Do-able Differentiation

Varying Groups, Texts, and Supports to Reach Readers

Michael F. Opitz and Michael P. Ford

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The general teaching suggestions, key elements, and intermediate grade lessons shown in Chapters 3 through 6 are adaptations of material found in Michael P. Ford’s Differentiation Through Flexible Grouping: Successfully Reaching All Readers, © 2005. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates.

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To teachers who matter:

Ruth Richards, Rene Kirkpatrick, Josephine Bruce, Arnold Burron, Douglas Burron, Charmaine Coppom, Elaine Vilscek, and Edna DeHaven.

—M.F.O.

and

Jeanne Ford, Pat Scanlan, Bill Ford, Peggy Ford, Mary Ford, Kerry Ford, Patti Ford, and Katie Ford.

—M.P.F.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii
Introduction ix

1 Understanding How Readers Differ and Teachers Matter 1
2 Grouping Structures Overview 23
3 Model 1: Grouping Without Tracking 31
4 Model 2: Jigsawing 51
5 Model 3: Connected Literature Circles 69
6 Model 4: Focused Readers’ Workshop 93
7 Yeah . . . But . . . What About These Questions? 112

Appendix A: Bibliography of Professional Resources 129
Appendix B: Blank Lesson Plan Forms 135
Children’s Literature Cited 140
References 141
Index 144
We would like to acknowledge the inspirational words of Dick Allington who we first heard say: “Kids differ. Teachers matter,” which we have liberally borrowed for the theme of this book. We would also like to acknowledge the role of the many individuals at Heinemann: editors Tina Miller and Kate Montgomery who were willing to travel far and wide leading us to this project instead of the project they were originally hoping for; Jillan Scahill for tidying up some loose ends; Vicki Kasabian for turning the manuscript into the book you see here; Eric Chalek for his writing what appears on the back cover; Jenny Jensen Greenleaf for the cover design; Denise Botelho, whose copyediting insights brought greater clarity; Cindy Black for her proofreading talent; Kim Arney, who typeset this book with great care and a superb design sense; Alex Murray for his index; and Louise Richardson, who handled the manufacture of this book. Our thanks to Charlene Cobb and Danielle Carnahan of Learning Point Associates who provided a forum for first organizing these thoughts and ideas; Melanie Sickinger and the Wrightstown (WI) School District for allowing use of their Response to Intervention plan; Maria Graf and the Clintonville (WI) School District for insights and ideas for working with ELLs; Jennifer A. Davis, doctoral candidate at the University of Northern Colorado who crafted the lesson annotations; our colleagues at the University of Northern Colorado and the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh for their ongoing support of our professional endeavors; and to our families for sacrifices they made as we completed this work.
You can boil the last fifty years of educational research down to four words—

Kids differ, teachers matter.

INTRODUCTION

We all want children to be the best readers possible, don’t we? It is this desire that keeps us searching for ways to reach them, all of them, isn’t it? And it is this search that takes us to professional conferences and to professional texts (both print and electronic), right? Invariably, though, our searching leads us to more than one answer and we are left on our own to synthesize and internalize them so that we can apply what we know for the sake of our students. Take differentiated reading instruction, the topic of this book, for example. It seems as though nearly every educational publisher of professional books has at least one text related to differentiated instruction. Taken together, these publications offer an array of ideas about what differentiated instruction should entail, from addressing gender to multiple intelligences, not to mention learning styles and personality types. While the authors of these texts approach differentiation from a different vantage point, as a group they underscore a major point we make in this text and a point that teachers focused on children’s learning rather than a prescribed curriculum have long known: readers differ.

And, thanks to the work of researchers such as Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998), we now have even more evidence to support a second point we make in this book and one that practicing teachers know firsthand: teachers matter. Indeed, we have much to celebrate in light of these findings. And now more than ever before, many different kinds of activities should show themselves in classrooms as a way of honoring readers’ differences while at the same time providing anecdotal evidence that knowledgeable teachers are crafting their lessons with reader differences in mind.

What should exist, however, and what actually exists is quite different. Even though there is much talk given to differences, for example, teachers
more often than not are expected to follow lockstep curricula and are often monitored to make sure that they are being true to the program (i.e., high fidelity). Another reason for the difference between espoused and applied ideas stems from the writing about differentiation itself. Because there are so many perspectives on differentiation, teachers can become confused and overwhelmed and then are inclined to shut down rather than open up to manageable ways to address readers’ differences. Frustration can triumph over action for busy, caring teachers who are trying to survive the many mandates imposed on them. So while differentiation is at the heart of helping all children become the best possible readers, there seems to be little or no time to sort out all of the information about differentiation. Yet, given all we know about reader differences and how paying attention to them will better ensure that children advance as readers, we have little choice. We are called on to eke out some time to attend to it. Clearly, understanding and applying differentiated instruction is simply too important to leave unattended.

That’s where this book comes into play. In writing it, we reviewed a tremendous amount of information about differentiation. We also thought about and discussed our own teaching experiences, regardless of grade level. Finally, we consulted newer legislation aimed at helping to ward off reading problems as early as possible (e.g., Response to Intervention). All of this knowledge led us to include the information that now forms the content of this book. Our aim is to show and tell you ways to take much of what is known about differentiation and use it in practical and manageable ways. In fact, as you’ll see in the sample lessons we provide and their accompanying explanations, differentiation fits easily into an already existing classroom routine. You are probably doing more differentiating than you realize and these lessons will help you to become more aware of how you might be differentiating and ways that you can enhance those practices.

In Chapter 1, we provide some background about differing differentiation perspectives. We discuss what the different perspectives have in common as well as how they differ. We then share our beliefs about differentiation. We continue by offering some suggestions about how to use much of the information garnered from these different perspectives in practical ways. For instance, rather than encouraging you to administer, score, and analyze the many different kinds of learning styles inventories, as suggested by some proponents of that perspective, we instead suggest that you use your time more wisely by assuming that there are many reader differences and use what you know about these possible differences when designing instruction. Your lesson then reflects different modalities, learner preferences, and intelligences so that by the end of the lesson, you will have addressed most if not all learner differences somewhere in the lesson. We conclude this chapter by making the
case for using four specific grouping structures as a practical way to hone in on reader differences when engaging children with texts for in so doing, we are convinced that you will better succeed in reaching all readers.

In Chapters 2 through 6, we provide information about the different grouping models. We provide an overview of the models in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, we explain a grouping without tracking model whereas in Chapter 4 we discuss a jigsawing model. In Chapter 5, we elaborate on a connected literature circles model and, in Chapter 6, we zoom in on a focused readers’ workshop model. Each chapter follows the same format:

- Diagram of the model
- Scenario
- Explanation
- Key Elements
- General Teaching Suggestions for . . .
  - preparing the lesson
  - frontloading
  - reading and responding
  - extending
- A Sample Lesson for Primary Grades
- A Sample Lesson for Intermediate Grades
- Additional Resources

Many times, the differentiated instruction we suggest in this book calls for some children to work independently. As we have discussed in other publications, when children are working away from the teacher, they need to be engaged with meaningful literacy activities that will enhance their understanding of how language works. They also need to be taught how to work independently. In Chapter 7, we offer some suggestions to help you know just what to do with the rest of the students when you are working with a small group.

We close the book with appendices that you can use to extend your understanding of this book in one way or another. Appendix A lists additional professional references and Appendix B provides blank lesson planning forms that can be reproduced for your own use.
Not sure where to begin? As a way of showing you as much as telling you about differentiated instruction, here’s what we propose. First, start with Chapter 1 so that you can gain an understanding of differentiation as we see it. This understanding will serve as a foundation as you read the remaining chapters. Second, take a look at Chapter 2 as it will provide you with an overview of the grouping structures, how they are alike and different. Third, preview the remaining chapters. Beyond this preview, though, differentiation kicks into high gear. If you are new to using different grouping structures in your classrooms, especially as a way to emphasize reader differences, we suggest that you begin with Chapter 3, “Grouping Without Tracking,” and once you feel you have a good handle on it, move to the next chapter. Continue in this sequential manner because each model becomes increasingly more complex and each of the previous models serves as a scaffold for the models that follow it. Following this sequence and moving along when you feel you and your students are ready, you move at your own pace, one that ensures success for both you and your students.

Others of you might already be somewhat familiar and comfortable with the models we present. However, you may be looking to refine one or more of the models so that you can better emphasize differentiation. You might also be looking for ways to improve your use of the grouping structures. In this case, we suggest that you begin with the model you most want to refine and move to the others as you see fit. Keep in mind that we wrote Chapters 3 through 6 as stand-alone chapters so that we could better help you read the chapters in the manner that best fits your needs. You might not need the same level of support as other readers and therefore need not follow any specific chapter sequence.

Still others of you might be comfortable with most of the models to the point where you would like to challenge yourself to try another way of reaching readers. We suggest that you try out one that is new to you. Many teachers, for example, like the idea of a readers’ workshop yet shy away from it because they are unsure how they can manage it. The focused readers’ workshop model we explain in Chapter 6 might be just the way to embrace the challenge and to forge ahead.

Regardless of the order you choose to read the chapters, reading and digesting them all will better enable you to understand and to provide differentiated instruction as we define it in this text. As a result of reading this text and reflecting on your own teaching experiences, we are confident that you will agree with the major point we make in this text which is this: readers differ and teachers matter!
Musicians seated, instruments tuned to the first violin, the orchestra readies itself for the conductor’s entrance. The conductor walks onto the stage and, after taking the necessary bows, steps onto the conducting platform facing the orchestra. As he raises his arms, baton in his right hand, musicians poise their instruments to begin playing the first part of the musical score. Arms held high, baton in hand, the conductor moves both arms to signal the musicians to play. Throughout the music, the conductor uses the musical score as a guide to make sure the music is performed as intended by the composer, which necessitates a variety of gestures. Some of the conductor’s gestures convey to the musicians to join in so that all are playing together. At other times, he signals some musicians to play and for others to remain silent. At still other times, he motions to a single musician to play a section of the musical score solo.

What’s going on here has as much to do with differentiating instruction and using different grouping structures to teach reading as it does playing a musical score! Like the conductor, teachers use a plan to help them know when to work with students as a whole group, when to work with smaller groups within the whole, and when to have students work independently. And like the conductor, teachers use these different grouping options to help us accomplish a given purpose. In other words, rather than relying on one grouping technique to the exclusion of the others, teachers use a combination knowing that each group size has advantages and disadvantages (see Figure 2–1) and that there are optimal conditions when each works best. Our understanding replaces an either/or mind-set.

The four grouping models we propose in Chapters 3 to 6 capitalize on our understanding of how to best use a variety of grouping structures, often
**Figure 2–1 Planning for Different Group Sizes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Size</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>When It Works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Class</td>
<td>• Teacher works with the whole class and everyone participates in similar activities. In one way or another, the same text is often read by all students.</td>
<td>• Builds a community of learners. • Provides a common knowledge base for all.</td>
<td>• Differentiating instruction is more difficult. • Some students can get frustrated or bored depending on the level of instruction. • Students may not interact as planned.</td>
<td>• Different learners are considered when planning instruction. • All members of the class are provided with a similar experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group</td>
<td>• Groups of two to five students work together to accomplish a given task.</td>
<td>• Provides for focused instruction. • Engages more learners. • Students learn to work with one another.</td>
<td>• Students may not interact. • Creates a higher noise level. • Students might be grouped together for too long. • Student perceptions of group can be negative.</td>
<td>• Group membership changes on a regular basis. • Students are taught how to respond to one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>• Students are paired up with one another to read text in one or more ways.</td>
<td>• Stays focused. • Enables relationships to develop. • Encourages independent learning so the teacher can help those who need it.</td>
<td>• One of the two students may become too dependent on the other. • One of the two may dominate.</td>
<td>• Partners are switched on a regular basis. • Procedures are clearly understood by both.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>• Students work by themselves and each often reads a different text.</td>
<td>• Allows students to read at a comfortable level and to develop their own understandings. • Enables teacher to evaluate individual progress to determine what students know and need to know.</td>
<td>• Can be hard to organize. • Students may become distracted and/or lose focus. • Little sense of community.</td>
<td>• Reading is at the appropriate level. • Students understand procedures. • An effort is made to bring students back together either as a small group or large group to discuss what they’ve learned.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
within one lesson, as a means for differentiating instruction. Just like four different musical scores cause a conductor to use different sections of the orchestra at specific times to accomplish different purposes throughout the piece, so, too, the grouping models cause us to use different sections of the class at specific times to accomplish specific reading support purposes. Figure 2–2 provides an overview of these grouping models and how each highlights differentiation.

