Differentiating Instruction:
Teaching Differently to Improve Student Outcomes

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Demystifying differentiating instruction, or explaining what it is and is not, facilitates implementation. Identifying how to differentiate instruction and make it happen in classrooms increases opportunities for successful teaching and learning (Gersten, 2001; Gersten & Domino, 2001; Gibson & Hasbrouck, 2009; McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003). This article briefly defines the instructional and organizational features of differentiating instruction. An overview is included that describes five practical, evidence-based steps for managing classrooms, behaviors, and student participation to enhance opportunities for differentiating instruction and practice.

Differentiating instruction: An overview

Many available resources describe differentiating instruction and herald the need for educational reform (Marzano, 2003; Tomlinson, 2000; Tomlinson & Edison, 2003; Marzano, Norford, Paynter, Pickering, & Gaddy, 2001; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Research supports *characteristics* of differentiating instruction, such as using data to inform practice and providing explicit instruction in smaller groups (Denton, Bryan, Wexler, Vaughn, & Reed, 2007; Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Schumm, 2000; Foreman & Torgesen, 2001; Torgesen, Houston, Rissman, Decker, Roberts, Vaughn, Wexler, Francis, & Riveria, 2007; Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum, 2001; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Kouzekanani, Bryant, Dickson, & Blozis, 2003). However, while effective models exist, there is less research that guides practical application in schools.

To date, no specific or definitive model for differentiating instruction has been clearly established as best practice. Additional research is needed to identify evidence-based methods for improving instructional effectiveness by differentiating teaching in small group lessons. Classroom practices often are evidence of the research-to-practice gap in education. Professional development that informs teaching and enhances instructional effectiveness is needed to ensure teachers apply what they know to what they do in classrooms. Despite limited research to support one model of implementation, there is sufficient evidence to guide how teachers can begin to differentiate instruction and improve student learning and achievement.

Differentiating instruction is not a new trend, and as a school practice, it is not a new concept in education. Identifying student variance and selecting students for participation in exclusive activities have been common practices for many years in schools providing special education services for students with identified needs. In many cases, support services included pull-out programs where students received instructional support provided by someone other than the general education classroom teacher.

Likewise, expecting classroom teachers to provide high-quality instruction to students is not a new concept. In fact, increasing teaching and improving instructional effectiveness has been the cornerstone of many large-scale state and federal grant programs in recent years. Classroom teachers have been expected to assess student needs, use data to set goals and plan instruction, prepare lesson plans and materials, and monitor and adjust instruction to ensure student progress toward grade level standards. What is new for classroom teachers, however, is the ***increasing student variance*** within general education classrooms, often coupled with diverse language and behavioral challenges. Additionally, shrinking resources (time, money, and personnel) have limited access to professional development, resulting in decreased support for administrators and classroom teachers responsible for managing these increasing instructional demands.

Despite changing student lifestyles outside of schools and increasing student variance within classrooms, changes in teacher preparation have remained relatively stagnant. Limited exposure to observing and participating in high-quality teaching and practice impedes differentiating or changing practice. Thus, preservice teachers experience exponentially increased challenges and expectations for classroom performance, with minimal opportunities to develop stronger skill sets for managing environments, teaching effectively, and assigning work for productive practice that enhances student learning.

Once teachers enter the classroom, they are expected to differentiate instruction with minimal training on how to make that happen and how to get everything done. Basically, one teacher is responsible for teaching one group of students while monitoring other students participating in guided and/or independent practice activities. Before that can happen, teachers are expected to review data, select curricula for practice activities, and ensure that all assignments are purposefully aligned with student needs. The challenges seem overwhelming!

In order to differentiate instruction in small groups, changes will be necessary. Differentiating instruction means to "teach differently" by changing how teaching and practice are provided using whole class and small group instruction. Teaching and learning behaviors become more interactive and collaborative, replacing the passive listening associated with traditional lecture formats. Differentiated instruction includes more collaborative learning through guided practice and student-focused, small group instruction — instruction led by a teacher who uses data to plan lessons that address specific student needs (Kosanovich, Ladinsky, Nelson, & Torgesen, 2006; Marzano, 2003; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003).

