

Using the Common Core: Differentiating a Middle Grades Reading Standard

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The two authors of this manuscript are professors at a university in Georgia, and work closely with pre-service and in-service teachers. In addition to teaching courses on literacy, the authors also offer professional development opportunities to schools around the state on how to properly differentiate instruction. What we have noticed is that many teachers at the middle grade level (4th – 8th grades) struggle with differentiated instruction, even more so, than their elementary counterparts. Part of this struggle is because the teachers simply never learned how to do this properly. Part of this is because they have many more students than their elementary colleagues, and are overwhelmed by the thought of individualizing lessons for 150 students. This paper seeks to propose a model that is seeing success with middle grades teachers in Georgia. There is a chance that this model, which is actually a lesson plan format, will be helpful to other teachers who are looking to differentiate instruction in their classrooms.

In 2004, with the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) inclusion was reached. All learners were immersed into general education classrooms. Teachers now had Gifted learners, Special Education students, and English Language Learners sitting before them, requiring individualized attention. It was at this point that differentiation began to take off in the form of differentiating for content, process, and product (Tomlinson and Strickland, 2005). Educators were told to vary their curriculum, or what the students were expected to learn (content), to individualize how the students were learning (process), and to ensure the assessment (product) adheres to student individual learning modalities. This is an incredibly cumbersome process. Teachers often modify the curriculum in one area (sometimes more) to individualize instruction. To be effective teachers must differentiate in all three areas to accomplish teaching that supports the students based on their individual learning needs (Brownell, Smith, Crockett, & Griffin, 2012).

During a professional development session given by Dr. Bogan, a 4th grade teacher in Georgia was asked to demonstrate what differentiation looked like in her classroom, after receiving a professional development workshop on how to differentiate for content, process and product. The teacher responded,

First, I will need to assess the students to determine their depth of knowledge. After assessment, I would use an open cluster group of students based on the current subject being addressed and their DOK [Depth of Knowledge]. Teachers should then develop tailored lessons that meet the needs of each learning style on a consistent, daily basis. After the subject area has been assessed, the process should continue with flexible and open grouping.

At first glance, it appears this teacher knows differentiated instruction and is implementing it properly. However, what is missing is the type of instructions or the process in which the instruction will be delivered. Here, the teacher has chosen to group students based on their ability levels, after assessing them. Once that happens, does the teacher offer direct instruction? This is an example of a teacher that grasps the idea that content, process, and product must be differentiated together, but still fails to differentiate adequately.

Once a teacher has decided to differentiate a lesson for every student, it is important to remember that it is not differentiation unless all three – content, process, and product have been differentiated. Simply put, there is no one-size fits all model for differentiation (Huebner, 2010). An educator cannot change the curriculum, and deliver that curriculum using one method and call it differentiated instruction. In that scenario, there will still be students who have not been reached. Classrooms need to be more responsive than simply allowing a child more time to finish an assignment or giving them a choice in what they are going to read or write (Levy, 2008). Although both of those strategies fit into the differentiated instruction agenda, it does not encompass the whole picture. Most teachers currently in classrooms have differentiated instruction in one way or another. For example,

a teacher might provide an annotated version of the text to a struggling reader, or offer a specific graphic organizer to a student who has problems with spatial reasoning. The problem is that this type of differentiated instruction is incomplete, because the teacher is choosing to modify/adjust in only one area - content, process, or product (Brownell et.al, 2012). If all three areas of differentiation are not working together, then the teacher is not differentiating effectively (Tomlinson, 1999).

The primary focus of the problem lies in the research based best practices for differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction combines what we know about constructivist learning theory, brain development, and empirical research on influencing factors of learner readiness, interest, and intelligence preferences toward student's motivation, engagement, and academic growth within schools (Allan & Tomlinson, 2000). This is where differentiation starts. If a pre-service teacher, for example, is not being trained at this level of differentiation, and is not experiencing this level of differentiation in her own college classroom, it is unlikely that she will be able to differentiate effectively when she enters the workforce as an educator (Strieker, Sloan, Stern, & Wade, 2012).

