



# You Get to Choose! Motivating Students to Read Through Differentiated Instruction

Kathryn L. Servilio

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## Abstract

One way to improve motivation and engagement for students with disabilities in academic areas is to teach at their level and increase their interest in the instruction and activities. Embedding these interests through offering students options within the curriculum can motivate students who were previously having difficulty or not interested in school. This article demonstrates how an elementary teacher and a special education teacher improved student engagement and increased grades in reading through differentiated instruction and student choice. Guidelines are provided along with examples of creative ways to include this integrated instruction across subject areas and grade levels.

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## Keywords

reading, differentiated instruction, student choice, elementary education, special education

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*Melissa was a veteran fifth-grade teacher with 24 students in her class, and 6 students who received special education services. She knew the importance of inclusion for the students with whom she worked, but she also discovered how difficult it can be to meet the needs of all of her students. Previously, Melissa used student choice on some of her reading assignments and found this to be extremely interesting and motivating for the students. She wanted to continue to utilize this strategy; however, she learned it was not so easy to incorporate this practice for the students with disabilities. Melissa approached the special education teacher, Kathy, to seek advice on how to resolve this problem; she felt like she was not making the impact that she wanted in her reading instruction. This article shares the design of a successful reading approach created by Melissa and Kathy to address the needs of all of the learners in an inclusive classroom.*


Many professionals in the field of education know that in order for instruction to be successful for students with disabilities, the general education teacher and the special education teacher need to collaborate to design and implement effective strategies (Jung, Gomez, Baird, & Galyon-Keramidas, 2008). Many educators find that, even with collaboration, it is often difficult to meaningfully include students with disabilities in their class-

rooms (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). Some teachers, like Melissa, have found that student choice is a successful method to increase motivation within a class; however, they may still not know how to make this strategy work for students with disabilities (Shevin & Klein, 2004). Differentiated instruction has been shown to be a successful approach to educating each student with a disability on his/her level within the general education classroom (Cusumano & Mueller, 2007). Like Kathy, many special education teachers use differentiated instruction, yet struggle to motivate their students to succeed. By combining these two approaches, Kathy and Melissa created an innovative program that differentiated the instruction for the learners with special needs yet also gave all of the students a choice in reading activities.

This article briefly describes the project, provides details on how to implement student choice in the inclusive classroom, and discusses the benefits and drawbacks of the approach.

<b>How do you Search a Database for Research-Based Practices?</b>
<b>1. Go to the specific database (e.g., ERIC, EbscoHost, JSTOR)</b>
<b>2. Click on the link that states something like, “Find Articles by Text”</b>
<b>3. Put in your search terms such as “research-based” lessons in “vocabulary.”</b> Note: When you put quotes around the search terms the terms will not be separated.
<b>4. To narrow your searches make sure that you are searching peer-reviewed articles, as well as terms within the Title, Abstract, and Full Text.</b>
<b>5. In your search attempt if you cannot find any articles with your terms try to reword your search terms (in lieu of “vocabulary” try “terminology” or “language”).</b>

**Figure 1. Program components with guiding questions**

Step	Guiding Questions	
<b>One:</b> Identify Student Needs and Learning Styles	Did you identify the students with special needs?	
	Are the reading goals and objectives identified for the students with special needs?	
	Does each student have a folder containing their name, information, learning style, reading level, and strategies that work for the student?	
	Has a learning style inventory been completed on each student?	
	Have you completed the Learning Style Checklist chart (identifying all of the types of learners in your class)?	
<b>Two:</b> Assess Current Achievement	Did you identify how you are going to assess the students?	
	Have you identified modifications and accommodations for assessing the students with special needs?	
	Have the roles of the general education teacher and special education teacher been identified?	
<b>Three:</b> Select Research-based Strategies for Reading, Comprehension, and Personal Connection	Have you identified research-based strategies for reading?	
	Have you identified what approaches for reading go with each student's learning style?	
	Have you identified research-based strategies for comprehension?	
	Have you identified what approaches for comprehension go with each student's learning style?	
	Have you identified research-based strategies for personal connection/generalization?	
	Have you identified what approaches for personal connection/generalization go with each student's learning style?	
	Are these approaches and materials clear and easy to understand?	
<b>Four:</b> Differentiate Material	If needed, did you differentiate the reading material for the students with special needs?	
	If needed, did you differentiate the comprehension materials for the students with special needs?	
	If needed, did you differentiate the personal connection materials for the students with special needs?	
	Are the materials that you differentiated clear and easy to understand?	
	Do these materials match the student's goals and objectives?	
<b>Five:</b> Develop Student Choice & Classroom Implementation	Do the materials offer student's a choice with activities that they can complete?	
	Did you model how this method is going to be used within the classroom?	
	Did you practice with the student's how they are going to do the activities?	
<b>Six:</b> Conduct Portfolio & Evaluation System	Is the data collection system appropriate and easy to understand?	
	Does the data system involve both the regular education and special education teacher?	
	Have the general education and special education teacher identified their roles in the assessment of the curriculum?	
<b>Seven:</b> Evaluate Student Performance	Have you identified a target end date for the unit?	
	Have you identified who is going to evaluate the program?	
	Have you determined how the students are going to evaluate the new reading approach?	

