Differentiating Instruction: Teaching Differently to Improve Reading Instruction

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Practically speaking, differentiating instruction means "teaching differently," or changing how instruction and practice occur in schools to enhance student learning, particularly for improving reading achievement. Departing from traditional classroom practice, differentiating instruction includes more interactive collaboration that is data informed and student focused. Following a whole class activity for introducing or quickly reviewing vocabulary or a concept or skill, students then work in small study groups and/or with assigned peer partners. They complete guided practice activities from previously taught lessons, providing feedback to each other. Another small group participates in a teacher-led, small-group reading lesson whose content and feedback are differentiated, specific to student need, to enhance comprehension. Some students work independently completing written assignments using skills that were introduced previously by the teacher and practiced in workstations. Expectations for performance and outcomes vary in response to diverse needs and student progress. In other words, teaching and practice are differentiated because all students do not receive the same instruction, nor do they complete the same assignments at the same time.

Changing old habits to differentiate teaching and learning (or practice) can be challenging if routines have not been established. Managing grouping is essential, and that requires establishing classroom and behavioral procedures that ensure the teacher can teach a small group with minimal disruptions. Student-focused, small-group teaching and guided practice opportunities that enable students to collaborate and practice depart from traditional classroom habits. Although small-group reading instruction is used more frequently in lower elementary classrooms, differentiating teaching and practice in small groups is less common in upper elementary, middle school, and high school classrooms. Thus, differentiating instruction requires adjusting expectations and behavioral habits that affect how we teach and how students practice.

Supported by research and evidence from classroom applications, small-group, explicit reading instruction has been proven effective for increasing opportunities for successful teaching and learning (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Schumm, 2000; Gersten & Dimino, 2001; Gibson & Fisher, 2008; McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003; Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum, 2001).

This article defines organizational features of differentiating instruction, including grouping and classroom management. The goal is to provide guidance for establishing routines that support high-quality differentiated reading instruction, productive guided practice in small groups, and successful independent practice where students demonstrate skill mastery.

Differentiating Instruction: An Overview

Differentiating instruction applies to all grade levels and subject areas, and it is critically important when teaching students to read and comprehend new or challenging text. Managing classrooms in order to teach a group with minimal interruptions is essential to teacher and student success. While many available resources describe differentiating instruction and herald the need for educational reform, fewer resources provide practical steps for making it happen in classrooms (Benjamin, 2002; Dodge, 2006; Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Heacox, 2001; Marzano, 2003; Marzano, Norford, Paynter, Pickering, & Gaddy, 2001; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Research supports characteristics of differentiating instruction, such as grouping students for instruction, using data to inform practice, and providing small-group explicit instruction (Denton, Bryan, Wexler, Reed, & Vaughn, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Vaughn et al., 2003). Most of the research to date has focused on teaching skills or strategies that enhance reading performance and comprehension, particularly with students who are at risk for reading failure. However, differentiating instruction in small groups benefits all students at every grade level regardless of content area. Teachers ensure students can read and comprehend text in small groups by monitoring them closely, listening, questioning, engaging in conversations, and providing feedback.

Students interact more in small groups, having more opportunities to respond and confirm their thinking and learning. They benefit from interactive discussions, using vocabulary words from the lessons while participating in small groups for collaborative guided practice. Sharing practice activities enhances comprehension and ensures higher performance on assignments when students work independently. So, why have habits not changed? The answer is . . . we need procedures to differentiate how we teach and how students practice.

Establishing routines and clearly defining expectations for performance is the foundation that creates opportunities for teachers to provide student-focused, small-group reading

instruction—instruction led by a teacher who uses data to plan lessons that address specific student needs (Archer & Hughes, 2010; Kosanovich, Ladinsky, Nelson, & Torgesen, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Tomlinson, 2000). Managing teaching and practice opportunities by alternating time periods for whole-class and small-group activities often involves managing multiple events happening in the classroom simultaneously, thus differentiating instruction creates a management challenge. Many teachers and administrators need assistance with getting started. Fortunately, differentiating reading instruction follows a predictable path as noted here:

- Data are collected and used to inform decision-making (identifying needs, setting an instructional purpose, selecting curriculum and practice activities).

