P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

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Putting It All Together: Special Education Examples

3rd Grade Self-Contained
Special Education

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3rd Grade Self-Contained

"THE DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING ZONE"
I heard a staggering fact at one of the workshops I attended at institute: if you teach the textbook and teach solely to one curriculum without differentiating your instruction at all, you'll meet the needs of about 10% of your students – the other 90% will either be above or below that level. Hearing that stark statistic was a huge realization for me, despite that fact that I had heard my CS and CMA talk about differentiation all summer. The achievement gap I wanted to close existed not only throughout the nation, but within my own small classroom? I immediately knew that I wanted to differentiate my instruction in order to meet all my students' needs.

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On my first day of school during my first year of teaching, I named my classroom "The Differentiated Learning Zone." I of course didn't know everything about differentiation right away – I'm still constantly researching, learning, and revising my systems – but knowing that I wanted to differentiate was a huge step in the right direction. Having it on my mind, I was able to see the extreme variance in performance levels of my students right away. From there, I could work to meet the needs of all of them.

BOOKS TO BORROW FROM

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

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There are a few books that I highly recommend you check out. The first one is called *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* by Carol Ann Tomlinson; the second is the handbook that goes with the text called *Understanding by Design* by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins. I really like the handbook because it focuses on Bloom's Taxonomy as well as Gardner's multiple intelligences, and it discusses how to create an entire differentiated unit by working backwards from benchmarks and objectives.

> *…the first step I took towards differentiating was to administer several diagnostics and interest inventories…I wanted to base my differentiation not only on my students' academic strengths and weaknesses, but also on their interests.*

Those books were great for background information, but the first step I took towards differentiating my first year was to administer several diagnostics and interest inventories, many of which I copied from a book called *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom* by Diane Heacox. There are a ton of excellent tools in that book besides interest inventories, like multiple intelligence inventories for both students and parents and forms for teachers to fill out based on student observations. I wanted to base my differentiation not only on my students' academic strengths and weaknesses, but also on their interests. I believe it's very important to get a sense of the whole child, and how all my students think about themselves as learners. I had no idea *how* I would actually differentiate my instruction until I got those results and could see what my students needed from me.

DIFFERENTIATING WITH READER'S/WRITER'S WORKSHOPS

This year my school implemented a really amazing literacy program called Mississippi's Choice (it's a subset of America's Choice, so you may have something like it in your own school). The idea behind the design of the program is that every day, my students spend one hour in Reader's Workshop and one hour in Writer's Workshop. (Next year, the second year my school will have the program, we'll implement an hour of Math Workshop as well.) My differentiation is now focused on these workshops, and it's gone really well so far – I saw a huge improvement in my students' reading and writing abilities right away. After several months in the workshops, I can see significant improvement in my students just from those two hours every day.

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P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

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For those of you not familiar with Reader's or Writer's Workshop, I'll give you a brief synopsis. You have a one-hour time block for each subject that starts with a mini-lesson of seven to ten minutes. My students meet on the rug while I sit in a chair in front of them with chart paper and give a very brief, focused lesson. It's different from a normal lesson in that I do almost all of the talking, and I'm entirely focused on one skill: for example, "good readers make predictions before they read." I'll introduce that message, tell my students how to make predictions before reading a book, demonstrate it for them, and then have them model predicting for me. Then I'll give them a related assignment for their individual reading time that day, by saying "Today, I want you all to make one prediction and write it on a sticky note before you read a new book or start a new chapter." My students then have a 40-minute work period of intensified, focused reading or writing, while I'm conferencing with students. I'll either pull a student to a table to have a mini-conference or do a running record, or I'll gather together a small group of students who have been struggling with a skill to give them a quick mini-lesson or review of that area. (I have a very small class this year of only 14 students, so I usually get to see each student 2-3 times a week in each workshop.) To close out, we have ten minutes at the end where we come back together on the rug, and I choose a student to sit in the Author's Chair. During Reader's Workshop that student presents and discusses the book they just read or are in the process of reading; for Writer's Workshop the student will read what they've written.

