Differentiated Instruction

Catherine Howe

St. John Fisher College

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Differentiated Instruction

Abstract
This study wanted to prove that using differentiated instruction in the classroom would improve students’ comprehension and learning. It is obvious that it does. Differentiated instruction has so many wonderful ideas and strategies that teachers can, and have used. Teachers need to have an understanding of their students, and then teach in response to student readiness, interest, or learning profile. This undoubtedly takes extra time and a commitment from the classroom teacher, but studies have shown that it is definitely worth the extra effort. Students learn better when they are taught as the individual that they are, rather than the old fashioned lecture hall.

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Differentiated Instruction

Catherine Howe

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Abstract

This study wanted to prove that using differentiated instruction in the classroom would improve students' comprehension and learning. It is obvious that it does. Differentiated instruction has so many wonderful ideas and strategies that teachers can, and have used. Teachers need to have an understanding of their students, and then teach in response to student readiness, interest, or learning profile. This undoubtedly takes extra time and a commitment from the classroom teacher, but studies have shown that it is definitely worth the extra effort. Students learn better when they are taught as the individual that they are, rather than the old fashioned lecture hall.
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Introduction

This manuscript attempts to answer the question: How does teaching with Differentiated Instruction in Science and Language Arts help the students to have a better understanding of the content? We know that each student learns differently. A good teacher finds out how students learn and tap into and teach to those learning styles. After doing extensive research on using differentiated instruction in the classroom, it is believed that if used on a regular basis, it will be most beneficial to each individual student. This paper will discuss what differentiation is, strategies to implement it, and some of its benefits. Differentiation is a way of thinking about the classroom. According to Tomlinsom (2000), “it is not a recipe for teaching. It is not an instructional strategy. It is not what a teacher does when he or she has time. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is a philosophy” (p. 6). To put it mildly, differentiation is what a good teacher does on a daily basis in his or her classroom.

Slowly, but surely, many teachers are seeing how students improve in their learning. The effects can be dramatic. Once a child and a teacher understand how each student learns, everyone benefits. Children learn things differently. To reach a child fully, teachers must appeal to these differences and teach to them.
Many educators believe that differentiated instruction is a better way to teach children. It may be more time-consuming, “resource-intensive, and complex. But, differentiated instruction is (or should be) as American as motherhood, apple pie, and baseball,” (VanSciver, 2005, p. 39).

Tomlinson (2004) stated that

While the concept of ‘differentiated instruction’ can be defined in many ways, as good a definition as any is ensuring that what a student learns, how he/she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning. A readiness match maximizes the chance of appropriate challenge and growth. An interest match heightens motivation. A learning profile match increases efficiency of learning. Effective differentiation most likely emanates from ongoing assessment of student needs (p. 4).

Carol Ann Tomlinson (2004) has done extensive research on this topic. She has written, taught and shared much of her knowledge. Differentiated Instruction is a wonderful addition for teachers to be able to teach to each individual style of each individual student. It is all about changing the thinking that one size teaching fits all students. It is doing away with lectures and textbooks being the only way to get information across to students. There are many varied strategies that will be discussed. Each strategy enhances a learning environment to support differentiation.
For differentiation to be successful, Tomlinson (2000) said districts should be providing time for teacher planning for differentiation and execution of plans; providing ample and suitable materials for academically diverse classrooms; developing and otherwise ensuring teacher access to differentiated curriculum; providing teacher incentives for growth toward differentiation; creating an environment that affirms innovation over the status quo and celebrates both successes and efforts at growth; limiting teacher overload; and making certain that district procedures and policies support differentiation (such as developing report cards that make sense in a differentiated environment, helping teachers distinguish between standards and standardization, and providing long blocks of uninterrupted instructional time).

Tomlinson (1999) described differentiation this way: “Teachers in differentiated classes use time flexibly, call upon a range of instructional strategies, and become partners with their students to see that both what is learned and the learning environment are shaped to the learner. They do not force-fit learners into a standard mold (p. 1).”

