Reading Horizons

Differentiated Reading Instruction: What and How

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Abstract

Ms. Martin (a pseudonym) is preparing to teach her new group of students this fall. This is her ninth year teaching second grade, so she knows much about the complexities she faces. The professional development focus in her district this year is differentiated reading instruction and she knows from experience that the twenty-two children who will enter her classroom have differing levels of abilities in reading.

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Ms. Martin (a pseudonym) is preparing to teach her new group of students this fall. This is her ninth year teaching second grade, so she knows much about the complexities she faces. The professional development focus in her district this year is differentiated reading instruction and she knows from experience that the twenty-two children who will enter her classroom have differing levels of abilities in reading.

Ms. Martin has used a variety of assessment tools in the past, and has looked at the records for her incoming group. Two of her students are just beginning to read at the emergent level, five students are reading just below the beginning second grade level at the end of first grade, and six students are reading fluently at the beginning second grade level, but their comprehension scores are much lower. Another six of Ms. Martin's students are reading fluently at a mid-second grade level for both reading and comprehension, while three of her new students are reading and comprehending text at the fourth grade level or beyond. Ms. Martin has long recognized these differences in her students, and knows that the instruction in her classroom will have to be differentiated to support the strengths and meet the needs of the learners. Where does she start with such a complex task?

Ms. Martin, identified as an exemplary teacher by administrators in her district, was the subject of a case study conducted by the first author. The purpose of the study was to explore the nature of differentiated reading instruction (Ankrum, 2006). In the following article, we first provide a brief history of differentiated reading instruction. Then focus on identifying practical ideas that may help teachers in their attempts to meet the needs of students in their classrooms–many of these ideas were seen in Ms. Martin's classroom while others come from the research and literature that support such differentiated instruction.

Different Instruction

Children have always come to school with a range of literacy experiences and abilities and teachers have struggled for years to meet the needs of *all* of their learners. Historically, teachers have grouped their students in attempts to tailor instruction to meet the different needs of individuals. They have attempted various types of grouping arrangements during the literacy block, including needs-based homogeneous groups, interest-based groups, or individualized instruction. However, it has become clear that it is not the grouping arrangement that matters; it is *what* the teacher does with each group of children that makes the difference (Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002). No simple formula exists that details *what* to do with each group of children. According to the IRA's position statement, *Making a Difference Means Making It Different* (2000), differentiated instruction can only truly occur if the teacher possesses a deep knowledge of the reading process, an understanding of the strengths and needs of her students, and the ability to teach responsively.

There is evidence that providing all students with the same reading instruction can be detrimental to student achievement. In classrooms comprised of students with varied reading levels where the teachers did not engage in differentiated instruction, student achievement for the average and low achieving students suffered; high achieving students made merely modest gains (McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, & Zeig, 2006; Schumm, Moody, & Vaughn, 2000). Other studies support the notion that differentiation in instruction is needed to narrow the achievement gap found in today's schools (Allington, 2005; O'Connor, Bell, Harty, Larkin, Sackor, & Zigmond, 2002). Since teachers in non-differentiated classrooms often focus on the average learners, students of high ability or low ability do not receive instruction to adequately improve their reading ability. This can be increasingly difficult for teachers given the current federal mandates outlined by the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Many districts require teachers to use a core

and/or scripted reading program, many of which provide little support and time for differentiated reading instruction (Block, Parris, Reed, Whiteley, & Cleveland, 2007; DeWitz, Jones, & Leahy, 2007). As a result, teachers may need more guidance in *how* to group children and *how* to provide effective differentiated instruction in reading (Moody & Vaughn, 1997; Schumm, et al., 2000).

Early Attempts at Differentiation: Ability Grouping

Reading programs designed for groups of differing abilities first appeared in the 1950's (Barr & Dreeben, 1991). Within-class "ability grouping" took hold as a predominant practice for many teachers (Dreeben & Barr, 1988; Hallinan & Sorensen, 1983; Hiebert, Wearne, & Taber, 1991). The term *ability grouping* seemed to encompass all that was necessary to differentiate reading instruction for the learner. In theory, students would be assessed and then homogeneously grouped by reading ability. Next, the teacher would craft different lessons to suit the needs of the students in each group. In reality, however, some teachers grouped their students by structural variables, such as class size. Others found that within a specific group, students differed in their strengths and needs, with some having problems with fluency, others with decoding, and others with comprehension. Still, these groups remained stable throughout the school year, rather than changing based on the needs of the learners (Dreeben & Barr, 1988; Hallinan & Sorensen, 1983; Hiebert, et al, 1991).

Barr (1973, 1975) and Allington (1983) described a differential, rather than differentiated type of teaching that occurred within such grouping arrangements. Some teachers spent more time on word level instruction with struggling readers; in contrast, others spent more time instructing higher-level comprehension strategies to the skilled readers. Further, the type of instructional materials used was often consistent across groups as the grade-level basal reader was the material of choice. It was the instructional pacing that differed (Barr, 1973, 1975). Therefore, children placed in lower-achieving groups were exposed to less text, since basal story reading occurred at a slower pace in these groups. In contrast, children in the higher achieving groups were exposed to more text at a faster pace (Barr, 1973; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Stluka, 1994). As Stanovich (1986) pointed out in his discussion about the Matthew effects, the rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. In other words successful readers continued to improve while the struggling readers actually lost ground.

The efficacy of ability grouping came under debate in the 1980's, and whole group teaching began to take hold in many classrooms (Moody & Vaughn, 1997).

In an effort to avoid providing differential treatment to their students, teachers were encouraged to use the same materials, lessons, and pacing for all of the children in the classroom. In an attempt to provide equal access to the curriculum (and the amount of text), one reading lesson was presented to the entire group of students. Although this resulted in the simplification of classroom management for reading instruction, it left little room for meeting the needs of individuals.

Does Differentiation Occur Today?

The answer is: sometimes. Evidence collected in studies of literacy instruction suggests that the predominant grouping arrangement currently used in reading instruction is whole-class, mainly due to management issues. Even when teachers expressed the belief that teaching small homogenous groups was the most effective method for reading instruction, most found it easier to manage one lesson and one group of students than to plan different activities for multiple groups (Moody & Vaughn, 1997; Schumm et al., 2000).

Contrasting findings do exist, however. A number of studies have been conducted to document the instructional practices of educators who have been identified as exemplary teachers of literacy. These studies revealed that the best teachers of literacy employed a variety of grouping formats, including whole group, small group and individual lessons (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, Morrow, Tracey, Baker, Brooks, Cronin, Nelson, & Woo, 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998). In addition, these teachers instructed their students more often in small groups than in the whole class setting (Taylor et al., 2000). The most effective teachers, those who fostered the highest level of student achievement, "seemed to be able to monitor student thought processes as they taught and interceded with just enough help to facilitate learning but not so much that they lost the flow of the lesson" (Wharton-McDonald, et al., 1998, p. 116). In other words, a great deal of individual coaching during small group lessons was observed in these classrooms. In addition, Pressley, et al. (2001) found that "teaching was very different in the most effective classrooms from student to student and from occasion to occasion" (p. 46-47).

Differentiated reading instruction has been documented in the classrooms of expert teachers; however in an effort to "leave no child behind" we need to see this kind of instruction in all classrooms. Yet this seems difficult for teachers to achieve. Perhaps the process of reading is so complex that instruction tailored to individual needs is difficult for practitioners to attain. Another possible explanation is that the management issues involved in differentiated instruction may be overwhelming as

teachers in the most effective classrooms were experts at managing different grouping arrangements within their classroom (Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 2000; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998).

How Do Exemplary Teachers Differentiate?

The research base in this area is sparse. We do know that exemplary teachers of literacy were observed teaching more often in small groups based on the instructional reading level of the students (Taylor et al., 2000). We also know that the most frequently observed teacher-student interaction style in these classrooms was scaffolding/coaching, which "involved prompting children to use a variety of strategies as they were engaged in reading during small-group instruction or one-on-one reading time" (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 136). How do teachers do this? Exemplary teachers indicated that they used systematic and on-going assessments in the formation of their groups in order to ensure accuracy of membership, as well as to avoid inflexibility in grouping. Group membership shifted as needed, according to assessment results (Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 2000). The differential treatment of groups discussed by Allington (1983) and Barr (1973, 1975) was not observed in the exemplary classrooms studied. Instead, students in the low-instructional level groups were exposed to as many higher-level teaching strategies as their classmates in the high instructional-level groups (Taylor et al., 2000).

