

What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

This resource is for all your students. It will guide your instruction and invention such that your students are making progress and you will have evidence to support their next steps learning. It's an amazing collection of ideas that you can implement tomorrow to impact the reading skills of your students.

—Douglas Fisher

Professor, San Diego State University

Wiley Blevins provides teachers new to the science of reading with the missing manual for making any literacy program's phonics instruction more effective. This book will help build their instructional decision-making skill and capacity for more effective lessons. A must-have for those serious about equitable outcomes for all students.

—Zaretta Hammond

Author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain*

Wiley Blevins's new book, *Differentiating Phonics Instruction for Maximum Impact*, is a must-read for all educators. When it comes to word learning, one-size-fits-all is not a viable option. But, with Wiley's book in hand, teachers become prepared to implement a systematic, responsive, and joyful approach to building and using word knowledge. This easy-to-navigate resource includes plentiful research-supported routines, lessons, and tools that are sure to enhance existing classroom instruction. Teachers—get ready to confidently support the success of ALL classroom learners!

—Pam Koutrakos

Instructional coach, consultant, and author
Mentor Texts That Multitask and the *Word Study That Sticks* books

Wiley Blevins's book is essential for teachers. He cuts through the clutter surrounding phonics, providing his readers with a clear understanding of what should be taught and why it is important. He also provides effective, research-based practices designed to meet the needs of every student in the classroom. An indispensable resource.

—Melanie R. Kuhn

Jean Adamson Stanley Faculty Chair in Literacy at
Purdue University and Moderator of thereadingforum.com

Wiley Blevins dispels the myth that differentiation is something that occurs only after a whole class lesson fails to meet individuals' needs. Through concrete examples, he shows us simple ways to bake differentiation into all instructional plans, programs, and resources. He also shares ways to modify instruction on the spot to support both student enrichment and acceleration. I can't wait to use this book in my day-to-day work with teachers.

—Leah Mermelstein

Consultant and author of *"We-Do" Writing*

In his inimitable way, Wiley Blevins once again advances phonics instruction with practical, fresh routines straight from the classroom. His guidance is specific and actionable—so much so that I could often “see” phonics lessons playing out. And, the book supports lasting instructional change with guidance for instructional leaders with “look-fors.” What a gift this book is to educators everywhere.

—Heidi Anne Mesmer

Professor, Literacy Education, Virginia Tech

Differentiating Phonics Instruction for Maximum Impact

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Differentiating Phonics Instruction for Maximum Impact

How to Scaffold Whole-Group
Instruction So All Students
Can Access Grade-Level Content

Wiley Blevins

Differentiation is *not just* what happens in small groups after a lesson has failed to meet individual needs. It is *not just* what should be happening during whole-group lessons. Differentiation needs to happen before, during, and after a lesson. It must be baked into the DNA of your instructional plan, program, and resources in order to meet the needs of all your students every minute of the day.

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Blevins, Wiley, author.

Title: Differentiating phonics instruction for maximum impact : how to scaffold whole-group instruction so all students can access grade-level content / Wiley Blevins.

Description: Thousand Oaks, California : Corwin, 2024. | Series: Corwin literacy | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023039083 | ISBN 9781071894279 (paperback) | ISBN 9781071931493 (epub) | ISBN 9781071931509 (epub) | ISBN 9781071931516 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Reading—Phonetic method. | Reading—Remedial teaching.

Classification: LCC LB1050.34 .B539 2024 | DDC 372.46/5—dc23/eng/20231012

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023039083>

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

23 24 25 26 27 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Visit the companion website for downloadable items at resources.corwin.com/differentiatingphonics.

About the Author



Wiley Blevins, EdD, studied at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Bowling Green State University. He is an author, educational consultant, and researcher, and has taught both in the United States and South America. Wiley has written over 17 books for teachers, including *A Fresh Look at Phonics*, *Phonics From A to Z*, *Differentiating Phonics Instruction for Maximum Impact*, and *Choosing and Using Decodable Texts*. He has authored several phonics and reading programs and wrote the phonics brief by the International Literacy Association (Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy

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PART I

Responsive Phonics Instruction



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Why Introducing All Students to Grade-Level Content Is Key

And Common Misconceptions About Tiered Instruction

Walk into any classroom and the range of student needs will be wide. In a Grade 1 classroom you might have students who are just learning English as a second or third language. You might have some students who can't read simple CVC words (consonant-vowel-consonant words) like *cat* and *run* and others who are already reading multisyllabic words like *funny* and *kitten*. You might have students who learn new high-frequency words like *they* and *said* after only a few exposures and others who need dozens or more exposures and more intensive instruction and practice. The responsibility of all of us working in classrooms is to meet the needs of *all* our students. We must provide instruction, especially whole-group instruction, that doesn't just "teach to the middle" in which students below grade-level expectations are lost and students above grade-level expectations are bored because they already know it. Instead, we need to provide instruction that meets the widest range of student needs. This instruction scaffolds, front-loads, modifies, and enriches at key points of the lesson to offer access and value in that instruction.

.....
We must provide instruction, especially whole-group instruction, that doesn't just "teach to the middle."

Take a look at this simple five-word spelling test (Figure 1.1) I gave the first week of school to some Grade 1 students in New York City. What does it tell us about each student's phonics instructional needs? What does it tell us about phonics instruction in general?

