

Beginning Reading Instruction and the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model

Over the past 15 years, there has been an unprecedented focus on the teaching of beginning reading. Although much has been accomplished, most educators would agree that we are continuing to fail too many struggling readers. Teachers are passionate about early reading success because they know that it is the cornerstone upon which knowledge, self-esteem, and future educational opportunities are built. Our students' futures are all but determined by how well they learn to read. In the United States, which offers few career opportunities for the illiterate, teaching children to read proficiently is the most important single task in education. The consequences of these literacy deficits are devastating to those students who are ill prepared for further educational opportunities and ultimately the world of work. Research is clear about the need for early, effective reading instruction. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD; 2000) finds that low-performing first-grade readers will likely be the lowest performing readers into adulthood. If teachers are to make achieving high literacy levels a reality for all children, the instruction must begin when students enter the school door. As students matriculate through the grades, an ever-growing chasm between proficient and nonproficient readers widens. Although teachers know a great deal about the reading process, many questions remain concerning the most effective methods to use when instructing children. I have encountered many teachers who remain frustrated by the lack of quality materials available for beginning reading instruction or who are led astray by boxed reading programs that typically don't meet their promises. Moreover, teachers often commented that they were poorly prepared in their undergraduate training to meet the needs of beginning and struggling readers in their classrooms. The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model presented in this book supports teachers by presenting easy-to-implement lesson plans that incorporate reading research-based strategies for teaching beginning reading. This model will give each student the opportunity to grow as a reader.

Children begin their formal literacy journey when they enter school, whether in a preschool or kindergarten program. Beginning this journey requires teachers to assess each student's literacy knowledge and provide the appropriate instruction that will advance the child's literacy learning. Students enter a typical kindergarten class with very different levels of printed-language knowledge, and instruction must be adapted for these differences. Implementing the components of a balanced literacy model, including small-group differentiated reading, is an effective way to provide appropriate instruction. Some educators feel that small-group reading instruction is inappropriate for young children.

On the contrary, young children deserve the same literacy opportunities as older children. For example, those students entering school with alphabet and sound knowledge should progress to the next step in the reading process. The “letter of the week” curriculum is no longer adequate in launching students into a literate world. Numerous young children are often left behind when they fail to acquire skills and knowledge critical to literacy development such as the ability to track print, alphabet knowledge, and phonemic awareness. Traditionally, instruction in these areas has taken place in a whole-class setting with little regard for individual student needs. Students who matriculate to first grade without solid literacy foundations often struggle to catch up.

Beyond the Basal for Beginning Readers

Basal reading programs remain the dominant means of reading instruction in the United States. A basal reading series was never intended to provide a complete program, only the framework. Many textbook companies tout their ability to provide all the tools necessary for providing effective reading instruction for a wide range of readers in whole-group, small-group, and intervention settings. In my opinion, this has not been the case. Basal readers are most effective when they are used flexibly and as part of a comprehensive, balanced program of instruction. Conversely, basal readers are least effective when they are used as the total reading program. This is true for all levels of readers but has particular implications for beginning and struggling readers.

The most overlooked component in current basal series is an effective small-group reading model with appropriately leveled texts accompanied by a developmental word study focus. Although some basal programs give lip service to small-group instruction, the materials and guidance necessary for successful implementation are often lacking. Recently, textbook companies have boarded the “leveled reading bandwagon” in an attempt to fill this void. Generally, these resources include one additional book below grade level, one book on grade level, and one book above grade level. In most classrooms, these materials are not sufficient in addressing an ever-growing diverse reading population. In most instances, the accompanying lesson plans are brief and generally focus on whole-group comprehension and word study strategies. These models lack the intensity, focus, and developmental sequence necessary to clearly address the needs of beginning and struggling readers.

It is not advantageous for textbook companies to support an extensive small-group reading model that requires school districts to purchase numerous books because it would be cost prohibitive. Additionally, basal word study is presented in a grade-level scope and sequence that ignores those students who have gaps in their word study knowledge or have already mastered the grade-level standards. Textbook companies are in a competitive market, and, therefore, they try to present the most economical program. As consumers, we must remember that without carefully leveled reading materials and developmental word study to supplement the basal, it is impossible to adequately meet the needs of a wide range of readers.

Children in the early stages of literacy development have unique needs. If children are to seek hungrily for literacy, they must experience early success in beginning reading.

Typically, the basal reader covers one story a week. Limiting a child to reading one story a week—a text that may or may not be at the appropriate instructional level—limits the child’s ability to reach higher levels of achievement. The instructional level of reading is the highest level at which a student can read with support from the teacher, usually a text read with somewhere between 93% and 97% accuracy. Reading and rereading a variety of texts at appropriate levels drives instruction forward for all students.

Perhaps the group most neglected in a basal-only reading program is struggling readers. High achievers are capable of reading the weekly story before it is introduced; therefore, these students flourish in spite of the system. Average students probably fare best within the basal reading model, although they too are limited by reading opportunities. Struggling readers, on the other hand, are the clear losers in a basal-only classroom. More often than not, their only reading instruction is presented at a level of frustration—the level at which they cannot comfortably succeed. This then begins the downward spiral; motivation is lost and the gap between readers and nonreaders widens.

Gaps in Other Small-Group Reading Models

Significant attention has been given to small-group reading during the last 12 years. The developers of guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell (1996), should be applauded for their contributions to this important small-group reading process. It was, in fact, the only reading model that attempted to instruct children in a small group at an appropriate instructional reading level for numerous years. The goal of this “guided” reading model is “to help children learn how to use independent reading strategies successfully” (p. 2), which focuses primarily on comprehension strategies. It could, therefore, be interpreted that this type of guided reading is most appropriate for those students who already have mastered basic decoding skills such as concepts of print, letter sounds, sight words, or basic phonics and have reached somewhat independent reading levels. Although the ultimate goal of any reading program is to comprehend text, basic foundational decoding skills cannot be overlooked. What happens to those readers who lack the prerequisite skills that are needed for reading? Providing reading instruction that takes a student from a nonreader to reader status is a skilled process. Many beginning readers require focused instruction that includes alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics, or even the ability to track simple lines of print. It is our responsibility as teachers to determine the developmental needs of each student in the beginning reading process and offer instruction necessary to advance his or her literacy learning.