What is missing in the research literature is a detailed description of *how* differentiated reading instruction occurs. What exactly happens within these lessons? How is each lesson different from another? What exactly does the teacher differentiate—level of materials, skills instruction, pacing, etc.? Also, methods for assessing student needs are mentioned in the literature, but not fully described. Further research in this area is required if teachers are to understand the nature of effective differentiated reading instruction. Based on what we know about individual differences and the achievement gap, it is critical that we begin to explore the areas that exemplary teachers like Ms. Martin may consider when trying to tailor reading instruction to the needs of their learners.

Decisions, Decisions!

Planning tailored reading lessons is not a simple task that can be described in a lock-step formula. There are many points to consider when preparing for differentiated reading instruction in the classroom (Figure 1). Each of these points is discussed below.

- Assessment
- Grouping Formats
- Classroom Management
- Materials
- Length and Frequency of Instruction
- Lesson Focus

Figure 1. Differentiated Reading Instruction: Points to Consider

Assessment

The primary consideration in reading instruction should be the needs and strengths of each child (Clay, 2002). It is only through assessment that teaching decisions can be made as assessment provides the data that informs good instruction (Taylor et al., 2000). Once these data are collected, the teacher must be empowered to analyze the information. This analysis, coupled with the teacher's deep knowledge of the reading process, will enable powerful instruction. Continuous informal assessments lead to responsive teaching, which is often linked to exemplary teaching (Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 2000; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998).

A common question that follows is "which assessments should I use?" There is no simple answer. Many school districts require specific assessments, which may provide teachers with the needed information. Specifically, assessment tools that are used to inform instruction should be comprehensive, on-going, classroom-based, and easy to administer and interpret. For assessments to be comprehensive, a variety of tools should be used to provide teachers a window to all aspects of the reading process. Both word-level skills and higher-level strategies should be evaluated. In addition, comprehensive assessments should be matched to the developmental process of reading. For example, one would not assess letter identification skills of fluent readers; alternately, one would not take a running record on a child who demonstrates little if any knowledge of letter-sound correspondence. In addition, assessment should be on-going, not a one-shot measure used at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. It is equally important to include classroom-based assessments. Teachers should observe students' reading skills and strategies in authentic situations, not just isolated drills (Holdaway, 1979). Finally, these assessments should be easy to administer and interpret so it is more likely that the busy classroom teacher will conduct the assessment and then use the results in planning instruction.

While formal assessments can provide teachers with a great deal of data, careful notes and records can equally inform teachers' decisions. Teachers can jot down anecdotal records as they engage in observation or instruction. Ms. Martin finds it useful to keep post-it notes readily available so that she can quickly record what she has observed during instruction, e.g., Suzy – multisyllabic words are a problem (graceful, delicate, happiness). Upon reflection, such records can guide the next teaching points. Close observations of students' reading can also lead to on-the-spot decisions, changing the direction of the instruction as needed (Clay, 2002). In addition, informal conferences allow teachers to converse with students about their selection of texts, the strategies the children are using, and challenges in their processing. Such conversations can offer great insight into a reader's strengths, needs, and interests. Ms. Martin holds an informal conference with each one of her students at least once a month; during that time, she listens to them read, asks them several questions about the selection that they have chosen, and talks to them about their reading interests. The students look forward to their scheduled, personal time with the teacher and Ms. Martin uses the valuable information collected from these discussions to inform her instruction.

Grouping Formats

Teachers must carefully consider the types of grouping arrangements they use during literacy instruction. It is best to employ a variety of grouping formats throughout the instructional block, including whole-class, small group, and opportunities for individualized instruction. Curriculum-based, grade-level appropriate skills, and strategies can be introduced to the whole class, ensuring that all children gain the needed exposure to this material. Teachers may choose to use approaches such as shared reading or interactive read aloud to provide explicit teaching through modeling for all of the students in the class.

This whole group teaching will not meet the needs of all of the students which is why small group instruction is a necessary component in the literacy block. It is with homogeneous, needs-based groups that the teacher can create lessons based on the evidence provided by assessments. Groups may change based on skill or strategy need. When children demonstrate a need to switch groups, teachers can do that, again based on the assessments. Individualized instruction can be arranged to meet the needs of struggling or accelerated readers, in addition to the whole class and small group opportunities provided.