Baumgartner, Lipowski, & Rush (2003) conducted a study where they used differentiated instruction to see if it would improve reading achievement of primary and middle school students in two Midwestern communities. Their purpose was to employ research-based interventions to students' deficits in basic phonemic awareness and comprehension skills, coupled with their difficulty in selecting appropriate books and lack of interest in reading. The strategies employed were flexible grouping, student choice in a variety of tasks, increased self-selected reading time, and access to a variety of materials. Their study concluded that the differentiated instruction strategies implemented successfully increased reading achievement (Baumgartner, Lipowski & Rush, 2003). Targeting students reading levels and varying the content, process, and product to meet those levels increased student application of comprehension strategies and mastery of phonemic and decoding skills.

The research of Baumgartner et al. (2003) provides for the concept that differentiated instruction can be the answer for accountability and performance standards in our schools. However, it must be done correctly, efficiently, and completely. When a 5th grade teacher in a Georgia middle school was asked to demonstrate differentiated instruction after receiving a professional development session given by Dr. Bogan, on content, process, and product, she responded:

Curriculum will be scaffolded. First grade students will get visuals and then the second grade students will work on making relationships. Third grade students will focus on vocabulary development and fourth grade students will work on developing the concept. By fifth grade, this information will be synthesized so that the students are working on vocabulary, relationships, the concepts, and change.

This teacher was discussing differentiation of weather patterns in regards to a Science curriculum. She is right that differentiated instruction must be scaffolded, but if you look closely at her analysis, she is only discussing the content that will be taught. She is going over the scope and sequence of an elementary curriculum that will depend upon the prior knowledge she expects her students to have when they enter fifth grade. These are wonderful expectations, but they are not differentiated instruction. At no point in her response does she discuss how the content, process, or product will change based on student readiness, interest, instruction, and learning preference.

Why is it then that differentiated instruction is not employed when research continues to prove that it is the best method of reaching all learners in our classrooms? In addition to the problem with pre-service teachers not being properly trained or exposed to differentiated instruction at the research based best practice level, there are misconceptions regarding differentiated instruction that prevent current teachers from embracing the model fully. According to Rock, Gregg, Ellis, and Gable (2008), common misconceptions regarding differentiated instruction are: (a) students will be ill prepared for standardized tests; (b) if teachers differentiate instruction, they create unfair workloads among students; (c) it is not fair to give students credit for learning if they have not

demonstrated the same knowledge as other students; (d) students will not be able to compete in the real world; and (e) there is only one way to differentiate instruction.

Considering that those misconceptions are based on fiction, rather than fact, the only way to debunk them is to provide the evidence and training on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction. There are a myriad of ways to differentiate instruction (Tomlinson, 2000a). Differentiated instruction is not a recipe a teacher can follow to produce effective teaching (Tomlinson, 2000b). In order for differentiated instruction to be effective, teachers must first evaluate students on their readiness and interests. Simply put, they have to know their students and what they are capable of doing without support, before they can offer appropriate help.

This cannot happen until educators receive images of appropriately differentiated classrooms, starting in their pre-service teacher preparation programs and in the professional development training in their schools (Strieker et.al, 2012). We teach in the same manner that we were taught (Rock, et.al, 2008). Until this changes, the idea that the way we were taught is not necessarily the way our students should be taught, the improperly differentiated classroom will continue to permeate throughout our schools.

Today's classrooms require teachers to deliver instruction that facilitates all students for learning regardless of ability. That is a daunting task for teachers that lack fundamental training in curriculum integration and adapting lessons for content specificity (Jacobs, 1989). The reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) requires teachers and administrators to address specific learning disabilities and academic problems that are most often related to reading (Walker-Dalhouse, Risko, Esworthy, Grasley, Kaisler, McIlvain, and Stephan, 2010). In addition, this legislation requires teachers to differentiate instructions for culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students experiencing problems learning content (IDEA, 2004). Differentiated instruction is a model that can help teachers to address the shortcomings found with the structure of the inclusive classroom, and can provide immediate teacher assistance.

