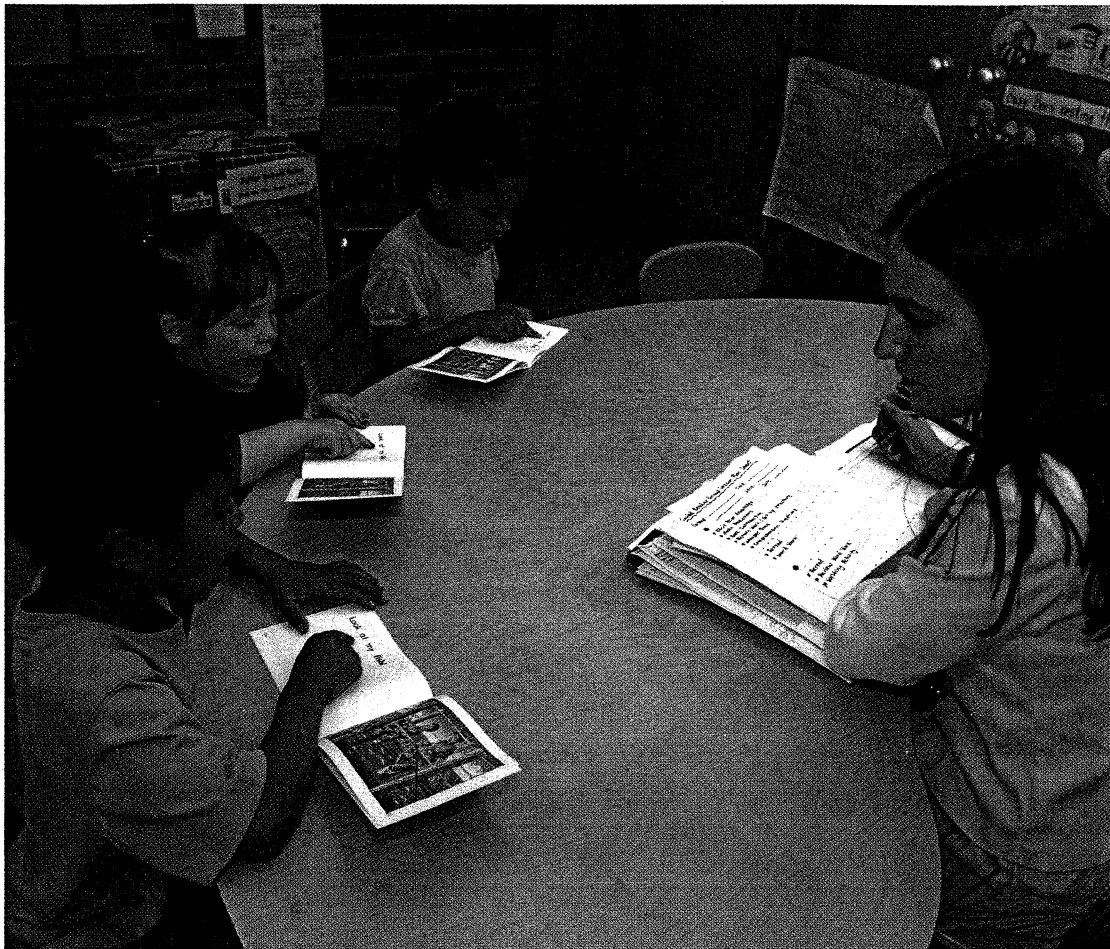


Individualizing  
in Early  
Childhood:  
The What,  
Why, and  
How of  
Differentiated  
Approaches

Celeste C. Bates



Primary Grades

## Flexible Grouping During Literacy Centers: A Model for Differentiating Instruction

**G**ROUPING CHILDREN WHEN DIFFERENTIATING literacy instruction can be challenging. Teachers often wonder how and when to differentiate instruction and in what ways they can actively engage the other children in the class while working with a small group. One answer is flexible grouping during literacy center rotations.

Flexible grouping allows teachers to call children from centers based on the children's interests and needs, recognizing that as these needs change, so do the grouping arrangements (Tyner 2009). Teachers can then plan for and adjust to variations in children's progress, as

children are often at different points on the continuum of literacy development. Teachers adapt their instruction to the needs of the children as identified through observation and assessment (Neuman 2006; Reutzel 2011), using tools such as developmental checklists and anecdotal records, which help identify children's strengths and needs. These assessments assist teachers in providing targeted support during small group instruction, which accelerates children's literacy progress (Pinnell & Fountas 2009).