Figure 1-1 ♦ Simple Five-Word Spelling Test

DICTATED WORDS	STUDENT 1	STUDENT 2
1. sad	1. sad	1. sad
2. big	2. big	2. bag
3. rake	3. rakce	3. rak
4. coat	4. cote	4. kot
5. flower	5. flowre	5. flar
STUDENT 3	STUDENT 4	STUDENT 5
1. sd	1. Seivrne	1. ePraH
2. bg	2. Bog	2. PEBL
3. lk	3. Rigvet	3. eHPLn
4. kt	4. Tetvai	4. sieHgt
5. fw	5. Levneia	5. cSeph

Notice that Student 1 has mastered spelling words with short vowel CVC spellings and is starting to apply (and overgeneralize) final-*e* spellings. Since this skill will not be focused on for a couple of months in Grade 1, this student is starting the year above grade-level expectations. The whole-group lessons currently planned will cover skills the student has already mastered and will not accelerate his growth unless enrichment opportunities are provided during those lessons. This student can also benefit from small-group instruction on skills further along in the phonics scope and sequence to challenge him and accelerate his growth in reading and spelling.

Notice that Student 2 has a good grasp of consonants and short vowel spellings and is meeting grade-level

expectations. This student is spelling words with more sounds using more letters, so she has strong phonemic awareness skills as well. The whole-group lessons planned will address this student's needs.

Notice that Student 3 is a vowel avoider. She has some grasp of consonants but did not master short vowel spellings in kindergarten. While the early lessons planned in Grade 1, which review the skills from kindergarten, will be beneficial, this student needs additional work segmenting sounds and attaching a spelling to each sound. Increased focus on reading short vowel CVC words will be helpful. Using sound boxes and counters, so the student can physically mark each sound and then replace each counter with a spelling, will be beneficial during whole-group lessons (already planned), but additional work with these tools needs to be offered during small-group instruction. In addition, reading and building word chains using minimal contrast short vowel words (e.g., *hat, hit, hot*) will also be extremely helpful.

Notice that Student 4 has some grasp of beginning sound-spellings but lacks the ability to segment words and attach learned spellings to each sound. While the student understands that words have letters, there are a lot of kindergarten skills this student has not mastered. The whole-group lessons will be quite challenging for this student. The incorporation of some alphabet review and simpler words in activities will be helpful, but other scaffolds and supports will need to be provided. In addition, intensive small-group work on phonemic awareness (at the phoneme/sound level) and alphabet recognition (basic letter-sounds) will be needed.

Notice that Student 5 knows that words are comprised of letters but lacks necessary phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition skills. The student, whose name is Stephanie, does have some awareness of the letters in her name. This student needs intensive supports during whole-group and small-group instruction and is severely behind grade-level expectations.

What do these data on Grade 1 students reveal? The realities that most teachers in elementary schools face—a wide range of student needs. This is what makes teaching phonics so challenging and why differentiation is such an important consideration when planning instruction.

PART I: Responsive Phonics Instruction

The range we see in just these five students also speaks to the reality that we *do* have tools to lean on as we differentiate instruction. First and foremost—a strong scope and sequence. In fact, when we know the scope and sequence *for each grade*, we can be nimble and responsive with our students. By knowing the scope and sequence for the grade I am teaching, I can quickly determine which words in a text students can fully sound out and, if they struggle, I can provide phonics-based corrective feedback (e.g., highlighting the missed sound-spelling and guiding the students to sound out the word again using that reviewed information) to reinforce skills with which they lack fluency. Further, knowing the scope and sequence of the grade I am teaching, as well as the scope and sequence of the previous grade and next grade, allows me to place students along a learning continuum during small-group time to meet them where they are in terms of their decoding needs. As you read this book, think of your scope and sequence as the spine of your instruction.

DIFFERENTIATION: IT'S NOT TEACHING TO THE MIDDLE

Current understandings of differentiation: engaging and challenging every student at every skill level during whole-group lessons



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Differentiation isn't a new concept, but it's certainly one that teachers have strong feelings about. *Can't be done! Too difficult and not realistic! A myth!* These are all statements I've heard

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and read in books, articles, and on social media. Yet the progress of every child in our classrooms is our responsibility. Most instructional programs are targeted for those “in-the-middle” on-grade-level students. The instruction is too easy for some of the students and too difficult for others. We all know that bored and/or frustrated students don’t sit quietly smiling during these lessons. And the reading growth of these students can and should be targeted as well during the entire instructional day, not just after the lesson failed to meet their specific needs.

In the mid-1980s, I was preparing for my student teaching, arguably the most exciting semester for any college of education student. I couldn’t wait! I was assigned the cooperating teacher everyone feared—the one whose student teachers were often seen crying. Undaunted, I was convinced I would win her over. For the first several weeks of student teaching, she asked me to sit in the back of the room and observe her. While my other student teaching friends were slowly taking over the teaching of different subjects—reading, math, science—I was still sitting in the back of the room watching.

So, one day I asked my cooperating teacher when the “teaching” part of student teaching was going to begin. She sighed and said I could introduce the spelling words and concept on Monday at the end of the day. I raced back to my dorm room and spent the weekend planning a spelling lesson that would knock her socks off!

The moment arrived. I stood in front of the classroom as a hushed silence swept over the room. Both the students and I could feel the excitement in the air. My cooperating teacher sat in the back of the room (my usual perch) with her notebook and a pen in hand. As I worked my way through the lesson, it felt so good. It was like fireworks were exploding in the background. In the back of the room my cooperating teacher wrote feverishly. At one point, I actually wondered if she was a walking thesaurus. I mean, how many ways can you write “great job!”