Although “guided reading” and other basal-driven small-group models present some excellent strategies, there are some deficits in these models that cannot be ignored. The accompanying systematic word study, vocabulary, and oral reading fluency strategies are necessary to complete the literacy framework. Most basal-driven small-group models use limited leveled books and do not differentiate for word study levels. In addition, these small-group models lack the frequency and explicit teaching that beginning readers require. Table 1 shows the similarities and differences among guided reading; basal, small-group reading; and the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model presented in this book. Although it might be argued that word study and writing are taught during another part of the school

TABLE 1
Comparing Traditional Guided Reading; Basal, Small-Group Reading;
and the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model

Traditional Guided Reading	Basal, Small-Group Reading	Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model
Students grouped according to reading level Uses leveled books Comprehension focus No systematic word study component No writing component No word bank	Grouped three ways: below, at, or above grade level Offers one leveled book per week per group Reinforces whole-group comprehension and word study focus	Students grouped according to reading and word study level Uses numerous leveled books Decoding and comprehension focuses Variety of reading strategies used (whisper, partner, and choral reading) Systematic word study (beginning with alphabet knowledge and continuing through variant vowel patterns) Writing (beginning with shared writing and progressing to independent writing) Vocabulary (automatic recognition of basic sight words and words in text)

day, the effectiveness of this instruction in the context of whole-class instruction with little regard for individual needs is questionable. Until a child becomes an independent reader, word study and writing are so closely linked in the developmental reading process that they are most effectively taught in a systematic way that supports each child’s reading level and builds a solid decoding as well as comprehension foundation. Although the traditional guided reading model as well as basal, small-group models have much to offer, we cannot ignore potential instructional gaps for beginning readers. As a parent, teacher, administrator, and reading specialist, I have observed that a more explicit small-group reading model is necessary, especially as it applies to beginning and struggling readers.

The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model

Development of the Model

My interest in developing a specific small-group differentiated reading model resulted from my work as a reading specialist in a large, urban school district in the southeastern

United States. Along with other urban districts, our district was experiencing an ever-increasing number of students reading below grade level. In an attempt to reduce these reading failures, a search began for an early, intensive reading intervention model that could assist numerous students. The Reading Recovery model (Clay, 1993) was quickly ruled out because of the program's high cost and inability to serve more than a few students dictated by the program guidelines. However, Early Steps, a reading intervention model developed by Darrell Morris, met the criteria. Reading tutors, assistants, and volunteers could be trained in this early intervention model, and numerous at-risk students could be served.

Early Steps, a one-on-one tutoring intervention, is based on research and best practices in reading instruction, including rereading, word study, and writing as integral parts. Most important, reading tutors are trained on site in an apprenticeship format. First-grade students in our district made impressive gains as a result of the implementation of Early Steps (see Morris et al., 2000). Although the intervention was successful for individual students, the basal reading program continued to be ineffective in meeting the needs of students in the classroom. Whole-class instruction and a lack of appropriately leveled books left teachers frustrated.

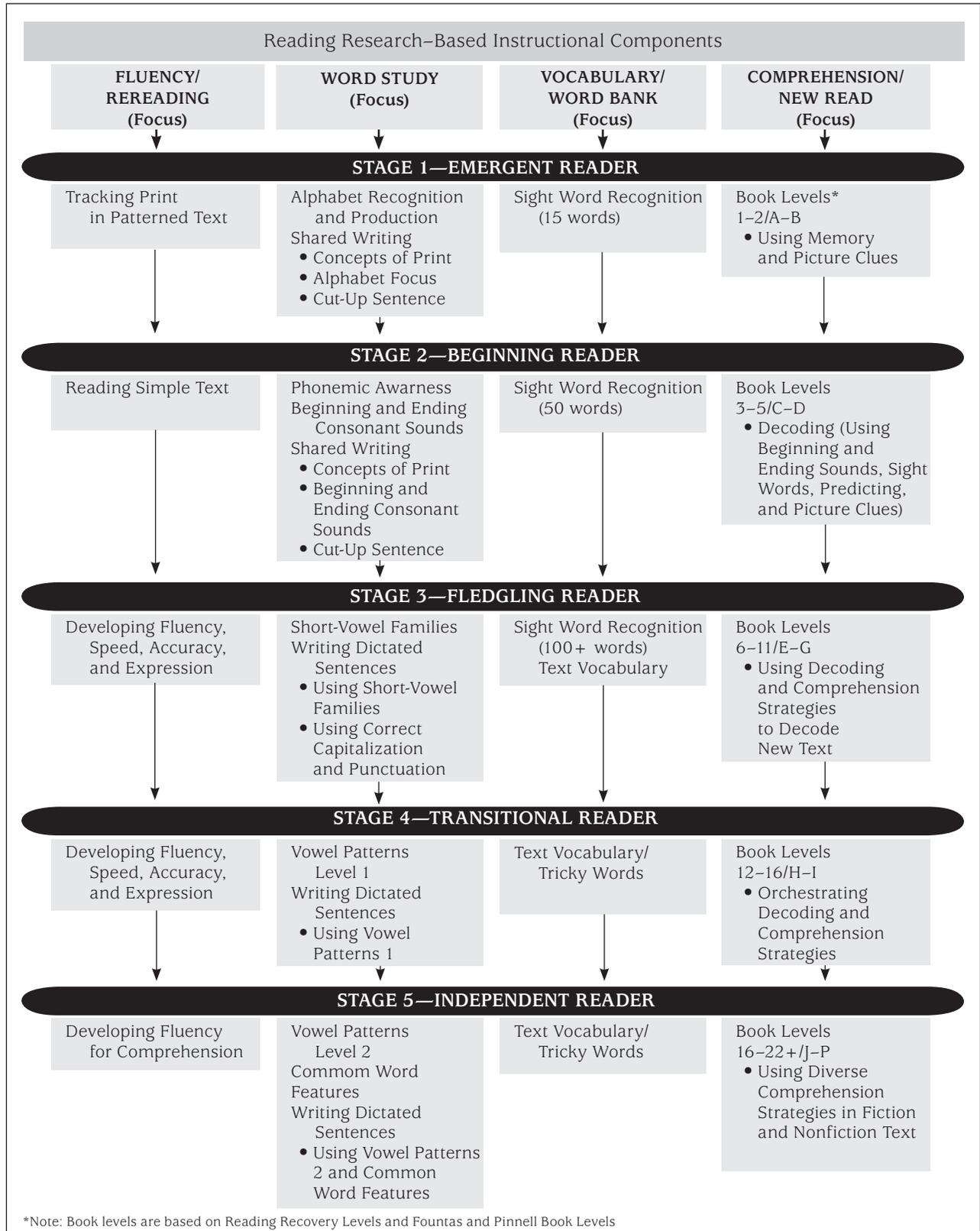
Using the components of Early Steps, I set out to develop a small-group differentiated instructional model that would address the needs of beginning and struggling readers in the regular classroom setting or in reading intervention. The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model (see Figure 1) provides a systematic framework for teaching beginning and struggling readers. It takes into consideration the developmental stages through which readers progress, the critical research-based components for reading success, and the time needed to develop these literacy foundations.

What Is Differentiated Reading Instruction?

As many schools continue to move toward adapting to an ever-increasing broad range of learners, it becomes more important than ever to develop instruction to respond to these academically diverse students. Differentiating instruction for beginning readers is one step to appropriately address the academic diversity that exists in virtually every primary classroom. Quite simply, differentiation means modifying instruction based on student readiness. A research study in Texas revealed that there was typically a four-year grade span between the lowest and highest readers in first-grade classrooms (Guszk, as cited in Texas Reading Initiative: Differentiated Instruction). Differentiating reading instruction enables teachers to plan strategically so that they can meet the needs of both weaker and stronger students.

At its core, the model of differentiated reading presented in this book uses research-based components and strategies in beginning reading instruction and developmental models that recognize the stages through which beginning readers naturally progress. Readers and nonreaders have been typically categorized as either one group or the other with little regard for the in-between group in which many beginning and struggling readers are often trapped. Reading is not an all-or-nothing skill: Alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics, print-related knowledge, word recognition, fluency, and

FIGURE 1
The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model



comprehension are all integral parts. This is the basis for the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model. The question then becomes, Where along the reading continuum does each reader fall? Whenever a teacher reaches out to a small reading group to vary teaching techniques and strategies to create the best teaching experience possible, differentiated instruction takes place.

Children enter the classroom with a variety of background experiences. For children with numerous prior experiences with print, many of the early reading processes may already be mastered. In contrast, children who enter with relatively no knowledge about print will require a different instructional plan. Without differentiated reading instruction, some children will fall further behind whereas others will be left unchallenged. In reading instruction, the gap between poor and good readers widens with each subsequent year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model includes a variety of reading strategies based on the developmental needs of the reader, not on the chronological age or grade level. Although accommodating student differences might be difficult at times, they must be recognized and addressed. If we are sincere about having students achieve higher standards and having the best interest of each student at heart, we must differentiate instructional reading strategies. Students start at different points in the reading process, and we must provide the most appropriate level of challenge to increase their literacy learning.

The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model presented in Figure 1 is differentiated in two important ways. First, the five stages in the beginning reading process—emergent reader, beginning reader, fledgling reader, transitional reader, and independent reader—are clearly differentiated as a reader progresses toward independence. Additionally, the instructional components—fluency, word study, vocabulary, and comprehension—are addressed for each stage of development, which included both encoding and decoding strategies. Although there remains some contention concerning these two predominant methods of reading instruction, it is time to recognize the common ground that research clearly supports: a need for both strategies to be taught.

Differentiating the Stages of Beginning Reading

Reading is a complex process with many steps and variables. However, the road to reading has some definite milestones through which readers must navigate. Beginning readers are often lumped together with little delineation of differences, yet these differences are critical to the reading process and should not be ignored. For example, students who are struggling in the classroom are often grouped together for reading intervention. These struggling readers should be assessed and placed with students who are most similar in their literacy needs in order to make adequate gains in reading.

In most primary classrooms, some students struggle with reading, others perform well beyond grade-level expectations, and the rest fall somewhere in between. By differentiating the stages of reading instruction through flexible small groups, the diverse needs of a heterogeneous group can best be met. This differentiated reading model recognizes the developmental stages through which a reader progresses and adapts instructional strategies to support the reader in each stage. Allowing for flexible small-group reading

instruction in primary classrooms where some students struggle and others perform well beyond grade-level expectations provides appropriate instruction for all readers.

To effectively guide the reading process, first there must be an understanding of the stages in beginning reading and the print demands placed on a reader at these different stages. For example, in the early stages of reading, there is a heavier emphasis on decoding than on comprehension. Contextual reading, writing, spelling, sight word recognition, and phonics develop simultaneously in predictable stages. Table 2 details the five stages that are addressed in the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model. Appropriate grade-level designations are given for each of the reading stages along with the beginning student characteristics and major focuses of each stage. This progression begins in Stage 1 with the emergent reader (basically nonreader) and continues to an independent reading level in Stage 5. Students advance through these levels as they build on their knowledge and move forward at their own pace. These five stages serve as the framework for the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model presented in this book and will be discussed thoroughly in Chapters 4 through 8.

Reading Research–Based Components of Effective Reading Instruction

Many educators and parents have been and continue to be frustrated with or confused about the wide swings in the reading instruction pendulum. A team of U.S. national education associations observed,

The famous pendulum of educational innovation swings more widely on reading than in any other subject. Pendulum swings of this kind are characteristic of fields driven by fashion, not evidence. Hemlines go up and down because of changing tastes, not new evidence; progress in medicine, engineering, and agriculture, based to a far degree on evidence from rigorous research, is both faster and less subject to radical shifts. In the same way, educational practice must come to be based on evidence—not ideology. (Learning First Alliance, 1998, p. 18)

Typically, when a particular strategy or approach in reading fails to teach some children how to read, educators respond by changing instructional approaches. Unfortunately, the new approach may prove to be effective with only a portion of students, and educators scurry back to the first approach. This is particularly evident as it relates to special needs students and English-language learners (ELLs). Many times educators search for “magic bullets” to fix students and abandon best practices in reading instruction. In most instances, these struggling readers simply need more time spent in explicit research-based reading instruction.

Few educators would argue that good reading instruction includes a combination of strategies to teach all children to read. A differentiated approach that includes the best research practices will more likely meet a much wider range of learners (NICHD, 2000). The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model attempts to capture the best practices in reading instruction for beginning readers through the integration of carefully differentiated

TABLE 2
Stages of Beginning Reading

Stage	Appropriate Grade Level	Beginning Student Characteristics	Major Focuses
1 Emergent Reader	Pre-K/Early K	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows less than half of the alphabet • Has no concept of word • Has little phonemic awareness • Recognizes few or no sight words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using memory and pictures • Recognizing and reproducing letters of the alphabet • Tracking print • Recognizing 15 sight words
2 Beginning Reader	Mid K/Late K	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows half or more of the alphabet • Has the ability to track print • Is able to hear some sounds • Recognizes 15 sight words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completing alphabet recognition and production • Using beginning and ending consonant sounds • Recognizing 50 sight words • Reading simple text • Using sentence context and pictures or word recognition cues to decode
3 Fledgling Reader	Early/Mid First Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirms with beginning and ending consonant sounds • Recognizes 50+ sight words • Reads simple text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing and using word families in reading and writing • Recognizing 100+ sight words • Reading more complex text • Developing fluency • Developing comprehension strategies • Self-correcting errors
4 Transitional Reader	Mid/Late First Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes word families in isolation and in texts • Recognizes 100+ sight words • Reads developed text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using common vowel patterns in reading and writing • Developing independent reading using decoding and comprehension strategies • Developing fluency
5 Independent Reader	Early/Late Second Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reads and writes independently • Uses strategies to figure out new words • Reads fluently • Uses common vowel patterns and word features in reading and writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing diverse comprehension strategies • Using complex vowel patterns • Developing fluency in a variety of texts • Responding to text in a variety of ways

instructional strategies in each lesson. Rather than relying on one approach or another, each strategy has been carefully weighed in relation to research and its importance to the reading process. Although Chapter 2 will address the specific instructional strategies and activities as they relate to the models and stages of reading development, it is important to discuss the most recent research-based components and their importance to a comprehensive reading model.

Most reading researchers as well as practitioners acknowledge that the teaching of reading is multifaceted; there are no quick or easy fixes. There is, however, a recognized set of instructional components that are imperative to the teaching of reading. The most current and comprehensive examination of these reading components was completed by the National Reading Panel and released in the year 2000 (NICHD, 2000). The panel reviewed the reading research for the foundational years of kindergarten through eighth grade to identify components that consistently relate to reading success. These five components were identified as (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) fluency, (4) vocabulary, and (5) comprehension. To understand the importance of this research, a brief discussion of each component will be presented with implications for whole-group and small-group differentiated reading instruction.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that the sounds of spoken language work together to make words. Most important, to benefit from phonics instruction a student needs to demonstrate phonemic awareness. Students who exhibit phonemic awareness will have an easier time learning to read and spell (Goswami, 2002). Phonemic awareness is a subset of a larger category called phonological awareness that includes identifying rhymes and syllables and manipulating sounds and is not included in the research base. Therefore, this discussion only relates to the strategies needed for students to accrue phonemic awareness. According to research, phonemic awareness can be taught and learned (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

Implications for Whole-Group Reading Instruction

Phonemic awareness is a grade-level benchmark for both kindergarten and first-grade students. Therefore, the strategies needed to acquire these skills should be taught explicitly in whole-group instruction. Songs, rhymes, and stories provide rich content for teaching phonemic awareness in whole-group instruction. Additionally, phonemic awareness is practiced by segmenting and blending words as these early readers begin to read and spell.

Implications for Small-Group Differentiated Reading Instruction

Research is clear that small-group instruction is effective in helping students to acquire phonemic awareness (Morris et al., 2000; NICHD, 2000; Santa & Høien, 1999). Although some students acquire this important skill set through whole-group exposure, many students still lack this important foundational knowledge. Therefore, small-group differentiated reading instruction provides phonemic awareness in an explicit and systematic format.

Blending and segmenting sounds in words as well as isolating initial sounds are strategies used in the small-group model. The beginning and fledging reader stages include strategies that support the development of phonemic awareness.

Phonics and Word Study

The term *phonics* falls under the wider category called *word study*. Word study refers to the systematic, developmental study of words. Word study for beginning and struggling readers encompasses alphabet knowledge, beginning consonant sounds, word families, common and uncommon vowel patterns, as well as simple word features such as prefixes and suffixes. For the purposes of this text, the term *word study* will be inclusive of these components. The purpose of phonics instruction is not to teach students to sound out words but to give students strategies so they learn to recognize words quickly and automatically, thereby increasing their reading fluency and comprehension.

Although the strategies and routines for the word study component will be reviewed in Chapters 4 through 8, it is important to examine the significance of word study in the reading process. According to Bear, Invernizzi, and Johnston (2004), the most critical factor behind fluent word reading is the ability to recognize letters, spelling patterns, and whole words effortlessly. Further, Bear and colleagues state that the ability to use phonics seems to depend on whether or how a child has been taught phonics. The National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000) points out that when phonics and word study are taught explicitly and systematically, not only kindergartners but even preschoolers, special needs students, and students through the eighth grade can successfully use this method to learn new words. Explicit, systematic phonics is a powerful mode of teaching young or slow learners. Additionally, students who have completed a basic phonics program benefit from the more advanced study of word features.

Implications for Whole-Group Reading Instruction

Basic phonics instruction is generally completed in two years for average students (generally mid-kindergarten through mid-second grade). After this foundational phonics knowledge is mastered, the study of word features continues through upper elementary and middle school. Grade-level standards dictate that much of this be taught in whole-group instruction. A phonics component can be found in most published reading basal series but, in my opinion, lack a logical scope and sequence and intensity and, therefore, fail to meet the developmental needs of all students. Whether teaching a systematic basal sequence or an alternative, this whole-group phonics instruction should address grade-level standards and be planned with systematic delivery. Additionally, a systematic word study component should continue as they relate to grade-level standards through middle school.

Implications for Small-Group Differentiated Reading Instruction

The need for systematic phonics and word study instruction delivered in a small-group setting is well documented (Morris et al., 2000; NICHD, 2000; Santa & Høien, 1999). In my opinion, it is the missing ingredient in most small-group models. Differentiated

instruction demands that this crucial component be delivered with the same level of concern and attention as an appropriate reading level. After administering word study assessments (see Chapter 3), teachers determine appropriate word study levels to accommodate readers in small-group instruction. This provides readers who missed important phonics or word study components taught in whole-group instruction opportunities for additional time to master these basic skills. Furthermore, students who have progressed further in the word study sequence will be able to move at an accelerated rate in the study of prefixes, suffixes, complex patterns, and Greek and Latin roots.

Fluency (Rereading)

Research is clear about the need to develop fluency in readers through rereading (Chard, Vaughn, & Tyler, 2002). Fluency is the vehicle that takes the child from focusing on the words to focusing on the meaning of the text. Quite simply, practicing reading makes better, more confident readers. As students reread, they are able to increase their speed, use phrasing techniques, and become more automatic with the reading process. Automaticity is essential to reading success. Automaticity refers to how quickly or automatically students can recognize words so they can focus on the meaning of the text.

Repeated reading is an excellent technique for helping children achieve automaticity in reading. Repeated reading facilitates automatic decoding among average readers as well as struggling readers (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). Furthermore, rereading can lead to improved comprehension (Chard et al., 2002). Poor readers who engage in repeated readings show marked improvement in speed, accuracy, and expression during oral rereading, and, more important, improvement is noted in reading comprehension.

Students need to become fluent or automatic in decoding to become skilled readers. After students have achieved some accuracy in word recognition, additional rereading enables them to become fluent. By exposing students to repeated reading, teachers help students become automatic decoders and thus good readers. Practicing oral reading fluency is an important reading component until the ninth grade (NICHD, 2000).

Implications for Whole-Group Reading Instruction

The practice of oral reading fluency in terms of whole-group instruction should be minimal. When the teacher reads aloud, students hear a fluent model, but that alone does not increase a student's oral reading fluency. The heterogeneous makeup of any classroom is typically comprised of a wide range of readers. Therefore, repeated readings of a grade-level text are of little benefit for those students reading either below or above grade level. Additionally, the whole-group setting does not allow for the individual feedback needed to improve oral reading fluency. Effective options for whole-group practice might include choral reading of poetry or short passages from text.