Teachers know that students come from various backgrounds with various knowledge. This makes them individuals. The teacher works with the students so that they achieve more than they thought they could. This can be done with many instructional strategies that support differentiated learning. These lessons engage the students by appealing to their differing interests, learning modalities, and varied degrees of complexity. Students need do be assessed before, during and after instruction. Differentiation is very different in the way that teachers do not start with the beginning of the curriculum, but they start where the student is. According to Tomlinson (2000), “the
same first step is required to make all teaching and learning effective: We have to know where we want to end up before we start out – and plan to get there. That is, we must have solid curriculum and instruction in place before we differentiate them. That’s harder than it seems” (p. 12-13). VanSciver (2005) agreed, and wrote that

Teachers who incorporate appropriate differentiated instruction methods are aware of and pay attention to various learning styles. They make certain that they start at the same point that each of their students actually is beginning from, as opposed to simply starting at the front of the particular curriculum guide designating what all of the students must learn. In properly differentiated classrooms, teachers are careful to furnish specific methods for each individual student to learn as deeply and quickly as they are capable of doing (p. 9).

Before differentiation can begin, the teacher must have thorough background knowledge of the curriculum that must be taught. That would enable the teacher to already understand what must be covered, and that is essential for learning.

A classroom that is differentiated may not look like a traditional classroom all the time. Many times during the day, the students will be working in cooperative groups of heterogeneous students, and other times they will be in homogenous groups while working with the teacher or teacher assistant in small groups. They will go from large groups, to small groups, and back to large groups again. A differentiated classroom is not usually quiet for long. Students thrive on change, and must be stimulated in a way that will challenge, encourage and educate them.

Teachers have been implementing some strategies using differentiated instruction without even realizing it. When teachers create guided reading groups in the Reading
and Writing Workshops, they are grouping the students according to their readiness levels. They find suitable reading material that covers the specific content, but at a reading level that will be comprehensive to all of the students. This variation of content is a baby step towards differentiation; a baby step that makes it possible for students to be able to understand the content. A step that increases their understanding of the content and concept that the teacher is trying to get across.

Special Education teachers embrace the idea of general education teachers using differentiated instruction. Edyburn (p. 2, 2004) agreed. “Indeed, some special education teachers have observed that inclusion efforts are significantly enhanced when a general education teacher attempts design and implement differentiated instruction.”

Another thing that happens is “the teacher differentiates in response to student readiness, interest, or learning profile,” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 25).

All children need to learn and to increase their current levels of achievement, yet whole-group, single-size-fits-all instruction rarely offers the kinds of adaptation required to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. Differentiation is defined in various ways, but it is usually regarded as accommodating learning differences in children by identifying students’ strengths and using appropriate strategies to address a variety of abilities, preferences, and styles. Then whole groups, small groups, and individual students can equally engage in a variety of curriculum enrichment and acceleration experiences. (Reis, Kaplan, Tomlinson, Westberg, Callahan, Cooper, 1998, p. 3).
By tapping into students' unique learning needs, we are differentiating lessons and thereby strengthening their understanding of the material and understanding of themselves as learners. We are helping students to meet their own unique learning needs.

In an article by Carol Ann Tomlinson (2005), she pointed out that

Teachers who practice differentiated or responsive teaching work to ensure that:
(a) learning environments are both safe and challenging for each student; (b) teaching and learning routines include whole class, small group, and individual attention; (c) learning goals are clearly designated and pursued to ensure focus on the essential knowledge, understanding, and skill in a topic or discipline; (d) preassessment and ongoing or formative assessment regularly inform teachers' instructional plans; (e) teachers use time, space, materials, and instructional strategies in flexible ways to address varied learner needs; and (f) classrooms become communities of learning in which students share with the teacher responsibility for respect, optimum operation, and maximum individual growth.

It is these aims that 'define' or shape effective differentiation (p. 3).

