

Implementing and scaling Differentiated Literacy System (DLS): A case of evaluators' voices channeling outside-in and bottom-up perspectives for equity and continuous improvement

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BACKGROUND

- Equity in reading achievement remains a persistent challenge: on average, 35% of grade 4 students were proficient on NAEP 2019, 18% and 25% respectively among Black and Latinx students.
- DLS provides K–3 teachers with assessment data to group students and recommends the number of minutes by instruction type (decoding and comprehension, either independently or with the teacher) for each student group. Participating schools receive access to the tool and instructional coaching by DLS coaches to differentiate small group instruction.
- As evaluators, Digital Promise juxtaposes teachers' current literacy practices and experiences integrating DLS with DLS' assumptions about how their program should be implemented and the benefit to students and teachers.

METHODS

Table 1. Interview and Focus Group Respondents, Fall 2018–Fall 2019

	Teacher	School-based Coach	School Leader (Principal/Assistant Principal)	District Leader	DLS Coach	Total
Fall 2018	106	21	22	8	10	167
Spring 2019	106	20	22	8	10	166
Fall 2019	108	20	21	n/a	8	157

Note: The respondents are from 21 schools in 9 districts. The vast majority of fall 2018 respondents participated in spring 2019 data collection. Fall 2019 data collection included approximately 50 new participants with the addition of another grade level implementing DLS. In total, there are over 200 unique participants.

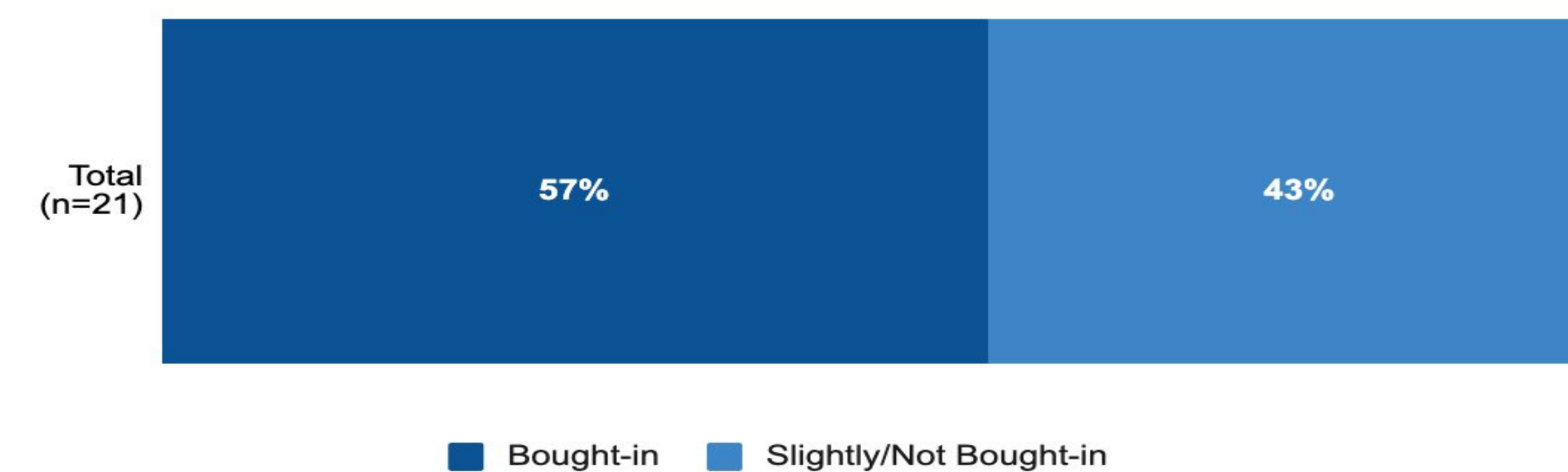
- Data come from focus groups, interviews, and classroom observations collected from fall 2018 through fall 2019 to understand DLS implementation and literacy instruction context.
- Within-case analysis involved a structured debriefing form for each school that aggregated data from all school-level respondents, noting variation in responses by grade level and role.
- Cross-case analysis systematically compared data across schools to generate key themes by major implementation categories, documenting evidence for each theme, and noted disconfirming evidence and contextualized reasons for divergence from dominant themes.

FINDINGS

In amplifying teachers' voices to inform DLS' continuing efforts to meet school and teacher needs, we highlight uncomfortable truths that lie at the crux of DLS' desired impact on education:

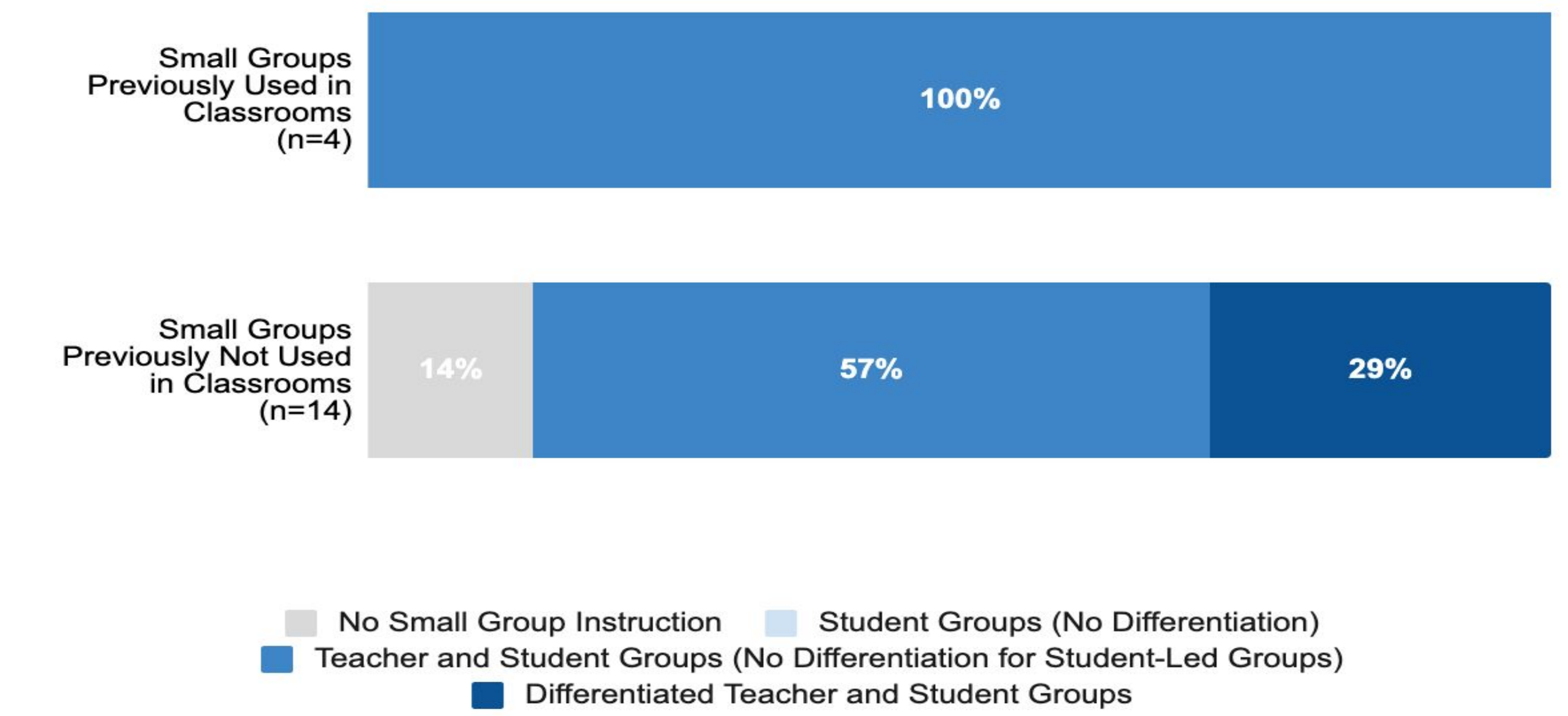
- Participating teachers vary widely in existing practices, resources, and understandings of effective literacy instruction, and in their willingness to use DLS to differentiate literacy instruction.

Figure 1. Teacher buy-in for DLS after one year of DLS implementation (spring 2019)



- DLS assessment does not provide diagnostic information on individual students' literacy skills acquisition, a key instructional need that undermines teacher buy-in and DLS' value proposition.
- Teachers express concerns that significant time spent by children in independent small-group learning underserves lower-performing students and exacerbates equity gaps.
- DLS' reduced support for K–1 teachers in the second year of implementation (due to a planned reallocation to 2nd grade as those teachers began implementation) may not meet their needs as they continue to face implementation challenges due to the changing demands of students.
- In some districts where multiple DLS coaches support schools, inconsistent messaging and supports have created confusion around small group instruction expectations, further challenging DLS coaches' ability to establish trust and credibility with teachers.

Figure 2. Small group instruction (in spring 2019) among schools previously using and not using small groups (n=18)



Note: We were not able to gather information regarding the status of small group instruction prior to DLS for 3 of the 21 schools.

"I would still like to get detailed reports about what they know and don't know, how they get that score. Like, they struggled with synonyms or long vowels.... Otherwise, we're at a loss on how to improve."
— Teacher

"I have a really hard time with my lowest group of students, [who] cannot do anything independently. It's very, very hard because I can't leave them to do anything on their own.... They will sit at each group and do nothing for 45 minutes basically.... And I really think that sometimes it's a little bit of a disservice to them. I'm not sure that I'm making the gains with them."
— Teacher

"I think in terms of expectation, it [could be] a little bit tighter. That comes into play early on when you're trying to implement something new, when you have too much flexibility, you run into problems with fidelity to the intent of the program. And sometimes, when [you] give a little bit more flexibility and leeway at the beginning, you start to confuse people about what that mission is."
— District Leader

DISCUSSION

Key recommendations for DLS focused on organizational policies, structures, and practices to better support DLS coaches and improve consistency in service quality for schools:

- Since teachers have varying levels of experience and expertise with small group literacy instruction, coaches must meet the teachers where they are in providing supports, rather than simply advocating for DLS tool use.
- Clarifying the benefits and limitations of the DLS tool for school staff and addressing teachers' key needs may be central to garnering their buy-in and trust in using DLS to inform small group instruction.
- Given the breadth of the DLS coach's role and the complexity of changing instructional practice, coaches could benefit from additional training to ensure consistent messaging around DLS expectations and supports to schools.
- Ensuring clear understanding of the stated DLS expectations and benefits for teachers and how the coach's role can support instruction remains critical.