Implications for Small-Group Differentiated Reading Instruction

Fluency develops as a result of opportunities to practice reading with a high degree of success. In other words, fluency practice should be at an independent reading level where a

student is reading with at least 98% accuracy. For struggling readers, the small-group format provides an opportunity to practice this important skill. Students in all small groups should reread text passages or even poetry at an independent reading level. Although the initial read of the text in the small-group setting is at the instructional level, the additional rereadings are at an independent reading level. This practice allows all readers to progress in their oral reading fluency and ultimately their overall reading comprehension.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary development is critical to reading development at all levels. In beginning reading, developing a basic sight word vocabulary is critical. As students mature and are capable of comprehending more complex text, vocabulary becomes the cornerstone of reading comprehension (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Hennings, 2000). There are two types of vocabulary that are important to reading instruction: oral vocabulary and reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary relates to words used in speaking or recognized in listening. Reading vocabulary refers to the words recognized or used in print. Vocabulary can be taught in two ways: indirectly and directly (NICHD, 2000). Indirect learning of vocabulary occurs when students hear and see words in many contexts, such as being read to, having conversations, or by students reading extensively on their own. Direct vocabulary instruction occurs when students are explicitly taught words or word-learning strategies.

Implications for Whole-Group Reading Instruction

Whole-group instruction provides fertile ground for the development of oral and listening vocabulary. Students begin to acquire oral vocabulary in their earliest school experiences. Many students come to school with a very limited oral vocabulary and need a language-rich classroom filled with words: words in stories, from conversations with adults and students, in rhymes, about the world around them, and so forth. It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of reading aloud to students of all ages, especially in a whole-group setting. In some instances, as students matriculate through the grades, teachers find less time to read to students. It is imperative that teachers continue to read above grade level in both fiction and nonfiction text to increase vocabulary. This preselected vocabulary should be taught in a systematic manner where words are pretaught, taught in context, and reviewed numerous times after they are read. In many cases, students who have passed the decoding stage in reading are limited in comprehension by their sheer lack of “what words mean.”

Implications for Small-Group Differentiated Reading Instruction

Small-group reading instruction is essential for initial reading vocabulary acquisition. Beginning readers must first master a basic sight word reading vocabulary before focusing on vocabulary that supports the text’s message. Therefore, the small-group differentiated format adjusts vocabulary instruction based on the unique needs of the readers.

Vocabulary development can be best supported and enhanced as students explore text at appropriate instructional levels.

Comprehension

The real reason that we all learn to read is to comprehend the text's message. Research is clear that comprehension can be improved by helping readers use specific strategies (Block & Pressley, 2000). Comprehension strategies are sets of steps that good readers use to make sense of the text they are reading. The National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000) identified six strategies that have a firm research basis for improving text comprehension including monitoring, using graphic organizers, answering questions, generating questions, recognizing story structure, and summarizing. Teaching comprehension can be a formidable task, especially when students are still focusing on each word. At this point in reading development, comprehension should not be the primary focus. As students develop oral reading fluency, comprehension becomes more important. Research supports the fact that comprehension strategies can be and should be taught explicitly both in whole-group and small-group instruction (Harvey & Goudvis, 2002; NICHD).

Implications for Whole-Group Reading Instruction

There are two big jobs in reading: decoding and comprehension. To comprehend, a student must first pass through the decoding stage of reading development. Most kindergarten and first-grade students are in the decoding stage of reading development and, therefore, receive much of their comprehension instruction in terms of teacher read-alouds in a whole-group setting. Primary teachers can begin to build comprehension foundations with quality read-alouds well before students are able to read on their own. The reading process is long and laborious, and all beginning readers should be aware at an early stage that the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension. With so much to teach and so little time left of the instructional day, each read-aloud should include a comprehension strategy focus that is explicitly taught whether it be summarizing, recognizing cause-and-effect relationships, identifying story elements, questioning, and so forth. Beginning readers as well as advanced readers should be well aware that the ultimate goal of reading is to understand the text's message.

Implications for Small-Group Differentiated Reading Instruction

The reading process requires that readers progress through developmental stages. These beginning stages are focused on the decoding process with a gradual transition toward a comprehension focus. Therefore, the beginning stages of reading development have less emphasis on comprehension. Although the texts at this level are so simplistic that they require little skill to comprehend, teachers should have students complete simple predicting, summarizing, and questioning as these simple texts are explored. Comprehension for students in these early reading stages is best left to stories introduced during teacher read-alouds in whole-group instruction because these texts are typically more complex. As students progress to more advanced stages of reading development, comprehension becomes an important of the small-group instructional model and is taught explicitly.

What Makes the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model Successful?

Models are representations that combine common parts into a whole. Models also suggest how the valued parts of a system might work together. Developing a model inclusive of differentiated reading stages and research-based components helps us to understand the reading process as a whole. Anchored in research, the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model brings together many complex reading strategies. However, it is because the model has been systematically developed that the instructional components carry special weight. There are several aspects of this differentiated reading model that support its success.

- Small-group differentiated instruction provides systematic and comprehensive coverage of the strategies required to move students to greater achievement in reading.
- The teacher ensures that the reading activities are “respectful.” Every group of students is given quality reading instruction and tasks that are worthwhile, valuable, and matched to students’ instructional level.
- Assessment is ongoing and directly linked to instruction. Students are regularly assessed on fluency, instructional reading, and word study levels. Teachers gather information from both formal and informal assessments about how their students are progressing in their learning at any given point. Whatever the teacher can glean about student reading readiness helps the teacher plan the next steps in reading instruction.
- Students are constantly evaluated, shuffled, and reshuffled in flexible groups to best meet instructional needs.
- Small-group differentiated reading provides intensive and continually adjusted instruction in fluency, word study, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Differentiated reading takes into consideration the individual characteristics of the children, capitalizes on the strengths they have, and expands and challenges their abilities.
- The individual components of the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model work interactively, building on and supporting one another. Each lesson introduces a new book or new piece of text. The rereading of this book builds sight word vocabulary, promotes strategy use, and increases fluency. In addition, new words for the vocabulary word bank are selected from the new reading selections. The sentence writing includes words taken from the word bank as well as from the word study. Comprehension is focused on the text being read in group, and written responses often include story vocabulary. Therefore, this model allows for the interactive development of reading, word study, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Each lesson is based on best reading research–based practices and includes all components identified as important to reading success.

Implications for ELLs, Special Needs Students, and Intervention

Perhaps the most important reason that the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model is successful is its ability to meet the needs of a wide range of readers. Teachers continue to be challenged with readers who struggle and those who have special needs, including students who do not speak English. As these teachers more thoroughly understand the stages of reading development, they feel better equipped to meet the needs of these challenges.

ELLs who have a good English listening vocabulary are often easy to place in the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model because the model already allows for differences among learners. Of course ELLs (and often students with low socioeconomic background) lack the vocabulary or background knowledge of some of their peers. Teachers need to spend extra time developing the background and vocabulary necessary for good comprehension. This is easier to do when using a model that places students at their instructional reading level and word study level.