- Students are assigned to small group memberships, usually by similar skill strengths and needs for reading instruction.

- Small-group guided practice activities utilize mixed skill groupings, enabling students to benefit from collaborative "study group" support.

- Daily schedules are adjusted to include 15–20 minute time periods for whole-class and small-group instruction.

- Whole-class activities are used for introduction, overview, and quick review with students often responding in unison or to a partner to increase interactions and provide more practice opportunities.

- Small-group activities are used for explicit reading instruction at the students' instructional level for teaching, which is a performance level higher than students can work at independently.

- Guided practice activities and written assignments include content and skills that have been previously taught, and the work is not graded (students may earn points for completing the work). Readability (level of difficulty) is lowered to enable more working memory for applying skills; thus teachers assign slightly less difficult leveled readers for guided practice activities.

- Independent work is completed after students receive teacher-led reading instruction in small groups and collaborative, guided practice; this work is typically assessed for grades.

Although this sounds relatively easy, implementing differentiated instruction is challenging because it involves changing adult belief systems and behaviors for how we teach and what we teach (Gersten & Dimino, 2001; Gibson & Hasbrouck, 2009; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Tomlinson, 2000). Allowing students to interact, peer tutor, and collaborate by sharing responses and completing assignments that involve recently taught content often appears unjust to some teachers who assume copying is cheating. Enhancing understanding by copying a good example is an excellent form of guided practice. Thus, opportunities for change and replacing traditional habits for teaching and learning are inhibited by old belief systems and behavioral habits. Differentiating instruction often feels uncomfortable because it challenges traditional practice. Identifying why change is necessary and focusing on evidence-based practices will help teachers teach differently.

The purpose for differentiating teaching and practice is to increase the quality and quantity of reading instruction to ensure effective support for teaching and learning occurs in classrooms. Changing the behavior of teaching requires examining how instruction and practice are currently provided, then ensuring curricula and skills are aligned to student needs and purposeful for differentiating instruction (Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009; Mathes et al., 2005). Using data to align classroom practices with teachers' instructional purposes is essential for differentiating instruction. Focusing on the reason for teaching a lesson, identifying the prerequisite skills necessary for student learning requires observation and considerations of students' existing knowledge. Differentiating instruction is more than just presenting the content or skill and assigning a written worksheet for practice. Teachers must clearly understand their instructional purposes for a lesson by considering why they are teaching what they are teaching to a specific student or group of students. Understanding and providing explicit instruction aligned with students' diverse skill sets is critical for differentiating teaching and practice.

All student work must be academically profitable and productive to improve student outcomes. Most importantly, sufficient high-quality, explicit, student-focused reading instruction in a teacher-led small group must occur before students are expected to participate in guided practice successfully with their peers. This requires a change in planning and pacing. In other words, students do not work alone on newly presented content or skills until teacher-led instruction in small groups has occurred followed by collaborative practice. Time is provided to

learn new vocabulary and concepts and discuss information to develop students' oral language prior to writing and performing to demonstrate mastery.

Selecting lesson materials and practice activities for reading instruction that align with the instructional purpose is also necessary. For reading practice, teachers use leveled readers to lessen the text difficulty during practice activities, enabling more working memory to be available for processing information. Having students work with peers also eases the difficulty and facilitates learning. Preparing materials, assigning roles and activities, and organizing to teach is difficult without systematic routines. Thus, the culprit for differentiating instruction is coordinating preparation and managing implementation for so many activities occurring simultaneously.

Managing Differentiating Instruction

As noted, classroom management and organization represents the most difficult issue to overcome when getting started with differentiating instruction (Gibson & Hasbrouck, 2008; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Teachers' primary concerns are reflected in the two most frequently asked questions:

- What are other students doing while I am working with a small group?
- How do I get everything done?

