Chapter 1

Setting the Stage

Before we actually started to write, we were tempted to argue that this second edition wrote itself. When we thought about it, though, we realized that it wrote itself in intense collaboration with the many teachers, coaches, and administrators with whom we have worked since initial publication in 2007. During those years, all of us have had to examine our biases and claims. New college- and career-ready standards and assessments in nearly every state require new instructional designs. Put simply, the bar is higher now. Higher-order thinking, the integration of reading and writing, and an intense focus on content knowledge are now the coin of the realm. We find this development exciting for children and teachers. However, this higher-order emphasis does not replace what we know about foundational skills and the need for early success. Rather, it heightens their importance (Lipson & Wixson, 2012). It also hastens our time line for proficiency.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of our philosophy and a teaser about the changes we have made for lessons in this volume compared with our previous differentiation books:

- *Differentiated Reading Instruction: Strategies for the Primary Grades* (Walpole & McKenna, 2007).
- *How to Plan Differentiated Reading Instruction: Resources for Grades K–3* (Walpole & McKenna, 2009).
- *Differentiated Reading Instruction in Grades 4 and 5: Strategies and Resources* (Walpole, McKenna, & Philippakos, 2011).

Don't worry, though. We address all of these issues in depth in the chapters that follow.

MODEL BASICS

We have always been attracted to the logical principle named for the 14th-century logician William of Ockham. *Ockham's razor* is a maxim that we can apply to the choices teachers face as they try to meet the needs of all of their students: All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best. In this book, we argue that a small but precious portion of each day's English language arts (ELA) time should be reserved to address students' needs. Luckily, in the area of reading, those needs can be predicted in advance through reference to research on development, identified easily with informal assessments, and addressed quickly through a combination of direct instruction and supported, high-volume practice. The reason it is important to notice and address these needs is that strong foundational skills are not the ultimate goal of ELA instruction. They are, however, the ticket to the game. Figure 1.1 presents our application of Ockham's razor to the design of differentiated lessons. We begin by grouping children on a set of progressively more-proficient "stairs."

Children standing on the bottom step are using what they know about oral language to enter the world of written language. They need to learn their letter names and sounds, identify speech sounds in oral language, learn to segment and blend speech sounds, and blend letter sounds to read simple words. We call their instruction phonological awareness and word recognition (PAWR). They spend all of their differentiation time working on this particular set of skills.

Children on the second step know their letter sounds and can use them to decode many unknown consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC; short-vowel) words. They understand that English spellings are a code, but they are admittedly novice code breakers. They need to master other common phonics patterns (blends, digraphs, *r*-controlled vowels, vowel–consonant–*e*, and vowel teams), and they need to practice reading words in isolation and words in controlled contexts. We call their instruction word recognition and fluency (WRAF), the term *fluency* referring both to building automaticity with individual words *and* engaging in simplified repeated readings to develop proficiency in reading with words in context.

Our next stair step supports children whose single-syllable word recognition is solid, but who still read at a rate too slow to facilitate comprehension. For them, we choose massed, supported oral practice in natural text followed by brief discussions. We call this

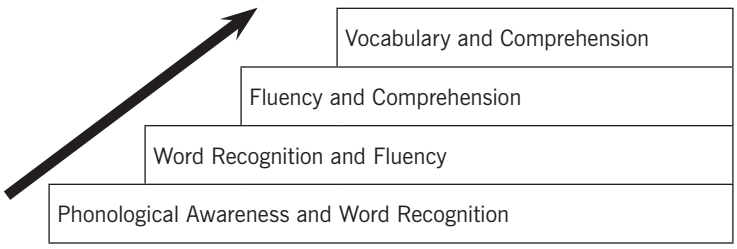

FIGURE 1.1. A staircase of proficiency.

instruction fluency and comprehension (FAC). Children remain here until they meet oral reading fluency targets.

Finally, the highest step is where the real action is—and also where the largest diversity of achievement is. Children who read with adequate speed and accuracy are poised to spend all of their cognitive resources on understanding. They can read silently in a wide range of texts, and the energy that they spend thinking during reading expands their understanding of words and the world. They will engage in wide reading, with teacher help, and in discussions that enhance their understanding. We refer to these students as a Vocabulary and Comprehension (VAC) group.

There you have it—our application of Ockham's razor tells us that when we group children by their needs, we should apply a razor-sharp focus to meeting those needs. This developmental model was part of our work in 2007, and it still informs our work today. No research has ever refuted the need for these skills or the order in which they are nearly universally acquired. That does not mean that we have learned nothing about how to make the model work; nor does it mean we have not made substantive changes in our thinking. We give you a short version of the development of our thinking below. If you are to use the lessons in this book, you have to have some reason to trust that we have our eyes both on research and on the realities of the classroom.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

What you will read about in this book is our differentiation model 2.0. Consistent with the requirements of implementation science (e.g., Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011), we used a process to guide us through the phases of *exploration*, *preparation*, *implementation*, and *sustainment* (EPIS), represented in Figure 1.2. Implementation science provides a lens for the design of interventions, but we have had to do two full iterations to arrive at the ideas in this text (e.g., Goldstein & Olszewski, 2015). We think that our design (and redesign work) makes the ideas more viable in the real world (and more likely to make your own work as a teacher easier).

One of our goals has always been to make a *realistic* contribution to the work of regular teachers. That means our *exploration* must consider the nested reality of the child

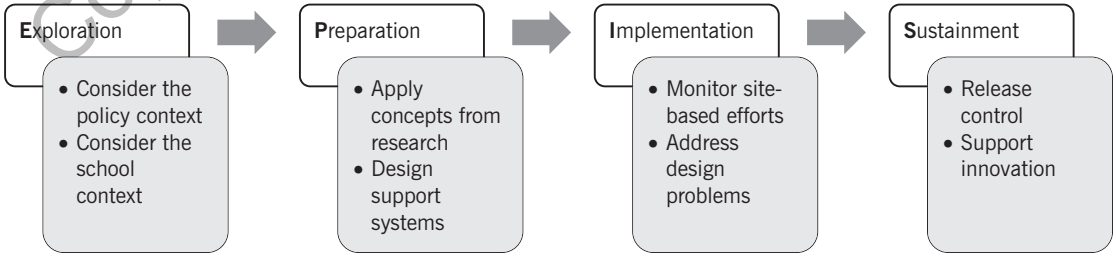

FIGURE 1.2. Four phases of intervention design.

learning to read, and the family trusting us to accomplish that goal at school, represented in Figure 1.3. The child and his or her family are the prize in a set of matryoshka dolls, either protected or hidden by the larger dolls around them. Think about these forces and their interactions as we provide you with a brief narrative of our design experiences.

We began with a set of goals and assurances made to each other, to teachers, and ultimately to children and their families.

1. We wanted to design a very low-cost, multiple-entry intervention to build foundational skills as quickly as possible or to increase meaningful reading when foundational skills were strong.
2. We wanted the intervention to fit into the realities of classroom life, where time during the day is at a premium and planning time is scarce.
3. We wanted the intervention to fit into the realities of school life, where the regular classroom teacher is likely to be the most consistent provider of differentiation.
4. We wanted to design the intervention such that it would help teachers with reasonable and evidence-based responses to policy mandates they were facing.

As we explored these issues in differentiation 1.0 in our previous books, we were influenced by the mandates adopted by some states in their Reading First initiatives. Reading First was a federal program that provided funds to support the neediest schools with instructional materials, assessments, and professional learning for teachers working in grades K–3. Reading First teachers had to teach with commercial materials with "fidelity," and they also had to use data to differentiate. The commercial materials that were adopted in this context had some combination of guided reading—a fluency-oriented approach to differentiation—built in to their daily plans. Data revealed, though, that not all children were building the skills they needed.

There was pressure on teachers to differentiate and to do it fast, but there was also pressure to use their materials exactly as designed. Most Reading First schools employed literacy coaches to direct these efforts. As we *prepared* version 1.0, we first attempted a large-scale teacher training initiative to help literacy coaches design very

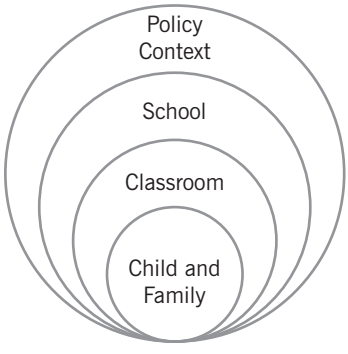

FIGURE 1.3. Nested contexts for children and their families.

brief foundational skills lessons to share with their teachers. This effort yielded too much variance in the lessons, and, frankly, took too much time. We moved to the *implementation* phase once we decided to design the foundational skills lessons ourselves (Walpole, McKenna, & Morrill, 2011). The newest version of those lessons are seen in Chapters 4 and 5. We provide models, but leave teachers with more choice and voice in the meaning-oriented reading lessons, with frames that are seen in Chapters 6 and 7.

We engaged in implementation work for several years, working with many schools through professional learning cycles of theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback (Joyce & Showers, 2002). The most important lesson we learned was that our lack of specificity about diagnostic assessment did not produce welcome choice, as we had hoped, but instead produced unwelcome confusion. As we worked with schools in *sustainment,* we also learned that a model for K–3 that excluded teachers of older children who might experience the same problems was inconsistent with the organization of schools. Our book for grades 4 and 5 remains a companion piece to this book. Finally, we learned that we had to produce shorthand descriptions of the lesson plans so that coaches and principals could focus their feedback. Without feedback from school-level personnel, some teachers would change the lessons in ways that we found inconsistent with research.

