limitations, and curricular demands.

The effectiveness of whole class grouping can be influenced by the teacher's ability to manage the classroom and integrate various instructional strategies. For instance, teachers may need to differentiate their instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, which can be challenging in a whole class setting (Vaughn et al., 2003). Moreover, whole class instruction may not always provide the individualized attention some students require, particularly those with special educational needs (Milsom, 2006). Despite these challenges, whole class grouping can have benefits, such as fostering a sense of community and facilitating social interaction among

students (Monobe et al., 2017). However, it may not always address the individual needs of students with diverse abilities (Vaughn et al., 2001). Classroom observations indicate that alternative strategies such as small group instruction can better support individual learning trajectories by fostering engagement and tailored support.

Some studies have found that whole class instruction is frequently used, even when it may not be the most effective method for all students (Dhakal, 2021; Hollo & Hirn, 2014; Vaughn et al., 2003). Students often make little academic progress in such settings, and their attitudes towards reading do not improve over time (Schumm et al., 2000). Moreover, research suggests that reading instruction for students with special needs is generally of low quality in whole class settings, with insufficient explicit instruction in key areas like phonics or comprehension strategies (Swanson, 2008). Evidence shows that prevalent whole class reading instruction may not be the most beneficial approach for all students, particularly those with special learning needs. The lack of individual support, curriculum limitations, teacher preparedness gaps, physical accessibility issues all contribute to a challenging educational environment for these students. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more inclusive practices that prioritize individualized instruction and promote integration within mainstream classrooms.

Alternative grouping formats, such as small groups or pairs, may offer more positive outcomes for these students (Schumm et al., 2000). Research on small group reading instruction has explored various aspects of its implementation and efficacy. The literature suggests that the traditional practice of grouping readers by text levels may not be as effective as targeted skill practice (Smith et al., 2022). Studies have also examined specific strategies within small group interventions, such as text previewing and keyword pre-teaching, with findings indicating that while both strategies are effective, the keyword strategy is more efficient (Burns et al., 2011). Small group instruction strategies have significant potential to enhance learning outcomes in the classrooms in Nepal, particularly for students facing language barriers or diverse leaning needs.

Small group instruction allows for targeted skill practice and can be more effective than grouping based on text levels alone (Toste et al., 2023). It also provides opportunities for differentiated instruction and frequent interactions with text, which can be beneficial in large classes (Marinez & Plevyak, 2020). Small group instruction targeting reading fluency has been shown to be effective, with most participants improving significantly (Begeny et al., 2018). The effectiveness of small group reading interventions is further supported by meta-analysis of small group reading interventions, which indicates a moderate overall effect, with targeted interventions being more effective than comprehensive ones (Hall & Burns, 2018). The impact of

small group instruction is also evident in English Language Learners (ELLs), with higher gains observed in students enrolled in direct instruction interventions that explicitly target foundational reading skills (Calderon & Slavin, 2011). Integrating small group instruction into classroom practices can foster an inclusive and effective learning environment that meets the diverse needs of students.

A broader range of reading skills, including high frequency words and grapheme-phoneme correspondences, taught through frequent practice and real books, has shown positive outcomes (Savage et al., 2018). Finally, evidence-based curriculum delivered in small groups as part of a three-tier model of prevention and intervention has been found to be beneficial, with students in directed, explicit intervention groups generally outperforming those in comparison groups (Gilbert et al., 2013). This evidence shows that small group reading instruction can be tailored to address specific reading skills and strategies. The research indicates that targeted interventions, especially those that are skill-specific and efficiently designed, are effective in improving reading outcomes. The evidence also suggests that small group instruction can be particularly beneficial for ELLs and young struggling readers (Reis et al., 2011). Targeting specific skills through small group instruction has significant applicability by providing differentiated learning opportunities that cater to the diverse needs of the students.