When the lesson ended, I strutted to the back of the room to receive my praise. My cooperating teacher announced we would debrief after the children left for the day. So the moment of my triumph arrived. We sat at a table as I eagerly

.....
**She looked at me,
 then her notes,
 then back at me,
 and said, “Wiley, I
 don’t know what
 you were doing in
 front of my class,
 but it wasn’t
 teaching.”**

awaited her positive feedback. She looked at me, then her notes, then back at me, and said, “Wiley, I don’t know what you were doing in front of my class, but it wasn’t teaching.” I sat in stunned silence remembering all her previous student teachers in a puddle of tears back at the dorm.

She went on. “I have five students (she listed them) who are above level. They got nothing out of that lesson. You wasted their time. How can I have you in front of my class if that is what you are going to do?” Then she listed four students who were quite a bit below grade level. She said, “My job is to get these students on grade level. They got nothing out of that lesson. They were completely lost. How can I let you stand in front of my class if you are going to ignore their needs?” Then she mentioned the one student in our class who had recently moved to the United States from China. Her father was a professor at the nearby college. “Now there’s Liz. She could have been in Beijing and gotten more out of that lesson,” she announced.

I was crushed.

But she didn’t stop there.

“I simply can’t have you doing whatever you called what you were doing in my class. From now on, I need you to write me detailed lesson plans to review before the lesson. I need to know *when* and *how* you are going to address the needs of my above-level and below-level students as well as Liz, our English learner. You cannot waste a minute of their instructional time. If you need to do things before the lesson to get them ready, tell me what that is. And if you need to do some follow-up things after the lesson, tell me what those things will be. But you better be giving them what they need DURING the lesson.”

I scraped back to the dorm repeating in my head: “There’s no crying in student teaching. There’s no crying in student teaching!”

Although what my cooperating teacher did felt brutal at the time, it was brilliant. She taught me how to think in the most global sense every time I stood in front of a group of students.

She taught me the realities of what good teaching requires and the realities of the range of needs my future students would have. She taught me how to teach—to really teach each and every child.

I thank her.

It's not easy, but it can and must be done.

And that's the purpose of this book—to help you succeed. The activities in this book will help you adjust and modify whole-group instruction. The activities will, over time, give you a nimble, global sense of all your learners. These activities will become habits. My hope is that these adjustments will also give you ideas about how to better meet the needs of all your students before, during, and after whole-group lessons and will serve as springboards to other things you might do for your students. The best teachers I've worked with over the years are never satisfied; they are constantly looking for ways to refine and elevate their teaching. It's what makes teaching so much fun. We keep learning and improving!

.....
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 how to think in
 the most global
 sense every time I
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 group of students.

COMBINING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND ADAPTIVE INSTRUCTION

While differentiated instruction is defined differently by different educators, what I'm addressing is actually a combination of **differentiated instruction** and **adaptive instruction**. Differentiated instruction is carefully planned activities and supports decided prior to a lesson. Adaptive instruction is on-the-spot modifications made to meet student needs that arise during instruction. For example, I was recently modeling a dictation lesson in a kindergarten classroom I had never been in before. The teacher had told me she was working with the students on tapping the sounds in short vowel CVC words and had done some spelling of these words. As we started the lesson, it became clear to me that several students could not easily orally segment the sounds in CVC words. So I made an on-the-spot decision to draw sound boxes on the board. I guided students to stretch the sounds in words. Then we

marked the sounds on the sound boxes. Finally, I guided students as we identified each sound and replaced the mark with the letter for that sound. We did several of these together. I continued dictating words and, for students who needed to continue using the sound boxes, I gave them a sound box template and counters. For students who didn't need that support, they tapped the sounds and wrote the words. These modifications are often necessary during lessons as issues arise, and it's helpful to have these potential scaffolds planned and the necessary resources (e.g., sound boxes and counters) readily available.

TEACHING PHONICS BASED ON RESEARCH

Before we dig into the specifics of differentiating and adapting phonics instruction, let's take a quick look at where phonics instruction fits into all that we know we must do to help our students become skilled, proficient readers who enjoy exploring the world of books.

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 Differentiated
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English is an **alphabetic language**. We have 26 letters in our alphabet. Alone and in combinations, these letters and spellings stand for the 44 sounds in English. Phonics instruction is the teaching of these spelling-sound correspondences. Learning the basic phonics skills we typically teach in kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 gives students a tool to access, or sound out, approximately 84 percent of the words in English text. Students have enough skills to figure out all or nearly all of the word. That's a powerful tool!

Strong phonics instruction starts with a **defined scope and sequence** that serves as the spine for the instruction and all associated activities. This scope and sequence must be developed to progress from easier to more complex, separate the teaching of confusing letters and sounds, and contain a **built-in review and repetition cycle to ensure mastery** of taught skills so students can cumulatively transfer these skills to all reading and writing demands. The **application of the phonics skills to reading and writing** is essential because it is through this application that the

learning “sticks.” This application begins with the reading of **controlled, decodable texts** and dictation, or guided spelling, wherein the teacher models how to transfer a student’s growing phonics skills to writing, as well as to writing about the decodable texts read to deepen comprehension. As students learn increasing numbers of phonics skills, they can begin to tackle bridging texts, which are a bit less controlled, and finally more authentic trade books.