As Figure 2–2 shows, there are differences in how differentiation plays out among the different grouping structures. Nonetheless, they are similar in seven ways.

1. A variety of group sizes are used within any given reading lesson. Every reading lesson begins with calling the class together as a whole group for a focus lesson. Students then break out into a smaller group and read and respond to a text independent of other groups. Students then come back to the large group to conclude the reading experience.

2. The lesson structure contains the same three elements: frontloading, reading and responding, and extending. As a way to set students up for reading success, the lesson begins by providing or accessing students’ backgrounds and providing demonstrations and/or explanations so that students will know exactly what it is they need to accomplish. All are then provided time to read and respond. The reading session then concludes with an inclusive whole-group activity. Each of these three lesson elements carries some important reminders. We list these in Figure 2–4.

3. There is a deliberate effort to use a variety of teaching and learning strategies. Recognizing that readers not only differ in their reading preferences and profiles but also in their learning styles, the structures enable the teacher to use visuals for those who need them, oral directions for those who lean toward learning through listening, and hands-on activities for those learners who are both kinesthetic and tactile. Likewise, a variety of ways of responding to text enables students to choose the mode of expression that will best help show their understanding. Some students might want to draw a response to text whereas others prefer to write in one form or another.
### Figure 2–2 Grouping Models and How They Highlight Differentiation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grouping Structure</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Differentiation Highlights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Grouping Without Tracking    | Whole-class approach in which the teacher provides different levels of support for students reading and responding to a common core text. | 3       | • Varying amounts of support are provided to enable all readers to engage with the text. Some groups read independently whereas others read with the teacher. Still others listen to the teacher read aloud as they follow along.  
• Reaches readers who fit the Reader Affective Profile 3 (see Figure 1–4) because text is selected and frontloaded to help students gain greater confidence in reading. |
| Jigsawing                    | Small-group approach in which similar achievement groups are formed to read and respond to different parts of a whole-class text. The text is intentionally divided so that parts vary in their degree of challenge. | 4       | • Repetitive reading to enable students to practice a chunk of text.  
• Accessible grade-level content by breaking up the text into manageable chunks for all readers and assigning different chunks to different readers depending on their reading level.  
• Reaches readers who fit Reader Affective Profiles 1, 2, or 3 because the text is shorter making it more likely that students will be able to successfully read the text in a short amount of time. |
| Connected Literature Circles | Small-group approach in which similar achievement groups are formed to read and respond to different texts of varying degrees of challenge that are related by topic, theme, genre, author, and/or strategy. | 5       | • Multiple copies of different texts are used for different groups of students who are of similar reading achievement.  
• Reaches readers who fit Reader Affective Profile 4 because of the social aspect that coincides with literature circles. |
| Focused Readers’ Workshop    | Individualized approach in which all readers read and respond to different but related texts. Again, texts may be linked by topic, theme, genre, author, and/or strategy. Individualized texts may come from a collection of resources with varying degrees of challenge. | 6       | • Readers read at their pace. There is no need to have all students finish a given book within a given time segment.  
• Individualized in that all readers are reading different texts that relate to a common theme.  
• Individual conferences with the teacher enable the teacher to monitor and adjust instruction for future lessons.  
• Reaches readers who fit all Reader Affective Profiles because students are provided time to self-select a just-right text of interest. It is especially effective for reaching readers with Reader Affective Profiles 1 or 2, however, because students get to use their interests as a way to select a text. They are more motivated to read their self-selected text and to start to see themselves as readers. |
4. All enable children to read by reading. Regardless of the structure, all children, regardless of perceived reading level, read appropriate texts. They learn to read as much or more by reading as they do when being taught about reading. Successful differentiation requires careful attention to text selection. Careful text selection, however, means considering factors beyond an identified level for the book.

5. Varying the degree of teacher support is a critical tool for differentiation. While students are reading and responding, the teacher provides varying levels of support to better ensure reading success. Instead of altering the tasks or lowering expectations, the teacher analyzes the level of support needed by different students. The teacher provides varying degrees of direct or indirect support based on students’ needs.