Unlike fixed groups, which often remain static throughout the year, there is fluidity to flexible grouping that accounts for children's changing needs and interests. For example,

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instead of being locked into groups defined by children's overall ability, teachers can flexibly organize children by their interest in certain genres of text or by an identified need, such as additional practice to develop fluency.

A teacher may observe that even though several children are reading at different levels, they have the same issue: they sound choppy, reading word by word. To provide support, the teacher can group these children and provide a minilesson on how reading should sound like talking, with words grouped into meaningful units and phrases. During the minilesson, the teacher can model fluent reading using a familiar poem, one previously introduced and read during whole group shared reading. After the children practice the poem several times, the teacher might record the group's choral reading with an MP3 player or another recording device. When the teacher plays the recording, the children actively listen and self-evaluate how the reading sounded. Following this minilesson, the children may reread familiar books at their independent levels, practicing much in the same way they did when reading the poem. The teacher may group these children together for several days for additional support or may regroup them based on other criteria.

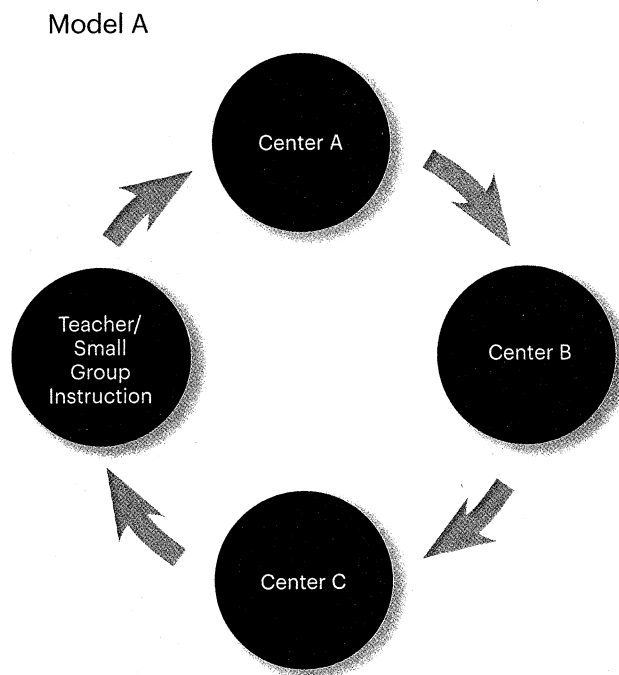
Teachers can group children in many ways for primary grades literacy instruction. In the next two sections, I compare two models for grouping: Model A, in which the teacher is part of a literacy center rotation, and Model B, in which the teacher is not included and which has the advantage of being flexible.

### Model A

When the teacher is included in the rotation, as in Model A, certain opportunities are limited. In this model, children are grouped homogeneously (at similar instructional levels). The groups rotate through a variety of literacy centers, such as word study, reading, and writing. In these centers children engage in meaningful literacy tasks. In the word study center, for example, children might highlight certain letters or high-frequency words from Sunday newspaper circulars. In the reading center, children use leveled text, text organized by topic and theme, and class-made books and audiobooks. In the writing center, children can compose stories, write letters to former teachers, or copy words they see displayed in the classroom. Since the teacher is part of the center rotation, each group also rotates to the teacher's table for small group instruction. For example, groups rotate every 15 to 20 minutes, with each group visiting three literacy centers and the teacher's table. Since each stop is equally timed, the teacher is restricted to working

with the groups for 15 to 20 minutes.

When deciding how to go about differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, teachers often consider curricular modifications and enhancements. These necessary adjustments require the teacher to engage different groups for different lengths of time. Due to the teacher's inclusion and the equally timed rotations, Model A makes this type of differentiation nearly impossible.



Additionally, Model A can impede collaboration and restrict cooperation among children of varying strengths and needs. The static nature of the groups in Model A limits children's interactions (Reutzel 2011). For example, if the teacher identifies children as struggling and groups them together, they remain together not only while they work with the teacher, but in the other centers as well. This becomes a problem when the children rotate to the reading center, as struggling readers can partner only with others who are at the same level.

