Differentiation and Literacy

What is differentiated instruction?
Differentiated instruction emerged out of a need to provide not only students with disabilities a varied and challenging educational program, but all students with a more individualized educational program. An effective differentiated classroom looks different than the more traditional model used in the past. These classrooms tend to have “a buzz” about them, with a variety of enriching learning experiences occurring simultaneously. The rationale for the differentiated model is associated with recent trends in education that focus on individual learning styles and preferences. In planning effective instruction teachers are no longer expected to lecture and quiz every student in the same manner, rather they must consider personal learning methods and how they can create a personalized learning environment within their classroom. The differentiated model allows teachers, related service providers, and other education professionals to collaborate and interact in their combined efforts to create an optimal learning environment. In this learning environment each student’s individual strengths and weaknesses are considered when planning and implementing instruction. Differentiation is marked by the following characteristics:

- Instruction is student centered
- Provides a variety of approaches that address content (what the student learns), process (how they learn it), and product (how the student demonstrates knowledge)
- Incorporates a variety of instruction models including group work, individual instruction, and whole-class activities
- It is obvious that the teacher has collaborated with others to plan appropriately to challenge and engage all children including those who have and have not been classified
- Staff is provided with opportunities to receive professional development related to best practices associated with effective differentiated instruction

Source: unreferenced handout from a graduate class
Differentiation and Reading

Why differentiate reading instruction?
Children differ greatly as readers. This is not a new revelation. Most of us can recall reading groups in our elementary classrooms where you were either a member of the high, middle, or low group. Despite our teacher’s efforts to disguise which groups were more advanced than others, every student in the class quickly made the distinction. Classrooms in America are very diverse, educating students coming from many cultures, backgrounds, and varying attitudes toward education. Differentiated reading instruction can no longer be considered a way in which we teach students with disabilities to read, rather a way we teach all students to read. All students must be given some ownership over their ability to read. They should be allowed to make choices related to the material they read, how they read, when they read it, where they read it, and what they do to demonstrate that they have comprehended what was read. The research has been consistent throughout the years suggesting the more a student reads the more successful they are as readers. So, if beliefs such as these are the same as they have always been then what needs to change in reading instruction?

Research has indicated that students are most successful when they are reading materials they can manage independently, with little or no instructional support. Students are even more successful when they are allowed the opportunity to choose a piece of literature in which they demonstrate great interest. The problem lies in the frequency in which students can engage in this type of reading within classroom settings today. Many teachers are frustrated as they are required to utilize the novels or textbooks sanctioned by their districts or curriculum. It is essential for teachers to continue to advocate for the practice of offering student’s choices when it comes to reading. With the close supervision and support of educational professionals students can be prompted to make smart, appropriate choices about what they should read. Students need to have ongoing interactions with a variety of texts. Schools that are successful at differentiating reading instruction demonstrate the following characteristics:
Prioritize time for reading in the school day.
Allocate more resources for a wide range of reading materials, allowing teachers and student’s more choices about what to read.
Focus on improving reading teachers, not reading programs.
A balanced reading program that addresses the learning needs of individuals, not an entire class.
Teachers are trained in best practices related to literacy instruction.


Differentiation and Writing

Why differentiate writing instruction? Writing instruction has changed greatly in recent years. Lessons used to focus on the rigid rules of spelling and grammar, making the content or “meat” of the written piece secondary. Today’s students are encouraged to worry about the content or substance rather than the superficial components of writing such as spelling and grammar. Educators today emphasize meaning, and the process involved in the development of a meaningful piece or story. This is difficult for many students, especially those with learning disabilities. They have a hard time establishing a clear picture of the message, idea, or thought they would like to convey in a piece of writing. In other words some student’s struggle to find a voice. Often their thoughts and ideas are somewhat random and incomplete. This making it very difficult for the reader to follow and comprehend. This is one of the reasons it is essential for today’s teachers to differentiate their writing instruction.

Much of the information available on writing instruction is consistent in its belief that to effectively teach writing the first focus should be on meaning. What message is the student (writer) trying to convey? This being said, it is essential to teach students about the writing process. It is not
you write and I grade. Rather, it is an opportunity to revisit and revise your ideas until you believe the product is consistent with your original plan or idea. Students must know and respect the many steps it takes to produce a good piece of writing. Choice is an easy way to incorporate differentiated tasks into writing assignments. Examples of how this is successfully done in class could include students choosing their own spelling words, vocabulary words, or type of writing. Another key to differentiated/modified writing instruction is associated with self-evaluation.

It is critical that the student improve his/her ability to evaluate their own writing and identify personal strengths and weaknesses which can be used to set personal writing goals. This is an easy way to differentiate as it allows learning and goals to be personalized based on student need. It also promotes social communication as it provides opportunities for student’s to engage in peer editing. This will improve their ability to read, listen, and identify weaknesses or problems in written work. The following are characteristics associated with effective differentiated writing instruction:

- Focus on meaning, not grammar or spelling
- Allow student’s to have choices about what they write
- Incorporate self evaluation throughout the writing process
- Focus on writing as a process rather than a single task
- Teach the writing process (pre-writing, organize, first draft, revise)
- Teachers are trained in best practices associated with differentiated instruction and writing.


**Reading Strategies**

**Literature Circles:** Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group reading pre-determined selections, each group member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion. The circles have regular meetings, with discussion roles rotating each session. When they finish a book, the circle members plan a way to share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more readings, and move into a
new cycle. Once readers can successfully conduct their own wide-ranging, self sustaining discussions, formal discussion roles may be dropped.

Source: www.literaturecircles.com

**SQ3R:** SQ3R is a strategy used to monitor comprehension and learning during the three phases of instruction: pre-reading, during reading and post reading. Typically, it is used with expository texts. It is often referred to as a five step process even though some steps may be combined. It helps some students read more efficiently because it gets them ready for what they will learn about within the text. SQ3R is most commonly used with students in grades 5-12.

**(S) Survey:** Students are taught to look at titles, paragraph headings, picture clues, and graphs to get a general understanding of what they are about to read.

**(Q) Question:** Students are asked to develop some questions that they believe will be answered in the text, paying particular attention to pertinent information (i.e. paragraph headings, words in bold or italics).

**(R1) Read:** Students will begin reading the text one section at a time with the purpose of answering their questions from each section before moving on to the next section.

**(R2) Recite:** Students are encouraged to construct an independent answer to their question from the text rather than copying it down directly from the text.

**(R3) Review:** Students are asked to review their questions and answers for the entire passage. At this time, they will attempt to synthesize all of the information in order to then recall the information.

Think Aloud Strategy: The think aloud strategy is a modeling procedure based upon explicit teaching intended to make students aware of the comprehension processes enlisted as reading is pursued. Think-alouds are intended to help readers examine and develop reading behaviors and strategies. As an instructional procedure, think-alouds have been used to help struggling readers adopt a meaning orientation to print, monitor their comprehension, and apply self correction strategies. Think-alouds should be modeled by the teacher and followed by ample practice by the students. As a teacher models this strategy they can describe their own thoughts about a text in various ways.

Examples of think-alouds: make predictions showing students how to develop hypotheses; describe your visual images; share an analogy or show how prior knowledge applies; verbalize a confusing point and show how you monitor developing understanding of the text.

Example Questions: Why is this character acting as he/she is? What may have caused this character to be in this place at this time? What would you do in this situation? How do you feel about what happened in the story? What do you notice that is interesting in this scene? What are you confused about in this scene?

Source: unreferenced handout from a graduate class

Making Connections: By becoming proficient at making connections while reading, students will have an improved understanding of the reading. Likewise, when students make connections in their written responses, the reader has a better understanding of what they, the writer, are communicating.

Help Students Become Active “Connectors” by....
1. Sharing your own connections between your reading and your personal life, your knowledge of the world and content areas, and other texts (i.e. This book reminds me of...)
2. Modeling and showing students how to make their own connections, while relating these connections back to the book.
3. **Prompting** them to make meaningful connections to their experience and other texts they have read and recall background knowledge.

4. **Encourage** students to constantly think about the story elements and what connections they can make to the story that help them understand the story better.


**Guided Reading:** Guided reading is a technique that supports and encourages the development of strategies for independence in reading within a small cluster or group. Each child is in the role of reader with his or her own copy of the book. The teacher acts as a facilitator to set the scene and, through skilful questioning, engages the students in a discussion that enables them to unfold the story and confidently read the text themselves.

**Steps to Guided Reading:**

1. **Select an appropriate text:** Will the children have a high level of success and be challenged? Is the text interesting?

2. **Set the scene:** The teacher will initiate discussion that increases student’s interest in the text and draws on their personal experiences. The teacher will talk about the cover and other illustrations in the text and read the title, author, and illustrator.

3. **Read the text:** “Talk” children through the book, page by page, using what they see in the illustrations to sample and predict. Highlight vocabulary through this discussion and focus on any details that help students make further predictions. Students will then read the text independently with teacher support when necessary.

4. **Return to the text:** Discuss the text with the students asking “What if....” Questions.

5. **Respond to the text:** Reread all or parts of the text to deepen and extend students comprehension. Enhance students’ creative responses to the text through writing, dramatization, and arts and crafts projects.
Writing Strategies

Graphic Organizers: Graphic organizers are a means of organizing information and concepts in a visual-spatial, pictorial format. They are beneficial for students of all learning styles, but are especially beneficial to visual-spatial learners. They can be teacher generated or student generated, depending on the instructional goal. In order to create any graphic organizer, the main idea/focus must be identified. Then the secondary points, supporting details, etc. are placed in relation to the main idea.

Some uses:
1. Graphic organizers can be created and used by teachers as a pre-reading/pre-unit activity. The organizer can present information that is to be learned and then be used as a reference for the rest of the unit of study.
2. They can be created by students as a study strategy. The process of forming a graphic organizer necessitates that students consider and compare the concepts that have been learned.
3. They can be used as a brainstorming activity to generate questions, answers, interest or activate background knowledge.

Varied Journal Entries: Varied journal entries provide options for teachers to vary journal requirements to stimulate higher level thinking. These journal entries extend traditional journaling by 1-2 steps. These journal entries allow for the development of voice and analysis of content. Two types of varied journal entries include Double Journal Entries and Journal Entries: Advanced. Double Journal Entries consist of the students...
taking notes on the content of the literary piece as well as giving their response or opinions regarding the literary piece. Journal Entries: Advanced requires the student to take notes on the content, give their opinions of the piece, and then respond to the piece from a different perspective/voice (i.e., a character, the author, the teacher).

**Question Starters:** A Question starter allows teachers to choose questions at a variety of levels based on the student's readiness and level of comprehension (Bloom's Taxonomy).

- Level 1: Knowledge (What are the facts?)
- Level 2: Comprehension (Explain what happened)
- Level 3: Application (Could this happen to you?)
- Level 4: Analysis (What conclusion could you reach?)
- Level 5: Synthesis (Invent a scheme that would...)
- Level 6: Evaluation (What solution or outcome do you favor?)

**Envelope Organizer:** The envelope organizer is a way to organize and sort a variety of information. It targets visual and kinesthetic learners and can be modified for emergent through advanced learners. This strategy can be used with readers/non-readers, writers and non-writers.

Source: unreferenced handout from a graduate class
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