The research on homogeneous grouping for reading instruction presents a complex picture. Homogeneous grouping for reading instruction, where students are separated based on ability levels, has been a subject of extensive research with varying conclusions. Studies have explored its impact on students' reading growth, with some suggesting that when substantial time is dedicated to reading instruction, homogeneous grouping can be beneficial (Liddell, 2016; Reis et al., 2011; Tieso, 2005). However, the effectiveness of this approach appears to depend on factors such as the amount of instructional time and the initial reading skills of the students (Hong et al., 2012). Contradictory findings emerge when considering the broader implications of homogeneous grouping. While some research indicates that homogeneous grouping may lead to slightly higher reading growth on average, other studies have not supported the hypothesis that such grouping leads to greater gains in reading achievement (Patrick, 2020). The social and instructional dynamics within ability groups also play a crucial role in reading development, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of these contexts (Gavelek & Bresnahan, 2014). Particularly, it depends on cultural factors as well as the educational objectives. Educators need to weigh these considerations carefully when deciding on grouping strategies to respond to the needs of all learners.

Research on mixed-ability grouping for reading instruction reveals a complex landscape where perceptions and outcomes vary across different educational contexts. Some studies suggest that mixed ability grouping can be beneficial for students' reading development. For instance, in elementary settings, students have reported a preference for mixed-ability groups, suggesting that such arrangements can foster cooperative learning and help students progress in reading (Condron, 2005). However, international studies have shown that extensive ability grouping can lead to lower overall performance and greater achievement gaps (Blanco-Varela et al., 2024). Review of the literature on setting and streaming through thematic content analysis by Francis et al. (2016) identified seven potential explanations for poor outcomes among those in low sets and streams. They are: misallocation to groups; lack of fluidity of groups; quality of teaching for different groups; teacher expectations of pupils; pedagogy, curriculum and assessment applied to different groups; pupil perception and experiences of 'ability' grouping, and impact on their learner identities; these different factors working together to cause a self-fulfilling prophecy (p.4).

The meta-analytic review in Elbaum et al. (1999) provides evidence that alternative grouping formats, particularly student pairing, have positive effects on reading outcomes for students compared to whole class instruction. Research supports the use of pairing strategies in reading instruction, particularly for students with disabilities (Elbaum et al., 1999). Pairing students can foster cooperative learning and help students progress in reading by allowing them to get help from classmates (Milarisa & Dewi, 2019). However, some students may not have experience with this format, which can limit its effectiveness (Elbaum et al., 1999). The role of the student within the pair and the context of the instruction may influence the effectiveness of this approach. While the research is promising, it is also clear that more rigorous studies are needed to fully understand the potential of pairing in reading instruction across various contexts and student populations. This is a feasible approach to enhance student engagement and enhance leaning outcomes as it creates collaborating learning environment that responds to the diverse needs of the students.

The research on one-on-one reading instruction indicates that when applied consistently over time, it can lead to improved reading skills in students (Bladel, 2018; Crouch et al., 2007; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Individual instruction, while potentially beneficial for students with significant disabilities (Vaughn et al., 2003), should complement rather than replace classroom instruction. The evidence supports the use of evidence-based reading instruction and professional development for teachers as a means to increase student achievement (NRP, 2000). However, the

debate on the most effective instructional methods, such as the role of systematic phonics, continues to be a point of contention and development within the research community (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Further research is needed to reconcile these perspectives and to refine instructional approaches for one-on-one reading instruction.

Overall, earlier studies on grouping for reading instruction present a nuanced picture. The effectiveness of grouping for reading instruction is not conclusive and appears to be context-dependent. While some studies show positive outcomes, particularly for specific student populations or under certain instructional conditions, others find no significant benefits. The research reveals the importance of considering individual student needs, the amount of instructional time, and the adaptability of instruction when implementing grouping strategies (Vaughn et al., 2003).

The effectiveness of various grouping may depend on various factors such as the amount of instructional time and the ability to adapt instruction to students' needs (Parsons et al., 2018). Current body of research on grouping for reading instruction presents both supportive evidence and challenges to its efficacy. Each grouping format has its merits and demerits. Whole class grouping is dominant instructional approach for reading instruction and its effectiveness depends on the teacher's ability to engage students actively and manage diverse learning needs within the classroom. However, small group instruction appears to be particularly effective for addressing individual student needs and improving reading outcomes. The choice of instructional grouping should be informed by the specific needs of the students and the instructional goals of the teacher. It is one component of reading instruction program that should be complemented with other grouping formats to cater to individual student needs and promote comprehensive literacy development. There is a need for more rigorous studies that explore teacher perception and strategies for grouping for reading instruction. This study underscores the critical role of small group instruction in enhancing reading outcomes for students.