As we began the EPIS process again to design version 2.0, there were substantive changes to every component of our nested system except the children and their families who were still struggling to receive the support that they deserve in school. Our new exploration phase had to acknowledge the changes that were inherent in the policy context. States began implementing response-to-intervention (RTI) models in earnest at the same time that they were adopting new standards and very rigorous assessments. Schools were backing off from "fidelity" requirements and instead supplementing commercial programs with all manner of teacher-created enhancements. We had to acknowledge a wider audience of schools, maintaining a commitment to those serving large numbers of students who struggle, while also considering those with smaller numbers. In addition, we had to consider schools that had no centralized skills curriculum at all. Most importantly, though, we had to acknowledge that the new college- and career-ready standards required a much more aggressive foundational skills time line. The change to the new standards, and initial data from more rigorous assessments, revealed that children and schools previously "on track" were potentially far behind. Those children were in every grade level, including grades 4 and 5.

As we moved to the preparation phase, we considered the potential for using differentiation lessons to accelerate development in kindergarten and first grade (Lipson & Wixson, 2012), and then to function as either an intervention or extension of the curriculum in second grade and above. We had originally thought our lessons would be a safety net for students who needed more direct instruction and practice than whole-group experiences could provide. Because of our ongoing work in schools, though, we discovered that our differentiation lessons can actually be used as an initial, differentiated foundational skills curriculum in kindergarten and first grade, *and* as a Tier 2 intervention at all grade levels. The benefit of using our lessons as initial instruction in the early primary grades is that no students who have already mastered foundational skills for their grade level

will receive redundant, time-wasting instruction. We also learned that we could boost multisyllabic decoding quickly at the start of a fluency and comprehension lesson at the upper elementary grades.

Implementation of differentiation 2.0 has been ongoing and rewarding. We have been able to both fine-tune and simplify our assessment protocols through widespread use of the Informal Decoding Inventory (IDI; Walpole, McKenna, & Phillipakos, 2011) and the curriculum-embedded assessments we have made for different lesson types. Because of that, many schools are using our approach as a centerpiece of their RTI efforts and avoiding additional assessments that cost too much money and too much teacher and student time. Sustainment efforts for 2.0 are in their infancy, but they still require deep understanding of the instructional routines by administrators, collaborative review of diagnostic and progress monitoring data by grade-level teams, and access to a variety of supports online, face-to-face, in print, and through observation and feedback. Finally, our sustainment efforts have forced us to be specific about when we expect children to master particular skills, while at the same time advocating that children need the instruction that their achievement data signal, regardless of their grade level. We are specific about our own interpretations of the foundational skills time line as we describe each step on our stairway.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

As we continue to refine our own knowledge and skills, we spend a good deal of time in the now-virtual library, reading the impressive work of our colleagues who are pursuing similar goals. We view it as our responsibility to represent research findings accurately and in an accessible way. Sometimes there are just one or two studies of a particular issue; sometimes there are more. You will see our work "keeping up" with new findings woven through these chapters.

A federal practice guide released in July 2016 tells the tale that while some details of our model may change, some essential aspects stay the same. The guide is a review of empirical literature, using a very strict protocol for selection and summary of findings. This summary document attests to the fact that, first and foremost, foundational skills cannot be ignored. Figure 1.4 summarizes the four recommendations produced by the panel charged to write the practice guide (Foorman et al., 2016). We include more specific reference to the guide as we discuss differentiation lessons of different types.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

Are we sure that our differentiation model works? Compared with the first edition of this text, we have considerable evidence that our approach is feasible for teachers and schools. We also know that the IDI provides clear grouping recommendations (McKenna, Walpole, & Jang, 2016). The materials are inexpensive to duplicate. The teacher routines are reasonable and easy to master. The lesson times work. We have worked with schools to

What?	When?	Level of Confidence
1. Teach academic vocabulary.	Across the elementary years	Minimal
2. Develop phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge.	Grades K and 1	Strong
3. Teach students to read and spell words.	Mid-K through grade 3	Strong
4. Engage children in extensive reading in contexts.	Mid-K through grade 3	Moderate

FIGURE 1.4. Key recommendations for teaching foundational skills.

track the number of students who struggle, and schools using this approach see reductions in the proportion of students at risk within and across academic years.

This anecdotal evidence is exciting, but we cannot attribute that progress to our lessons alone. Strong evidence of effectiveness of instructional programs is very hard to come by. The research would have to be experimental, with students randomly assigned to our intervention lessons or to a control condition—a requirement that few schools or districts will accept. We would also have to ensure that the rest of their instruction was the same. Such research is prohibitively expensive because it implicates the entire ELA block at every grade level. Instead, programs (including ours) are typically "based on evidence." That means that the instructional ingredients have been validated individually, but the particular combination has not. As we designed our lessons, we used only procedures with strong research pedigrees. We then combined them in ways that were sensitive to reading development and realistic for classroom teachers.

We are currently addressing the most prohibitive factor in the list above. We have designed an open education resource (OER) to address the rest of the ELA block. We call the full program Bookworms (*www.bookwormsreading.org*). Like the small-group lessons you will read about here, Bookworms is low cost, uses a small number of evidence-based routines, and provides for extensive practice. The best part of Bookworms, though, is that it uses only authentic, intact trade literature. More on Bookworms later. For now, know that we are doing our best to keep up with policy, research, and reality. Know, too, that we are concerned that teachers have the tools they need to support all students.

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