

Dynamic Grouping

Grouping allows children to support each other in reading and feel part of a community of readers.

It also allows for efficient use of a teacher's time. JOHN SMITH AND WARWICK ELLEY

There are three assumptions at work when a primary teacher is getting ready to group children for guided reading: (1) there will be a wide range of experience, knowledge, and skills among any group of primary-age children; (2) every child will be different from every other child in some levels of knowledge and skill; and (3) children will progress at varying rates. Given those assumptions, how does a teacher organize groups for teaching reading? And added to the logistic difficulties are the documented dangers of grouping, against which we must always be on guard. *Dynamic grouping* enables teachers to group children effectively for efficient teaching.

Concerns About Grouping

In 1991, a committee of the Massachusetts Reading Association thoroughly reviewed the research on grouping and found that:

1. Assigning students to self-contained classes or tracks within classes according to achievement or ability does not enhance achievement. Once a child is assigned to a low group, the chances of moving to a higher group is very low (Hiebert 1983; Good & Marshall 1984). Assigning a student to an ability group does not seem to meet individual needs very well and may actually cause harm.
2. Students in high- and low-ability groups receive different instruction. For example, Allington (1983; also see Allington & McGill-Franzen 1989) found that children in low groups have fewer opportunities to read. Moreover, they spend more time practicing "item" tasks like decoding individual words. Students in higher groups spend more time on critical thinking, focus more on meaning, and read two to three times as many in-context words as children in low groups. For lower-group students, the pace is slower and they are more likely to be off-task.
3. Students' self-confidence and self-esteem are damaged by their assignment to low groups. No matter how carefully teachers name groups, everyone always knows which is low and which is high (Filby, Barnett & Bossart 1982). This situation is particularly evident when children follow each other through the same books in the basal system, the low group finally reading the book read by the high group months before. Moreover, minority groups are more likely to be assigned to low groups (Eder 1983;

Good & Marshall 1984; Sorenson & Hallinan 1986).

4. Interaction among students of a variety of ability levels appears to increase achievement (Slavin 1987). If students, particularly "low group" students, benefit from being in contact with a variety of achievement levels, then we need to make opportunities for children of all levels of experience to mix. When cooperative learning groups made up of students of different experience and abilities work together toward a goal there are significant increases in learning (Johnson et al. 1981; Slavin 1983a, 1983b).

5. Supplementing heterogeneous groups with smaller needs-based groups may contribute to achievement. Ability groups are effective when students are placed in them for specific instruction rather than as broad ability categories and when the composition of the group is flexible and fluid. The fluidity of the needs-based group works against the dangers of tracking.

Based on these findings, the Massachusetts task force recommended that teachers:

- Create opportunities for interest-based, multiability reading groups.
- Increase opportunities for noncompetitive student-student interaction.
- Use peer tutoring and cooperative learning pairs.
- Introduce cross-grade "buddies."
- Create opportunities for needs-based groups.
- Implement flexible grouping using a combination of whole-group instruction and needs-based smaller groups.

Rationale for Grouping

Like most teachers, we are concerned about the catch-22 created by the harmful effects of grouping and the necessity for children to

read material that is right for their skills and abilities. As a way of resolving this dilemma, we propose combining grouping by similar reading processes and text level with a wide range of heterogeneous grouping for other purposes:

- Maintain heterogeneous whole-group activities for reading aloud, shared reading, literature circles, readers workshop, science and social studies, interactive writing, and other curricular activities.
- Promote heterogeneous small-group activities in these same areas.
- Convene interest groups around literature and curriculum study.
- Assess individual students using a wide range of measures.
- Form small guided reading groups of students who have similar reading processes and can read about the same level of text.
- Meet with these small guided reading groups about three to five days a week.
- Regularly assess children in guided reading using running records.
- Re-form guided reading groups based on this ongoing evaluation.

If young children are to learn to read, they must encounter material that supports their development. In the beginning, even small details are important. For example, children who are just beginning to understand important concepts about print need clear words with spaces between them and only one or two lines of text. To force them to read complex texts with three or four lines and without clear picture clues would confuse them. Sometimes teachers select books for and have conferences with each child individually. While it is possible to teach guided reading this way, for most teachers it simply isn't practical given the number of children in many classes. In addition, social interaction enhances children's

learning to read; they learn how to support and help each other, and when instruction is handled effectively, they learn from the teacher's interactions with individuals and the group.

The Observation Survey scores in Figure 8-1 illustrate our concern about the consequences of not grouping for needs-based reading instruction. If the teacher uses whole-class instruction for reading, with everyone in the same book on the same page:

■ Students like Kara, Karin, and Ray will day after day read material that is too hard for them. Faced with several lines of print, which they cannot match word by word with spoken language, they will have difficulty seeing individual words and will find it almost impossible to use what they know about words and letters. They may develop wrong concepts such as the idea that reading means listening to what is said and "remembering" rather than solving problems using many sources of information. They may "mumble along," a nonproductive behavior.

■ Students like John will be completely lost during instruction, not able to attend or participate.

■ Students like Casey and Molika will day after day read material so easy that they do not have the opportunity to increase their processing power. Moreover, reading along with slower readers who are struggling with the text can undermine their fluency and integrated problem solving.

Traditional Versus Dynamic Grouping

While we are convinced that whole-class reading does not provide the context needed for guided reading, we want to avoid the mistakes of traditional reading groups. Figure 8-2 shows important differences between traditional grouping and dynamic grouping in terms of underlying assumptions

and the processes of grouping, teaching, and evaluation.

Traditionally, only one kind of grouping—based on ability—was used for classroom work. In dynamic grouping for comprehensive literacy, many kinds of groups are used for reading and for other activities, with only guided reading based on achievement or experience. Matching children to texts is tentative and cautious, because young children learn very quickly. Any particular grouping is a hypothesis that is continually being tested. Groups are expected to change. Moreover, in dynamic grouping, children do not read a fixed sequence of books. Texts are chosen for their appropriateness for the group.

There are also differences in the teaching provided to groups; using appropriate-level texts avoids the slow progress through texts experienced by many "low" groups. It was typical in the past for the low group to spend many days on a story that the middle and high groups spent only one or two days reading, part of the reason being that the text was so hard (and the exercises that accompanied it even harder) that the teacher had to spend many days going over the material.

With dynamic grouping, all children can read many books; children making slower progress have easier books but they are building experience. Evaluation is based not on unit tests or progress through a fixed sequence of texts, but on running records and teacher observations that are documented through notes (the reading graph described in Chapter 6 is an effective way to document individual children's progress).

The Process of Dynamic Grouping

Let's talk through the initial grouping of the class listed in Figure 8-1. First, how many reading groups should we form? Three groups for twenty-six children would give us too many students in each group and a range within groups that might be difficult to cope

Observation Survey and Benchmark Data**Grade 1
Ms. Baker**

Name	Letter Identification	Word Test	Concepts About Print	Writing Vocabulary	Hearing & Recording Sounds in Words	Benchmark Assessment Reading Level	Percent of Accuracy
1. Casey	54	20	21	47	36	D	93
2. Molika	54	17	22	51	34	G	92
3. Rashon	52	8	19	21	23	D	96
4. Carrie	54	9	16	29	25	C	100
5. Laura	53	4	19	15	20	C	92
6. Shawn	49	10	17	17	32	C	94
7. Heather	53	2	16	31	30	C	95
8. Kayla	54	3	11	20	19	B	95
9. Steven	49	2	13	13	16	B	100
10. David	49	2	13	8	12	A	100
11. Michael	53	4	16	6	5	B	100
12. Amber	47	0	11	1	9	A	80
13. Cameron	38	0	13	7	14	A	93
14. Ashley	40	0	12	1	1	B	80
15. Talisha	42	0	12	3	4	A	90
16. Terry	21	0	11	3	5	A	85
17. Curtis	5	0	10	3	1	A	75
18. Nicky	21	0	3	0	0	A	60
19. Sherrell	12	0	5	0	0	A	80
20. Courtney	10	0	0	0	0	A	55
21. Maria	2	0	0	0	0	A	75
22. Kara	1	0	5	0	0	A	63
23. Ira	6	0	1	1	0	A	20
24. Karin	0	0	0	3	0	A	20
25. John	2	0	0	0	0	A	35
26. Ray	3	0	2	1	0	A	40

