Chapter 5

Purposeful Grouping

Today’s classrooms are incredibly diverse. As the personalized learner assessments from Chapter 3 reveal, students come to school with a wide range of abilities and interests. A comprehensive assessment program, detailed in Chapter 4, will continually identify different areas of need among students. Effective instruction accounts for students’ unique academic challenges and strengths, but how can teaching be individualized in classrooms where learners differ from one another in so many ways?

Purposeful grouping allows you to provide personalized instruction in the general education setting. It can help you design lesson plans that set up all students for success, including those struggling with particular skills from the curriculum. In fact, grouping can be one of the most powerful support tools in your RTI efforts. You can provide intensive academic interventions—even with limited time and resources—without diminishing the potency of instruction for the greater student population.

Grouping students effectively relies on a thorough working knowledge of students’ strengths, interests, thinking and learning styles, multiple intelligences preferences, and academic needs. The assessment methods discussed in this book can help you collect this information. Grouping strategies in this chapter build on the student information compiled in earlier RTI stages.

How Do I Group Students?

The primary motivation for grouping students is to differentiate instruction for diverse learning needs. Differentiating instruction involves adjusting the pace, level, or type of teaching to address unique academic challenges and instruct students in the ways they learn best. When you divide students into groups, you can reach diverse learners in the classroom, even as you provide more intensive instruction in challenge areas for struggling learners.
The learning groups that you create will not be fixed or permanent. Instead, they will be flexible and change often over time. This practice of flexible grouping allows you to routinely adapt your instruction; you can consistently arrange students to meet specific learning objectives within subject areas. When you analyze screening results, progress monitoring data, and other assessments, you can identify evolving student needs and ensure your teaching is responsive to those needs.

It’s important to be thoughtful in grouping practices. How many students will you include within each group? Will you group learners homogenously (by shared traits) or heterogeneously (based on student differences)? What kind of teaching strategies will you use within group structures? The answers to these and other questions will be determined by your specific circumstances. Perhaps during math instruction some students require remediation in a particular multiplication skill. You might set up heterogeneous pairs in which a student who excels in the given skill area can help another who struggles with it. (See “Using Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring” on page 141 for more on this grouping strategy.)

In another situation, a different type of grouping might be more effective. For example, in teaching a unit on the Revolutionary War you might group students based upon preferred learning styles. In this scenario, a quality shared among students determines their grouping and how they will demonstrate knowledge of the topic. A group of visual learners might focus on presenting information about the Revolutionary War on a poster, brochure, bulletin board, or Web site. The auditory learning group might prepare a speech, a rap, or another performance incorporating information from the unit. Finally, students favoring kinesthetic learning might create a play or reenact a key battle for the class.

The “Class Profile” (page 149) can help you make grouping decisions. This table incorporates student data collected in “Educational Profiles” (pages 118–134). By referencing learner qualities during your academic planning, you can design lesson plans that address academic deficits while focusing on strength and interest areas. The result: personalized instruction for meeting student needs at any tier within the RTI framework.

Purposeful grouping allows you to provide personalized instruction in the general education setting. It can help you design lesson plans that set up all students for success, including those struggling with particular skills from the curriculum.
Example of “Class Profile”

The “Class Profile” gives you at-a-glance information on academic deficits, learning strengths, and personal interests. These learner attributes allow you to easily group students for virtually any instructional purpose. You can also feel free to add other categories of your own—including open lesson periods when you are not targeting specific learning objectives in a given subject area. For these situations you might divide students based on physical features (such as eye or hair color) or personal preferences (like a favorite food or sport).

Classroom Grouping Strategies

After you have set up student groups, you can begin to concentrate on how you will monitor students during your lesson time. Because these structures are flexible and based on instructional needs for various subject areas, you will probably have a number of groupings prepared for different times of the day or week. You might, for example, have evolving groupings of homogenous learners for
English and math blocks when it’s important you focus on building basic skills. You might mix things up from time to time in the math block with peer-tutoring sessions, checking in with student pairs as they work together. You might also have groups for science and social studies periods that have been determined by multiple intelligences preferences or thinking and learning styles.