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### **Project Details**

This model was used in a fifth-grade inclusive classroom of 24 students, with six students identified as having a disability. The school was in a low income area. Melissa, the general education teacher, utilized the support of Kathy, the special education teacher, to make this model successful within her classroom. In this model Melissa and Kathy collaborated about the students' needs in Melissa's classroom. They also administered assessments of reading skills and inventories to identify the students' learning styles, then they researched appropriate research-based methods for each of the areas (i.e., reading, reading comprehension, and connections) to create a reading curriculum based on specific books. At the completion of the project, Melissa and Kathy assessed each student using oral assessment and portfolio review. They found that this approach increased students' reading grades.

### **Guidelines for Integrating Student Choice with Differentiated Instruction**

You can implement this program if you collaborate with another professional (depending on if you are a general educator or special education teacher). You can also create this program in other classrooms (e.g., self-contained special education, general education); however, collaboration with a special education teacher or general education teacher is vital for the support and success of the program. Here are seven easy steps you can follow to create a differentiated curriculum that incorporates student choice: (1) identify student needs and learning styles within your classroom; (2) assess current student achievement; (3) select empirically based strategies for reading, comprehension and personal connection; (4) differentiate the material for the students with special needs; (5)

provide options for student choice; (6) conduct the assessment; (7) evaluate student performance. Figure 1 provides a checklist with criteria for each of the components of the program.

#### *Step 1: Identify Student Needs and Learning Styles*

First, you should identify the students with disabilities, their goals and objectives for reading within this program, and strategies that are already in place and are successful (Jung, et al., 2008). While the general education teacher and special education teacher discuss each student, they should have a folder with their name, information, learning style, reading level, and strategies that work for the student. This folder can continue to grow throughout the year as the student changes and grows in this curriculum.

You may want to utilize the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, Myers Briggs Type Indicator, or Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Model to determine how all of the students learn. After completing one of these inventories, it is important to chart the class as a whole to determine the types of learning styles that are present within the classroom. This chart will be useful during the third step of implementing this program. Figure 2 is an example of this chart.

#### *Step 2: Assess Current Achievement*

Together, you now should determine how you are going to assess the students to determine if the program is working. Measures could include end-of-quarter grades, portfolio assessment, scores on past curriculum reading assessments, oral assessment, or everyday assessment of reading and comprehension. Melissa and Kathy used a portfolio assessment as well as an oral assessment for their program. The first time that this process

was evaluated, Melissa and Kathy were awarding too many points per day (50 was the maximum). This made it extremely difficult for other activities that the teachers did in reading (e.g., independent reading, reading fluency). After assessing the evaluation tool, this process was altered to better meet the needs of the students.

When thinking about any assessment, it is important to determine how you are go-

ing to administer it and the amount of points you are going to assign to each activity. This is a key factor in implementing this program because as an educator you want to ensure that the students will benefit from these activities. Figure 3 is an example of a rubric that was designed for an oral assessment of reading.

**Figure 2. Example of learning style chart**

Students Name	Kinesthetic Learner	Visual Learner	Auditory Learner	Visual / Spatial Intelligence	Verbal / Linguistic Intelligence	Logical / Mathematical Intelligence	Bodily / Kinesthetic Intelligence	Musical / Rhythmic Intelligence	Interpersonal Intelligence	Intrapersonal Intelligence
Bob	✓						✓		✓	
Sue			✓		✓					✓
Joe	✓	✓				✓				

*Step 3: Select Research-based Strategies for Reading, Comprehension, and Personal Connection*

When selecting reading material it is important to locate research-based strategies for reading, comprehension, and personal connections. You can look for ideas in published articles in Web data bases (e.g., JSTOR, ERIC) or in books and journals.