FIGURE 8-1 Observation survey data

Comparison of Traditional and Dynamic Grouping

	Traditional Reading Groups	Dynamic Grouping for Guided Reading
Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General ability as determining factor • Progress through same phases with established rate; change not usually expected • One kind of grouping prevails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to use sources of information to process text is determining factor • Change on a continuous basis is expected • Different groupings for other purposes are used
Process of Grouping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grouped by general determination of ability • Static; usually remain stable in composition • Progress through a fixed sequence of books • May not skip materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grouped by specific assessment for strengths in the reading process and appropriate level of text difficulty • Dynamic, flexible, and changeable on a regular basis • Books chosen for the group from a variety on the appropriate level—some overlap but generally not the same for every group • Difference in sequence of book level expected
Process of Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Words pre-taught • Skills practice follows reading • Limited number of selections buttressed by skills practice in workbooks or worksheets • Limited variety of selections • Controlled vocabulary • Selections usually read once or twice • Heavily focused on skills • Round robin reading; children take turns; each reading a page or line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction foregrounds meaning and language with some attention to words in text • Skills incorporated into reading; skills teaching directly related to selection • Unlimited number of selections; skills taught during reading • Wide variety of selections • Many frequently used words but vocabulary not artificially controlled • Selections reread several times for fluency and fast problem-solving • Balanced focus on reading for meaning and the use of flexible problem-solving strategies to construct it • All children read the whole text to themselves
Process of Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation based on progress through set group of materials and tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation based on daily observation and regular, systematic individual assessment

FIGURE 8-2 Comparison of traditional and dynamic grouping

with. Based on the wide range of scores on this class list, we could form five, six, or even seven groups; however, we have to weigh our need to match children's reading levels against the time we have. Too many groups means the teacher spends too much time on guided reading to the detriment of other important areas of the curriculum

(process writing, art, mathematics, etc.), cuts down the time spent with each group, or meets groups less frequently. Whichever alternative is chosen, teaching opportunities are limited. So, for this group of children, we recommend four groups.

Since we need to meet with each group for about twenty or thirty minutes, we could

expect to meet with three groups within a daily ninety-minute block. A rotation system like the one described in Chapter 5 and the variety of productive independent activities we provide assures that all twenty-six children will engage in focused reading and writing for about ninety minutes every day and will meet in a guided reading group three or four days a week. In the beginning of first grade, group meetings may take somewhat less time because the selections are quite short, but time needed will increase as text length increases.

The rotation system in Chapter 5 provides for two groups per day; as you begin meeting guided reading groups, that's realistic. Two groups a day in a class with three reading groups guarantees guided reading time for each child five times during a two-week period. Three groups a day in a class with four groups guarantees each child in-

struction every other day. It is better to have high-quality teaching than brief, rushed periods that accomplish little. Over time you will find that you will become even more efficient and can meet with more groups each day, and your students will make even faster progress.

For Ms. Baker's class, our goal is to get some initial groups started and then revise and regroup based on our experience with these groupings. (Figure 8-3 illustrates the chain from observing individuals, to grouping, to selecting an appropriate text that supports the reader's use of strategies but offers opportunity for new learning.)

We decide to place Casey, Molika, Rashon, Carrie, Laura, Shawn, and Heather in one guided reading group. We feel comfortable having seven children in this group because they will probably be able to work with a great deal of independence. All these

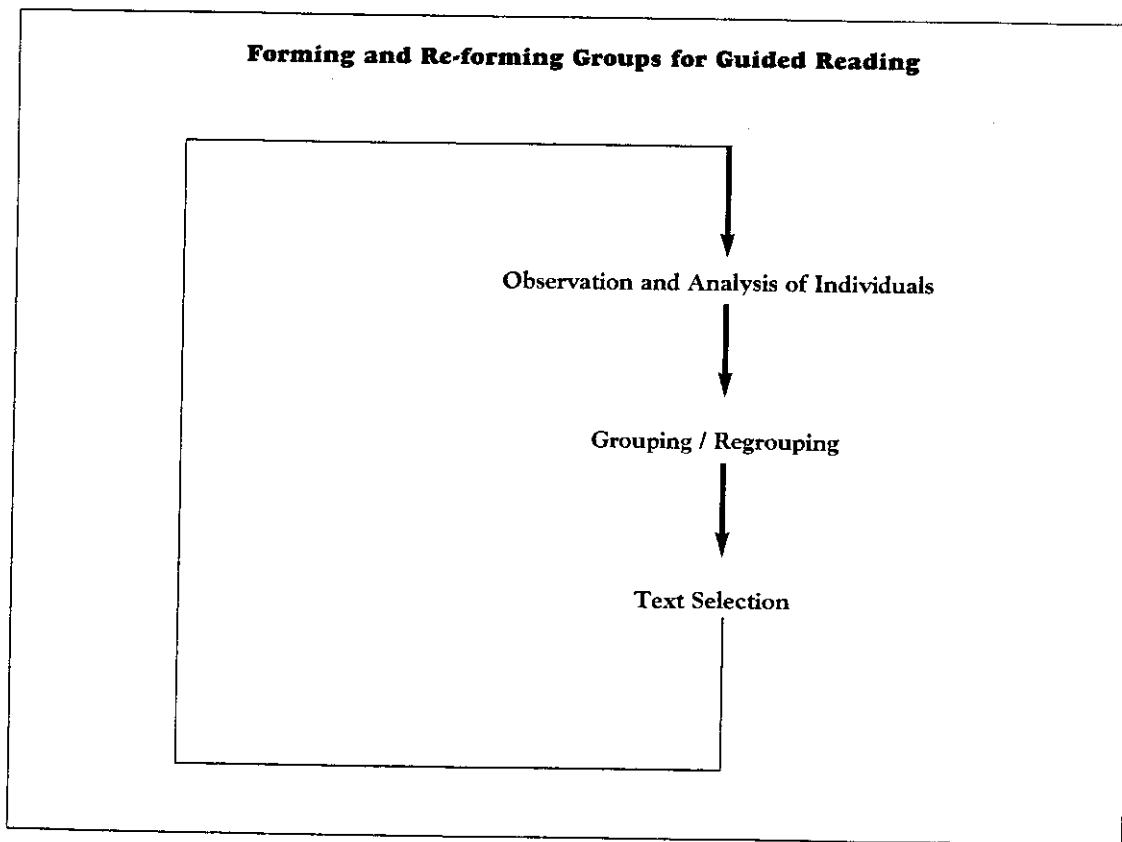


FIGURE 8-3 Forming and re-forming groups for guided reading

children can already read print that has several lines of text. They can represent a majority of the sounds with letters and all know many words (their word tests and writing vocabulary assessments show that they can write many words independently, spelling them accurately). All of them can match word by word in reading and their Concepts About Print assessment indicates they have the early strategies under control. All these children will most likely be able to read texts at level C. (Refer to the book list in Appendix M). Molika will need supplemental reading to challenge her but will enjoy the work with the group even though the texts are easy.

We will begin our guided reading in this group with a relatively easy text, give it a rich introduction (see Chapter 11), and observe children closely. If their behavior confirms that the book is too easy, we'll select a slightly more difficult book the next day, repeating this procedure until we are sure that the level is about right. Given appropriate selections and introductions, this group will move rapidly through the text levels. The challenge will be to continue offering them texts that stimulate problem solving. The goal for these children is not so much to move up levels but to assure their enjoyment, expand their experiences and understanding of books, and increase their strengths as readers with a greater variety of texts.

Next, we look at some children who will need extra attention. We place Ray, John, Karin, Ira, Kara, and Maria in another guided reading group. This group of children needs to concentrate on early reading behaviors like directionality and word-by-word matching. We will begin this group with very simple caption books. (See the level A book list in Appendix M.)

The members of this group don't know many letters, but that does not mean reading needs to be delayed. They can start to enjoy reading from the very beginning and learn about letters, words, and sounds as they go

forward. We'll take this group through a gradual transition from shared to guided reading. A priority will be to help them use what they know to create "anchors" (familiar or known words) in the text that they can use to monitor their reading. We will try to meet this group every day, perhaps varying their activity by including some group shared reading or interactive writing, which is a powerful way to help them learn letter names, develop phonological awareness, and build up a store of known words, all of which will be important to use while reading. We will do a great deal of explicit demonstration and modeling for them, and they will read their selections many times. All these children will be placed on the list for Reading Recovery (see Chapter 15), with John, Ray, and Karin receiving top priority.

In another group, we place Courtney, Sherrell, Nicky, Curtis, Terry, and Talisha. These children know a few more letters than Karin's group but will still need a great deal of work on early strategies. We will also begin their reading with simple caption books.

Our final group has Kayla, Steven, David, Michael, Amber, Cameron, and Ashley. Most of these children can read very simple patterned texts and their Concepts About Print scores indicate awareness of how print works. Even though Amber's text reading score indicates that she is not really reading, she does know the names of almost all the letters and quite a few of the sounds associated with them, so we believe that with a few demonstrations she will be able to participate successfully in the group. Ashley may have more difficulty even though her score on text reading indicates that she can read level B texts; she could be using meaning and structure to predict in patterned text but not attending much to print. We will observe her closely to be sure she is building a reading process that uses all sources of information.

For the two groups of children who have little knowledge about literacy, our guided reading lessons will, in the beginning, look

much like shared reading; we will probably do a lot of writing work with them as well. But we will certainly introduce them to many texts. All children in this classroom will build up a large number of books that they can read and reread.

It is obvious that specific "item knowledge" such as letter names, concepts about print, writing vocabulary, and hearing and recording sounds in words played heavily in our initial placements. But we must fight our inclination to think of grouping as a house-keeping detail that we want to accomplish so that teaching can begin. We need to remember that grouping is a continuously developing process based on observations of literacy-related activities. It is as much a part of teaching as is text selection and deserves constant attention and evaluation.

Therefore, our last decision related to these initial groupings is to watch closely for needed changes. *We expect changes*, so our initial decisions are tentative. Some children may have had very few experiences with print but will learn quickly once they receive instruction. Others may need a longer period. We will monitor children's progress closely as they work in their small guided reading groups. We will also take running records regularly. Change in groups does not have to happen all at once, nor is it a "big deal." When our observations and records indicate a change is needed, the child in question can be moved that day. Another possibility is to ask the child to attend two groups for a week or so and then decide which group is best. What matters is that the individual child reads an appropriate level of text. Children should become accustomed to a fluid situation in which groups change often.

Skilled teaching, which begins with observation, is the key to successful dynamic grouping. The chart in Figure 8-4 (adapted from McCarrier, Henry & Bartley 1995) shows the changes Ms. Baker made in six guided reading groups during a six-week period. The dotted lines show children who

moved to other groups and the dates the changes were made. David and Becky exchanged places for two weeks and then Ms. Baker put them back with their original group. Though Jake and Tiffany were reading at a level far beyond the other children, they were able to participate in heterogeneous groups at other reading times. Juan, Bobby, and Mara received Reading Recovery in addition to their regular guided reading instruction.

Revisiting Purpose

Here's how dynamic grouping fulfills the purposes of guided reading:

1. *To facilitate the teaching and learning of individual children.* Although children are working in groups, they are being observed as individuals; often, the teacher has an opportunity to make critical notes on individual behavior or interact briefly to bring a good example to a child's attention. Because the text is selected within the appropriate range, it offers the maximum chance for individuals to use their developing skills.
2. *To help children understand reading as a thinking process.* A guided reading group provides an opportunity for children to discuss reading with each other and with the teacher and to support each other as they encounter new material that demands new strategies. Because the children have a few challenges in the text, there are opportunities for the teacher to call their attention to examples of effective problem solving.
3. *To make efficient use of time and materials.* Grouping gives the teacher a way to approach reading instruction systematically so that each child's needs are met. With their ability to learn constructively, almost all children can learn from skillfully managed group practice. Making a totally individualized program is not necessary or desirable; children learn pleasurable together.