Ms. Martin frequently refers to her assessment data throughout the year to reconsider small group membership. In past years Ms. Martin found that three of the four children who entered her class reading below grade level achieved accelerated progress, two were placed with the average group by the end of the year, and

one of the struggling readers was moved into the highest reading group by spring! Ms. Martin is planning on similar movement for her two struggling readers this year. It is also likely that members of other groups will switch due to ability or interest differences.

Classroom Management

Management issues create the largest barrier to this model of teaching (Moody & Vaughn, 1997; Schumm et al., 2000). It is imperative that teachers find methods to keep all children actively engaged in meaningful literacy learning, while meeting with small groups or individual learners. There are a variety of approaches that teachers employ; it is important that teachers select a management technique that is comfortable and matches their teaching style.

Literacy Centers. This popular spin-off of learning centers requires children to work independently or in small groups on literacy related activities. Teachers generally organize a number of stations around the room with literacy-related materials, and present the curriculum-based activities to the children on a weekly basis. A variety of rotations may be employed, ranging from teacher or student selected groups and pacing. With careful planning, the activities within the literacy centers can be tiered to provide differentiated practice of reading skills and strategies and/ or reinforcement of skills taught in whole class or small groups. Figure 2 provides a list of sample literacy center ideas.

Independent Reading. Some teachers require their students to read independently as they work with small groups of students. Independent reading provides opportunities for developing fluency as well as practice with comprehension strategies and decoding skills (Clay, 1991; Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986). At times, students read orally, perhaps with one or two partners, or with an audiotape. In order for this to be effective, teachers must ensure that students read texts at the appropriate reading level. At the same time, there should be some opportunity for student choice since students can often read materials above their instructional reading level if they are interested and excited about a specific topic. There should also be times when students read silently, although Shanahan (2006) does caution teachers in their use of sustained silent reading, stating that there is not enough conclusive evidence to support SSR in place of explicit instruction. What is important is that students receive guided explicit instruction in addition to independent practice through silent reading.

Independent Response. It is not uncommon for teachers to require students to practice reading skills or strategies independently through written responses to reading. Keeping these activities open-ended and creative can increase student

engagement. Such activities enrich and extend the instructional strategies presented to students in whole or small group lessons. Students enjoy having the chance to write a reaction to the selection, perhaps from the perspective of a particular character, or to write three questions that they can ask their fellow students. Ms. Martin asks students to keep journals in which they respond to one or two questions that she poses about a specific selection. These responses often call for a personal connection with the text. Students then bring their journals to the next reading lesson and share what they have written with others.

- *Writing Center*: All that is needed is a table, some chairs, and supplies to write with and write on. For example, markers, crayons, colored pencils, and paper of all sizes. Dry erase boards and chalkboards are great for practice as well.
- *Overhead Projector*: Place it on the floor, with some blank transparencies and overhead markers, and let your students write or put some familiar poems on overheads for the children to read.
- *Book Nook*: Find a comfortable corner; add some pillows, chairs, or even a loveseat. Fill some bookshelves with books of all genres and levels. Allow students a chance to browse and relax.
- *Big Books*: Hang your big books on a coat rack near the Book Nook. Invite students to read with a partner or independently. Students can look for known words or letters in the Big Book.
- *Book Buddies*: Students can read known or easy books to or with a partner to practice fluency.
- *ABC Center*: Preschool and kindergarten children can practice letter identification with a variety of materials. Stock shelves with magnetic letters, ABC cards, alphabet puzzles, and games.
- *Word Building*: Students can use letter tiles, magnets, and cards to build words.
- *Poetry Box*: Write all of your favorite poems or nursery rhymes on poster board. Keep the poems in a box for students to read and read; this is a great way to build fluency.
- *Listening Center*: This is an old classic! Provide a small table with a tape or CD player, headset, and books recorded on tape or CD. Students can read along with assigned or self-selected books.
- *Computers*: Students can practice both reading and writing on computers. Software is designed to help build reading skills and strategies. Simple word-processing software allows students to compose and publish stories independently.
- *Researcher's Lab*: This space can change with the current science unit. Carve out a space at a table, provide some clipboards and a variety of materials to observe or explore. Students can record observations and write about what they discover. Try placing this area near a window so students can observe and record seasonal changes in nature.

