



# Introduction

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## WHAT? ANOTHER BOOK?

It was a cold, gray day in February, and my husband and I were at the Cape for the weekend. Most people think of Cape Cod as a summer destination—sand between the toes, lobster, family fun. But we love it year round. Picture a funky little beach house a stone’s throw from the bay (our “someplace else”), doggie curled up in front of the fire, husband in the kitchen whipping up a hefty pot of clam chowder, and me...at my computer. (Well, some things never change, regardless of the location.)

I had been sitting there for an hour plotting a workshop I’d agreed to present for a district on small-group instruction a couple of weeks hence.

Ron (a.k.a. Mr. Nancy Boyles): What are you doing?

Nancy: Writing a book.

The clattering pans in the kitchen stopped clattering.

Ron: You just finished a book. You said you were done with books for a while.

Nancy: I changed my mind.

In fact, I’d had no intention of starting another book right now and was as surprised as Ron when those words fell from my lips. But it was true; I *had* to write this book. As I sorted through documents filed away on my laptop under “small-group instruction,” I suddenly saw a structure that would make small-group instruction make sense to intermediate-grade teachers.

We struggle so much with the whole concept of small-group instruction, especially beyond the primary grades. And how do we *differentiate* that small-group instruction? The pattern that emerged for me was not one I’d seen described anywhere else, and I felt an urgent need to write it all right now.

Nancy: If I could just stay here for the week, I think I could get most of this manuscript done.

No comment from the kitchen, but Ron was probably seeing the next few months of his life flash before his eyes; he's been down this road a few times before—shoving sandwiches under the door as I scramble like a mad woman to layer a book project on top of teaching my classes and school visits and conferences and all those meetings that we educators face endlessly.

This truly was an opportunity to *rethink* small-group instruction—in the context of so many things that I've thought about and written about over the last decade:

- Comprehension strategies: How do they fit into the mix for small-group instruction?
- Specific comprehension objectives aligned with high-stakes standards: Where do they fit?
- Literacy components that contribute to comprehension, such as fluency and vocabulary and author's craft: Is there a place for them in our small-group teaching, too?
- Discussion (which has somehow taken a back seat to our highly focused instruction): Can we bring that back in a meaningful way while also teaching explicitly?
- And what about our intermediate-grade students who continue to function at a primary level? What can we do for them in our small groups?

## **WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT—AND WHY YOU WILL WANT TO READ IT**

I've answered all of these questions and more in this book, offering sixteen different options for small-group instruction for students who need to: construct basic meaning about a text, reinforce particular comprehension skills and strategies, and learn the art of discourse leading to higher-level critical and creative thinking. I've included all of the resources you'll need to implement these instructional formats, too—rubrics and checklists, planning templates, prompts, and so much more.

This material is intended mostly for classroom teachers of the intermediate grades—anywhere from third grade through middle school. Even second-grade teachers may find this book useful for students fluent at that grade level. I also hope literacy coaches will share these instructional techniques with teachers in their building. And I hope administrators will look for teaching rich with the many learning opportunities that this book suggests as they visit classrooms and help teachers reflect on their practice.

Small-group instruction is too often the missing piece in RTI where the classroom teacher is responsible for meeting the needs of *all* students at the tier 1 level. Find answers in this book to differentiate that instruction so it will make the needed difference for students. Find out, too, how to embed the Common Core State Standards into your small-group instruction and how these standards can make your teaching even more powerful.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is divided into two parts. **Part I: Understanding Small-group Instruction in the Intermediate Grades** contains three short chapters to set the stage for the instructional formats that follow:

- **Chapter One: What’s Up with Small-group Instruction in the Intermediate Grades? Issues and Concerns.** This illuminates a number of dilemmas common to small-group instruction at the intermediate grade level.
- **Chapter Two: Making Sense of Differentiation.** Learn what it means to differentiate the literacy process, product, and content for students reading at different levels with different literacy needs.
- **Chapter Three: Frequently Asked Questions about Small-group Instruction.** The questions answered in this chapter relate to the “how-to” of getting small-group instruction off the ground in your classroom.

**Part II: Implementing Small-group Instruction: A Menu of Possibilities** contains all sixteen of the formats divided into four mega-chapters. Before exploring them, though, be sure to check out the “Introduction to Part II,” which includes a really streamlined *Small-group Planner* and an extensive annotated bibliography of authentic short texts useful for small-group instruction in the intermediate grades and middle school.

- **Chapter Four: Constructing Basic Meaning: The Prequel.** Included in this chapter are five instructional formats to help students achieve a basic level of understanding about what they read. Comprehension for both literary and informational reading is addressed through comprehension strategies and text elements.
- **Chapter Five: Reinforcing Skills and Strategies.** Reinforce important literacy standards through the five formats targeted in this chapter that focus not just on comprehension strategies and standards-based objectives, but also on vocabulary, fluency, and author’s craft.
- **Chapter Six: Extending Literacy Learning through Discussion.** Teach students five different formats for talking about text—literary and informational—to generate both critical and creative thinking.
- **Chapter Seven: When They “Can’t Read”—Teaching Primary Skills in the Intermediate Grades.** If students (at any grade level) are still “getting to fluency,” the instruction needs to be different than that which we offer students whose main focus is comprehension. In this chapter, learn exactly how to meet the needs of your most struggling students within their small group.

This book also contains a **CD** with all of the reproducibles included—an important perk for busy teachers whose time is so valuable—as well as target sheets matched to each objective that explain how to find the best evidence to meet the objective. Look for this icon (🎧) throughout the book, indicating what files are available on the CD.

## **THE CHAPTER I NEVER WROTE**

As I pondered the possibility of this book on that dreary February day, I envisioned a final chapter about independent reading. After all, I had written about shared reading (*Launching RTI Comprehension Instruction with Shared Reading: 40 Lessons for Intermediate Readers*, Maupin House, 2009). And now this book was to feature small-group instruction. How could I *not* complete the symphony by attending to this other critical component of the literacy curriculum?

Then I started writing, mostly at home in Connecticut and after my semester ended at the Cape, for as many stolen days as I could manage. The pages just kept coming...and coming...and coming. I realized it was unrealistic to think that I could embark on a whole new focus at the very end of what had already become very comprehensive in scope.

It worries me a little that this chapter is not included because I would not want anyone to conclude—just because I haven’t written about it—that I don’t value independent reading. Independent reading is the glue that holds literacy learning together. We have shared reading to introduce concepts, small-group instruction to reinforce them, and independent reading to practice what has been learned in a way that builds stamina and enjoyment. If we want children to *choose* to read, we need to give them opportunities to do so. But that, as I said, will need to be a conversation for a different day.

Enjoy the reading ahead. Oh, and in case you were wondering, the clam chowder was DELICIOUS!