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Personalizing Student Learning With Station Rotation | Practitioner Brief

Personalized approaches to student learning may be one strategy to improving student learning. In a personalized learning approach, educators incorporate students' specific needs, talents, and strengths in their instruction. The key elements of personalized learning include integrated digital content, targeted and differentiated instruction, student reflection and ownership, and data-driven decisions.[1]

Station rotation is one approach to personalized learning. In station rotation classrooms, groups of students rotate among different types of learning modalities, such as computer-based instruction, group projects, or paper-and-pencil assignments. The model does not require large changes to the school day, schedule, or building infrastructure. Station rotation can be implemented in a single classroom or within a group of classrooms, and it is appropriate for a variety of grade levels. Thus, station rotation may be more feasible for some schools or districts to implement than other approaches to personalized learning that require more substantial departures from the traditional education model or require students to be physically together in a classroom.

The information in this document is based on research conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR).[2] For further information, please see AIR's *Personalizing Student Learning With Station Rotation: A Descriptive Study.*[3]

What is station rotation?

There is not one standard definition of station rotation in the field of education. In AIR's study, station rotation must include all the following criteria:

- The class must be split into groups.
- Students must rotate through two or more stations during a class period.
- Station rotation must be done at least twice a week.
- At least one station must incorporate the use of digital instruction.
- Each rotation must last at least 10 minutes.
- Stations and rotations must be within a single classroom under the same teacher.

Citation: Fulbeck, E., Seidel, D., Atchison, D., & Giffin, J. (2020). *Personalizing Student Learning With Station Rotation: Practitioner Brief.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

1. Education Elements. (n.d.). *Personalized learning guide: A comprehensive personalized learning guide for educators, administrators, and parents.* Retrieved from https://www.edelements.com/personalized-learning

2. The sample in AIR's study included teachers of grades 4 through 8 and principals from five school districts and charter school organizations, representing 119 schools. In all, 615 teachers participated in a survey, and 23 teachers and five principals were interviewed..

3. Fulbeck, E., Atchison, D., Giffin, J., Seidel, D., & Eccleston, M. (2020). *Personalizing Student Learning With Station Rotation: A Descriptive Study.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

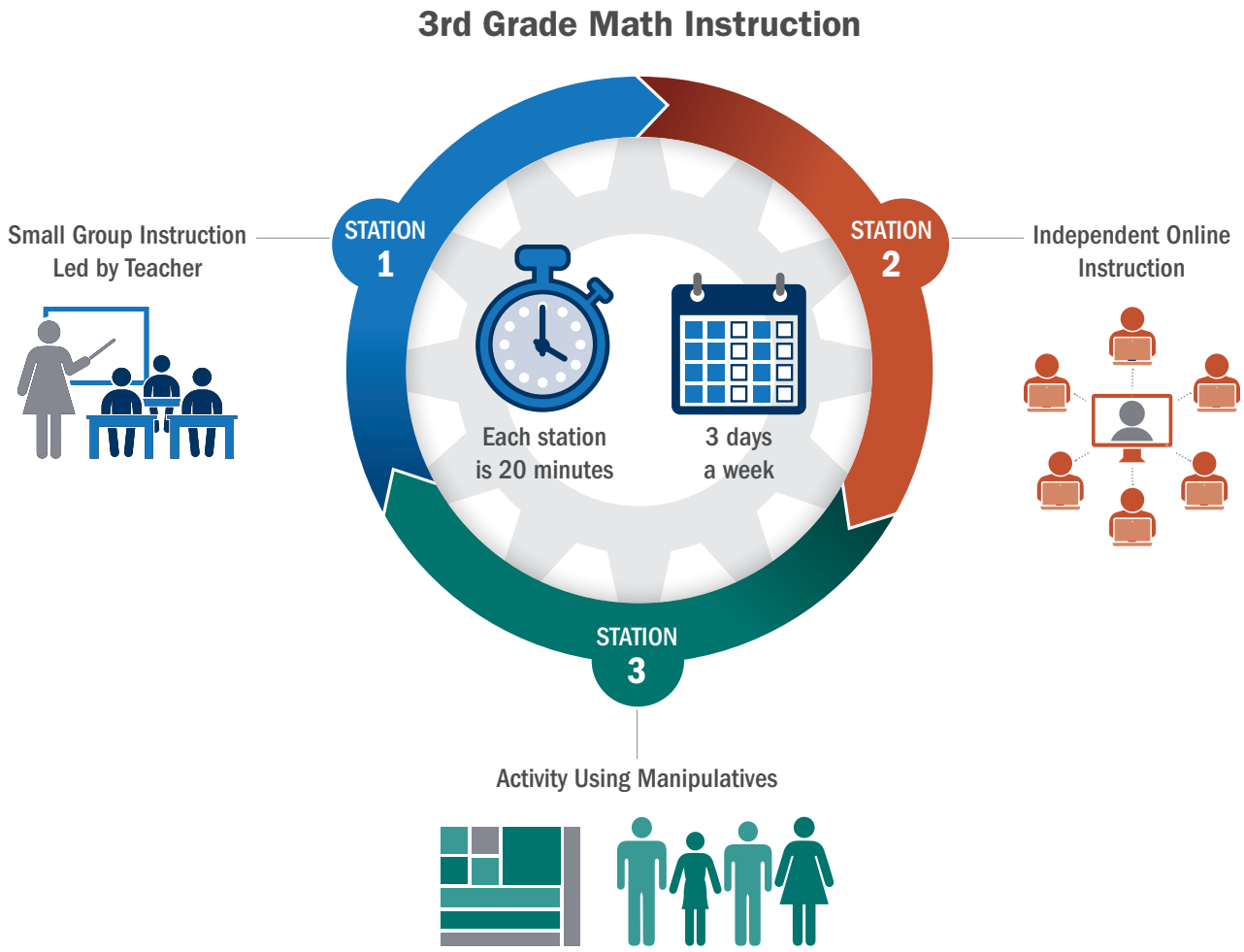
In practice, many classrooms may implement some or all of the listed items. For example, many teachers in the AIR study used a number of the criteria for station rotation but did not use digital instruction as a station. For the study, these teachers were classified as not using station rotation.