Regardless of the number or type of groups you might have, this section can provide you with ideas for overseeing students and making smooth transitions within the school day.

**Clock Grouping**

Grouping students often is directly tied to teaching specific units or subjects. Clock grouping is one method that is simple and appropriate for all age groups. It allows the teacher to easily manage the grouping of students in up to twelve different ways. Teachers can effectively transition from group to group by calling out the time of the group they want students to form. (These groupings are not related to actual time.) Many create a clock prop for the classroom, turning its hands to the appropriate group time at transition times.

1. Use your “Class Profile” to determine groupings. Groups should account for student interests and attributes as well as any specific learning needs that might be present.

2. Create the clock visual aid that you will use to indicate changes in groupings. You might add your school name or mascot in the center of the clock (or involve students in its decoration). Place the clock in an area where it will be visible to all students (such as on a bulletin board).

3. Add student grouping structures to the clock. You can make additions to or rearrange groups as necessary throughout the school year as points of instructional emphasis change.

4. During instruction, identify transition times by drawing attention to the clock and asking students to assemble in appropriate groups. An alternative to creating a large clock in the classroom is to provide a clock visual on handouts for respective students or groups.

In Figure 5.2, a teacher has used the “Class Profile” to create 12, 3, 6, and 9 o’clock groups.
Pocket Chart Grouping

A second simple approach to grouping is through the use of pocket charts. With this method, student names are placed into groups and posted on a visual display. The pocket chart, which can be hung on any wall or bulletin board, shows the rotation order to be followed during small group work time. Following are steps for setting up pocket charts in your classroom.

1. Begin by buying or creating a pocket chart for the classroom. Common materials for charts include clear pockets, index cards, construction paper, and other art supplies. You might also incorporate different curriculum themes within the display.

2. Use the “Class Profile” to organize students into groups based on your teaching objectives.

3. Post student names in groups, putting them in the pocket under the appropriate subject area or specific teaching time. The names of student groups can be based on information taught within the teaching unit. For example, if you are teaching a science unit on insects, groups might be identified by bug names.

Shuffling the Deck Grouping

This grouping method allows you to create groups of varying size for different lessons. Each student is featured on a card along with identifying categories that can be used to form groups. Before a session of small group work, take out the deck of cards and identify the factor that will determine groups (making your selection based on the number of students you’d like in groups). Following are directions for this grouping method:

1. Obtain a pack of 3” x 5” index cards and create a card for each student in your classroom. (You may also create cards digitally.) Student names or pictures can be placed in the middle of cards. Various grouping criteria will appear in the card’s four corners.

2. Determine how many students you want in the first group and how you want them to be grouped. This will be your largest grouping; if you have 24 students and want three groups of eight then you will use numbers 1–3. Place the appropriate number (1–3) in the top left corner of each student’s card.
3. In the top right of each card, write one of eight colors. In a classroom of 24 students, each color group will be composed of three students.

4. In the bottom left corner of each card, list one of twelve countries. This creates twelve student pairs.

5. In the bottom right corner of each card, write “Choice.” This is a grouping you can use to reward students by letting them work with others of their choosing during fun activities or free periods.

6. Set up with determining factors that include countries, colors, and numbers, this grouping method is less about grouping by achievement level and more about the number of students you would like for groups. For example, if you wanted to set up a peer-tutoring session, you could make the country the determining factor in group selection. You can replace these grouping characteristics with others (such as multiple intelligences preferences or thinking and learning styles) that are more directly tied to instructional goals.

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**Using Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring**

Peer and cross-age tutoring are teaching strategies that involve pairing students together as they learn new information or practice academic skills. Pairing students of the same age is peer tutoring; cross-age tutoring consists of partnering those who differ in age by two or more years. Peer and cross-age tutoring allow you to accommodate a classroom of diverse learners.

When using these methods, of course, it’s important that students are quality tutors. Learners should know how to give positive feedback and identify when a partner needs help. It’s also important they be able to provide explanations about the material and work with partners to find solutions (rather than just providing answers). Finally, students should be able to identify when to seek out the teacher for assistance.