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The workshops have been amazing in helping me differentiate my instruction for reading and writing, and I'm trying to implement similar ways of differentiating in Math, where we use the scripted Saxon math program. I really like the Saxon program, but it doesn't always delve deep enough into the math concepts we're studying, so I try to supplement the program with enrichment activities that I find in Marilyn Burns's books. While I can adjust my students' reading and writing instruction toward their level to move them forward, in math all of my students are expected to meet the state benchmarks, so I have to approach differentiation a little differently.

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P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

Mostly I pull aside a small group of students to work on specific skills during independent practice, which helps out my lower-performers. My higher performers, if they finish their independent practice early, know where to find extra problems or math-related activities they can work on during the rest of the period. Finally, my students write in their "math journals" at the end of each lesson, where they write a response to a question that pushes their thinking about a concept. I also try to differentiate social studies, science, and spelling through other common methods (centers, differentiated questioning, separate spelling lists/homework/assessments, etc.), but my main focus this year has been on moving my students' literacy and math skills forward through workshops and independent and small group practice. I think it's been incredibly successful so far.

TRACKING: A FOUNDATION TO DIFFERENTIATION
In addition to providing me with the workshop formats, leveled reading selections, and writing assignments, Mississippi's Choice also has fantastic grids that I can use to track my students' academic progress. For example, I have one grid where I list all my students' names down the left-hand column and all the different elements of writing that I look for in my students' work across the top row (i.e. an engaging beginning, sensory details, complex characters, etc.). When I analyze a piece of a student's writing, I can give him a plus or minus in each box based on whether he has met those standards for that assignment. I also have a space on the chart after each student's name where I can write down the two grammar skills he most needs help with. Having these grids has made it incredibly easy for me to quickly see the needs of my students: I can see that the whole class needs to work on writing an engaging beginning and plan a whole-group lesson based on that skill, that I need to pull aside five students for a mini-lesson on spelling during the next day's workshop, and that I need an individual conference with one student who's really struggling with sensory details while the rest of the class has mastered it. This practice of tracking, through these grids and other forms (like logs of my conferences with my students), has been a critical element of my differentiation and make every aspect so much easier for me.

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MODEL, MODEL, MODEL
Of course, my students didn't magically know how to do Reader's and Writer's Workshops, and how to work quietly during math while I taught a small group of students. I had to actually *teach* my students how to behave at the beginning of the year, which I did by tons of modeling and tons of practice. For example, I had to teach them how to come sit down on the rug for the beginning of a workshop. I'd divide them into groups and call them over group

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

by group; they would practice how to stand up, push in their chairs, walk over quietly, and sit down. To help them, we have a poem called Rug Rules that we even now still say together at the beginning of rug time:

> Our hands and feet are folded,
> Our backs are straight and tall,
> Our eyes are on the speaker,
> *(Whisper)* We make no noise at all.

I got this poem from another corps member, Dana Guyer, and it's worked really well. Just like for learning how to sit on the rug, we worked up to every other system in place in our differentiated classroom. I'd have my students start off the year during Reader's Workshop by reading at their desks, and the class worked towards earning reading spots that they could go to like beanbags and rugs by meeting a goal of how fast and how quietly they could come to the rug. It was a huge motivating factor for their behavior to let them earn that incentive. They all got to choose a reading spot, which is their spot till the end of the year (so there's never any question or argument about where everyone goes during independent reading time).

There are a whole bunch of those little procedural things that I had to teach my students in order to be able to differentiate the way I do. The other main skill they had to learn was how not to disrupt me when I was conferencing with another student – I find it very disruptive for a student to even raise their hand when I'm working with a student, since that conference time is so sacred. The system I use is that I put on a funny Dr. Seuss-type hat while I'm conferencing; my students know that when the hat is on, they don't talk to me. They can still get what they need – for example, if they hold up two fingers, that means they need to get up and get a supply – but implementing that system and teaching them that specific process has made my conferencing go so much more smoothly, and therefore it's more beneficial for the student I'm working with and his or her academic progress. For any classroom management system, including the ones related to differentiating, I've found that it's all about constant modeling.