What does station rotation look like in practice?

AIR found that most teachers used station rotation at least **three times a week** (40% used it 5 days a week). Teachers often provided **two or three stations,** which each lasted between **15 and 30 minutes.**

Figure 1 gives an example of what instruction using station rotation could look like, based on AIR's research. In this example, a teacher uses station rotation three times a week for their third-grade class's math instruction. During this time, each student will spend 20 minutes at each of three stations. The stations include direct instruction from a teacher, independent work using a digital curriculum or program, and an activity using manipulatives.

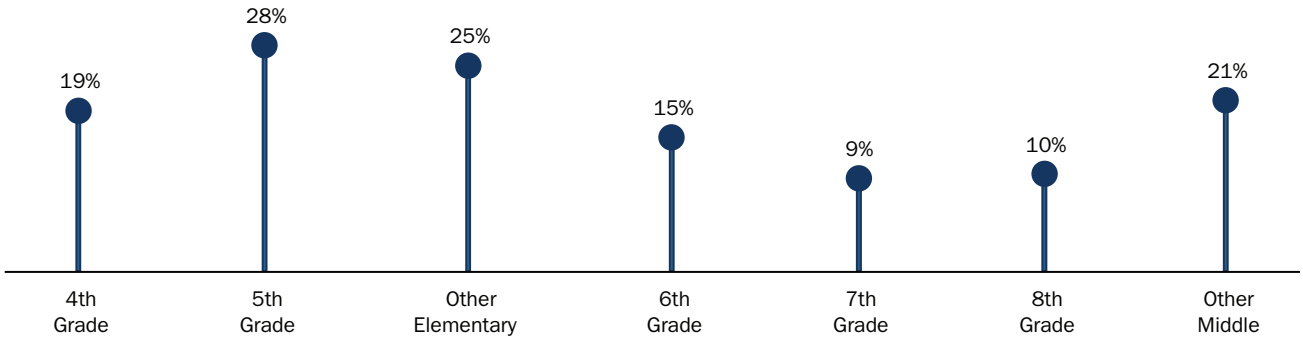
Figure 1. Example of Instruction Using Station Rotation



Who uses station rotation?

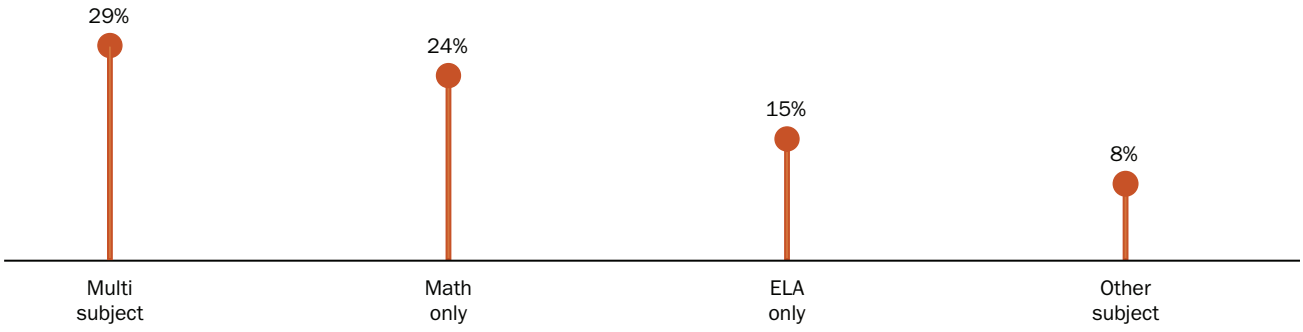
As reported in AIR's study, station rotation is used by teachers of all subjects, and in elementary and middle schools. Teachers in elementary schools and those who taught math or multiple subjects were more likely to use station rotation. See Figures 2 and 3 for a breakdown of the teachers using station rotation. For example, 28% of fifth-grade teachers used station rotation compared with 15% of sixth-grade teachers.