You can train student tutors by role-playing with your class and helping learners develop a list of prompts and praises. How you implement peer or cross-age tutoring will depend on your specific setting and students, but here are some general guidelines for the process:

1. Teach students how to tutor and review expectations for tutor/tutee roles.

2. Assign partners and hand out necessary materials.

3. Ask that students follow a highly structured tutoring routine; tutors should present material previously covered by the teacher and provide feedback to the tutee.

4. Monitor pairs by circulating around the room; provide feedback as necessary.
Grouping Guidelines

Grouping students effectively can help them learn and demonstrate their knowledge in ways that set them up for success. Grouping also gives you flexibility in your instruction to address unique academic deficits, learning strengths and interests, thinking styles, and multiple intelligences preferences. Research suggests that the most effective small groups have three to four students.* Using group sizes any larger should be reserved for select activities where community building (rather than skill remediation) is the primary focus.

Grouping students allows you to directly address areas of student need, but it can also do something else. When you group students, you allow them to become partners in one another’s learning. Grouping methods such as peer and cross-age tutoring have been shown to improve on-task behavior, promote stronger student-to-student relationships, and increase academic growth for both the tutor and the tutee.** Chapter 6 includes information on some techniques you can use to help create productive learning relationships.

It’s important that groups are not static. Rather, they should be changed frequently and continually formed based on regular assessment of student strengths and needs. Additionally, research has consistently shown that grouping by ability level should be done sparingly, if at all.† Students with low academic achievement perform more poorly when they are grouped by ability with similarly performing peers.†† Ability grouping has also been identified as a source of lowered self-esteem and motivation among struggling students.†††

Grouping within RTI will often mean placing together students who are achieving at similar levels in specific academic areas. This is not the same as ability grouping, which separates learners into groups of high, average, or low general ability. Instead, students are grouped based on specific skill deficits with the intention of improving performance in those areas. As learning needs change, so do groupings. Groups are thus in constant flux as student needs vary over time, across subject areas, and in accordance with particular learning strengths and interests.

†Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik (1982).
Grouping Students Within RTI Tiers

Purposeful grouping is an important tool for differentiating instruction to meet unique student needs. But how do these groups function within the RTI framework?

Tier I

Tier I instruction is the universal level of teaching in the classroom. Schools often designate specific research-based education programs for core subject areas. These programs offer teachers curriculum that is explicit and structured in its approach. Even with stringent guidelines for teaching in core subject areas, however, grouping comes to play a vital role in teaching. Students, after all, have mixed abilities and will respond to the curriculum in varying degrees. Additionally, they'll respond best to instruction methods that account for their particular learning strengths and interests.

The best teaching at Tier I generally features a combination of whole class and small group instruction. There are two primary ways to group students at this level—peer pairs and heterogeneous groups. Teachers often use heterogeneous groups to carefully observe, assess, and monitor each student’s abilities. Peer pairing helps students learn from one another during Tier I instruction (as does heterogeneous grouping). Both methods reduce

Spotlight

Reasons to Avoid Ability Grouping

It’s important that your grouping be varied and constantly evolving. Stagnant ability grouping can have a negative social-emotional impact on students. When learners perceive they are consistently being placed in groups of low-achieving students, their self-esteem can be severely damaged. There may be times when grouping students based on specific skill strengths and deficits is in order to provide targeted instruction; however, it is important to vary your grouping styles enough to camouflage grouping by academic means. Following are reasons to avoid ability grouping.

• It doesn’t work well. Kids can learn more if their diverse needs are being met using other techniques.
• It has a negative effect on students’ self-esteem, and kids know who’s in the low-achieving group.
• Parents have legitimate concerns about the social stigma of their child’s perceived lower status.
• Students of similar economic backgrounds are often placed in the same group—displaying possible discrimination.

