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Differentiation in Reading: Meeting the Needs of All Students

Jamie W. Richardson

Liberty University

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Abstract

Differentiated instruction is a way to meet the instructional needs of all students. Students are met at their academic levels rather than given work that is above or below their level. Even though differentiation may appear to be something that is easily achieved, there are some who decide otherwise. Many educators are considered to be exemplary in their positions. They create interesting and innovating lessons that create a well-engaged environment. Even though these teachers are at the top of the list as superior educators, many still struggle with differentiating literacy instruction. Educators feel as if they are differentiating if they are using a particular instructional method. Even though a set format may be used, there is a concern to whether differentiation is actually being done. Based on the literature related to differentiating instruction in reading, it was discovered that educators are very much aware of the varying ability levels of students, but there is a need to see which strategies are working best for students.

Key words: differentiated instruction, literacy, reading, strategies

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Introduction

In today's educational society, differentiated instruction is a common practice. Educators know that not all children learn in the same manner. As educators, it is known that not all students comprehend material using the same learning methods. In content areas such as math, science, and social studies, teachers can prepare tier lessons to accommodate student ability levels. Not to say that those contents are unimportant, but teachers should definitely find ways to differentiate instruction in reading. Students tend to struggle in other areas if their reading abilities are poor. The purpose of this study is to identify effective practices in the differentiation of reading instruction.

Many states require their students in third grade and beyond to take a form of state assessment. In some cases, these assessments may serve as promotion criteria. In the state of Georgia, third grade students are required to pass the reading portion of the assessment before being promoted to fourth grade. Fifth grade students are required to pass the reading and mathematics portion of the assessments in order to be promoted to the sixth grade. In order for students to be ready to master state standards in reading, yearly instruction must be provided on their academic levels. This is where differentiated instruction comes into perspective.

Educators say that reading assignments are differentiated, but are they truly differentiated enough so that the needs of all struggling readers are met as well as keeping them up to par for state standards? In addition, the students who are considered as academically gifted need their assignments differentiated so they can be challenged. In the article, *A Rationale for Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom* (2005), George indicates that all students

should experience challenge, success, and satisfaction. Many teachers say that they are differentiating instruction to meet these varying needs, but are they truly helping the students?

Differentiated Instruction

In different school districts, schools decide various formats to structure their reading instruction. Many school districts choose to use a Guided Reading approach that include the use of reading groups, some choose a Four Blocks approach with guided reading instruction, and other districts choose other methods and formats to teach reading. Some school districts begin using one format for a number of years and decide to change to a different model for another amount of years. It is understandable that times are changing and research is constantly being completed, but are students actually keeping up with what is going on in their reading instruction?

In the article, *Differentiated Learning* (Huebner, 2010), differentiated instruction is defined as an approach to teaching and learning where students with varying learning abilities work within the same class. Huebner (2010) goes further to indicate that the purpose of differentiated instruction is to maximize student growth and individual success by meeting students where they are. In other words, students should not just be expected to fit into the curriculum and do well. The curriculum should be used as a guide to plan differentiated lessons for students.

Anderson (2007) implies that differentiated instruction serves to allow teachers to use best practices to move all students toward proficient levels. While differentiating instruction, teachers still apply the knowledge and skills of local and state standards. Furthermore, differentiation can be based upon individual student readiness. This can be achieved by varying the difficulty levels of the content material that is covered in the classroom (Anderson, 2007).

According to George (2005), differentiated instruction can be defined as adapting classroom strategies to meet the different learning interests and needs of students.

Review of Literature

A number of researchers have looked into the elements of reading differentiation. Knowing that there are a number of differentiated reading programs that are being adopted by schools, educators need to identify which programs are working best. In the article, *Differentiated Instruction in Reading: Easier than It Looks* (Knowles, 2009), reading differentiation can be completed in three main areas. These areas include content, process, and product.

Content refers to the information that the students need to learn, process refers to how the students will learn the material, and product refers to the manner in which the students demonstrated that they have learned the material (Knowles, 2009). Experts who have studied reading instruction suggest that students cannot have success with reading unless they have a block of time that allows them to read (2009).

Levy (2008) also looks into the areas of differentiated instruction aspect of content, process, and product. Students who are below grade level in reading will experience higher levels of success if they are provided with smaller amounts of content. Also, the content has to be appropriate for the level of the learner. Content is basically the information that the educators teach. It can be varied using differentiated instruction, and it can be done without losing the meaning of the curriculum.

According to Levy (2008), process is the manner in which teachers teach and students learn. When providing appropriate reading instruction, learning activities must address different learning styles, learning abilities, and learning interests. Educators understand that not all

students learn in the same manner, so reading instruction cannot be provided using the same methods for all students. Instructional materials must be altered or adjusted to meet all learning styles. For example, teachers can make use of reading graphic organizers, thinking maps, foldables, and rubrics to enhance reading instruction.

Levy (2008) also explains the product of student learning. Students show what they have learned during differentiated instruction sessions through an end product. Through the use of formative and summative assessments, students can demonstrate what they have learned. Portfolios, mini checks using leveled reading passages, reading assessments, and end-of-the-year state assessments can be used to serve that purpose. Also noted by Levy (2008), learning is meaningful to students when they recognize its importance. In terms of reading instruction, it can be meaningful to students when it meets their levels and they have a chance to select reading texts.