As noted, managing the classroom to include flexible grouping and collaboration presents a huge challenge for some teachers whose habit is lecture format with more student independent practice. It is also challenging for administrators responsible for monitoring and evaluating teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

Teacher survey data indicate that teachers have not received training or professional development that develops their expertise for differentiating instruction effectively for students with increasingly diverse needs. Administrator survey data reveal similar evidence that more training is needed to assist with monitoring and support of instructional effectiveness. Minimal guidance has been provided for evaluating quality teaching and practice or for monitoring or supporting differentiating instruction (Lyon, 2005). The message is clear: teachers and administrators need to develop competence and confidence for differentiating instruction and

practice. Implementation must look doable. Establishing an instructional management system will provide the structure that clearly identifies steps for effectively implementing change and teaching differently.

Making It Happen in Classrooms: Five Steps

Implementing changes in practice to differentiate instruction works best when teachers create orderly, predictable environments with clearly identified behavioral expectations (Gibson & Wilson, 2010b; Marzano et al., 2003). Successful implementation begins with establishing routines and procedures that develop school behaviors for participating in activities for teaching and practice. The routines and procedures suggested in this article have a "history"—they are field tested, evidence based for effectiveness, and aligned with scientific research that identifies changes in practice that enhance student achievement. There are five steps for implementing changes that create opportunities for differentiating instruction to occur in an efficient and effective learning environment.

1 Establishing the environment

2 Using data to inform practice

3 Managing resources

4 Creating routines and procedures

5 Providing high-quality teaching and practice

Step One: Establishing the Environment

This step involves organizing the physical environment to support differentiating instruction and practice. Classroom furniture is arranged to include 4–6 student work areas. One area is for small-group, teacher-led instruction. That area is often called the "teaching table," even though the group may not always officially meet and work at a table. The term teaching table simply communicates a performance expectation to the student: participation at the teaching table involves new and more challenging content, and the teacher will lead participation and provide support with constructive feedback. Teacher-led, explicit, student-focused instruction that is differentiated and specific to needs occurs at the teaching table.

Additional areas will be needed for workstations, or designated areas where students gather and work collaboratively. The teacher creates 2–4 small-group/partner work areas in the classroom. The teacher can push desks together to form tabletop workspaces or may simply direct students to an area in the room where they can sit and work on the floor. Dispersing students around the room for guided practice activities invites discussion and cooperation to complete assignments, and it also reduces noise. If students need hard surfaces for writing, they can use notebooks or clipboards.

Teachers use the term worktable to denote a time period when students are expected to work independently, either at their desks or table spaces or in another area specifically designated in the classroom. Because the term is intended to clarify student performance expectations, the worktable may not include a table where students gather to work. Students complete independent assignments during the time period designated as the worktable. Teachers may assess students' work to monitor progress or evaluate achievement. Many teachers allow students to begin homework assignments during worktable time. This ensures that support is accessible at school, if needed, before students attempt to complete assignments at home. All assignments used during worktable have been previously taught and practiced at the teaching table and in workstations.

Step Two: Using Data to Inform Practice

This step involves using data to inform decision making about teaching. Teachers initially examine evidence (assessment data, work samples, student observations) and identify specific instructional needs. Then, using data, teachers develop an instructional purpose to achieve standards-based goals. Next, using data, teachers assign students to small groups. Student memberships may be homogenous (grouped by similar skill) for explicit, teacher-led instruction or heterogeneous (mixed skill groupings) for small-group practice. Group memberships are flexible, changing dynamically to align instruction and need and to accommodate activity choices or available resources (time, equipment, or personnel). Data may be collected at the teaching table as the teacher monitors student performance. Additional information may be obtained by reviewing work samples. Data are constantly used to inform teaching, monitor progress, and make instructional adjustments for differentiating instruction and practice.

Collaborative or student-led practice activities using mixed-skill groupings enable students to provide constructive feedback to their peers when the teacher is unavailable. Group memberships change as student performance or instructional purpose change. Grouping patterns are flexible to ensure teaching and practice are always purposeful, meaningful, and specific to student needs.

Step Three: Managing Resources

An important step for implementing efficient and effective instruction involves managing resources to ensure high-quality learning experiences occur daily. Efficient time management is essential; therefore, teachers develop daily schedules that clearly identify when small-group and whole-class activities will occur. Three tools assist teachers with managing time and student participation during instructional periods.