Teachers need to be able to address the needs of all students in a way that individual needs are met for significant learner outcomes. The fundamental problem with addressing the individual needs of a student is that without proper training or a model to use, theoretically, three to four teachers would be needed in each classroom. This reasoning is supported by the perspective that each class is composed of students from different subgroups for learning (i.e., special education, gifted-talented, English language learners, and general education students). According to Tulbure (2011), teachers must learn how to manage all the differences that they face within a class for instruction. Thus, teacher training at the pre-service and in-service level becomes critical for the teacher to respond to meet the needs of all students (Heacox, 2002). A possible solution then is to train teachers to use an effective model of differentiated instruction, so that they can meet the individual needs of the students in their classrooms.

One of the core problems with improper training is that teachers begin differentiating at the content, process, and product level, before considering student interest and ability. For example, the teachers in West Georgia that were previously discussed in this paper were found to start immediately differentiating at the content-process-product level. That starting point forces teachers to overlook the readiness level, student interest, instructions, and learning preference (Tomlinson, 1999). The teacher starts to use the traditional models of teaching, whereas students are required to adapt to the content-process-product regardless of appropriateness for instruction. It should be the teachers adapting the instruction to their students' needs, not the students adapting their learning to the teacher's ability.

The training sessions for West Georgia began with helping the teachers to understand their classroom demographics. The trainer had the students develop a planning pyramid that directly related to classroom subgroups (Schumm, Vaughn, & Leavell, 1994). The pyramid has a "few" group that is populated by Gifted Talented, Special Education, and English Language Learners. The model is also represented by a "most" group for general education students, and concluded with an "all" group to account for inclusion or every student within the classroom. The teachers then review the performance standard for that lesson, and develop six skills to support

that standard. The six skills that are scaffolded from the standard are assigned to the students based on their needs for learning. According to Heacox (2002), students that receive differentiated instruction will be taught the same content but in a way that facilitates individual learning based on what a student needs. The six skills described were all derived from the same standard, which reflects the idea that the same content is being taught. However, the skills being taught to the students are individualized based on their need – the skills are differentiated.

Bogan Adapted Model (2012) of Differentiated Instruction

Grade/Subject: 7th Grade Reading

Big Idea: Fluency

Essential Question: What inferences can be drawn based on the background knowledge and evidence from the text? How does identifying key details help me as a reader gain meaning from the text? How does fluent reading help me to comprehend a text?

Standard: ELACC7RL10: By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding needed at the high end of the range.

Lesson Objectives:

The student will be able to:

1. Use references from texts to provide evidence of applying ideas and making connections between text and self, text and other text, and text and the real world.
2. Fluently read – able to read orally and silently with speed, accuracy, proper phrasing and expression.
3. Evaluate print and non-print materials to build an understanding of texts.
4. Use scaffolded skills for reading (i.e., understands and acquires new vocabulary for application, read at the independent level, identify genres, and use letter sound knowledge for decoding and cueing systems for pronunciation and meaning).

6 Skills:

1. Provide models of fluent reading
2. Repeated oral reading
3. Guided oral reading
4. Direct Instruction: Comprehension
5. Word recognition skills
6. Direct Instruction: Vocabulary



Flexible Groupings

Heterogeneous Small Groups

Readiness – Informal reading inventory to determine reading level

Interests – Inventory (formative)

Instruction – Direct & explicit

Learning preference/profile - Visual, auditory

discussed in the literature for application (Bogan, 2012). For example, seventh graders requiring instructions in fluency would be taught using English Language Arts Common Core Standards (ELA-CC). The standard for application is selected from the domain for reading literary and the anchor standard is Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity (ELACC7RL10). The standard chosen relates directly to reading fluency. The teacher must read the CC and then “unpack” it to reveal the six skills to be taught to facilitate the learning and mastery of reading fluency and differentiated instruction. After “unpacking” the standard, the six skills selected to facilitate reading fluency are:

- 1) Provide models of fluent reading
- 2) Repeated oral reading
- 3) Guided oral reading
- 4) Direct Instruction: Comprehension
- 5) Word recognition skills
- 6) Direct Instruction: Vocabulary

These six skills would be used to differentiate reading fluency at the process level for student learning. Once the standard has been selected and unpacked to reveal the six skills that will be taught to achieve that standard, it becomes easier to apply differentiated instruction. The Bogan Adapted Model (2012) would need to be presented as either a pre-service or an in-service training. What follows is an application of the Bogan Adapted Model (2012) for differentiated instruction.