The two words most closely associated with this strong phonics instruction are *explicit* and *systematic*. **Explicit** means that sound-spelling correspondences are initially taught directly to students, rather than through a discovery, or implicit, method. That is, students are taught, for example, that the /s/ sound can be spelled with the letter *s*. A discovery method is less effective for initial teaching because it relies on students having prerequisite skills that some do not have (e.g., sophisticated phonemic awareness skills). As a result, the implicit method can leave some students behind—either not learning the new content or having difficulties and confusion (Adams, 1990).

Systematic means that the instruction builds from easy to more complex skills with built-in review and repetition to ensure mastery. Two critical aspect of systematic phonics is that the instruction has a clearly defined scope and sequence (rather than being random) and that it builds from the known to the new in easy steps that make the new learning more obvious and easier to grasp. **For example, systematic does NOT mean that all children receive the same phonics instruction on the same day at the same time and ONLY that instruction.** Students need to receive both grade-level instruction during whole-group lessons (with differentiation and modifications for some students), and targeted small-group instruction that addresses a lack of mastery of previously taught skills (for below-level students), reinforcement of current skills (for on-level students), or acceleration along the phonics scope and sequence (for above-level students) if the students have already mastered the week’s focus skills. That is, this small-group instruction meets students where they are and rapidly moves them forward.

The best phonics instruction is also **active, engaging, and thought provoking**. Students are playing with letters and

.....
Strong phonics instruction starts with a defined scope and sequence that serves as the spine for the instruction and all associated activities.

sounds and discussing what they observe about how words work to deepen their understanding of our alphabetic system so they can read and write. Phonics instruction involves talk. It involves observation. And it involves tons of application to authentic reading and writing experiences.

WHAT THE SCIENCES OF READING BRING TO THE PARTY

At the time I'm writing this book, educators are engaged in a national conversation about what has been labeled the **sciences of reading**. This conversation clarifies the important role of phonics in early reading development. While the sciences of reading conversation is *not* solely about phonics, early efforts have been focused on improving the phonics instruction provided to students. The big shift in the sciences of reading is going beyond the research conducted by teachers and educational researchers and incorporating research by other fields of science, such as that of cognitive scientists who conduct brain research, linguists, speech language pathologists, and so on. This inclusion has led to a broadening and deepening of our understanding of what comprises the most effective early reading instruction. Unfortunately, national surveys in English-speaking countries have revealed that this knowledge base is largely unknown by classrooms teachers because it is not being taught in many colleges of education. In addition, some of the most popular, widely used reading instructional resources do not incorporate this research into their materials. These circumstances have led to local and state boards of education funding additional training for teachers in this knowledge base. That knowledge base is now making its way into classrooms.

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This new emphasis on the sciences of reading has led to some important changes in phonics instruction that are greatly benefiting students, but this whirlwind of information has also resulted in some serious misconceptions and overgeneralizations as surface knowledge of the research has led to preference over data, and even legislation based on limited research support.

It should be stated that the sciences of reading is *not* a program and is *not* a philosophy. It is just a body of evidence about how to teach children to read. We know a lot, but there are still unanswered questions. This growing body of knowledge enables teachers to fine-tune their instruction to maximize student learning. That's exciting! But we should also proceed with caution and work to understand more deeply the research and its limitations for classroom application.

THREE MODELS OF READING TO CONSIDER

One of the most interesting outcomes of the national sciences of reading conversation is that two older models of reading have been reintroduced to teachers to clarify what is needed in order for students to learn to read: The simple view of reading (SVR) by Gough and Tunmer (1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001). These older models of reading help to situate phonics instruction in its proper place (Gough et al., 1996). Recent models, such as the active view of reading (AVR; Duke & Cartwright, 2021), have also emerged. This model includes the connections across the learning strands (e.g., bridging skills like vocabulary, morphology, and fluency) and the importance of things like executive functioning (self-regulating) skills.

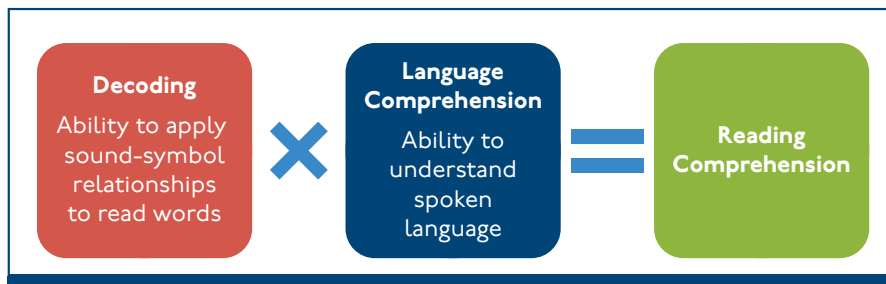
The simple view of reading (Figure 1.2) explains that reading comprehension is a product of decoding (all the work readers do with phonics) and language comprehension (e.g., vocabulary and background knowledge learned primarily through listening to complex read-alouds in the early years of instruction). One without the other does *not* lead to skilled readers who can readily understand the texts they need to tackle at each grade level. For example, if we overemphasize phonics instruction in the early grades and don't simultaneously and equally build students' content knowledge and vocabulary, students won't have all the necessary skills to tackle more complex texts as they move up the grades. Likewise, if we don't do a good enough job with phonics in the early grades, students will enter later grades without the

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PART I: Responsive Phonics Instruction

ability to decode words effortlessly with these basic skills. This lack of facility will lead to fluency issues, which have a negative impact on comprehension as students aren't able to get through enough words quickly enough to form meaningful units as they read. When I work with schools in developing a systematic approach to phonics instruction, one of the first questions I ask is, *What is your structured plan for building knowledge and vocabulary? Are you using your read-alouds in the primary grades to do this?* Every school should have a plan in place.

