

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND ENRICHMENT OPPORTUNITIES: AN ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to systematically reflect upon my teaching practices, and to investigate the benefits of differentiated instruction using action research methods. This paper outlines the action research process, and is a case study examining the academic, social, and emotional progress of an advanced grade three learner involved in differentiated instruction activities. Pre and post assessments of this student include interviews, writing samples, math journals, and anecdotal records. Observations indicate strong support for differentiation in the primary classroom. Differentiated instruction promotes enthusiasm, motivation and confidence towards learning. The conclusions of this paper encourage the use of differentiated instruction techniques, and the ongoing self-reflection of teachers through action research methodology.

What would you say if a teacher told you that all students were not equal and that only some could be sufficiently challenged or taught? Are all students capable of growth and improvement? Should the needs of all students be met? Most teachers would agree that all students are equal and should be treated as such. However, increasing demands in an era of standardization can lead to a "one-size-fits-all" approach to instruction. With a dense and challenging curriculum, teaching to the norm is not uncommon. As a result, exceptional students can be overlooked or neglected. Research indicates that modifications for struggling learners and advanced learners are often inadequate (Tomlinson, Kalbfleish, 1998). What can be done? This is the question that has fueled my curiosity and subsequent Action Research: *How can I learn more about differentiated instruction using action research methods?*

What is Action Research?

Action research is the process of systematically reflecting on individual/group teaching practices using research methodologies (Watts, 1985). The purpose is to encourage professional development and to enhance student learning and achievement through reflective inquiry. There are 5 phases of effective action research including; problem identification, plan of action, data collection, analysis of data and plan for future action. It is my hope, that by identifying personal areas of concern and by formally reflecting on my own teaching practices, I will solidify my philosophies of education and thus provide a better program for my students.

Problem Identification

At any school you will find a mosaic of learners. As a teacher, it is my job to meet all of their learning needs. In my Grade 3 classroom, I thought I made it a priority to differentiate learning based on student needs. With seven out of 18 grade 3 students on Individual Education Plans and approximately 58% reading significantly below grade level, my attention was directed at differentiating for this population. However, during a staff meeting on differentiated instruction, I revisited the philosophy and its applications for all learners, including those with advanced abilities. It was at this time that I recognized my neglect for a student in my room with a high achievement record. Let's call her "Emily." She presented as quiet, respectful, hard-working and of above average ability. My inquiry began to revolve around her need for challenge. Were her learning needs being met? In reflection, I now know that they were not. Thus, my final action research question became, *How can differentiated instruction benefit individual students when applied to enrichment programming?* In following action research methodology, I developed a plan of action, collected and analyzed classroom data to answer this question.

Plan of Action

My first step was to research differentiated instruction practices and philosophies to better understand their adoption into my room. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2000), stresses that differentiation is not an instructional strategy. It is a philosophy or a way of thinking about teaching and learning that embraces students as individual learners with individual needs. Differentiated instruction, allows all students to

participate in respectful learning experiences that may be different but, equally interesting, equally important and equally powerful (Tomlinson & Kalbfleish, 1998) According to Petting (2002), it represents a pro-active approach to improving classroom learning for *all* students by redesigning instruction on the basis of student abilities, needs and even interests. Teachers can differentiate for their students through content (material to cover), process (how to cover it) and/or product (how to demonstrate it).

In summary, differentiated instruction focuses on student choices, interests, readiness and learning styles. It encourages flexible groupings, tiered lessons and individualized scaffolding. With this philosophy in mind, I took the next step to apply my interpretation of differentiated instruction in the classroom. I gave myself a five-month time frame, to question and to investigate the benefits of differentiated instruction on individual enrichment programming (for Emily) through action research methods.

Many instructional strategies were employed for the five-month action research period. In the beginning, Emily was the prime focus for differentiation. However, it quickly developed into a whole-class agenda. The classroom was rearranged to encourage group sharing and we practiced our group-work roles regularly. Many tasks and assignments began to have a cooperative component. As a whole class, we engaged in Think-Pair-Share and Resident Expert activities. The hope was that students could assist and compliment one another. Groupings were flexible and targeted student needs and interests. Emily was encouraged into leadership and mentoring roles. As a peer tutor, Emily became more conscious of her own learning and developed the ability to communicate and to share her thinking with others.

I also differentiated instruction through our guided reading program as outlined by current balanced literacy strategies. Emily was given frequent opportunities to read above grade level material and to complete related assignments. Students were often divided into groups based on their reading readiness levels, and worked with appropriately leveled texts. Following their reading, they completed different but equally important comprehension activities. For example, one group sequenced their story with sentence strips, while another completed a story map. Emily's group had already demonstrated strong comprehension skills, and therefore worked on generating their own thoughtful and meaningful questions about their reading. My role was to facilitate group sharing, to scaffold when necessary, and to monitor progress. Additionally, our silent reading time was accompanied by our schools Accelerated Reading initiative. Accelerated Reading allowed Emily to read books at her own level and to take computer comprehension tests based on them. We also participated in literature circles and author's theater to differentiate Language instruction.