The model also makes it difficult to change the groups because modifications and accommodations often require restructuring. If one child's progress necessitates a group change, the entire system must be reworked. This can be overwhelming for the teacher, and despite the identified need for greater challenges, the teacher might forgo the change because it can disrupt what is otherwise a practical system.

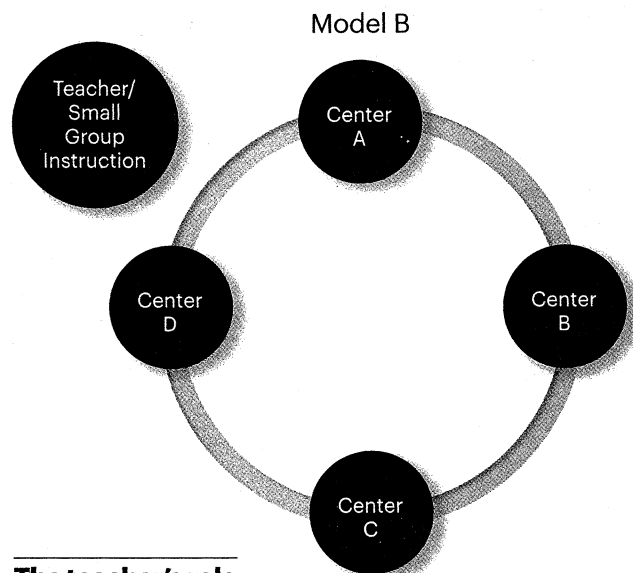
### Model B

In Model B, the teacher is not included in the literacy center rotation. Instead, the children in Model B rotate to literacy centers with a heterogeneous group of peers (at

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varying instructional levels) and are called from centers at differing points to work with the teacher, according to need and interest. The teacher forms heterogeneous groups every six to nine weeks. The teams include children with different personalities, behaviors, abilities, and needs. They visit centers together but do not necessarily work with the teacher as a group. This approach allows for flexibility with grouping practices, although it makes managing the classroom more complex (Reutzel 2011). However, it also provides more opportunities for children to interact with others with different strengths. For example, children of varying reading abilities are grouped together. This can be advantageous when the groups rotate to the reading center, because children can support one another. If a struggling reader has a question about a particular text, another child in the group can help.



### The teacher's role

Conveying expectations and establishing routines for the teams while in centers sets the tone for small group instruction. By having the children practice the steps related to the center rotation (McGee & Richgels 2003; Morrow 2010), the teacher solidifies a block of uninterrupted time to work with small groups. These steps include caring for and storing materials, identifying traffic patterns within the classroom as children rotate among centers, and designating an appropriate noise level for a constructive classroom.

The teacher can establish these routines and procedures at the beginning of the year prior to implementing small group instruction by conducting minilessons. For example, a teacher can address classroom noise levels by engaging children in an activity on classroom volume. Using a ruler, she can explain it is 12 inches long. Next, she can display a tape measure and invite the children to mark off six feet. Then the teacher can relate the two lengths to volume levels. During literacy centers, children should be using

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voices that a team member 12 inches away can hear, but a classmate six feet away cannot.

### Team captains

Another way to help manage the classroom in Model B is to encourage children to be more responsible for their learning environment (Morrow 2010). Assigning a daily team captain can help with this. Team captains wear a badge or lanyard with a digital photo of the team to signal their role during the center rotation. They can assist with a variety of center-related tasks, including the collection of completed work. For example, when a team finishes using letter stamps to make high-frequency words in the word study center, the team captain collects the finished products, paper-clips them together, and adds a sticky note with the team name or number before dropping them into the completed-work basket. This helps foster children's sense of autonomy and requires less of the teacher's attention.

### Implementation

Once these routines and procedures are in place, the teacher can call children together for small group instruction. The teacher might call one child from team one, one child from team two, one from team three, and two from team four, depending on their reading levels, interests, or other learning needs. This approach does mean children miss time in centers, but the teacher can encourage them to return after small group instruction to the center from which they came.