Figure I-2 • The Simple View of Reading



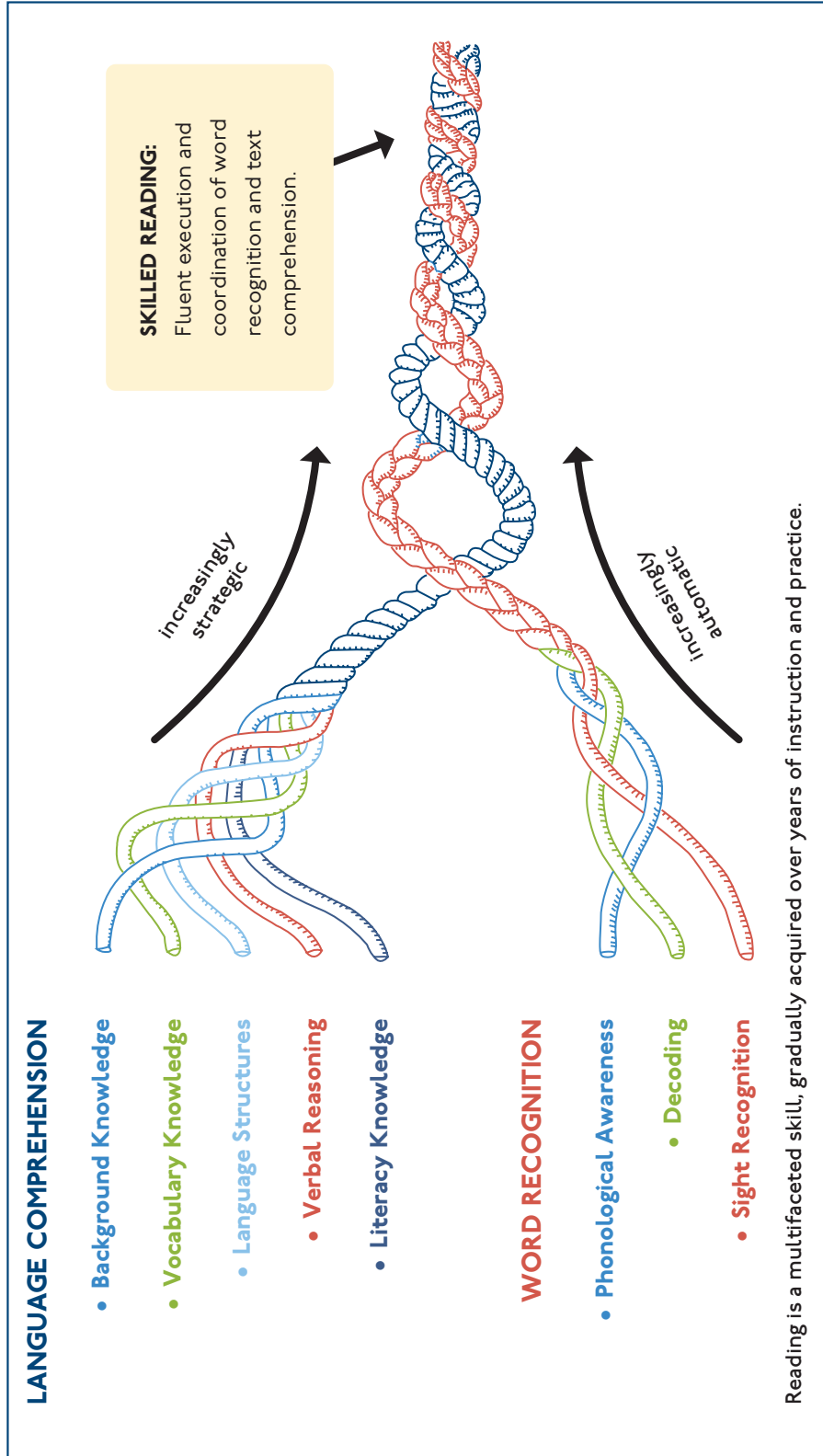
SOURCE: Adapted from Gough and Tunmer (1986) and Hoover and Gough (1990).

While the SVR model explains a lot, it does not provide specifics on what, when, and how to teach word recognition and language comprehension—necessary details for planning effective instruction.

Scarborough's Reading Rope (Figure 1.3) clarified the SVR model and illustrated how, as one becomes more fluent in word recognition skills (e.g., through phonics) and more strategic in using language comprehension skills, these skills begin to intertwine—creating skilled, fluent readers capable of comprehending more complex texts. This model identifies key areas in each “bucket” (e.g., word recognition, language comprehension) on which we need to focus our instructional efforts. It gives us more information about the *what*, but doesn't define *when* or *to what degree* each skill needs to be emphasized as students move through the grades.

Both models of reading highlight the critical role phonics plays and emphasize that phonics alone is not enough. In addition, the phonics instruction we deliver must be aware

Figure I-3 • Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001)



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 The phonics
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 simultaneously
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 where they are.