Students were given increased opportunities for choice and began completing research projects based on their own interests. For one assignment, students were studying the provinces of Canada. They were given the option to create a television commercial, newspaper article, poster or pamphlet in order to demonstrate their research on a province of choice. Emily often chose projects that involved a significant amount of writing and internet exploration. In this case, she chose to write a news article and to create a brochure.

Individual differentiation for Emily included accommodated assignments focusing on higher-level thinking. In Mathematics, she tackled complicated word problems and worked on identifying her problem solving strategies and thinking in her math journal. She also developed her own word problems to challenge the class with. Emily had indicated that she enjoyed drill activities, math puzzles and problems, thus she also kept an extra activity booklet in her desk filled with such exercises. During writing times, Emily was partnered with another student who had complimentary skills. Together they developed their writing through peer-editing and modeling. At the computer lab, Emily was encouraged to explore the junior programs. She often assisted struggling students in class and completed modified homework each night. These are just a few of the strategies employed to differentiate instruction to accommodate Emily's advanced needs. Were they effective?

Data Collection

In accordance with both action research methodology and differentiated instruction, it was important to develop a sense of where we were and where we wanted to go. Understanding the value of pre-assessment, Emily and I met for conferences and interviews. I hoped to unveil her interests and to develop a better understanding of her learning needs and style. The interview was a surprise. Emily seemed to have very little appreciation for her own interests, hobbies and personality. I thought that giving her the opportunity to write about herself may offer us more. In 20 minutes, Emily wrote only a few sentences about herself:

"I am a happy person. I like math and reading chapter books. I like watching T.V. and movies. I am a kind person. I like arts and crafts too."

This is a student who normally writes not only several sentences but paragraphs during writing periods. Perhaps, through differentiation, Emily could better understand her own learning needs.

At this time, I collected writing samples, math journals, reading inventories and anecdotal notes to aid in my pre-assessment. I recorded observations in an action research journal, which I shared with colleagues. Report cards and formative assessments were also used. I continued with these data collection methods for the duration of the research.

The pre-assessment indicated that Emily was an independent, logical/mathematical learner. She excelled at tasks that were based on sequential organization and rote learning. Her number fact skills were above grade level and her writing was free from any spelling or convention errors. At the beginning of grade three, Emily was reading grade four material. Most of her assignments were completed with perfection! However, as I investigated further, it became evident that her math journals were often replicas of my modeling and her writing was repetitive and displayed little authors voice and creativity. I was also concerned about her social skills development and confidence in herself. She rarely participated in class activities and often took a very passive role during group assignments. Emily often met new challenges with anxiety and even tears. At this point, Emily and I made some common goals. We wanted to increase the quality of her writing by encouraging voice and creativity. We also wanted to give her appropriate challenges to expand her math thinking. My hope for Emily, was that she would develop an appreciation for herself and her interests. I wanted her to feel challenged and encouraged to take risks.

Analysis of Data

Over the next few months, I employed various differentiated instruction strategies. I continued to collect data in the form of writing and math samples and meticulously maintained my action research journal. My observations were not necessarily what I expected but were very much welcomed.

Academically, Emily demonstrated consistent growth in her reading scores and is now reading late grade 5 material with independence. She began to make more accurate and reflective inferences from her readings. Her writing became less repetitive and more creative. While sharing her writing with the class, one of her peers said, "Emily is so smart and she keeps getting better and better." In math, she continued to solve word problems with ease and independence but often offered more than one solution for the same problem. She also assisted others with their problem solving skills.

Socially, Emily began to take on more leadership roles. In the beginning, she required direct prompting to participate actively in group activities but later became skilled at encouraging and assisting her group members. She also demonstrated more social activity on the yard at recess.

The most obvious changes observed in Emily were her moods and emotions. The social and academic results can be skewed by maturity, encouragement and simple modeling. It is Emily's emotional reactions that illustrate the true benefits and rewards of differentiated instruction. Once she was challenged sufficiently with material that interested her, she became more "alive." Looking back in my action research journal, I am reminded that the Emily I first knew did not smile very often. She seemed low energy and participated very little in class discussions. She was often distracted or tired. I thought this was just Emily. My assumption was that she was quiet and passive. I realize now, that she was actually bored. Differentiation allowed her to work at her own level. It allowed her to explore her interests and to work with others to develop positive social relationships. It also allowed her to develop more confidence in herself. How do I know? Emily began to participate much more in class activities. She approached her assignments and tasks with an obvious increase in enthusiasm. I also recognized that Emily was more willing to take risks. She no longer approached challenge with tears and grief. Instead, she asked for assistance and seemed eager to attempt something new. We saw more smiles and energy from her. When asked at the end of the five-month period to once again write about herself and her interests, she completed a few paragraphs instead of only a few sentences. She explained that she liked traveling, chapter books, cartoons and extra math activities. Emily seemed to develop a better understanding of who she was and what she enjoyed. These are the true benefits of differentiated instruction for enrichment programming.

As for the other students in the class, they too seemed more stimulated and more willing to take risks. The classroom tone was different somehow. Students became accustomed to working with others and as a

result a greater sense of community was developed. Differentiated instruction accounted for individual differences. The mixed and flexible groupings allowed students to work in both skill-leveled groups and in groups that were more heterogeneous. I did recognize that student product for differentiated assignments did not always represent the student's best effort. We often became more concerned with the process than the product for differentiated assignments. We focused on our thinking skills, our communication and cooperation skills, all of which are essential to student progress. In the final analysis, the students were more enthusiastic about their learning and the topics at hand. Differentiated instruction also allowed them to develop social confidence and to explore concepts with individual skills and interests in mind. Most importantly, I observed that many of the students were more willing to take risks and seemed more accepting of student differences. All students were given opportunities to "shine" and to develop an appreciation for one another.

Plan for Future Action

Overall, I am pleased with the results and experiences provided to me through action research. Action research gave me the license to reflect and to analyze both my teaching practices and philosophies. As a new teacher, it can be difficult to find the time and energy to step-back from yourself and to evaluate your own strengths and needs. However, only in doing so can you become the teacher that you want to be. Believing in your practice and taking the time to reflect on it in such a procedural way can only benefit you and your students. As a result, I have developed a greater understanding of how to effectively differentiate for the learning needs of all students.

In the beginning, I found applying differentiated instruction tiring and overwhelming. Over time, my confidence as well as my understanding increased. Now, I am an advocate for such teaching methodology. *Through action research, I have come to believe that differentiated instruction is a pro-active approach to learning and classroom management.* I have always wanted a classroom booming with the sense of community and confidence. It has been my priority to promote student learning, risk taking and confidence. I have found that differentiated instruction is a realistic tool in developing my "dream classroom." My direct observations of Emily have proven to me that differentiated instruction stimulates and challenges students of mixed ability.

The coming school year is just around the corner and I am eager to begin the new year with a more pronounced atmosphere of differentiation. I have two goals for the coming year. *It is my hope that I can find a more effective balance between teacher-directed and differentiated activities.* I believe strongly in the benefits of modeling and understand that there is a time and place for whole-class instruction. However, I have also witnessed the advantages of differentiation. In time and with increased experience, I feel that this balance will become a natural part of my teaching.

My second goal is to approach the challenges of assessment and evaluation that come with increased differentiation. Currently, in Ontario, all same-grade students are evaluated on a standard curriculum with predetermined expectations. A student's report card mark does not reflect student growth and improvement in a subject area. It only accounts for their product in terms of grade level standards. Ideally, students would be working on grade level expectations and differentiation would be one method of achieving them. However, when differentiating instruction based on student needs and abilities, some students may not be working at grade level. In my case, over half of the class was working on below grade level Language goals. Thus, how do you adequately assign a letter grade, when students may not be completing grade level tasks? Again, we encounter the topic of balance. How do you balance a student's learning needs with their need to see improvement on report cards? How do you balance individual needs while doing your job at teaching a dense, standardized curriculum? Thus *it is my goal to continue to investigate and apply differentiated instruction in the classroom, while developing balance between assessment, evaluation, curriculum and various other strategies.* Perhaps, with increased experience and practice these inconsistencies my naturally dissolve. Time will tell.

In conclusion, my experiences with both action research and differentiated instruction have been positive and beneficial. I have a better understanding of where I want to go as a Primary/Junior educator. I have become an advocate for differentiated instruction and have identified its benefits in the classroom. I also intend to continue with action research throughout my career. In the future, I hope to collaborate more with other professionals and colleagues. Networking with other educators can only add to my knowledge and understanding of children, learning and teaching. I would recommend my experience. What a fantastic, effective way to grow and to develop in your career- to provide the best for you and your students!

References

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Biographical Note:

Terri Lynn Kirkey has been teaching with the Hastings and Prince Edward District School board since September 2002. She completed her Bachelor of Education at Nipissing University in North Bay, Ontario, specializing in the primary/junior division. Prior to this, she obtained an Honors Degree in Psychology from Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. The majority of her experience has been in the grade three classroom. However, she is currently assigned to a grade 3/4 where she hopes to continue her research on differentiated instruction. Terri Lynn has taken an active role in the school community and continues to promote action research among her colleagues.