ELLs with limited English lack the oral vocabulary needed to support their decoding and comprehension efforts. I have found that selecting books with good text and picture correlation supports vocabulary development in ELLs in much the same way that it supports decoding in beginning reading. Without this crucial ingredient, ELLs become nonsense decoders who have little hope of comprehending all that they read. Beginning with simple texts also allows students to develop a sense of predictable sentence structure critical to the ELLs. Small-group differentiated reading instruction provides the components that ELLs need to be successful readers.

Additional reading intervention outside of the literacy block is important to those students performing below expectations. New federal guidelines in the RTI model suggest that early intervention for struggling students be delivered in an explicit and consistent manner outside of the literacy block. A prevalent model for delivery of primary reading instruction and intervention is called the three-tier reading model. This three-tier model is an attempt to prevent reading failure through early intervention rather than testing and placing students into special education. It consists of three levels of instruction: Tier I is the basic reading instruction delivered in the literacy block, Tier II is reading intervention that takes place outside of the literacy block, and Tier III provides additional intense reading instruction for students who continue to struggle. The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model plays a key role in each of these levels of reading instruction because of its ability to adjust to the needs of the individual student.

Students identified as those with special needs or who require more reading assistance have often been assigned to a “different” reading program or boxed program, with the hope that the program would be more effective in meeting their needs. This model has, for the most part, allowed these students to fall further behind because of the lack of differentiated strategies in scripted programs. The days of sending the special needs students down the hall for the literacy block are quickly coming to an end. The new RTI model supports a reading model for regular classroom reading instruction along with intervention. In other words, a model that supports *additional* instruction, not one that

replaces regular reading instruction. Realistically, what these students need is more appropriate instruction geared to their instructional reading and word study level delivered in a more intense format. Using the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model for reading intervention provides the intensity that these students require. Teachers also recognize that their knowledge about the teaching of reading will best prepare them to meet the needs of students with special needs.

Components in a Balanced Literacy Model: Literacy Venues

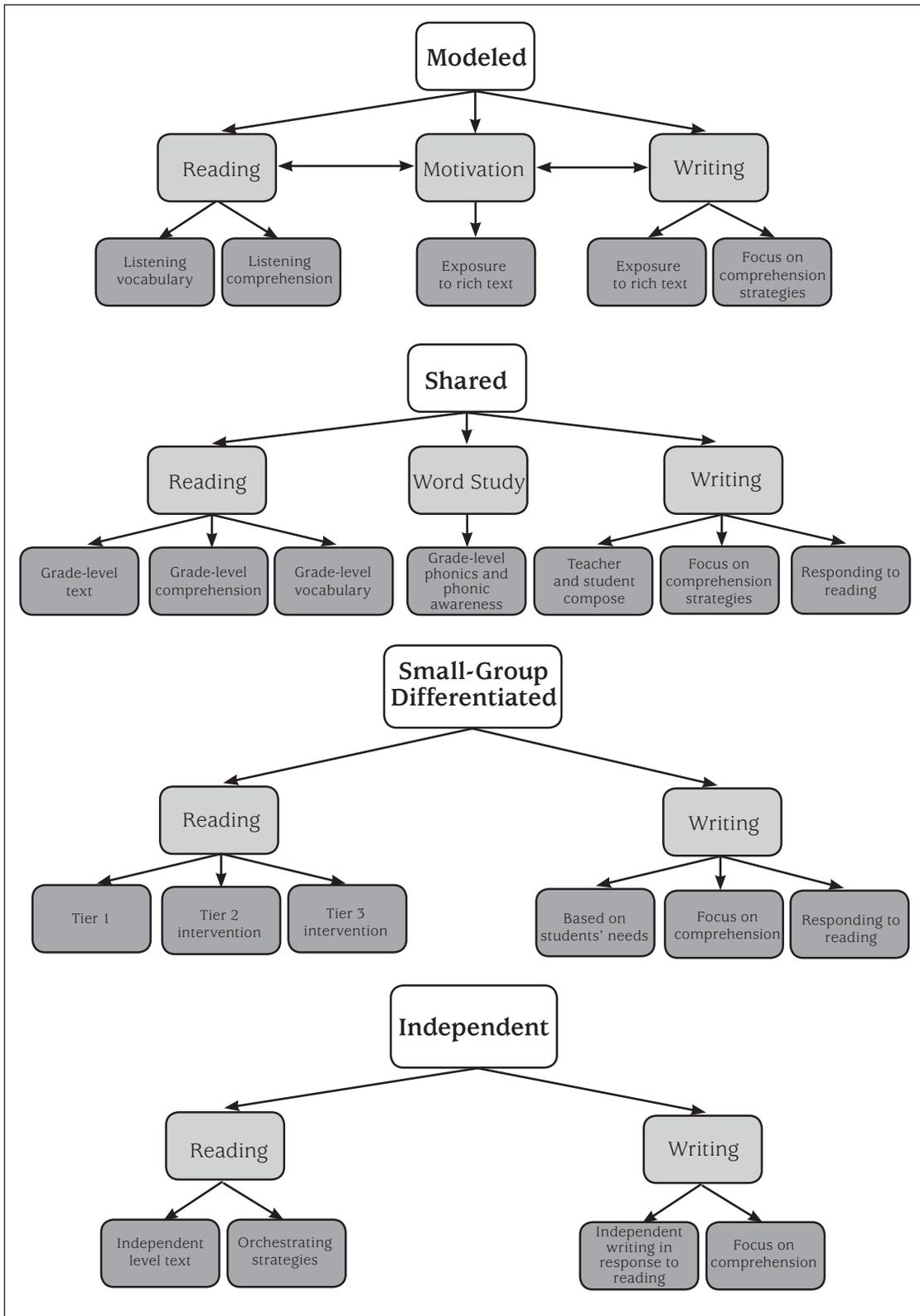
Although this book focuses on small-group differentiated reading instruction and its importance, the additional components of a balanced literacy program cannot be overlooked (see Figure 2). During the school day, reading and writing instruction is delivered in either whole group, small group, or independent practice. In whole group, literacy instruction is delivered through teacher modeling or a shared instructional format. It is, therefore, important to examine the research-based reading practices best taught and practiced in these settings. In essence, these are the delivery systems or venues we use to teach literacy. Small-group differentiated reading is a critical part of balanced literacy instruction, which, when implemented effectively, gives every student the opportunity to become a successful reader.

Modeled Reading (Read-Aloud)

Reading aloud to students plays a critical role in literacy development. This format allows the teacher to read above the reading level of most of the students in the classroom and therefore provides a rich format for a wide range of learners. Reading aloud allows children to connect to the text and experience the excitement and pleasure in reading. Additionally, teacher read-aloud is a powerful tool for teaching explicit listening comprehension and listening vocabulary to children who are beginning the reading process.