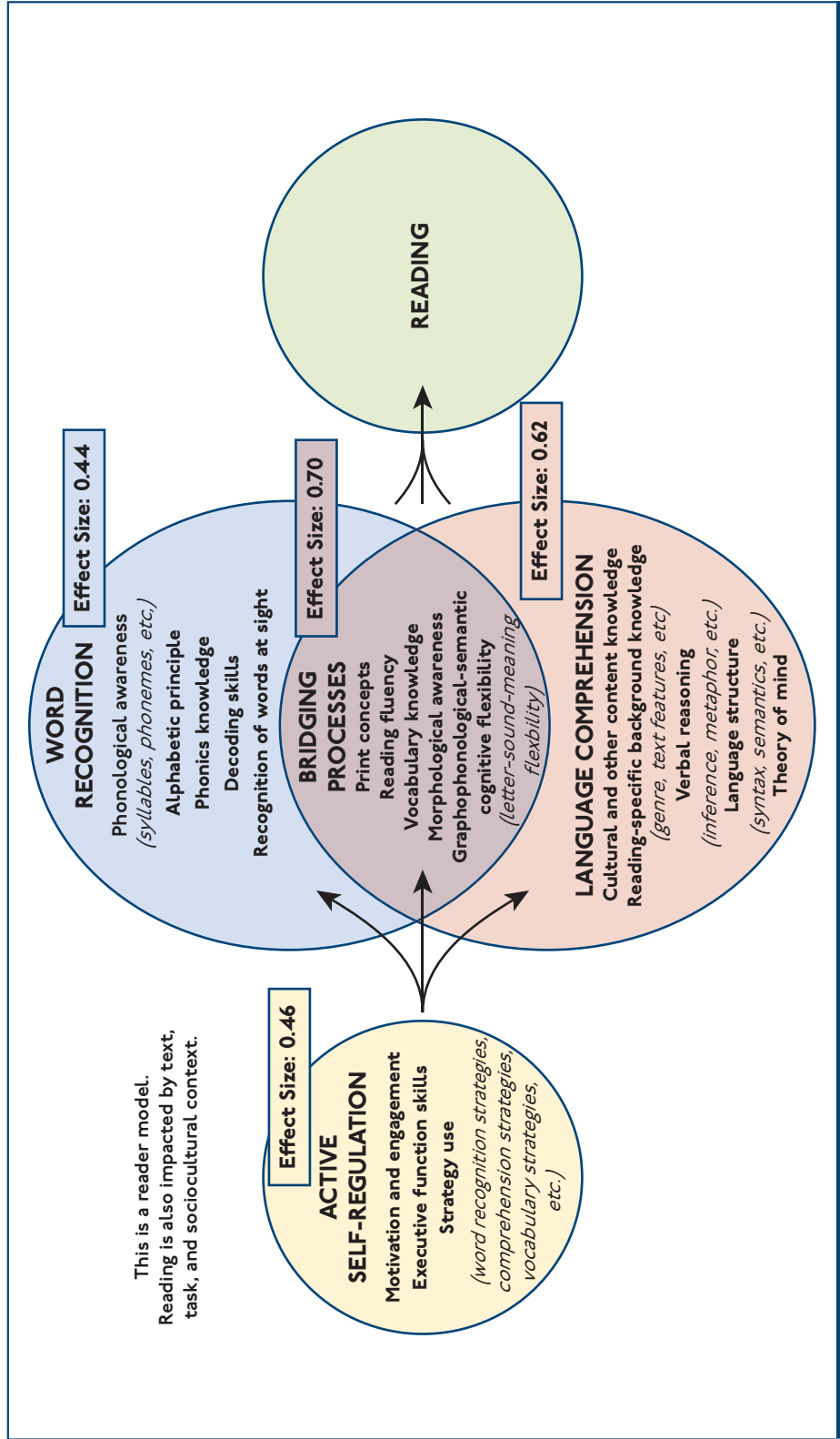
of grade-level reading demands while simultaneously meeting students where they are.

The active view of reading model (Figure 1.4) is a newer model of reading by Duke and Cartwright and highlights important aspects of reading development that overlap and serve as bridges between the word recognition and language comprehension “buckets,” such as vocabulary, morphological awareness, and fluency. We often hear fluency being described as the “bridge to comprehension,” and this model shows its importance and the research-based impacts that focusing on these aspects has on student development. Research shows that many of the bridging aspects of reading instruction have a significant impact on student growth (see effect sizes).

Fluency is and should be a focus from the beginning of phonics instruction (hence the need for cumulative and spaced practice during which students continue to work on a skill for an extended period and then are asked to use the skill in purposeful ways at spaced intervals to ensure mastery). Fluency is a key reason students struggle as they encounter more complex texts throughout the grades and is an oft overlooked aspect of reading instruction.

Also, as fluency increases, teaching switches from focusing on decoding words using individual spellings to focusing on morphology (a morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning in a word, such as the base word, suffix, prefix, or Greek or Latin root), which helps readers use word parts to both decode words and determine meaning. Morphology increases in importance and instructional emphasis as students move through the grades. Phonics does not end in Grade 1 or 2 after the basic skills are introduced. It transforms into word study, which involves syllabication strategies, the teaching of syllable types, morphology work using roots and affixes, looking at spelling consistencies across related words (e.g., sign/signal/signature), and the understanding of how authors use context clues (e.g., restatements, definitions, synonyms) to assist readers in sounding out words and determining word meanings. There is so much we can and should teach our students about how English words work that will benefit them in both reading and spelling, well past kindergarten and Grade 1.