Strategies that have already been identified and researched are important, because as a teacher you can be confident that these strategies are likely to be successful. As you gather the strategies, you should sort them into categories based upon the three components of the program (i.e., reading strategies, comprehension strategies, and personal connections). You can use Figure 2 as an organizer, just

change “Student Name” to “Reading Strategies,” “Comprehension Strategies,” or “Personal Connection Strategies.” You should begin to think about each strategy as it is appropriate for a specific learning style or intelligence. For example, a research-based strategy for reading is listening to the book on tape. This type of strategy would best fit a learner who is an auditory learner. So this strategy would go under the “reading strategy” category and then a box would be checked under auditory learner.

approaches to the content, the process, and/or the product in anticipation of and in response to the student differences in readiness, interests, and learning need (p.10).

This is an individualized method of meeting all of the students’ academic needs at their level. As you differentiate you should focus on the level of learning that will challenge the student and include their learning style and intelligence, adapting and modifying the curriculum for each student with disabilities as needed.

*Step 4: Differentiate Reading Material*

After reviewing all of the research-based strategies it is now important for you to mesh the students learning styles and intelligences with these strategies. Using three different categories (i.e., reading, reading comprehension, personal connection), it should be relatively easy to choose activities that are appropriate for different learning styles and intelligences; however, the materials for the students with disabilities then need to be further differentiated for individuals with specific disabilities (Key, 2008; Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Tomlinson (1995) stated:

Differentiated instruction is a flexible approach to teaching in which the teacher plans and carries out varied

Helpful Journals with Research-Based Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Action and Teacher Education</b></li> <li>• <b>Intervention in School and Clinic</b></li> <li>• <b>Teacher Development</b></li> <li>• <b>Phi Delta Kappan</b></li> <li>• <b>Remedial and Special Education</b></li> <li>• <b>Teacher Education Quarterly</b></li> <li>• <b>Theory into Practice</b></li> <li>• <b>Exceptional Children</b></li> <li>• <b>Leading Professional Development Education</b></li> <li>• <b>Teacher Education and Special Education</b></li> <li>• <b>Learning Disabilities Research and Practice</b></li> <li>• <b>School Science and Mathematics</b></li> <li>• <b>Journal of Special Education</b></li> <li>• <b>Journal of Research in Science Teaching</b></li> <li>• <b>Journal of Learning Disabilities</b></li> <li>• <b>Learning and Instruction</b></li> <li>• <b>Learning Disabilities Research &amp; Practice</b></li> <li>• <b>Reading Research Quarterly</b></li> </ul>

*Step 5: Provide Options for Student Choice*

Now that all of the materials have been gathered and created, it is important to design activities that offer the students a choice. If you completed Figure 2 with the types of research-based activities, now create each activity to be appropriate to the book that you are teaching. This is where you get into specifics such as; characters, events, number of chapters. Figure 4 is an example of this checklist of activities for a student to complete.

**Figure 3. Example of rubric for oral assessment**

Rating	Exemplary 100% to 95%	Moderately proficient 94% to 89%	Proficient 88% to 83%	Novice 82% and below
Summary	Summarized chapter with 100% accuracy.	Summarized chapter with one error about the reading.	Summarized chapter with two or three errors about the reading.	Had difficulty summarizing chapter and made four or more mistakes.
Work sample	Presented material that scored at least 95%, and could relate the project to the book.	Presented material that scored at least 89%, and could relate the project to the book.	Presented material that scored at least 83%, but could not relate the project to the book.	Presented inappropriate material that scored 82% or below, and could not relate the project to the book.
Open-ended questions	Answered questions with 100% to 95% accuracy.	Could answer 94% to 89% of the questions.	Answered questions with 88% to 83% accuracy..	Answered questions with 82% or below accuracy.

After all of the materials have been created for all of the students within the classroom, it is now important to teach the children about their new reading curriculum. First, you should show the students the format of a lesson. As their teacher, model your thoughts of how you decide to choose an activity as well as completing the activity. Then have the students complete a lesson using this style. This can be done through short activities that are 30 minute lessons.