For the first time in my career in education, early childhood teachers have told me that they are frustrated by a lack of motivation in some students to want to learn to read. When I was a teacher of young children, I found that most students could hardly wait to come to school to learn to read. However, now many students simply lack experiences in hearing great stories traditionally read at home. In most households, both parents work and in some cases have more than one job so students don't have as many opportunities to be read to at home. As students enter school, their motivation to become a reader occurs in two ways. First, as teachers read aloud to students to share the joy of reading, students are motivated to want to learn to read and read more. Second, an overlooked yet critical motivator is giving students books that they can read successfully. One student recently told me, "Success feels good." That statement pretty much says it all. Students who are routinely given books to read at a frustration level will soon lose motivation. Students get excited about reading when they are surrounded by a variety of books to explore, read, and enjoy. It is, therefore, the teacher's responsibility to provide a literacy-rich

FIGURE 2
Balanced Literacy Instruction for Beginning and Struggling Readers



environment. Children come to school expecting to learn to read. It is only when we fail to support these readers in meaningful ways that motivation becomes an issue.

Modeled Writing

Modeled writing provides teachers with the opportunity to demonstrate the thinking processes of a writer as he or she responds to a text. With a particular comprehension strategy as a focus, the teacher uses think-aloud strategies as he or she composes the text's message. This provides students with an opportunity to observe the comprehension process with a deeper understanding of the text communicated in writing. Formats for the modeled writing might include the use of graphic organizers, charts, lists, or short written pieces. One way that teachers can always attract a focused audience for modeled writing is by making personal connections with the text as they write about the text. Children find it refreshing that teachers do have a life outside of the classroom. Modeled writing also can serve as a venue for demonstrating writing processes.

Shared Reading

Shared reading is perhaps the most misunderstood venue as it relates to balanced literacy. The primary focus for shared reading is to share grade-level text; therefore, the teacher is primarily responsible for reading the text. Shared reading pieces are generally written at grade level with each student having access to the text. Although the teacher is primarily responsible for reading the text, he or she actively engages the students as they follow along in the text or participate with the teacher in choral reading. Choral reading provides the support necessary to give all students access to the text. Major focuses in shared reading instruction are explicit teaching of grade-level vocabulary and comprehension strategies. Shared reading can also be used as a strategy to read grade-level text in the content areas. The shared reading venue supports readers as they access grade-level texts and standards.

Note that calling on individual students during shared reading should be avoided because it is not an effective strategy. If the primary focus is comprehension, for example, and if the story is read by multiple readers—some fluent, some struggling—it is difficult at best to comprehend the text's message. Another way that teachers routinely share the weekly story is by playing a taped version. However, this is not an effective or appropriate strategy for whole-group instruction. By using a taped version of the text, many comprehension opportunities are relinquished. As the teacher reads the story while the students follow along or perhaps whisper read with the teacher, the text becomes the framework for rich conversation, questioning, and exploring the text more deeply. Another common practice in many classrooms is to reread the story several times during the week. Again, this strategy must be more closely examined. Many teachers feel stressed that their students must pass the weekly test based on the story; therefore, they read the stories numerous times. Unfortunately, the students may become better at listening but not reading. This is especially true for struggling readers where the grade-level text is too hard. For average or advanced readers, a maximum of two reads should be considered. This would

also allow for students to read more books and ultimately get better at reading. We have already established that whole group is not an efficient way to practice fluency. Teachers should always ask themselves, What is my purpose in this activity? In reading instruction, the answer should be one of the research-based components: fluency, phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, or comprehension.

Shared Writing

In much the same way that shared reading support readers, shared writing supports writers as the teacher and students compose the text's message together. With the teacher acting as scribe, students respond to a commonly shared text focusing on a specific comprehension strategy. Although comprehension is the intended objective, this venue also provides a rich format for teaching the writing process as well as standard conventions of writing. The literacy block dictates that the writing process not be taught during this time frame, but when combined with a comprehension focus, the two work well together. Writing encourages a deeper understanding of the text's message. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to express their understanding of the reading through writing.

Small-Group Differentiated Reading

Small-group differentiated reading instruction is a critical component of the balanced reading model. The small-group model should be used both for primary instruction in the literacy block as well as for reading intervention. The primary classroom can be a place of great diversity. Students can be diverse in their instructional reading and word study levels as well as the time and instructional setting that is required for them to succeed. Because students progress at different rates, it is important to have structures in place (other than special services) that provide for an immediate response to their needs through additional intervention. This format works well for the regular classroom teachers as well as in intervention models such as the three-tier reading model and RTI discussed earlier in this chapter. Students who struggle need more time in a smaller instructional group and not necessarily a different program.

Small-Group Differentiated Writing

The writing process develops in stages much like beginning reading. Therefore, the small-group setting provides writers with an opportunity to receive instruction geared to the group's needs. Writing is a skill that must be modeled, supported, and practiced. Differentiated writing instruction brings together writers with like needs so that teachers are better equipped to deliver appropriate instruction. When the writing in small group supports or is an extension of reading, comprehension also increases. Research is clear that writing instruction can raise reading achievement (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). Many classroom models require that writing be taught outside the reading block. When comprehension is the focus of the writing activity, writing can most certainly be included as a part of the reading block. Furthermore, writing and reading are so innately entwined that they support and build upon one another.

Independent Reading and Writing

Finally, “practice makes perfect” is a phrase that we need to pay closer attention to as teachers. Students get better at reading and writing by practicing these skills at appropriate independent levels. This important piece of a balanced reading program should take place while small-group reading groups are being conducted. The days of “drop everything and read” are quickly coming to an end. With an ever-shrinking instructional day, this activity should take place while the teacher is working in small group. In my opinion, teachers are often overly stressed about what the other students are doing during small-group instruction. When implemented most effectively, the activities that students are engaged in are extensions of the work done in small group. For example, students who have completed reading a book in group might be asked to reread the book with a partner outside of group to practice fluency. Or, a group studying common *a* vowel patterns might be assigned a word hunt where they find words in books that have the same vowel patterns. Teachers need to ensure that they do not assign tasks to the rest of the class that are not at appropriate independent reading, word study, or writing levels. Students become frustrated, management problems surface, and off-task behavior is exhibited. Simply put, students need to be doing more reading or listening to reading, writing in response to reading, and working with words. Careful planning for independent reading and writing activities promotes quality time spent away from the direct supervision of the teacher. (See Chapter 9 for more information on this topic.)

Organizing and Managing the Literacy Block: Whole-Group, Small-Group, and Independent Practice

The challenge in orchestrating the literacy block, which consists of whole-group, small-group, and independent reading, can be best described as putting together a literacy jigsaw puzzle. Consideration must be given to grade-level literacy standards, reading research-based components, and the developmental reading and word study levels of all students. In most instances, the literacy block is no less than 90–120 minutes of focused instruction.