Since teaching differently involves managing multiple activities happening in the classroom simultaneously, teachers and administrators need assistance with getting started. The process follows a predictable path:

- Data is 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 for instruction and guided practice
- 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
- Small group activities are used for instruction and guided practice
- Independent work is completed when students work alone at a desk or table

Basically, differentiating instruction involves changing *how* teachers teach and *what* they teach (Gibson & Hasbrouck, 2009 & 2010; Tomlinson, 1999). The daily structure for delivering standards-based content differs for teaching and practice. After an initial whole class activity, students then separate and work in small groups or independently. While a teacher provides explicit, skills-focused, differentiated instruction for one small group of students, other students not working with the teacher may participate in collaborative, guided practice activities (working with assigned partners, reading text, and/or completing assignments together for extended practice). Some students may work independently on previously taught and practiced skills.

All students may not complete the same assignments or work on the same practice activities at the same time. Instruction and practice may differ depending on instructional purpose and needs. All students interact by discussing and peer tutoring to enhance their comprehension and complete productive work that is tightly aligned with the teacher's instructional purpose and state and district expectations for content mastery. Students assume active roles by supporting each other and providing constructive feedback during practice activities when the teacher is unavailable or working with another group.

The purpose for differentiating teaching and practice is to increase the quality and quantity of instruction so that effective support for learning occurs in classrooms. Changing the behavior of teaching requires examining how instruction and practice are provided and then analyzing what instructors teach to ensure curricula and skills are aligned to student needs and meaningful for differentiating instruction (Mathes, Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, Francis, & Schatschneider, 2005). Using data to align classroom practices with teachers' instructional purposes is essential for differentiating instruction. Lesson materials and practice activities must be academically profitable and productive for improving student learning. Most importantly, explicit, skills-focused instruction in a teacher-led small group must occur before students can be expected to practice successfully with their peers. Similarly, sufficient, meaningful guided practice activities must be provided before expecting students to work independently.

Managing differentiating instruction

Classroom management and organization represents the most difficult issue to overcome when getting started with differentiated instruction (Gibson & Hasbrouck, 2009; 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?*

Managing the classroom to differentiate instruction presents a huge challenge for some teachers. It is also challenging for administrators responsible for monitoring and evaluating teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

Teacher survey data indicates that teachers have not received training or professional development that develops their expertise for differentiating instruction effectively for students with increasingly diverse needs (Shanahan, 2008; Stanovich & Stanovich, 2008; Tilly, 2003). Administrator survey data reveals 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 (Chen & Chang, 2006; Lyon, 2009). The message is clear: Teachers and administrators need to develop competence and confidence

for differentiating instruction and practice. Implementation must look doable. Establishing routines using 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 & Hasbrouck, 2009; Marzano et.al, 2001). Successful implementation begins with establishing routines and procedures that develop school behaviors that support 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. *To implement changes that create opportunities for differentiating instruction* in an efficient and effective learning environment requires five steps:

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 leads participation and provides support with constructive feedback. Teacher-led, explicit, student-focused instruction, 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 in small groups. *Students complete assignments during the time period designated as the worktable. Students complete assignments independently. 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 time 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, again 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 is 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 allow 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:

- A flexible *Daily Schedule* that ensures specific time periods are assigned for small group instruction that occurs daily when possible
- 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
- 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 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 allows 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 teaching and practice

Improving the quality and quantity of 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 specific to student needs. After teachers observe and collect data, they can develop an instructional purpose, set attainable goals, select curriculum, define activities that provide essential support for targeted students' needs, and begin teaching more effectively.

Providing high-quality instruction in small groups involves more than grouping, moving students from one activity to another, and selecting curricula. Using a curriculum developed from research that incorporates best practices for student learning is important. Curriculum supports quality instruction and provides resources for differentiating teaching and practice; however, teachers teach — the curriculum does not. Evidence-based best practices must be applied to *present and teach* content. Therefore, merely assigning students to small groups, or purchasing and using leveled books for adjusted practice, does not guarantee that teaching is changed within a small group lesson. In that sense, grouping represents only a *procedural* change in how instruction is delivered: changing from whole class lecture format to small group participation. The *instructional purpose, content, method of delivery* (teaching), and *feedback* must be aligned with student needs in order to differentiate instruction.