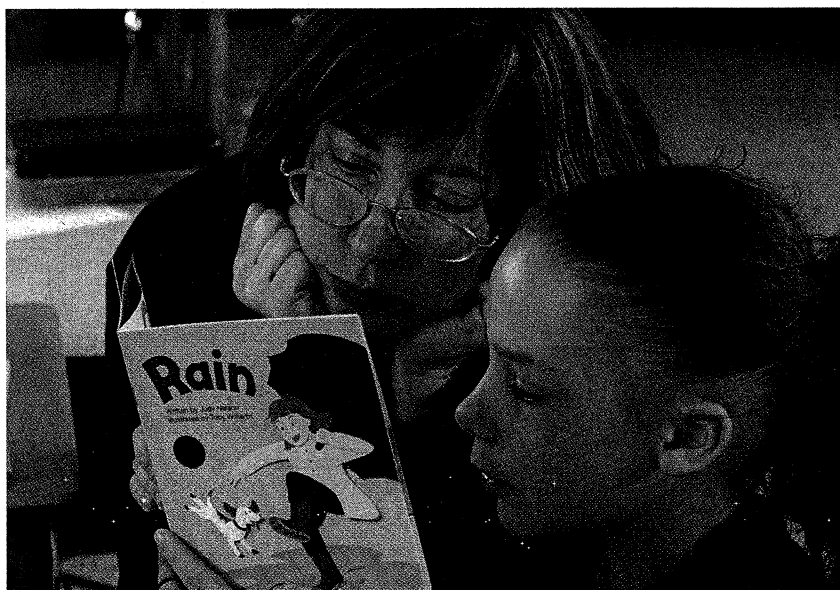
Since the teacher is not part of the rotation, flexible groups can be assembled and reassembled according to children's needs and progress as identified by ongoing, formative assessments and teacher observation. Moreover, the teacher has the opportunity to focus on children individually. He can assess letter and sound knowledge or listen to a child read while taking a running record (a type of oral reading assessment in which a teacher records and analyzes a child's reading behaviors).

In Model A, when the teacher is part of the rotation, working with individual children can present additional planning challenges. The teacher must consider what the other children in the group are doing while the one-on-one work takes place. In Model B, however, the children are always rotating independently of the teacher, therefore allowing teachers to call children one at a time, if needed.

## Time management

The teacher's role in establishing routines at the beginning of the year, which includes helping the children learn how to rotate through centers in a timely manner, is crucial (Roskos & Neuman 2012). Instead of the teacher directing the rotation, a timer can serve the same function while shifting responsibility to the children and encouraging them to be self-sufficient. The teacher sets the timer to the children's designated work time. After the timer rings, the teacher sets it for three more minutes for cleanup in the centers. When the timer rings a second time, the children rotate to the next center. The timer is solely for the children working in centers and does not govern small group instruction.

As children rotate during centers, the teacher can dif-



ferentiate the amount of time spent with each small group. In a first grade classroom, for example, she might work for 25 minutes with a group of children learning early reading behaviors. On this same day, she might also work with two children reading on a third grade level. Instead of putting these two children in text at their instructional (first grade) level, the teacher may have them read a chapter book at their independent (third grade) level. The children then have the opportunity to read at their level, but they do not require the same amount of attention from the teacher. Prior to asking them to read a chapter, the teacher may give a modified book introduction and discuss with them how making personal connections with the text deepens a reader's understanding. When finished with this brief conversation, the children find a place to read on their own, taking with them sticky notes to mark places in the text where they have questions or make connections with the story. Later, the teacher may pull the two children back to-

gether to discuss the chapter and places they marked while reading.

In this example, the children still spend 25 minutes engaged in differentiated reading instruction: five minutes discussing the text with the teacher before reading, 15 minutes of independent reading, and five minutes conferring with the teacher after reading. The time is differentiated because one group spends the entire 25 minutes face-to-face with the teacher, while the other group spends 10 minutes face-to-face and 15 minutes reading independently. Allotting different amounts of small group time with the teacher is essential, as different groups have different needs. Model B makes this possible because the teacher is not part of the center rotation.

## Closing thoughts

Differentiated instruction depends not only on the use of ongoing, formative assessment, but also on the classroom environment. Not being part of the center rotation can free teachers to differentiate for a variety of skill and interest levels. Additionally, teachers are able to adjust group formation and the amount of time spent with groups on an as-needed basis. Flexible grouping is an important strategy for meeting all children's needs.

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