Table 3 depicts the literacy block and the components that should be included in an effective delivery model (a discussion of the balanced literacy model, which provides the framework for the literacy block, was discussed in the previous section). The literacy block comprises the core reading program based on scientific research and grade-level standards which may include the basal or alternate grade-level reading curriculum, small-group differentiated reading, and independent literacy activities. The literacy block addresses all five components of reading research in both whole-group and small-group instruction: (1) oral reading fluency, (2) comprehension, (3) phonemic awareness (where appropriate), (4) vocabulary, and (5) comprehension. In whole-group instruction, these elements are addressed in terms of grade-level standards. In a similar way, small-group instruction addresses the same research-based components but at the developmental

TABLE 3
The Literacy Block

Time	Curriculum	Instructional Venue	Text
10–15 minutes	<u>Quality fiction and nonfiction text</u> Focus: Listening vocabulary Listening comprehension	<u>Modeled Reading (Teacher Read-Aloud)</u> Whole group	Above grade-level text
30–45 minutes	<u>Basal Program or Grade-level Alternative</u> Focus: Grade-level literacy standards	<u>Shared Reading</u> Whole group Cooperative groups	Grade-level text
20–30 minutes x number of small groups	<u>Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model</u> Focus: Fluency Developmental word study Vocabulary Comprehension	Small group (6 or fewer students)	Instructional reading level
30+ minutes	<u>Independent Reading</u> Independent practice of key components	Individuals or partners	Independent reading level

levels of the students and the differentiated materials that are required. A common misunderstanding among teachers is that small-group instruction is primarily for at-risk students. On the contrary, small-group instruction is for all students, although the struggling readers might be seen more frequently. Based on my experience, a good offense is a great defense: Providing quality instruction in the regular classroom setting during the literacy block is the most powerful way to prevent reading failure.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle in implementing this literacy model is time management. If the literacy block is shorter, consider completing the read-aloud component outside of the block and choose a book that supports standards in social studies or science. If a basal program is the centerpiece of whole-group grade-level instruction, choose the activities carefully. In some instances, not all activities included are powerful or even make sense for the readers in your classroom. By picking and choosing wisely, time will be freed up to do the things that are the most important as well as motivating to students.

A Look Ahead

Chapter 2 begins with an in-depth look at each of the reading research–based components and the strategies and activities that support each stage of the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model. These components include fluency (rereading), vocabulary, (word bank) word study (phonemic awareness, phonics, and common word features), and comprehension.

Chapter 3 discusses the assessments that support the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model. The Early Reading Screening Instrument (ERSI) provides an initial assessment for nonreaders. Using information gained through the ERSI allows teachers to make informed decisions as they assign prereaders for small-group instruction based on individual literacy needs. As students' literacy levels increase, additional assessments are provided to help teachers continue to track students' progress. These assessments provide important information concerning word study levels, sight word knowledge, and instructional reading levels to maximize learning opportunities. These assessments also provide valuable information for curriculum planning, student groupings, and individual growth.

Chapters 4 through 8 are structured similarly and present the five stages of early reading development. In each chapter, a brief review of student characteristics associated with each specific reading stage is presented followed by appropriate text recommendations. A lesson plan format that supports each developmental stage also is included in each of these chapters. Step-by-step directions are given for implementing the lesson plan, followed by selected teacher and student dialogue that supports the lesson. This dialogue is included to demonstrate the activities in an authentic small-group setting; all student names are pseudonyms. Independent Activity Alerts are interspersed throughout these chapters to provide suggestions for easy-to-implement activities that are appropriate for each stage of reading development.

Chapter 9 discusses how to engage and manage students while the teacher is conducting small-group instruction. Activities that support the reading research–based components and that focus on the developmental reading and word study levels of students are suggested. These activities are both easy to implement as well as powerful in providing independent practice. Responsibility sheets that coordinate with student developmental levels are also included.

The accompanying CD contains essential information concerning assessments and materials necessary to implement the Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model. Table 4 shows the contents listing for the CD. These materials are referred to throughout the book and can be located solely on the CD.

TABLE 4
Contents Listing for Accompanying CD

Assessment Materials	<p>Early Reading Screening Instrument</p> <p>Reading Review</p> <p>Spelling Assessments</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 1: Alphabet Production</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 2A: Initial Consonant Sounds</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 2B: Initial Consonant Blends/Digraphs</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 3A: Word Families</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 3B: Short Vowels</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 4: Vowel Patterns 1</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 5A: Vowel Patterns 2</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Stage 5B: Common Word Features</p> <p>Oral Reading Fluency Rating Scales</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Grade 1</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Grade 2</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Grade 3</p> <p>Sight Word Assessment</p> <p>Student Reading Assessment Profile Sheet</p> <p>Classroom Profile Sheet</p>
Word Study Materials	<p>Emergent Reader</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Scope and Sequence (Alphabet Recognition and Production)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">100 Most Frequent Words in Books for Beginning Readers</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Letter Cards</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Sight Word Cards</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Cut-Up Sentences</p> <p>Beginning Reader</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Scope and Sequence (Initial Consonant Sounds, Digraphs, and Blends)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Picture Cards</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Cut-Up Sentences</p> <p>Fledgling Reader</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Scope and Sequence (Word Families and Short Vowels)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Cards (Word Families and Short Vowels)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Elkonin Boxes (3 boxes)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Elkonin Boxes (4 boxes)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Spelling Sort (3 boxes)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Spelling Sort (4 boxes)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Ladders</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Scramble Activities</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Dictated Sentences</p> <p>Transitional Reader</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Scope and Sequence (Vowel Patterns 1)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Cards (Vowel Patterns 1)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Make and Write (Word Scramble)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Scramble Activities</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Dictated Sentences</p> <p>Independent Reader</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Scope and Sequence (Vowel Patterns 2 and Common Word Features)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Study Cards (Vowel Patterns 2 and Common Word Features)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Word Scramble Activities</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Dictated Sentences</p>

(continued)

TABLE 4
Contents Listing for Accompanying CD (continued)

Auxiliary Instructional Materials	Beat the Clock Buddy Reading Log Cause and Effect Circle Story Compare/Contrast Cut-Up Sentence Template First, Then, Next, Finally Listening Center Log Main Ideas/Details Memory Reading Lesson Plans Emergent Reader (Stage 1) Beginning Reader (Stage 2) Fledgling Reader (Stage 3) Transitional Reader (Stage 4) Independent Reader (Stage 5) Reading Log Record and Reflect Story Map Summarize With Vocabulary The Top Five Things About... Vocabulary Map Watch Our Sight Words Grow Weekly Responsibility Sheet for Stage 1: Emergent Readers Weekly Responsibility Sheet for Stage 2: Beginning Readers Weekly Responsibility Sheet for Stages 3, 4, and 5: Fledgling, Transitional, and Independent Readers Word Hunt Word Study Card Template Word Wizard Cards
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