Adapted from “Is the Bluebird Really a Phoenix?” by Bruce Hansen (Reading Today, 25(6), 19, 2008). Reprinted with permission of the International Reading Association (www.reading.org).
The primary focus of third-grade teacher Ms. Ciaccio’s reading instruction is teaching students how to effectively use comprehension strategies. Most recently, she has been teaching the importance of visualization and predictions in the reading process. While her students must ultimately learn multiple comprehension strategies, Ms. Ciaccio has found it is most beneficial to focus on just one or two techniques at a time. She is now teaching students how to make predictions before and during reading using the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, a reading comprehension strategy (see page 184).

In the full class group, Ms. Ciaccio asks students to make predictions about the story they are going to read. She encourages them to draw upon their prior knowledge to make predictions, asking students to write predictions on a whiteboard. There is then a class discussion that covers why predictions have been made and how they can help with comprehension. Following the group discussion, students partner with reading buddies. These pairings have been determined by Ms. Ciaccio based on information gathered in students’ Educational Profiles.

The reading buddies are one of four groupings established through clock grouping:

- The 12:00 grouping consists of twelve pairs of students with similar thinking and learning styles.
- The 3:00 grouping consists of four groups of six children who share similar areas of interest.
- The 6:00 grouping consists of six homogeneous groups of four students organized by reading strengths and deficits.
- The 9:00 grouping is made up of four groups of six students (heterogeneously grouped in four groups so not to disturb the 12:00 grouping of peer pairs).

After the whole group reading instruction, Ms. Ciaccio works with one reading group of six (9:00 grouping). The remaining students are in 12:00 groupings; along with their reading buddies, they continue to make predictions as they read. Ms. Ciaccio has found that pairing students with reading buddies gives each student more practice than reading in small groups of three or four. She has also found that it is more efficient to model the reading comprehension strategy with the whole group, and then transferring the work to the students to practice with their peers. Ms. Ciaccio plans to extend this by encouraging students to make predictions during their independent reading.
Tier II

Though there are fewer students receiving Tier II level support, it generally is still not practical or possible to provide individualized instruction for each student. Purposeful grouping, however, ensures that individual learning needs continue to be met. Assigning students to groupings that account for their specific learning strengths allows them to engage and teach one another, thus allowing you to work with small groups of those who need to be re-taught concepts. As a result, purposeful grouping helps resolve a tough classroom challenge at Tier II—ensuring that all students are engaged even as teachers work specifically with small groups struggling with skill deficits.

Tier II groupings bring together students who are failing to meet grade-level benchmarks. These students should be grouped homogeneously by skill deficit area (rather than general ability). Herein lies the difference between this form of organizing students and ability grouping—children are grouped based on specific skill deficits rather than high, average, or low general ability. It’s important to remember that Tier II instruction should take place outside of Tier I instructional time. Groups at Tier II should be fluid and flexible with students moving in and out of the small groups within eight to twelve weeks (as determined by frequent progress monitoring).
One administrative suggestion for overseeing groups at Tier II is to group across grade level. Here Grade Level Teams divide instructional areas among staff, allowing teachers to provide expert instruction in one or two skill areas. In this scenario, all grade-level teachers provide Tier II instruction at the same time so that students can move to the staff member specializing in their skill deficit areas.

**RTI in Action**

### Reading Groups at Tier II

Ms. Ciaccio’s Tier II instruction begins shortly after a language arts block of 120 minutes. She starts by explaining to the class that they will be working in their 3:00 groups to complete an assignment. While students work on group assignments, Ms. Ciaccio teaches a small homogeneous group in areas of phonemic awareness and letter recognition. The small group is made up of students from her classroom and the classrooms within her grade level. The grade-level expert in this area, Ms. Ciaccio, works with this group of students three times a week for 40 minutes. As the other expert instructors do, she monitors student progress every two weeks. Students frequently move in and out of her group, as they do in the groups of her colleagues. The Grade Level Team meets weekly to discuss student progress.