*Step 6: Conduct the Evaluation*

During your discussions, as the general education teacher or the special education teacher, you may have already determined how you are going to evaluate the students' work. This design sets up a portfolio assessment of each day with a checklist of activities that the child has chosen. The student maintains the portfolio each day during reading instruction but chooses a preferred activity, checking it off on the checklist, and then attaching the completed work in the portfolio. During each reading class a sheet configured

like Figure 4 will be added to the portfolio. This also helps to teach the students to organize their work because they must manage and maintain the folder every day or they will not receive credit for the activities.

*Step 7: Evaluate Student Performance*

After completion of the process, it is important to evaluate how well the students performed as well as their feelings about the program. It is important to remember that changing their reading curriculum to permit student choice may be very different from other reading instruction they have experienced. Most of the time the students need to get used to the program before they are comfortable with it. After you have completed these activities with at least two books, it is then appropriate to ask them their thoughts about the new reading program. Evaluating student grades at the same time will provide a well-rounded picture of the implementation of the program.



**Figure 4. Sample reading activity**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Reading</b> (Choose one of the boxes to do)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Read individually Chapters 1, 2, &amp; 3.</li> <li>▫ Read every other page with one person (either DeShawn, Laura, or Theo) Chapters 1, 2, &amp; 3.</li> <li>▫ Go to the back table and listen to Chapters 1, 2, &amp; 3 on tape (Fredrickson, 2009).</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Comprehension</b> (Choose one of the boxes to do)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Write down the questions you asked yourself as you read through each of the chapters. You should have at least 5 questions per chapter.</li> <li>▫ Summarize what you read in each chapter. Each summary should have at least 5 sentences.</li> <li>▫ Use the advanced organizer to complete the events that occurred in the first 3 chapters.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Personal Connection</b> (Choose one of the boxes to do)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Research on the computer who George Washington is using the attached websites. Complete an open-minded portrait of George Washington and respond around the picture of how George Washington has affected your life.</li> <li>▫ Create a list of rules that you would give George Washington and his troops. Then create a song that the troops could chant as they marched to remember these rules. Finally, on a separate piece of paper write why you choose the rules that you did.</li> <li>▫ Draw a picture and label what you think all of the characters that we have met look like. On a separate piece of paper write down the page number and where you got your information that lead you to believe that's what they looked like.</li> </ul>

**Final Thoughts**

Differentiated Instruction combined with student choice can increase student engagement and learning for all students. The benefits of using this program are improvements in student engagement with and enjoyment of reading. Not only will the students' motivation for reading improve but so will their grades in reading. Effective collaboration between the special educator and gen-

eral educator in the design of the program will enhance reading skills in all students in the classroom.

Some of the drawbacks of the program are the time and energy needed to research, organize, and create the program specific to you classroom; however, once the program is set up, only minimal time will be needed to gather the materials for each of the lessons. Another drawback is failure to iden-

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tify specific students that may need extra support. You can prevent this by early identification of students who struggle with organization or semi-structured activities. An additional drawback is that the classroom can be a little chaotic. However, as long as the students are highly engaged, discussing the book, gathering materials, and completing their activities, this should not be a significant problem. Teachers who are used to a quiet classroom may find this difficult to adjust to in the beginning. If you create a lesson structure and classroom rules to support this program, the noise level may not be a drawback after all.

This program can be highly successful and easily manageable for classroom teachers and special education teachers working together in inclusive classrooms. Since everyone is working on different levels and activities, it is a smooth transition to teaching and learning for all students. All of the student's abilities are showcased through the design of differentiated materials, the choice that each student makes, the oral assessments, and the portfolio in this type of reading curriculum. The combination of a differentiated curriculum and options for student choice is ideal for promoting success for students with disabilities and it can improve outcomes for other students as well.

Through their research, Melissa and Kathy discovered that the students enjoyed reading more. They were eager to begin reading and creating their projects. They also stated that, "it was cool that everyone was doing something a little different." An average of 83.4% of the students' grades improved in reading, 12.5% remained the same, and 4.1% of the students' grades decreased. In the students whose grades remained the same all but one of them already were achieving A's in reading. There was only one student

whose grade decreased. This was due to issues with poor organization and loss of materials. As a result of these responses and the improvement in student grades, Melissa has continued using this approach and finds it extremely successful within her 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. As for Kathy, she has enrolled full-time into college; however, she still recommends using the "You Get to Choose" reading program.

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### About the author:

Servilio: