

Small group tuition

Moderate impact for moderate cost, based on limited evidence.



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Small group tuition is defined as one teacher or professional educator working with two, three, four, or five pupils. This arrangement enables the teacher to focus exclusively on a small number of learners, usually on their own in a separate classroom or working area. Intensive tuition in small groups is often provided to support lower attaining learners or those who are falling behind, but it can also be used as a more general strategy to ensure effective progress, or to teach challenging topics or skills.

How effective is it?

Overall, the pattern is that small group tuition is effective and, as a rule of thumb, the smaller the group the better, e.g. groups of two have slightly higher impact than groups of three, but slightly lower impact compared to one to one tuition. Some studies suggest that greater feedback from the teacher, more sustained engagement in smaller groups, or work which is more closely matched to learners' needs explains this impact. Once group size increases above six or seven there is a noticeable reduction in effectiveness.

However, although the above pattern is usually consistent, there is some variability in impact within the existing evidence. For example, in reading, small group teaching can sometimes be more effective than either one to one or paired tuition. It may be that in these cases reading practice can be efficiently organised so that all the group stay fully engaged as each take their turn, such as in Guided Reading. The variability in findings suggests two things. First, the quality of the teaching in small groups may be as or more important than the group size, and there is evidence of the benefits of professional development on pupil outcomes. Second, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of different arrangements as the specific subject matter being taught and composition of the groups may influence outcomes.

Given this uncertainty and the lower cost of small group tuition, it may be sensible to trial small group tuition as an initial option, before moving to one to one tuition if small group tuition is ineffective.

How secure is the evidence?

The evidence is limited and mainly relates to low attaining pupils receiving additional support to catch up with their peers. More research has been undertaken into paired tuition than other kinds of small group tuition, so the evidence for small group teaching across varying sizes of groups and at different levels of intensity is not conclusive and mainly comes from single studies. There are very few studies where group size has been varied systematically to explore the effects beyond one-to-two and one-to-three, so more research would be useful in this area.

To date the majority of the evidence comes from the USA. However, in recent years a growing number of rigorous UK studies have been conducted. In a 2014 evaluation Year 6 and 7 pupils made an additional three months' progress from Switch-on Reading, a structured programme involving small group tuition. In addition, an intensive coaching programme that involved one to one and small group tuition has an average impact of five additional months' progress.

A 2011 evaluation of Every Child Counts also found that the programme had a positive impact when delivered on a one to one basis, or with groups of two or three, with all group sizes making similar amounts of progress.

What are the costs?

Overall, costs are estimated as moderate. Costs decrease with group size, as the majority of the costs are for teaching time. The cost of paired tuition is approximated as £350 per pupil per term (based on two pupils receiving 30 minutes tuition, five times a week for 12 weeks) plus any resource or equipment costs, with one to three cheaper still (£233 per pupil).

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Small group tuition is most likely to be effective if it is targeted at pupils' specific needs. How will you assess pupils' needs accurately before adopting a new approach?
2. One to one tuition and small group tuition are both effective interventions. However, the cost effectiveness of one to two and one to three indicates that greater use of these approaches may be worthwhile. Have you considered trying one to two or one to three as an initial option?
3. Training and support are likely to increase the effectiveness of small group tuition. Have those leading the small group tuition been trained in the programme they are delivering?