Methods and Procedures

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the implementation and perceived effectiveness of grouping in reading instruction within school classrooms. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of educators within a specific context (Yin, 2018). Selecting a case study design aligns with research questions focusing on gaining in-depth understanding of complex phenomena of grouping for reading instruction. The ability to address nuanced "how" and "what" questions further enhances its applicability in diverse research settings.

Participant selection is a critical factor in case study research that significantly influences both the depth of data collected and the potential generalizability of findings. Therefore, three school teachers (one secondary and two basic level) from a diverse public school in Kathmandu were recruited for this study. The participants were purposefully selected based on their reported experience and expertise in implementing grouping strategies for reading instruction. All participants held valid teaching licenses and had at least five years of experience teaching in respective school classrooms. Choosing these relevant, diverse, and knowledgeable participants enhances the richness and validity of insights gained while also shaping how these finding might relate to broader contexts.

Multiple data collection methods were employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher observed each participating teacher's reading instruction for a total of 5 lessons across a two-week period. During the observations, the researcher focused on how teachers implemented grouping strategies, interacted with students within groups, and adapted instruction to meet individual needs. Detailed field notes were taken to capture the observations. Combining observation with other data collection methods such as interviews and document analysis significantly enhances the depth and reliability of research findings.

Individual interviews were conducted with each participant following the classroom observations. The interviews explored the teachers' experiences and perspectives on using varied grouping strategies, including its perceived benefits and challenges, implementation strategies, and any adaptations they made for successful use in their classrooms. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. By integrating interviews with observations, this study achieved a more comprehensive understanding of grouping practices for reading instruction, leading to richer findings that inform practice and effectively

Relevant school documents, such as lesson plans and curriculum materials were collected from each participating teacher. These documents provided additional context and insight into the teachers' planning and implementation of grouping for reading instruction. These documents significantly contributed to the triangulation of data in the study by providing complementary information, validating findings, and offering richer contextual understanding of the issues under investigation.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from all three sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved coding the data for recurring themes, categorizing the codes, and then identifying higher-order themes that captured the essence of the data. The analysis was an iterative process, with constant comparison occurring between the data and emerging themes. To ensure trustworthiness, member

checking was conducted by sharing the preliminary findings with the participants for feedback and verification of accuracy. The iterative nature of thematic analysis was essential for ensuring a detailed and comprehensive understanding of qualitative data. This approach allowed to capture the complexity and richness of participants' experiences effectively by continuously engaging with data, refining themes, enhancing credibility, integrating multiple perspectives, and adapting to emerging insights.

Results and Discussion

Teacher perceptions significantly influence the implementation of grouping strategies in classrooms that impact both academic outcomes and social dynamics among students. Thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) collected from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis revealed three central themes related to the implementation and perceived effectiveness of grouping strategies in reading instruction: grouping formats, perceived benefits, and challenges associated with grouping for reading instruction. They are described below.

Grouping Formats

Four sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the field data on grouping formats. They are whole class groups, small groups, pairs, and individualized instruction. Teachers used these grouping formats for reading instruction to enhance reading instruction.

The first sub-theme that emerged from data related to grouping formats was whole group instruction. When asked about teaching whole group reading instruction, teacher C, who was teaching in grade five said, "Whole class instruction is most common in my classroom. I know that all students may not benefit from such instruction. Poor readers may be left behind because there are so many students in my class and I don't have enough time to deal with them daily." Similarly, teacher B, who was teaching in grade 8 revealed, "Whole class instruction saves instructional time. It can be used to model strategies so that students can watch and imitate". Teacher A agreed with this and added,

> A lot of content can be covered in short period of time in whole group instruction. Discussions and activities around a common text can arouse interest and love of reading and it prevents classrooms from being noisy and chaotic. It will be easier to manage compared to small groups". These findings suggest that whole class grouping for reading instruction can be valuable tool for modelling strategies, managing classrooms, and building community (Teacher A, personal communication, March 31, 2023).