1. A flexible daily schedule that ensures specific time periods are assigned for small-group instruction that occurs daily when possible
2. A job chart that delegates classroom responsibilities to students who help with monitoring workstations and distributing materials, thus allowing more time for teachers to focus on instruction
3. A rotation chart that clearly communicates student performance expectations by illustrating group memberships and how participation in instruction and practice activities will occur

The rotation chart helps students know what to do, how they participate in activities, and when they have choice options in workstations. In addition, the rotation chart serves as a visual road map for the teacher to clarify expectations and encourage organizational planning.

These three tools create an environmental structure that allows students to safely perform within preset boundaries and expectations. Students learn to self-regulate, make responsible choices, and participate successfully. When teachers consistently apply these tools and routines, they report significant reductions in behavioral distractions. Thus, more time and attention is focused on effective instruction. Using a rotation chart to structure environmental and behavioral management enables teachers to teach differently in small groups.

Step Four: Creating Routines and Procedures

It is critical that teachers create routines and procedures that facilitate small-group management and ensure efficient transitions between activities. Since multiple activities happen simultaneously, routines and procedures are necessary to maintain an efficient yet flexible pace. The rotation chart and daily schedule establish routines for student participation during instructional activities. Teachers also may establish other routines and procedures, including paper management, using student contracts to organize work, and creating ways to facilitate transitions. Teaching and modeling expectations for students will encourage compliance and help them develop new habits for efficient classroom participation and collaboration. During initial implementation, teachers should provide frequent practice opportunities using discussions and role play to ensure students clearly understand and can perform expectations for attending to tasks, completing assignments, and making timely transitions.

Step Five: Providing High-Quality Reading Instruction and Practice

Improving the quality and quantity of reading instruction provided in whole-class or small-group instruction is a critically important step for teaching differently, but it should be addressed after managing the environment and establishing routines for behavior. Once classroom routines are operating efficiently, teachers can realistically focus on differentiating instruction. After teachers observe and collect data, they can develop an instructional purpose for each small group and set attainable goals.

Using data to inform practice, teachers assign students to small groups. Then they select resources, materials, and activities that support differentiated small-group instruction and purposeful practice. Changing the content, behaviors, and activities used in a lesson are part of differentiating instruction and practice. Simply having small groups of students move from one activity to another and expecting them to complete the same assignments represents a procedural change involving how instruction is delivered: changing from whole-class lecture format to small-group participation. When the lesson content and expectations for performance are the same for all students, differentiating teaching and practice is not happening. That is simply grouping students for participation.

The instructional purpose, content, method of delivery (teaching), and feedback must be aligned with student need in order to differentiate instruction. That means teachers may need to adjust the lesson presentation (increasing talking, providing pre-reading or vocabulary instruction, or adding more modeling, differentiated pacing) or the lesson content (materials and instructional purpose) to differentiate teaching and learning. Teachers use whole-class activities for introducing new content or skills, but essential information is presented again for teacher-led, small-group lessons to ensure comprehension. For example, new vocabulary words may be introduced in a whole-class activity and practiced with peer partners. However, vocabulary words that are critical for understanding text will be presented again and taught explicitly in small groups to ensure students can apply the word meanings correctly in a passage and in discussions about what they read.

When new material or content is introduced and the level of difficulty is higher, teachers provide support with teacher-led modeling that clarifies meaning and engages students in discussions to enhance comprehension. Interacting to collaborate with students and enhance meaning occurs in whole-class activities and small-group lessons, but the instructional purpose differs. In whole-class, the purpose is to introduce new content or provide a quick review of previously taught information. In small-group, the instructional purpose is to ensure understanding and develop sufficient skills for working: first, in small study groups with peers, then later, completing assignments independently. Initially, new instruction is teacher led (or teacher informed) and students are responsible for learning and developing a basic conceptual understanding. Students are not expected to produce outcomes independently too soon. Elaboration and exploration are encouraged while foundational knowledge and instruction are provided, to enhance student success and prevent learned error.