That means a teacher may need to adjust the lesson content and/or instructional purpose to differentiate teaching and learning. High-quality, evidence-based curricula and instructional materials will be used to support and enhance teaching and practice. Changing teaching behaviors within the small group lessons and using materials that enhance comprehension is differentiating instruction. In other words, all aspects of teaching must be aligned with *purpose* and *needs* within each small group lesson. The materials may be the same for a lesson, but the way materials are used for differentiating instruction may differ. The teacher may begin the lesson at a different entry level or extend the learning to a higher level of difficulty using the same materials or activity. The teaching is adjusted to enhance student learning.

Teaching differently requires schools to close the research-to-practice gap, to ensure what educators do is aligned with what research has identified as best practices for effective teaching and learning. To that end, differentiating teacher preparation and professional development will be

necessary to ensure high-quality instruction occurs in classrooms. Changing teacher preparation to develop excellent teaching skills has attracted national attention (Duncan, 2010). The rationale for "teaching *teaching*" to improve instructional effectiveness exceeds the scope of this article. However, the steps included in this article provide guidance for implementing change using small groups for differentiating instruction and practice.

Summary

Differentiating instruction means teaching *differently*, and the behavioral changes to make that happen in classrooms often depart from traditional practice. This presents a management challenge that may be resolved by establishing routines and procedures for organizing resources (classroom space, time, and materials or activities). Successfully implementing changes to differentiate instruction will depend on clearly communicated expectations between stakeholders, administrators, and teachers. These expectations identify how the change process will occur to establish well-managed classrooms that include opportunities for small group, teacher-led instruction and ample collaborative, guided practice for students. In order to teach differently, efficient routines and procedures must be taught, modeled, and practiced. Differentiated professional development and clear directives will be needed to support teachers as they begin to change how they teach, what they teach, and how students practice.

Educators using the steps suggested in this article report immediate changes in performance, including a significant and immediate decrease in behavioral incidents and an increase in student participation and completion of work. Using these suggestions, teachers will have more time to differentiate learning experiences and provide effective instruction that makes sense to students. Differentiating instruction improves performance for both teachers and students — so let the changes begin.
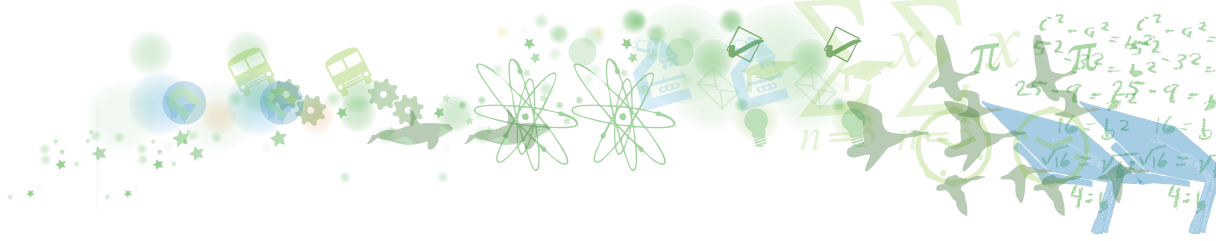
Vicki Gibson, Ph.D., is an accomplished author, national consultant, speaker, and trainer specializing in differentiating instruction, classroom and behavior management, early childhood education, and reading. Her experience at all levels of the educational continuum includes expertise in both print and technology environments. Currently Dr. Gibson is the Chairman and President of Gibson Hasbrouck & Associates, a premier educational consulting firm that provides professional development presentations, keynotes, and consultation as well as excellent products proven to work in improving instructional effectiveness, enhancing student achievement and increasing school success. She is an author for the Macmillan McGraw-Hill core reading program, *Treasures*, and recently coauthored a teacher handbook on managing whole class and small group instruction entitled *Differentiated Instruction: Grouping for Success*.

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