Classroom observation revealed that the most common implementation of this method involves the teacher delivering instructions for the assignment to the class, followed by individual seat work. Emphasis during instruction is primarily based on teacher explanations and encouragement to promote student learning. Explaining the benefits of whole class instruction, teacher B said,

> Teaching to whole class is beneficial because there is one lesson for the entire class. Due to time limitation, less time is spent preparing and developing instruction and lesson plans for various ability levels. Students who are poor are left behind in this type of grouping. Students who work faster with bored time on their hands, or students who work slower feeling rushed, left behind, or simply not being able to finish (Teacher B, personal communication, February 16, 2023)

The above statements reveal that whole-class instruction favors equality in education, rather than equity. Those who are struggling are left behind and those who are excelling also have to wait for their peers. Only the average students seem to be benefitting much from this type of grouping format for reading instruction.

The second sub-theme that emerged from data in grouping formats for reading instruction is small group instruction. Participant teachers believed that small group reading instruction provides opportunities for teachers to meet the individual needs better. For instance, teacher A said, "Small groups can provide teachers an opportunity to provide individual attention as per their need. Students also can learn from each other." She further added, "Small groups are often noisier than whole group." These statements reveal that small group reading instruction offers valuable opportunities to increase student participation, peer learning, and targeted support based on their individual needs. However, it creates challenge on the part of teachers for classroom management.

Pairing students for reading instruction is next sub-theme that emerged from the field data. According to teacher C "students love working together in pairs. They learn from each other. Especially, struggling readers can benefit from their better peers." Teacher B added that students "enjoy working in pair". She admitted, "Pairing in reading instruction can encourage student motivation and promote peer learning." However, teacher A warned, "It is problematic when pairs do not accept each other. Therefore, I most often ask them to make pair themselves so that they can accept each other." These statements suggest that pairing in reading instruction can motivate student in reading and develop collaboration among peers.

The next sub-theme that emerged from the field data was individualized instruction. During classroom observation it was evident that participant teachers

provided individualized instruction to some of the needy students. Some students seek help themselves while for some students; teachers had to identify. When I asked teacher A during interview about individualized reading instruction, she said,

> Individualized reading instruction gives us opportunity to find strengths and weaknesses and adjust instruction effectively to their need. This also helps to establish a strong connection with students. They feel more care from teachers. But we have limited time. We cannot spend much time dealing with individual students. We have only 45 minutes. There are nearly sixty students in each class. Nearly, one minute can be spent for a student. What can we do in one minute? (Teacher A, personal communication, March 31, 2023)

Contradictorily, teacher B cautioned, "It is not feasible to provide individualized instruction all the time". These statements unveil that individualized instruction provides personalize support to students however it is not practical to provide such instruction all the time, particularly in the large classes. Teachers see very little option other than whole class instruction.

Perceived Benefits of Grouping

All three participating teachers identified various benefits associated with grouping for reading instruction. These included: increased student engagement, targeted skill development, and opportunities for collaboration.

Participant teachers reported that students were more engaged and motivated to participate in reading activities when placed in group works. For instance, teacher C said, "Students feel comfortable to work with their close peers and they feel a sense of belonging and acceptance with their peers and become more motivated, engaged, and keep effort to read." This shows that grouping helps students to get opportunities for collaboration, fostering positive learning environment that promotes intrinsic motivation and academic success. This type of positive learning environment provides opportunity to work with peers of varying abilities, and the focus on specific learning objectives relevant to individual needs. This finding is similar to Tomlinson (2017) who advocated using grouping for reading instruction.

Classroom observation revealed that grouping allowed participant teachers to provide instructional support to meet the specific needs of individual students within each group. This enabled them to provide targeted instruction for developing specific reading skills, such as decoding, fluency, or comprehension. Moreover, working within groups provided students with opportunities to collaborate with peers, discuss reading materials, and develop their social and communication skills. In this regard, teacher B said, "When students work in small groups, they have the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions, share ideas, and support each other's learning".

This is similar to sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning, suggesting that students learn best when they work together and construct knowledge through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Grouping allows students to benefit from this social learning process, leading to improved reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. Teachers observed instances where students helped each other with challenging concepts, shared different perspectives, and built a sense of community within the classroom.