Application of Bogan’s Adapted Model (2012)

Step 1: Develop a theme/big idea to organize your subject area to connect the content. To explain the big idea determine what is the most essential and critical information that the teacher wants the students to learn. For example, if you are using a novel to teach the fluency standard, what is the theme of the novel you are teaching? Is it a novel on identity, making choices, or relationships? Is your focus on character, point of view, or, is the focus on fluency? You will need to choose one big idea or theme that will tie your lesson into the rest of your unit, and into your scope and sequence.

Step 2: Select which common core standard(s) will be designated to support the integration.

Step 3: Unpack the standard. Construct lesson objectives to ensure scope and sequence are met to examine the content and support the standard (e.g., how will the student...; the student will...). This is where the six skills are pulled from the standard. These skills are directly aligned with the standard and will be used to differentiate the process.

Step 4: Construct the essential questions. What are the enduring understandings that the students will need to remember years from now? What is the most important question these students should be able to answer? The essential questions and enduring understandings should be aligned with the standard and the objectives/skills.

Step 5: Start examining and assigning students to the classroom groups derived from the planning pyramid (i.e., Few, Most, & All). Please note that each group has a subgroup(s) to help facilitate this process. For example, the Few group has the subgroups of gifted talented, special education, and English language learners. The Most group has the subgroup of general education students, and the All group is comprised of everyone in the class or inclusion. Every student must be assigned to either the Few or the Most group. Either they are a member of a special population that has been labeled, or they are not. This step cannot be achieved until the teacher understands each student’s readiness, interest, and instruction/learning preferences. It is at this point that flexible grouping can be employed.

Step 6: Initialize differentiation by assigning two of the skills to each subgroup to be taught. Please note that for the Few group redundancy of skills must be avoided. However, when assigning skills to the Most and All group, the skills may be repeated/retaught due to the nature of each group. The six skills that were “unpacked” from the standard will be assigned out as 2 skills to the Few group, 2 skills to the Most group, and 2 skills to the All group. In this manner, all students will be learning 4 of the skills at any given time. This is simply because all students are members of either the Few and Most subgroups, and they are all members of the All group.

It is important to note that all students are being taught the same theme or big idea. For example, using the 7th grade standard mentioned earlier, all students were being taught fluency, regardless of which of the six skills they had mastered. If any of the six skills are taught, the teacher is delivering instructions for fluency (Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 2005). However, some might be learning it through a novel and some might be learning it through supplementary material. That is where the content is differentiated by using the actual curriculum that is provided to the students to learn based on their readiness, interest, instruction, and learning preferences. Once both the content and the process are differentiated, it becomes necessary to differentiate the product, to ensure that the measurement is aligned for validity. Considering that assessments need to be aligned with objectives, and each group of students is being taught a different skill/objective, it would make sense that the products measuring mastery of those skills/objectives would offer options to assess students in a differentiated process.

Teachers must differentiate properly in order to effectively teach all of the students in their classroom. This means that differentiation must occur for all three: content, process, and product. Differentiating in one area, such as giving student choices over the product they are going to create, is not proper differentiation when it does not follow a change in both content (curriculum) and process (student learning). That is a daunting task for teachers that lack fundamental training in curriculum integration and adapting lessons for content specificity (Jacobs, 1989). Improper differentiation is a problem that is faced by both pre-service and practicing teachers (Strieker et.al, 2012). Teacher training at the pre-service and in-service level becomes critical for the teacher to respond to meet the needs of all students (Heacox, 2002). The fact of the matter is that both populations will need images of classrooms that are effectively differentiated.

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