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WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT, TOO
Differentiating my instruction, even stepping up the level at which I do it (in my second year compared to my first) has made a huge difference in the level of academic achievement in my classroom. Every now and then, I still do a whole-group work period if there's a step-by-step process I need to teach all my students for a certain skill, and it's always remarkable to me how much less engaged they are than when they're working in small groups or independently. I think how students learn and whether or not they learn on their level is tied

to their motivation, which I believe (and I've seen) directly correlates with their academic achievement. Through various differentiated strategies, I've seen my students' reading, writing and math skills improve tremendously. You really can notice a difference in just one hour of individual, differentiated instruction.

While the workshop format has worked really well for my classroom, I know it's not for everyone, and I'm certainly not recommending you implement it in your classroom tomorrow. The fact is, differentiation does not have to be a huge, daunting task – it can be as simple as taking 5 minutes to come up with a higher-level list of spelling words for a few of your kids. You don't have to create entirely new classroom systems or write an entire differentiated unit overnight – if differentiating seems really daunting to you, you're probably making it harder than it needs to be. Even by differentiating your instruction in a really simple way, you'll see an increase in your students' motivation and their level of improvement. It's important that you give it a try.

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Back to Top

P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

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Special Education

Question: How do you ensure that you have a classroom environment of respect for and acceptance of a wide range of student learning differences and abilities?

Answer: I teach several lessons about difference at the beginning of the year. For example, I teach a lesson in which I tape three packs of gum to the wall as high as I can reach without jumping. I then select three children - one who is as tall or taller than I am, one who is slightly shorter than I am and will need to jump, and one who is significantly shorter than I am so that even jumping will not allow him or her to reach the gum.

I then tell my students that the gum represents the goals of education which we have previously discussed: acquiring information, developing self confidence and worth, cultivating talents and abilities, compensating for deficits and needs, ensuring self sufficiency, and gaining skills. I tell the three selected students that if they can grab the gum (the goal) it is theirs to keep. The tall student grabs it easily and the medium height student jumps once or twice but gets it. I tell them to begin chewing their gum. As expected, the short student cannot reach the gum by jumping. I begin to chide him/her and tell him/her to work harder. Usually the other students start getting mad at me and tell me I am being unfair because I knew the short student wouldn't be able to reach the gum and I won't let anyone help him/her. Eventually, the shorter student asks if he/she can use a chair. In response I say, "No. That would be unfair. You just need to jump higher or get taller." The students get very annoyed at that - some actually get up to try to lift the short student up – so eventually I give in and let him/her use the chair.

After this, we have a whole group discussion. I ask if the fact that the medium height student had to jump and the tall student did not in any way diminishes the other's ability, success, or the taste of the gum. I then ask the same about the child who used the chair, insisting that the gum must taste worse for the other two now since I allowed one kid to cheat. They vehemently disagree with me. At this point we discuss the difference between fairness and giving students what they need and about how we can all reach our individual and common goals in different ways. I stress that all that matters is that we reach the goal. I ask students to list ways they can help someone learn that are analogous to the use of the chair. They volunteer things like calculators, number lines, charts, highlighters, tapes for reading, differentiated assignments – pretty much every standard modification I use in my classroom.

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I simply make it the norm that nothing is normal or standard, that everyone is different and will be taught differently. If someone says, "hey that's not fair" when I give a student a

calculator, invariably another says, "your right, but remember that it's not about being fair, its about giving each student what he or she needs." As one of my students said (paraphrasing me), "Steven and I can't read, Anthony and Kendrick have behavior disorders, Brielle needs a calculator, Marie and Angelica use a spellchecker, Candace has Downs Syndrome, and Mr. Murphy talks to himself. We've all got problems, so let's do our math." That was one of my proudest moments.

Back to Top