Knowles (2009) gathered a researched list of best practices in reading instruction. As identified in the article, the main factor in reading instruction is having readily accessible reading materials. In addition, it is suggested that teacher read-alouds should not end at the third grade level. Students should still be allowed to hear what fluent readers sound like so that they can model the reading behaviors. Differentiation can be applied to student silent reading as well.

Traditionally, leveled reading groups can be used to promote differentiation in the classroom. Groups read a selected-leveled text and applied strategies such as phonics, site words, and other reading strategies to enhance their instruction. Knowles (2009) describes another widely used reading program in which whole group instruction was used to allow all students to read the same story, stop at certain points, then question and summarize. Yet, other approaches to reading instruction involved students using phonics and only reading decodable text. All in

all, there are a number of reading programs, but which ones are actually promoting differentiation among students.

In her article, Knowles (2009) insists that selecting just the right book for students can help with pretesting and teaching necessary skills. Using this practice of selecting appropriate books can mean the difference of allowing elements in literature to help build skills or using simply a worksheet as a lesson. With teacher guidance and media specialist guidance, students should eventually be able to independently select texts that are just right for them. In a Guided Reading approach, students use leveled, selected text to support their instruction.

Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez, and Rascon (2007) define guided reading as a part of the balanced literacy program that provided differentiated instruction in small groups to four to six children who have similar instructional needs. With this in mind, schools are conducting guided reading models, but they are not all structured in this manner. Kosanovich, Ladinsky, Nelson, and Torgesen (2007) recommend differentiated instruction be implemented during the reading instructional block. Generally, a whole group lesson is conducted at the beginning of the reading block. Then, students break into Reading Centers for small group instruction.

While in the small group sessions, the teacher leads the differentiated instruction. Small, flexible groups of students are formed, and they meet for a certain number of minutes and sessions per week. According to Kosanovich, Ladinsky, Nelson, and Torgesen (2007), data should be used to initially form these groups. The lessons within the small groups should be skill-focused, aligned to the curriculum, and meet the needs of the learners working in that particular group.

Ankrum and Bean (2007) note that differentiated instruction in reading occurs when the teacher has a deep knowledge of the reading process, understands the strengths and weaknesses

of all students, and has the ability to teach students in response to their needs. Many researchers have agreed that teachers who do not differentiate reading instruction tend to reach to the middle group. This is fine for the middle group, but what happens to the students who are below grade level and those students who are above grade level? Differentiated reading instruction is linked to the “no child left behind” efforts. So, it is pertinent to have this type of instruction going on in all classrooms.

Ankrum and Bean (2007) go further to detail how exemplary teachers differentiate reading instruction. Exemplary teachers offer small group sessions that instructionally appropriate for students’ levels. They use a systematic approach of on-going assessments and data to be sure that the groups are remaining flexible. Within the groups, students practice a number of skills based on the curriculum using the text that they are assigned to read. The article, *Differentiated Reading Instruction: What and How* (Ankrum & Bean, 2007), examine several points that should be considered if differentiated reading instruction is to be effective. Those points include assessment, grouping formats, classroom management, materials, length and frequency of instruction, and lesson focus.

Tobin & McInnes (2008), express how teachers understand that there are diverse needs within the literacy classroom, but many of them have difficulty in supporting the varying needs of these students. The article goes further to promote teachers in their efforts of providing a number of differentiation strategies in their classrooms. For example, the teachers that exhibited these qualities of successfully differentiating literacy instruction for all their students offered their students menus of tiered assignments.

According to Tobin and McInnes (2008), differentiated instruction can be used to help students apply content and understand their reading skills. Since there are diverse learners within

a classroom setting, teachers should have a variety of teaching strategies in under their belt. Differentiating instruction in reading can be such a positive resource when helping students increase literacy skills. Students are provided chances to work independently and in group settings by working at skills that are adjusted to their level.

Methods of Data Collection

Participants

Due to the timing of this course and the timing of the school year, this study has not had a chance to be completed at this time. If this study had been conducted, the participants would have to come from two or more different school districts. Third grade is the area in which I have years of experiences, so it would be relevant to use third grade teachers who differentiate instruction in a variety of ways. The literature provided various ways in which teachers format their differentiated reading instruction. Participants would include two third grade teachers from three neighboring school districts who have different methods for their literacy blocks.

Procedures

Students in each teacher's classroom will be administered a pre-assessment of reading skills. Teachers will use differentiated instruction within their district's selected model for literacy instruction. After the end of the nine weeks quarter, students will take a benchmark assessment in reading instruction. Data will be collected from the benchmark scores. In addition, teachers will be surveyed to determine what strategies worked and which ones did not necessarily help students to show improvement.

Research Design/Results

The data from each district's benchmark scores will be evaluated to see which strategies are actually working and which ones are not. Data from the teachers' surveys will also be used to determine which differentiated instruction strategies work best. The type of data analysis plan that will be used is inferential. Using the data from the sample of teachers from the three neighboring districts, a conclusion regarding the differentiation strategies can be drawn. Results would be used to enhance teachers' knowledge of differentiation, and to provide strategies and instructional practices to those teachers who struggle with creating differentiated lessons for their students.

Discussion

After reading the related literature and developing a proposed study, it is apparent that even those teachers who are considered to be the best at their craft seem to still struggle with differentiating reading instruction for some students. There are so many ways to structure a literacy block. A whole group lesson can be used initially, but there has to still be some small group interaction where direct, level-appropriate teaching is taking place.

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