Figure 2. Literacy Center Ideas

Materials

The materials used in a reading lesson should be based on the instructional reading level of the students in the group (Allington, 2005, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2002) as well as the interests of the group members. Once again, this requires the teacher to use a variety of assessments for decision-making. The book selected for the small group lesson should support the development of reading skills and strategies needed by that particular group. Therefore, there cannot be one sequential formula outlining the order of books or stories read for all students. The materials that are used are differentiated to meet the needs of the learners. Teachers should use a variety of genres at the instructional level of each group as well.

What about a state or district mandated core reading program? The core program, if chosen wisely, provides some assurance that there will be systematic instruction within and across the grades. At the same time, the core is just that—the core! Most teachers are not required to use *only* the core program provided by their district. Therefore, they may and should select appropriate materials to use when differentiating instruction. A colleague of Ms. Martin's decided to spend additional time on expository text with a small group of readers who seemed to struggle with that type of material used in the core curriculum. Based on informal conversations with students in their individual conferences, she chose the book *Iditarod: Dogsled Across Alaska* (Fuerst, 2000) as the teacher knew that her small group of students would be motivated to read and learn from this text.

Length and Frequency of Instruction

Teachers often ask how long a differentiated reading lesson should last and how often these lessons should occur. These are decisions that only a well-prepared teacher can make, using formal assessments and anecdotal records as a guide. The answer to the question will change from one grade level and classroom to the next, based on the needs of the learners. All students should receive daily instruction in the whole-class lesson. However, struggling students may need to be instructed more frequently than other students in a small group in order to make accelerated progress. Students reading above grade level may benefit from opportunities for independent practice, so they may not meet with the teacher as frequently. On the other hand, students experiencing difficulties may require additional time and the teacher may need to work in very small two to three person groups or one-on-one with them. Attention level, text length, and depth of lesson focus will all be used to determine the length of time for the meeting. The frequency of these instructional meetings should change over the course of the year as responsive teaching changes over time, as do the needs and strengths of the students.

Lesson Focus

There is much to consider when planning a reading lesson. Teachers must attend to the state standards for their grade level, which inform their district's curriculum. Teachers must also weave the required curricular components into their whole group, small group, and individual lessons. In some school districts this includes the constraints of a mandated reading program and/or concerns regarding standardized test preparation. At the same time, the knowledge base of the children must be considered.

Teachers must be able to accelerate struggling readers, increase the ability of average readers, and continue to challenge the students who read above grade level in their classroom. This cannot be accomplished by simply following a mandated reading program as it is a huge undertaking that requires the teacher to possess a deep knowledge of the reading process and student learning. It is only with this deep knowledge that a teacher can make informed decisions about what to teach in the small group lesson. Before and during each lesson teachers must consider the needs of the learners in order to decide which comprehension strategies to stress, how to build and maintain fluency, and which word-level skills and strategies to teach. Ultimately, if children are taught how to successfully comprehend all types of text, they may perform well on standardized measures.

Summary

What should the teacher differentiate? Past research demonstrates that differential pacing of the same material and/or lesson does not work (Barr, 1973, 1975; Allington, 1983). The recurring message from research is that it is the teacher, not the programs or materials that makes the difference; therefore, only a well-prepared teacher can effectively differentiate reading instruction for students (IRA, 2000; Taylor et al., 2002). Ms. Martin exemplifies such a teacher. She is aware that a one-size-fits-all model of teaching will not meet the needs of her diverse learners. She possesses a deep understanding of the reading process and the needs of the students in her classroom.

Ms. Martin knows that research tells us that in order to accelerate the learning of struggling readers, the text level is important (Allington, 2005, 2006; McGill-Franzen et al., 2006). Therefore, materials used in small group reading lessons must be differentiated. In Ms. Martin's classroom each reading group is matched to an interesting text at the instructional level of the members and the amount of time spent in small group instruction is differentiated across the groups as well. Ms. Martin bases the decision about lesson length and frequency on the needs of the

group members. True differentiation means that the lesson focus will be different for each group. Within one classroom some students may need help with beginning phonics skills, while others need to strengthen their ability to summarize information from text. Ms. Martin, and other expert teachers, crafts each lesson based on the developmental needs of the learner. Finally, the level of teacher support/scaffolding varies across groups in the differentiated classroom. The struggling readers in classrooms like Ms. Martin's receive more teacher support than the average readers. Students reading above grade level spend more time applying newly taught strategies independently. There is no simple solution to differentiated reading instruction. The answer to the question, "*what* do I differentiate?" is *simply complex*: it depends on the students.

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