Figure I-4 ♦ The Active View of Reading Model



SOURCE: Used with permission of the International Reading Association, from "The Active View of Reading," Duke, Nell K. and Cartwright, Kelly B., Vol. 56, 2021; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

WHY IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THIS: DIFFERENTIATED PHONICS INSTRUCTION

All three models of reading show that phonics instruction is critical, and that's why in the last several years we've seen a dramatic increase in whole-group phonics instruction—every child needs grade-level instruction, and whole-group time is the surest way to provide that access. Students get more time with and feedback from the teacher, as opposed to working independently for large chunks of the literacy block. But this is where misconceptions arise, and vexing problems of practice flare, with teachers understandably asking, *How do I teach a vast range of students in a single whole-group lesson?* This entire book is devoted to answering that question. Because, while small-group instruction is critical, and tiered instruction is forever, it is my strong belief that excellent Tier 1 whole-group instruction reduces the number of students who will need Tier 2 and Tier 3 support. Excellent, *differentiated* whole-group instruction, that is. It also significantly increases the amount of time every student gets direct instruction from the teacher.

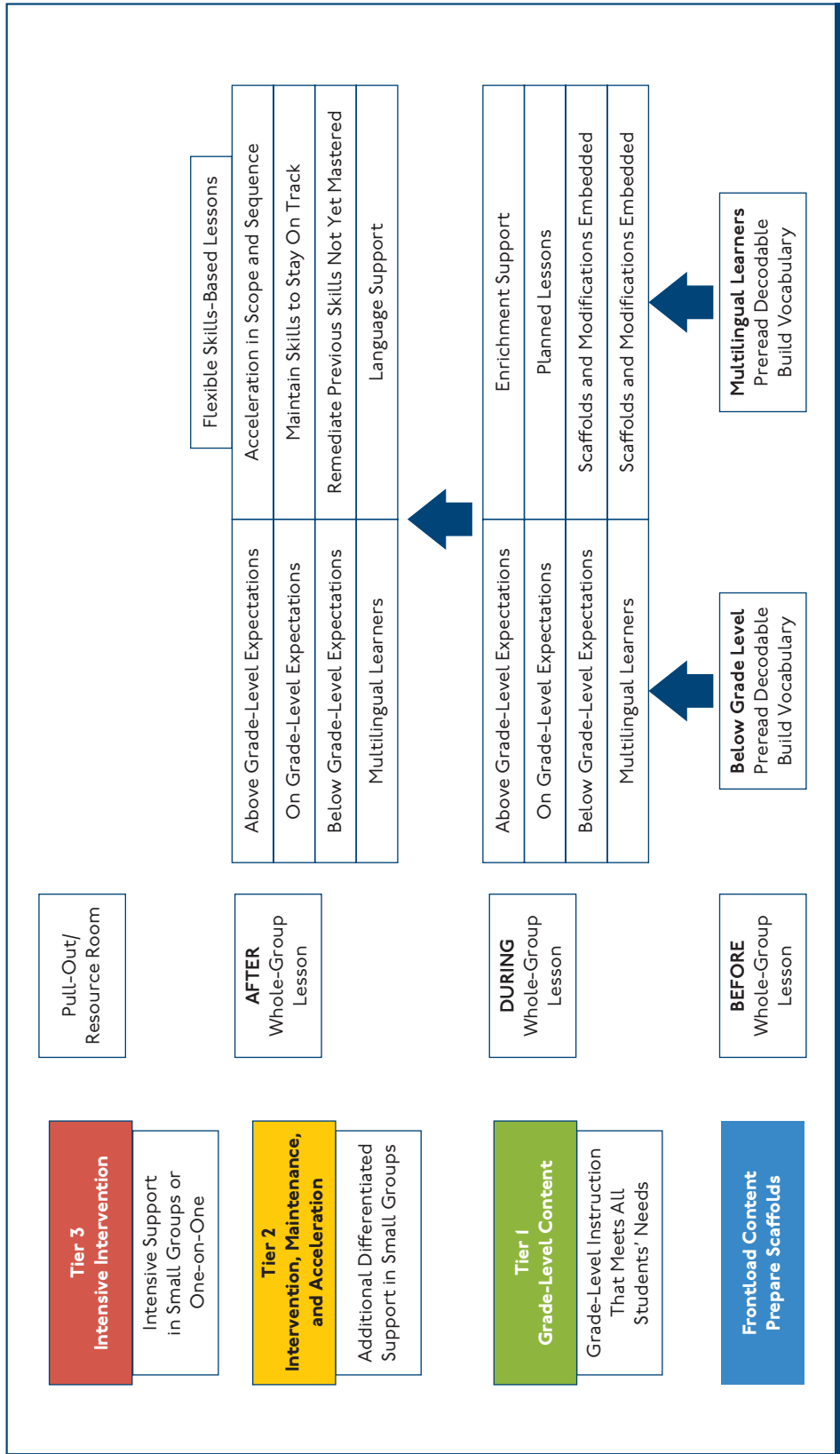
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 It is my strong belief that excellent Tier 1 whole-group instruction reduces the number of students who will need Tier 2 and Tier 3 support.

With the increase in whole-group as opposed to small-group teaching dominating the delivery of phonics instruction, in large part due to a lack of teaching and paraprofessional personnel, it is imperative that teachers differentiate instruction for students below grade-level expectations, for those above grade-level expectations, and for those who are multilingual learners. No instructional time should be wasted for any students, and phonics lessons can and should be modified to support the wide range of students' needs found in most classrooms. In addition, phonics instruction needs to occur in both whole-group and small-group settings to meet these needs more fully. The graphic in Figure 1.5 shows the big picture of where differentiated phonics instruction resides.

Tier 1 Whole-Group Instruction

All students must be introduced to grade-level content, including each grade's key phonics skills. Too often students who haven't mastered previous grades' phonics skills are stuck in grade-level

Figure I-5 ♦ Where Phonics Instruction Resides



instruction that is not differentiated and unnecessarily frustrating for them, or they are placed along a phonics continuum based on their instructional needs and only receive that instruction. This lower-level phonics instruction is often provided at a slow rate, resulting in students not gaining access to all their grade-level skills. This pace condemns these students to continuing to the next grade behind, and further so. While it is essential that we address students' learning holes in their foundational skills, we must also expose them to grade-level skills. But how do we do this when these students are so far behind? We differentiate the instruction and modify our expectations of their learning outcomes during the whole-group lessons, such as focusing on a smaller set of grade-level words to read or spell during the lesson. These differentiations to whole-group lessons not only ensure that students are introduced to grade-level skills but also appropriately modify their learning expectations and decrease their cognitive load and frustration. Modifying expectations does *not* mean lowering expectations.

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Tier 2 Small-Group, Skills-Based Instruction

Small-group time is when you reinforce the week's target phonics skill to make sure on-level students stay on track, provide targeted instruction for below-level students to address deficits in previously taught skills, and accelerate learning for students who have already mastered the week's focus skill.

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Comprehensive phonics and spelling assessments and a phonemic awareness assessment will be needed to help you determine each student's specific skill needs.

Comprehensive phonics and spelling assessments and a phonemic awareness assessment will be needed to help you determine each student's specific skill needs (also an alphabet assessment for kindergarten students). The "Comprehensive Phonics Surveys" and the "Comprehensive Spelling Surveys," especially the "Quick Assessment for Placement," which are all provided in the appendix (pages 232 and 243), are organized around skill categories (e.g., short vowels, long vowels, consonant blends and digraphs) to give you an instructional starting point with students.

For below-level students, be careful to adjust the pace of this instruction based on how students are reading and writing words with the skills. It will be unnecessary to spend an entire week on some of the skills if students are showing competence with the skills. Other skills might require more than a week.

For above-level students, use the “Comprehensive Phonics Surveys” and the “Spelling Survey—Quick” in the appendix to place them farther in the scope and sequence and begin instruction there during small-group time. During whole-group lessons, you can provide enrichment activities.

For on-level students, small-group time offers you an opportunity to keep them on track for grade-level reading success. For example, some students progress at an expected rate until they hit a wall when the complexity increases too quickly, such as when multiple spellings for long or complex vowels are introduced. This extra instruction and practice can assist in keeping them on track.

Tier 3 Small-Group or Individual Instruction



Photo Source: iStock.com/Halfpoint

Contrary to common practice, learners in Tier 3 need loads of reading and writing practice with target words and meaningful books instead of isolated skill work.

Some students will require even more intensive intervention support than Tier 2 instruction can provide. A well-designed, research-based intervention resource is required to meet these students’ needs, as it will take some time to get them back on track and able to be successful in Tier 1 and Tier 2 classroom instruction.

It’s all about intensity, intentionality, and the dosage of instruction and practice students need to master the basic phonics skills and beyond. Each tier of instruction increases that dosage. My one main concern with Tier 3 instruction is

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that it too often involves increased amounts of isolated skill work and focuses *only* on phonics. What these students need is the opposite. They must get increased amounts of the *application* of phonics skills *to* reading and writing. So a little instruction should be followed by loads of reading and writing words with the target skills.

In addition, vocabulary and background knowledge must be added to this Tier 3 work. It can be a separate stream of knowledge-building support or tightly connected to the simpler decodable texts that students are reading. For example, if students are reading a simple, decodable text on frogs, the teacher can read aloud a more complex text on animal habitats. The language and information learned in this read-aloud can be carried over to the discussion of the simple, decodable text to elevate the language used and build more of the skills these students need. If students struggle in reading, they read very little. It is through reading that vocabulary and background knowledge are built for our older students. So we need to fill in those gaps through our complex read-alouds, the rich conversations we have about those read-alouds, and the ways we connect them to conversations and writings about other texts students read.



FIVE KEY TAKE-AWAYS

1. When whole-class, Tier 1 phonics instruction is high quality and effective, fewer students will need Tier 2 and Tier 3.
2. Differentiating phonics instruction in whole-group lessons is the most efficient way to keep the most students engaged in—and succeeding with—grade-level skill acquisition.
3. Plan small-group instruction to target the needs of students who are above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level. Students in *each* group need sufficient challenge to be engaged and grow their skills.
4. Below-grade-level students need the opposite of what they are often given—they need MORE access and opportunities for meaningful reading and writing practice and MORE vocabulary and content-knowledge building.
5. The sciences of reading is a body of research, not a program. In addition, a scientific base to instruction does not mean that there is a fixed, inflexible way of doing things. The most effective teachers teach systematically and explicitly while also differentiating and adapting plans based on current student data.