In an article by DiMartino (2004), he quoted one of the teachers there as saying, “You’ve got to allow your faculty to design and make choices, and you have to be prepared that what you try isn’t always going to work. Support the fact that they tried what they tried p. 45).” That shouldn’t be a problem. Teachers are flexible.

Holloway (2000) said that it was

Discovered that teacher-education programs in general are not preparing tomorrow’s teachers for the increasing diversity of students. She found that preservice teachers seldom, if ever, experience differentiated instruction in their
teacher-preparation programs. Specifically, most teachers had only one survey course focused on exceptional children. The course was intended to help them understand the needs of academically diverse learners; however, preservice teachers reported that it dealt exclusively with learner traits, not with methods of teaching. The message is clear: to successfully implement differentiated instruction in our schools, two events must occur. First, universities must develop preservice programs that provide prospective teachers a meaningful understanding of the elements of differentiated instruction. Second, school leaders must provide all teachers encouragement, support, and nurturing – all delivered through effective professional development that is founded on competent training and effective mentoring and that is conducted by experienced, skilled professionals, (p. 46).

Apparently, a majority of educators are for differentiated instruction. Teachers know going in that “to purposely implement differentiated practices can be time consuming and cumbersome, especially as greater demands and expectations squeeze into teachers’ already tight schedules. However, by promoting the focused and deliberated integration of technology supports, these challenging and sometimes difficult tasks can become both practical and increasingly more manageable in the differentiated classroom, (Keck, 2005, p. 12).”

Teachers need to be educated about the benefits for their students when using differentiated instruction. They need to learn from other colleagues who have tried about what worked, and what didn’t work. One high school in a rural setting tried it one year.
They wanted to be able to deliver curriculum with equity and excellence. After challenging years, with a lot of trial and error, they shared their thoughts:

"The experience taught us a few lessons about change.

- Move slowly during change. We tried to move too quickly.
- Include all stakeholders. Certain key parents felt left out.
- Provide training throughout the process. The staff could have used more assistance in developing the contracts and learning about differentiation.
- Provide mutual information throughout the process. Parents received information from the school but they excluded staff at their meetings.
- Change is messy. Some enjoyed the chaos, but we had a mission to accomplish.
- People generally do not embrace the unfamiliar. New ideas caused tension for some parents and teachers.
- Change is a journey. We made strides in the effort.

Taking on the challenge of differentiating high school courses is not easy. It is an experience that teaches. As educators, we should welcome these experiences. We wanted to. We did, (Fahey, 2000, p.3, 4)"

Differentiated Instruction can be many things. It would look different every day. Some students get bored with the same thing every day. To change it up and move things around would make things more exciting.

"To say that there is a single, perfect example of differentiated instruction is a contradiction in terms. Differentiated instruction has as many faces as it has practitioners and as many outcomes as there are learners. Every day, teachers struggle to meet the needs of many learners who have individual needs. In some
cases, this struggle yields a patchwork of strategies that merely ‘make do’ from September until June. In other cases, that struggle leads to frustration and a sense that meeting so many needs is unrealistic, (Pettig, 2000, p. 1).”

There are many varieties of strategies that allow students to have a choice in their learning. When a student is aware of how they learn the best, and a teacher is attuned to this, the teacher can then set up the classroom to allow this kind of learning to happen. Now of course, all students will not learn in the same way. Therefore, the teacher needs to be flexible and change things up once in a while to vary the supports given to the students.

However, the nice thing about incorporating differentiated instruction into the classroom is that it can be done as slowly as the teacher wants it to be. Teachers usually start small, with content that they feel they know thoroughly. “Add differentiation activities gradually so that they don’t overwhelm you or your students. Start with one student and differentiate only the content, for example, advised Wehrmann (p. 22, 2000).” Again, knowing the content is necessary.

