

# Preface

**T**hrough our work and coaching in differentiation, we have had many opportunities to listen to teachers. We have observed and coached in hundreds of classrooms and talked with teachers about their work, and each time we have learned something new. We have listened to students' voices as they describe their learning in a differentiated setting. Both teacher and student voices have guided us in writing this book.

Teachers' voices have inspired us to build this book around nine complete differentiated lessons from kindergarten through fifth grade. Included among these lessons are examples from a librarian and a gifted/enrichment teacher as reminders that differentiation is an all-inclusive and schoolwide philosophy. Teachers from Conway School in St. Louis, Missouri, developed all the lessons, and all supplemental materials are their original work. In response to requests from teachers, these lessons are based on state standards; clearly spell out what students should know, understand, and be able to do; include preassessments; employ strategies especially suited for effective differentiation; and provide all supplemental materials needed to teach the lesson.

To place our work in context, we begin with a history of our initiative at Conway that chronicles professional development and offers supporting data. We follow with a chapter on coaching to emphasize our belief that expert coaching is a key ingredient in advancing a clear understanding of differentiation. In conversations with teachers and administrators, a question often asked is "How could we implement differentiation without coaching?" To put our answer in perspective, think of the coaching we depend on in our daily lives. We rely on planners to advise us on finances, coaches to teach our children sports, and experts to help us learn new technologies. Their guidance and support help us avoid detours and frustration. Teachers are our students' coaches in learning. Doesn't it follow that we should provide the same resources to our teachers as they learn new skills?

The chapters that follow focus on curriculum design, preassessment, management, lesson examples from primary and intermediate grades, and applications of this model in other districts. Sections of many of these chapters contain dialogue with teachers as they reflect on the creation of their differentiated lessons and share the "whys" of their lesson design. We intended to devote a chapter to a discussion of the relationship between differentiation and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, however, imminent revisions expected in this legislation convinced us to wait. Nonetheless, we believe that any revision of NCLB will continue to embrace these core tenets: that assessment should be designed to diagnose, intervene, and prescribe; that curricular goals should be clearly aligned with performance expectations; and that instruction should focus on closing achievement gaps for ethnic and socioeconomic minorities and students with disabilities or language challenges. As you will discover in the chapters ahead, differentiation not only enhances achievement of these goals, but in so doing empowers teachers and students, increasing the potential for both to be successful.

Students' voices have been a key influence on our writing as they tell us if we are on the right track regarding teaching and learning. When asked for examples of differentiation in the classroom, students have talked about preassessment:

My teacher gives a pretest so she will know what I know and what I and the rest of the class need to work on.

When asked how differentiation influences their learning, students have responded:

It helps me get what I don't know and not repeat what I already know.

To me, if we all learned the same thing, then school would be boring. I have trouble with some math skills. If I don't understand something and the rest of the class does, I know that I can get help from the teacher in practicing the skill.

When asked about their learning styles, students have shared these insights:

When I work with partners, it helps me memorize better. If we were learning spelling with partners and my partner was telling me the words to spell, they stick in my brain better.

I learn most effectively by taking notes and re-reading my thoughts, or using creative strategies to memorize facts.

I really like putting things in order.

When asked to describe a classroom where there is no differentiation, students have said:

I would probably not learn much, whether it was because I already knew everything or it was simply too hard.

Boring for the people who know it, too hard for the people who don't know it.

One fifth-grade student summarized it beautifully:

If there were no differentiation, classrooms would be unfair. Everybody has different learning styles and levels. Since we are all different, we could be learning on a level too high or too low for our own mind.

It is our hope that the information, lessons, dialogue, and reflections shared in this book will be helpful to you as you guide teachers and learners and empower them through effective differentiation.

*Lane Narvaez, Principal  
Kay Brimijoin, Differentiation Coach*