Determining what content or skills will be presented in whole-group lessons or taught in small-group lessons will require reflection about the instructional purpose and expectation for student outcomes. Most content, skills, or procedures can be introduced in whole-class or quickly reviewed in an interactive lesson. However, whole-class activities are not purposed for differentiating instruction or aligning content to specific students' needs. The instructional purpose is to provide an overview or early introduction of instruction that will be provided in a teacher-led small group or practiced in small groups at workstations. Understanding the

difference between the purpose for whole-class and small-group activities is essential for differentiating instruction and changing how we teach.

Less instructional time is allocated for whole-class lessons even though the activities include interactivity for guided practice. Students can respond in unison to teacher questions or directions. They can restate or retell information to another student sitting nearby. Selecting what will be presented in whole-class depends on the instructional purpose, whether it is introduction or quick review. Since the whole-class presentation is general in nature and not specific to student needs, the lesson simply addresses the big ideas or general concepts, not individualized, skills-focused instruction with a high expectation to develop mastery.

Restating, interactive whole lessons lasting 15–20 minutes are worthy for introduction and quick review. Using a graphic organizer to summarize content (big ideas, key vocabulary words, and observations made during class discussions) is highly recommended to enhance comprehension. Later, assigning written activities and using the graphic organizer to support spelling and concept organization is also suggested for extending lessons, but having students complete follow-up assignments from a whole-class activity may not involve differentiated teaching or practice.

Small-group lessons are reserved for differentiating instruction by providing explicit teaching and feedback and adjusting pacing so that difficult text becomes comprehensible to students as a result of teacher guidance and support. This is critical when expecting students to read new and challenging text! Changing teaching behaviors within the small-group lessons and using materials that enhance reading comprehension is differentiating instruction (or teaching differently). Adjusting pacing, or how much content is presented and how fast, is also differentiating instruction in small groups. In other words, multiple aspects of teaching must be aligned with the instructional purpose and needs within each small-group lesson.

Materials may be the same for multiple small-group lessons, but the way a teacher models and uses materials to differentiate instruction may differ, as well as the pacing for presentation. In other words, the teacher may use similar materials but differentiate the pacing and lesson difficulty by beginning the lesson at a different entry level or by extending the challenge to a higher level of difficulty. The teaching (purpose, content, and pacing) is adjusted, or differentiated, to enhance student learning. Teachers often ask what content or activities are

used for whole-class or small-group activities. The answer is this: just about everything can be presented in whole-class, overview-type activities, but essential content and skills are presented again and taught in small groups to enhance comprehension and student achievement.

Changing how we teach and how students practice can happen, but it will require that teachers replace some traditional habits and establish routines for managing whole-class and small-group instruction. To that end, differentiating teacher preparation and professional development will be necessary to ensure high-quality reading instruction will occur in classrooms. Changing teacher preparation to develop excellent teaching skills has attracted national attention. However, the rationale for "teaching teaching" to improve instructional effectiveness exceeds the scope of this article. Steps included here simply provide guidance for continued discussions about implementing changes that support differentiating instruction and practice.

Summary

Differentiating instruction means teaching differently, and making that happen in classrooms often departs from traditional habits and practice, and it frequently presents a management challenge. Establishing routines and procedures for organizing resources (classroom space, time and materials, or activities) and implementing changes will be necessary. Stakeholders, administrators, and teachers must clearly identify and articulate how the change process will occur to establish well-managed classrooms and provide support for teachers, students, and parents.

Differentiated professional development may be needed to support teachers as they begin to change how they teach, especially when students are expected to read new and challenging text regardless of subject area or grade level. More guidance may be needed to help teachers when they are selecting or adjusting materials and activities to support small-group lessons, collaborative practice, and independent practice.

Differentiating instruction is possible, and changing how we teach and how students practice leads to improved outcomes. The practical suggestions provided in this article provide directive steps toward change. Teachers using these suggestions report they experience an immediate decrease in behavioral problems, see an increase in student performance because more

assignments are completed correctly, and have more time to focus on teaching—so let the changes begin.

Additional resources for differentiating instruction and professional development, including the training manual *Differentiating Instruction: Guidelines for Implementation*, are available on the Gibson Hasbrouck & Associates website: www.gha-pd.com

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