When a teacher knows the goal or objective of the subject, they will know where they need to go. What can change is how they get there. There can be differentiation when the content, process, or product is modified. Also, “Students vary in readiness, interest, and learning profile. Readiness is a student’s entry point relative to a particular understanding or skill. Interest refers to a child’s affinity, curiosity, or passion for a particular topic or skill. Learning
profile has to do with how we learn. It may be shaped by intelligence preferences, gender, culture, or learning style. (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 11).

Tiered activities let a teacher ensure that her students are all working on the same essential ideas and key skills.

"Teachers use tiered activities so all students focus on essential understandings and skills but at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. By keeping the focus of the activity the same, but providing routes of access at varying degrees of difficulty, the teacher maximizes the likelihood that (1) each student comes away with pivotal skills and understandings and (2) each student is appropriately challenged" (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 83).

Learning contracts are another form of differentiation. Tomlinson (2000, p. 7) pointed out that

"A learning contract is a negotiated agreement between teacher and student that gives students some freedom in acquiring skills and understandings that a teacher deems important at a given time. Many learning contracts also provide opportunities for student choice regarding some of what is to be learned, working conditions, and how information will be applied or expressed."

A few more instructional strategies that support differentiation are: problem based learning, group investigation, journal notebooks, choice boards, compacting, portfolios, and independent study.

Notebooks give teachers access into students’ thinking – what they do and don’t understand what misconceptions they have, and the organizational skills they are using. Teachers can use ‘notebook’ assessments to guide their next steps in
instruction” (Gilbert, 2005, p. 30). Students in the Greece Central School District use journaling notebooks for reflection on learning, and for writing back and forth with the teacher. “Having these personal conversations with students allowed,” (Werderich, 2002, p. 750) teachers to vary their lesson plans to attend to either misconceptions, or to go forward in their teaching.

With all of these differentiated strategies, teachers worry about how to grade the students fairly. Salend (p. 34, 2005) says

The teacher can give students a menu of differentiated assignments related to the concepts within the general education curriculum and the corresponding levels of difficulty of the assignments. Students can then select an assignment and receive a grade that the teacher commutes by multiplying a numerical score representing the quality of the assignment by a factor reflecting the assignment’s level of difficulty. Educators can also use multiple grading to adapt numerical grades to reflect a variety of grading factors. Teachers can assign grades to students on the basis of multiple factors, including achievement, effort, and level of curriculum difficulty.

Lewis (2005, p. 4) acknowledges that

“While teachers do and should use whole-group instruction, teaching to the whole group without using any other instructional method will not address the need of all learners. The benefits of implementing differentiated instruction far outweigh any pitfalls. Teachers agree that every year they get better at planning.”
It is true that differentiation takes a lot of time, thought and planning. But all the research seems to point to the fact that a one-size-teaching-fits-all is not the be-all end-all only way of teaching. As the articles have said, whole group instruction can be good. But not for the whole time that students are in the classroom. Students need variety as do adults. It is a difficult thing to overtake, but if teachers have support, they will more likely be successful. Benjamin (2006) agreed, and said that “Because teachers may give up on differentiated instruction if the logistics and paperwork overwhelm them, principals need to value and promote collegiality. Differentiated instruction thrives in a collegial community because teachers need ideas, encouragement, tips, a venue for reflection, and a wealth of sources.” This educator believes that differentiation is possible. Support from administrators and peers are crucial. As is, reflection on lessons done well, and lessons that need some adjusting. Differentiation is a process. Tomlinson (p. 8, 2000) advises, “It’s better just to do a few things well. Set goals for yourself and stick with them, but make sure they are reasonable goals. Like students, teachers grow best when they are moderately challenged. Waiting until conditions are ideal or until you are sure of yourself yields lethargy, not growth. (p. 8)” She encourages teachers to start small, but start. It’s one of those things that you just need to do, to understand how to do it.
Methodology

In order to verify that differentiation is beneficial to students and their understanding of the basic concepts of Science, Science will be integrated into the English Language Arts block. The students in this particular classroom had been separated into three groups of eight students for guided reading groups. They were grouped according to their reading ability in homogeneous groups. The first 2 hours of the day are devoted to English Language Arts. It is common to integrate other subjects into this time.