6. Open-ended activities enable all children to participate. All readers can complete the response activities at their own level because the activities are designed such that they can. For example, all children keep a literature response log and respond to their reading in one or more ways. When responding in writing, their writing is representative of where each is functioning.

7. All are based on our beliefs about differentiated instruction. Recognizing that knowing why we do what we do yields high student achievement (Pressley 2005), we set forth our beliefs in Chapter 1 (see pages 1–22).

So there you have it; an overview of the four grouping structures we showcase in Chapters 3 through 6. But before we bring this chapter to a close, there are four additional points we need to emphasize.

First, let’s remember that successful differentiated instruction begins with knowledge of literacy demands and the students we are teaching. This elevates the role of assessment as a driving force in differentiating instruction. We need to know what is critical for becoming successful readers and writers and how to assess those elements. Since assessment has been a focus of our work in the past (Opitz and Ford 2000), we will refer you to that resource to explore issues related to assessing learners. The primary reason for assessing is to inform our thinking and influence our planning. (See Figure 2–3.)
Assessment will lead you to the following key questions:

- What do assessment results tell me about each of my students?
- Which target skills and strategies can I identify?
- Which of my students need to work together as a group at this time?
- How much time is required per group?
- What resources are available for me?
- How do I organize the classroom during the reading block in order to manage differentiated instruction?

It’s the last question that brings us to our second reminder. In selecting which model to use in organizing your differentiated instruction, there are several considerations to keep in mind as you prepare to use the three-part lesson plan that is common to all four models. We show these in Figure 2–4.

Third, in keeping with our earlier writing about grouping, we deliberately use the terms similar achievement in place of homogeneous and mixed achievement in place of heterogeneous when we discuss grouping in each model. We do so because we believe, as do others (e.g., Allington and
Figure 2–4  Reminders for the Three-Part Lesson Plan Common to All Grouping Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Component</th>
<th>Reminders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Frontloading     | • Time invested on the front end of the lesson guarantees that more students will be better able to work independently from you thereby reducing the number of students who will need support.  
• Gradually turn over the responsibility for the reading of and responding to the text to the students by moving from modeling to guided practice to independent practice. This will also ensure that more students will be able to work successfully away from you.  
• Make sure the purpose and directions for independent reading and writing are clear for all students before turning over the activity to students and starting any instruction with a small group or individual in need of more support. |
| Reading and Responding | • Engagement activities should be developed so that they encourage students or teams to actually read the assigned texts or parts of texts. Assist them in processing the texts and create a paper trail that can be used when responding to the text. The paper trail also can provide information for quick assessments of students’ reading performance and independent work skills.  
• Hold the same expectations for all students and then differentiate the level of support and/or texts during reading and responding.  
• Discourage the use of activities within small groups in reading and responding to the text that promotes disengagement (e.g., round-robin reading). Make sure students have seen and practiced many meaningful alternatives.  
• Allow for some choice in how students can respond their reading. |
| Extending         | • Activities should allow all students to contribute to the follow-up activity in mixed achievement groups. Activities should allow all members of a team to play a role in sharing what was learned with others.  
• Activity should allow students to build on instruction provided during the frontloading and practiced during the reading.  
• The activity should allow teams, partners, or individuals to use this text as a springboard for additional inquiry.  
• Encourage teams or individuals to reflect on their work together to improve team and independent work skills throughout the year. |

(Adapted from Ford [2005a])

Cunningham 1996), that tapping innate ability is difficult if not impossible. The only conclusion that can be drawn from how children perform on different reading measurements is just that: we assess their performance rather than their potential ability. Therefore, talking about achievement is much more accurate than talking about ability. No two children are alike and to assume otherwise is faulty thinking. We take to heart what Betts noted years ago: “When groupings are made for any activity, the teacher should not assume that homogeneity is assured. In fact, homogeneity is a fiction” (1946, 391).
As you can see by reading this quotation, we are not the first, nor are we alone when we exclaim *readers differ!*

The fourth and final reminder is that some musical scores are more complex than others and conductors who know their orchestra members choose the score accordingly. The conductor then gradually selects more complex scores so that all can meet with success while at the same time grow as musicians. The same can be said for these grouping models. The first is easier to orchestrate than the fourth. One way to scaffold your learning right along with your students is to choose the model that will afford all with just-right growth, adjusting as needed. Like orchestral conductors, *teachers matter!*
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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