**RTI in Action**

### Science Groups at Tier II

Mr. Campbell realizes that some students in his third hour science class are really struggling to understand key vocabulary related to the unit on plant life. He decides to implement a targeted intervention aimed at teaching students these vocabulary words and the concepts behind the terms. He elicits help from his colleague’s teaching aide, Miss Payton, who is working on a teaching degree and majoring in biology at the local university. She volunteers in the school two days a week. Miss Payton will teach a series of lessons every Monday and Wednesday for the next three weeks in Mr. Campbell’s class while Mr. Campbell uses Vocabulary Picture Cards (page 193) with the students who are struggling with the vocabulary terms. He will monitor their progress once a week.
Tier III

Students receiving instruction in Tier III typically demonstrate inadequate progress after Tier II interventions have been implemented. These students are in need of more intense instruction within a structured, research-based program. Tier III instruction will most often take place outside of the classroom, though in close collaboration with the classroom teacher.

Tier III is similar to Tier II where students needing more intense instruction work with one “expert” in a given area at a particular time. Tier III instruction can also be offered at the same time as Tier II instruction. As students move to the appropriate classroom for Tier II instruction, Tier III students can go to the specialist trained to provide more intensive instruction in their deficit areas.

RTI in Action

Reading Groups at Tier III

Ms. Ciaccio’s struggling students receive Tier III instruction at the same time she teaches Tier II groups. Two of her students spend 30 minutes with the reading specialist. Later in the afternoon, these Tier III students return to the reading specialist for an additional 30 minutes of intense instruction. As a result of the afternoon instruction, the Tier III students miss 30 minutes of classroom instruction (but not in the areas of reading or writing). Both Tier II and Tier III groups change often throughout the school year so there is constant movement in and out of the groups and tiers.

Science Groups at Tier III

A student in Mr. Campbell’s sixth hour science class has fallen behind despite his efforts to intervene at a Tier II level and his routine differentiation. He is working with the school’s interventionist, Mr. Garrett, to get the student up to speed. Mr. Campbell, Mr. Garrett, and the Evaluation Team have reviewed the student’s work samples and have identified lack of content area reading comprehension as one of the primary reasons the student is falling behind. She is also struggling in her English and social studies classes. Analysis of her results on the Gray Oral Reading Test confirms their initial evaluation. The team decides that Mr. Garrett will provide instruction on content area reading strategies, such as Reciprocal Teaching (see page 187), for the student during her science class. Mr. Garrett will use material from the science curriculum in his instruction so the student doesn’t continue to fall further behind.
**Spotlight**

### Resources for Grouping and Differentiating Instruction

**Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners (Grades 3–12)** by Diane Heacox (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2002). Differentiating instruction is all about changing the pace, level, or type of instruction to meet diverse needs in the classroom. This book provides general education teachers with a full menu of instruction and grouping strategies to deliver appropriate instruction and manage the classroom.

**Differentiation: From Planning to Practice (Grades 6–12)** by Rick Wormeli (Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2007). This resource provides step-by-step instructions for differentiating instruction for middle and high school classrooms. Discover how to craft lesson plans that foster academic achievement in all types of learners, including students who are gifted, struggling, or learning English.

**Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom** by Rick Wormeli (Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2006). Differentiating instruction is increasingly common in classrooms, but one aspect of differentiation continues to give many teachers trouble: grading. This resource offers guidelines for making difficult grading decisions in middle and high school classrooms.

**How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms** by Carol Ann Tomlinson (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004). This title on differentiating instruction provides guiding principles and hands-on strategies for designing lesson plans for diverse classrooms. From curriculum planning to tips for overseeing learning groups, this book offers a comprehensive look at differentiated instruction.

**Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design: Connecting Content and Kids** by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006). In an era of education emphasizing standards, many educators are looking for ways to ensure students fully understand concepts from the curriculum and can apply them in meaningful ways. This book helps teachers foster this kind of learning while maintaining standards and targeting students’ specific areas of academic strength and weakness.

**Making Differentiation a Habit: How to Ensure Success in Academically Diverse Classrooms** by Diane Heacox (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2009). This resource provides easy-to-use tools, checklists, and surveys to incorporate differentiation principles into the everyday curriculum. Find specific strategies for assessment, tiering assignments, grading, and differentiating for gifted learners. The book also offers research connecting differentiation and RTI.