Participants –

The participants in this case were a 5th grade class of twenty four students; 10 boys and 14 girls. They are a regular education classroom, and are an average age of ten years old. Three of the students were African Americans, the others were Caucasian. The students were of varying interest in the subject. There are no behavior problems in this group.

Materials –

The kidney-shaped table in the back of the room was used for guided reading groups. There is more privacy there. There are three leveled books on food and nutrition. They are *The Food Pyramid; A True Book*, by Joan Kalbacken, *Making Healthy Choices*; National Geographic, by Carolyn Newton, and *Food for Life*, by Kathleen v. Kudlinski. There was a graphic organizer and a rubric for the students. The graphic organizer was a tool of differentiated instruction, was the rubric. The students knew what was expected of them for their food pyramid poster.

Procedure –
Students were called to the back table with the teacher. For the second lesson study, using differentiation, the students were given the chance to take a picture walk through the book and brainstorm their ideas. Then the students were given a graphic organizer to write the meaning of some of the content vocabulary within the book. They also had to find the words in the book, and notice how they were used in a sentence. This activated their prior knowledge of food and nutrition, as well as fueling discussions about what was already known. This paper was meant to jumpstart the students’ thinking about what they would be reading, and to deepen their understanding of the vocabulary words.

After finishing the book and the graphic organizer, the students were required to complete a food pyramid poster to share their knowledge of the different groups of foods, and their importance to maintain a healthy diet. This was done during class time. They were given the freedom to choose what they wanted to make it from, with requirements and expectations clearly written on the rubric. This offered each of the students an opportunity to express themselves in varied formats. They could make it out of magazine pictures, the computer, markers, newspapers, or they could write about it. If they thought of something else, they would have to have it approved by the teacher. The students were graded on their participation in small groups, the food pyramid poster they created in class, and the tests.
Results

Student success rate improved throughout this learning experience. Students were readily using their learning from differentiated groups during science instruction during this unit.

Students who were in differentiated groups that addressed their abilities as readers were able to meet reading needs without frustration because the literature was at their own reading level.

Seven students out of seven students in a differentiated group passed the unit exam that assessed their learning based on differentiated learning experiences. These students also made use of the graphic organizers that they were using during learning experiences. It may be due to the fact that they realized the learning that occurred in this type of teaching. This improvement carried over to other areas of the curriculum.
Discussion and Conclusion

All of the data that has been observed and collected throughout this study points to the overwhelming fact that using differentiated instruction in the classroom proves to be most beneficial for students. Differentiation was used in Math, Science, Social Studies and Language Arts. Worksheets and graphic organizers were made up for the different readiness levels of the students. Students and teachers agreed these tools helped students with their understanding of the content and material. Undoubtedly, there will always be students who need that little extra nudge or push from the teacher. They may have been spoon-fed information in earlier grades and did well with it. Differentiated instruction isn’t spoon-feeding, but it is another way to help students relate to the material being presented and to be able to comprehend it.

Educators that are currently implementing differentiation in their classroom will never go back to one size fits all instruction. They know that students, whose interest has been piqued, by either activating their prior knowledge, or by the many strategies of differentiation that are available, are more likely to learn and to retain that knowledge.

This study mirrors the findings of the authors that have been quoted in the literature review. Carol Ann Tomlinson has dedicated her life to learning about, and then teaching about this newest form of teaching. She has written many books and articles about this subject and feels strongly about its value. It is evident that numerous others do too.

Further research should be conducted as far as which strategies are the most beneficial for students of every grade, ability and interest. It would also be nice if there were a complete listing of all of the strategies in one place for each teacher to be able to
go to. There could be tried and true lesson plans in there also, to help with the time element. Of course, teachers might have to do some adjusting according to their class, but that is to be expected.

As far as shortcomings with this study, it would be ideal if there were more time to implement more lessons using more of the differentiation strategies. It would also be helpful if all teachers in the school were on board with using these strategies. Then there would be plenty of colleagues around to bounce ideas off of. The more people doing it, the better it would be.
References


Appendix A

Money center 1

Name

Problem #1 – You and your sister (or brother) wants to buy a nice Valentine’s present for your Mom. You have $18.75, and your sister (or brother) has $13.12.

- Figure out how much money you have altogether, and then decided what you can buy for her at the store.
- If you have money leftover, you can buy yourself something.
- Don’t forget to add tax to whatever it is you buy (8% sales tax).
- You may use a calculator if you like.
Appendix B

Money center 2

Name

Problem #2 – You want to buy a nice birthday present for your best friend. You have $8.45, and your parents will give you $15.50.

- Figure out how much money you have altogether, and then decided what you can buy for him/her at the store.
- If you have money leftover, you can buy something for your pet.
- Don’t forget to add tax to whatever it is you buy (8% sales tax).
- You may use a calculator if you like.
Appendix C

Money center 3

Name ________________________________

Problem #3 - You and your friend want to buy a Saint Patrick’s Day present for your teacher. You have $12.62, and your friend has $9.87.

- Figure out how much money you have altogether, and then decided what you can buy for her at the store.
- If you have money leftover, you can buy yourself something.
- Don’t forget to add tax to whatever it is you buy (8% sales tax).
- You may use a calculator if you like.
Appendix D

Money center 4

Name _______________________________________

Problem #4 - You and your sister (or brother) wants to buy a birthday present for your bus driver. You have $12.90, and your sister (or brother) has $11.65.

1. Figure out how much money you have altogether, and then decided what you can buy for him/her at the store.
2. If you have money leftover, you can buy yourself something.
3. Don’t forget to add tax to whatever it is you buy (8% sales tax).
4. You may use a calculator if you like.
Appendix E

Scavenger Hunt

Red Group
The People who gave us the U.S. Constitution

Name ____________________________________________

- What do you already know about the United States Constitution? Share what you know with someone at the table.
- Do a picture walk through the book.
- Please check these vocabulary words, and give their definition.

Checks and Balances -
____________________________________________________________________

Compromise - ______________________

Delegate - ______________________

Executive Branch -
____________________________________________________________________

Judicial Branch -
____________________________________________________________________

Legislative Branch -
____________________________________________________________________

Ratify - ______________________

- While you are reading the book, you can answer these questions.

1. Which of the delegates in this book wanted the strongest central government?
____________________________________________________________________

2. What did Benjamin Franklin contribute to the writing of the Constitution?
____________________________________________________________________
3. What do you think George Mason thought of the final Constitution?

4. Why do you think the Bill of Rights was an important addition to the Constitution?

- After Reading

The Constitution was a plan for an entire nation. It was not easy to write, especially because the delegates did not agree about everything. Write one paragraph in which you explain what you admire most about the people who wrote our Constitution. Be sure to include examples to support your opinion. Please write this in your Language Arts Spiral. Show it to me when you are finished.
### Appendix F

**Math Activity**

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**Subject Area:** Mathematics  
**Grade Level:** 5th Grade

**General Objective:** Students will be able to add fractions

<table>
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<th>Intermediate</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Goal</strong></td>
<td>Students will use pictures or words or numbers to add fractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instruction</strong></td>
<td>Students will use manipulatives and work with partners to add fractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Activity</strong></td>
<td>Students will be able to explain how they got their answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td>Fraction flash cards and notes taken in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Products</strong></td>
<td>Students will be able to add fractions in everyday life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homework</strong></td>
<td>Students will grade each others papers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREASSESSMENT: SCAVENGER HUNT OF USE OF FRACTIONS IN OUR LIVES

ASSESSMENT: CORRECT COMPLETED ASSIGNMENT