Figure 2. Percentage of Teachers Using Station Rotation, by School Level



Note. In addition to the numbers presented in the figure, 25% of elementary teachers who were not grade specific and 21% of middle school teachers who were not grade specific also used station rotation.

Figure 3. Percentage of Teachers Using Station Rotation, by Subject



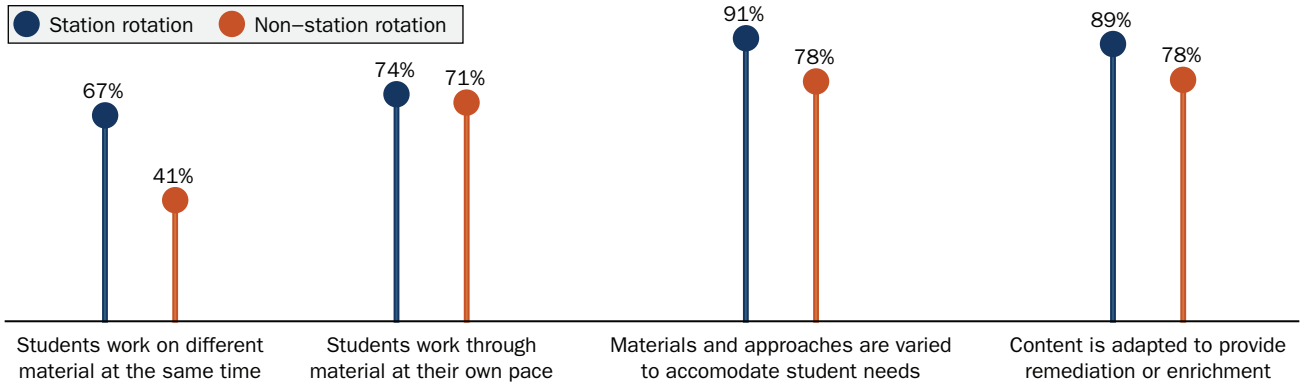
Key Elements of Personalized Learning Used During Station Rotation

Teachers who used station rotation reported:

- using a variety of different **technologies/digital curriculum** products such as Zearn, IXL, Lexia, i-Ready, and ST Math;
- having more access to **data to guide differentiated instruction;** and
- using more **differentiated instruction** while using station rotation.

Figure 4 provides more information on the use of differentiated instruction.

Figure 4. Percentage of Teachers Who Reported Using Various Types of Differentiation to a Moderate or Large Extent



> *"I think [station rotation is] one of the biggest tools I use because it definitely allows me to have students focus on one particular topic or type of question or skill. Even if they're not working with me, I'll have them work on something at their station, and [it] allows me to switch it up, or change things as needed. [It is] probably one of my most used tools in differentiation."*
>
> —Station Rotation Teacher

What supports are helpful for teachers to implement station rotation?

Teachers mentioned the following supports were useful for implementing station rotation:

- **A mentor** on the use of station rotation
- Feedback from a **coach**
- High-quality **digital platforms and technologies**
- Good **classroom management** skills
- **Additional classroom staff,** especially in the beginning of implementation
- **Common planning time** with other teachers

"My coach told me about [station rotation], showed me it, and then observed me while I did the rotations and set it up, and then gave me feedback. For my first year, [my coach] did that a couple of times. Then my second year, I was able to set it up myself. Then third, and fourth, and then subsequent years, I was able to [run it] myself and keeping that same system going every subsequent year."

—Station Rotation Teacher

Educators' Reflections on Station Rotation

Teachers in AIR's study reported that

- students were more motivated to learn and are more engaged during station rotation,
- teachers were better able to meet the needs of students who were below or above grade level, and
- teachers were able to develop stronger relationships with students.

Although classroom management can be a challenge with station rotation, teachers felt the use of station rotation **led to fewer behavioral disruptions.** More station rotation teachers reported **liking the way things are run at their schools** and described their fellow teachers as liking teaching at the school. Fewer station rotation teachers reported thinking about transferring to another school or giving up teaching if they could find a higher paying job than non-station rotation teachers.

"When students enter our school in fifth grade, eight out of 10 are below grade level…. And because of that gap, we really felt that we needed to meet students at their individual needs…. [The] station rotation model allowed us to operationalize flex grouping."

—Principal

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1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW
Washington, DC 20007-3835
202.403.5000

www.air.org

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