This study's findings on the perceived benefits of grouping align with previous research highlighting its potential to increase student engagement (Vaughn et al., 2000) and provide targeted skill development (Ainsworth, 2008). The dynamic nature of groups, as observed by the teachers, resonates with the idea that students are more likely to be engaged when challenged appropriately and presented with opportunities to collaborate (Ainsworth, 2008). Furthermore, the ability to tailor instruction within groups allows teachers to address individual needs and provide targeted support for specific reading skills, as noted in the findings and supported by previous research (Vaughn et al., 2003).

Challenges Associated with Grouping for Reading Instruction

Teachers not only acknowledged the benefits, they also identified challenges associated with grouping effectively for reading instruction. These included: time constraints, differentiation within groups, and managing student behavior.

Based on the analysis of data, finding sufficient time within the daily lesson plan to effectively plan, implement, and manage groups was a recurring challenge for all participant teachers. For instance, teacher A said,

> Sometimes, I wonder how much time to engage students in group work. We have only 45 minutes in a period. When I use small group work, I have to spend more time than in whole group. Similarly, sometimes, I have hard time to reach to all of them and meet their needs. Some students don't participate in group activities. Some of them even go out of track sometimes. It is really hard to engage all students at the same level of engagement (Teacher A, Personal Communication, March 31, 2023).

Providing varied instructional strategies to cater to the diverse needs of students within each group was another challenge reported by participant teachers. For instance, teacher C said, "Grouping is time consuming. It takes a lot of planning and time management. It takes a lot of efforts from teachers' side to make it work better." Teacher C highlighted the need for careful planning and the development of instructional materials that catered to a range of reading abilities and learning styles within each group.

Maintaining focus and managing student behavior during group work emerged as a concern for some teachers. For instance, teacher B pointed to the diverse nature of the students even within the groups when she said, "Students in a group don't have similar needs. Some need more support while some of them can work on their own after minor guidance". This involved establishing clear expectations for group work, providing effective scaffolding and support, and addressing any disruptive behavior promptly.

The identified challenges associated with grouping, including time constraints, meeting the needs within groups, and managing student behavior, are also consistent with existing literature. Studies have acknowledged the pressure on teachers to manage their time effectively when implementing flexible grouping, requiring careful planning and organization (Ainsworth, 2008). Similarly, the need for differentiation within groups presents a significant challenge, as highlighted by the teachers (Tomlinson, 2017). Developing appropriate instructional materials and activities to cater to diverse learning styles and abilities within each group requires additional planning and resources. Finally, managing student behavior during group work is a concern echoed in previous research, emphasizing the importance of establishing clear expectations and providing effective support for successful collaboration (Ainsworth, 2008).

These findings suggest that grouping offers valuable benefits for reading instruction. Careful planning, effective classroom management strategies, and ongoing reflection are crucial to address the associated challenges and ensure its successful implementation (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of educators utilizing varied grouping in reading instruction. By triangulating the data from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, the study offers a comprehensive perspective on the perceived benefits, challenges, and key considerations for successful implementation.

Conclusion

The decision to group students for reading instruction is a complex issue that requires careful consideration of the potential benefits and drawbacks because it is often difficult to decide exactly how to choose different grouping strategies. Findings reveal that ability grouping may offer advantages in terms of targeted instruction and heterogeneous grouping can foster a more inclusive and collaborative learning environment. This study suggests that while grouping offers valuable benefits for reading instruction, careful planning, and effective strategies to address the identified challenges are crucial for its successful implementation. Grouping for reading instruction needs to be flexible and teachers need to utilize whole-group,

small group, pairs, and one-on-one instruction based on the requirements of the students' abilities, classroom context, available time, and resources. Whole-group instruction is appropriate when teachers need to introduce new concepts, build shared understanding, and foster a sense of community within classroom. Small group instruction is appropriate in order to meet the diverse needs of the students in the classroom. Paired instruction helps create effective and engaging learning environment. Individualized instruction is necessary for the students with special educational needs and those students who benefit less from whole group and small group instruction.

Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of this instructional approach and its effectiveness with diverse student populations. By building upon existing research and addressing identified limitations, educators can make informed decisions about grouping for reading instruction to enhance student engagement, promote targeted skill development, and foster a collaborative learning environment. This study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a specific geographic region. Further research with a larger and more diverse sample population could provide a broader understanding of the effectiveness of grouping across different contexts and student demographics. Future studies can overcome the limitation of sample diversity by optimizing sampling techniques to produce more robust and generalizable findings.

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