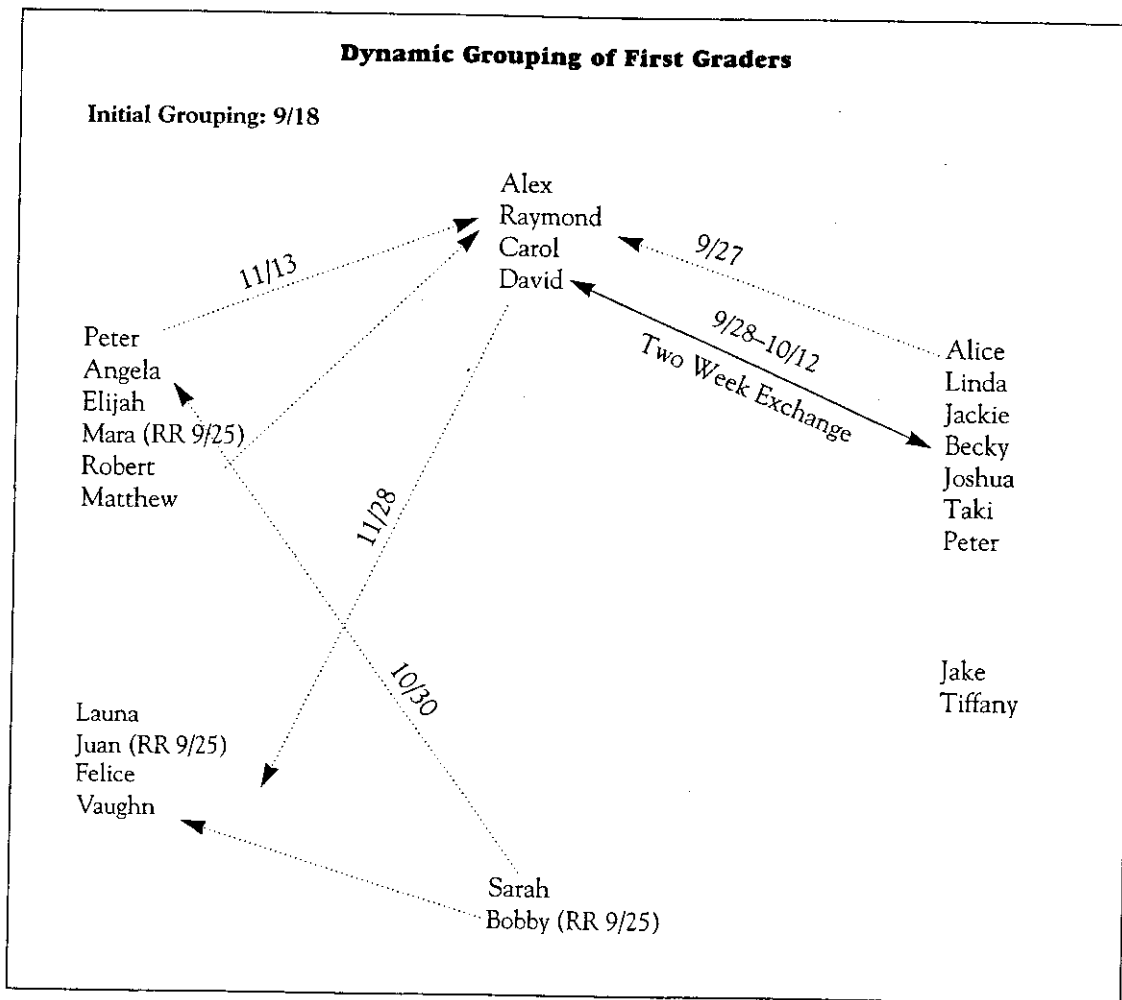


FIGURE 8-4 Dynamic grouping of first graders

4. To move toward the goal of each child selecting and reading books independently. The goal of every group teaching session is independent reading of the new book introduced and, eventually, of books that children pick up on their own. The teacher can instantly evaluate the book selection and introduction by watching individuals in the group as they read through the whole text on their own.

Supporting Guided Reading

It is clear from this chapter that we strongly favor needs-based grouping for guided reading. It is based on ongoing, systematic observation for the purpose of gathering small clusters of students who are similar in their

development of a reading process. But guided reading is only one part of the literacy framework. There are many other kinds of grouping that support guided reading and we would expect other groupings to take place in primary classrooms:

- Interest groups to listen to literature selections read aloud and extend them through discussion.
- Author, illustrator, theme, or genre study by the whole class or small groups.
- Literature circles or book clubs for discussion and closer attention to the meaning of texts.
- Research "clubs" to investigate areas of interest in science or history.

- Cooperative learning groups of all kinds.
- Readers workshop for self-selected reading.

Suggestions for Professional Development

1. Form a group of colleagues interested in developing a deeper understanding and greater skill in dynamic grouping. Set a time to meet.
2. Using the Observation Survey results or your current assessment measures, form two guided reading groups, each made up of four children who show evidence of similarities in their reading processes and read at about the same level of text. (These groups can later be expanded, but it helps to begin with a very small group in order to gain experience.)
3. Select three texts for each group, one you think will be easy, one you think will offer some challenge but will be within their control, and one that you think is a little bit too hard. Try out the three texts with each group, first introducing the text and then observing them as they read. Take a running record for every student on that same book

the next day. At the end of the period, evaluate your grouping and text selection:

- What were the strengths in each child's processing of the text? What did each child do when he or she encountered difficulty or made an error? What will each child need to do to process a new text more successfully?
 - How did children in each group compare with each other? Were the results consistent? Is the composition of the group workable? Do changes need to be made?
 - Were your text selections appropriate? Did most children in the group find the texts, in order, easy, just right, and difficult? (Here you are checking whether you were able to judge the level of text for the group you had in mind.)
4. Work at the above exercise until you get the feel of forming groups. Then expand the existing groups and form more groups.
 5. Share your running records, texts, and insights with your colleagues.