

Differentiating Instruction to Teach All Learners

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*Walking into Ms. Gage's sixth grade English class, a visitor sees six students seated around a listening center playing a tape of *The Outsiders* while they complete a graphic organizer comparing Ponyboy's experiences to their own. Another group of six students is seated in a literature circle discussing the themes of the different novels they have read independently. The teacher is in the front of the room with six students conducting a mini-lesson on narrator's point of view using the overhead projector. The remaining four students work independently on self-selected anchor activities related to figurative language.*

*In Mr. Bland's sixth grade English class, in a school several miles away in the same school system, all 28 students are seated in rows facing the teacher who is explaining the use of "who" and "whom". Following this activity, students take turns reading aloud from *The Outsiders*, a novel the teacher has selected for the whole class. All students will then answer the same set of comprehension questions.*

Silver Spring International Middle School (SSIMS) has embraced the vision represented by the first scenario. As we set up a new school, our aim was to create a school that had a special focus. In making plans for the new school, we made a conscious decision to address the needs of all students using differentiation as the framework of the school's organization and of its instructional program. Differentiated instruction, according to Tomlinson (1995), is a student-centered approach to learning where the teacher, based on student needs, designs multiple pathways to content, process, and product. The chief goal of differentiation at SSIMS is to provide rigorous instruction to students at all levels.

Traditionally, a student's academic level is decided by the end of the primary grades; therefore, there is very little movement between levels, especially for those students labeled as less able. By the time students reach middle school, ability groups all too often become inflexible. Only those identified as highly able or gifted and talented have access to more challenging content and instruction. And as has recently become apparent at the national level, white and Asian students are disproportionately represented in this higher level group. The mission of the SSIMS staff is to expand access to higher level content and instruction to include all students, especially to those who have been de facto denied access in the past.

A decision was also made to develop a schoolwide focus on international studies because of the diversity of the student population, the proximity to Washington, D.C., the access to a range of international resources, and the school's housing of partial immersion programs in French and Spanish. The name, Silver Spring International Middle School, reflects this emphasis.





DIFFERENTIATION AND THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

Given this background, our goal was to find a way to engage all students in exploration of our essential question, *"What does it mean to be a citizen in a global society?"* Our guiding belief is that all students deserve an academically challenging curriculum. It would be difficult philosophically and practically, given the school's commitment to differentiation, to segregate students according to standardized test scores, label them accordingly, and then ask that they "reach higher." We would have already told them that they have exceeded their grasp! Instead, by creating mixed-ability classes with a critical mass of students at each ability level, we send the more compelling message that all students are expected to work at the highest possible level. Heterogeneous grouping not only provides an encouraging and challenging environment for all students but also provides for more flexibility in the schedule, thereby giving students access to more learning opportunities.

In a mixed ability class, flexible grouping is a primary strategy for providing differentiated instruction. Students are grouped and regrouped routinely within the class based on on-going pre-assessment, readiness needs, prior knowledge, interest, learning style, and student self-selection. Additional strategies include use of anchor activities, student learning stations/centers, and the use of tiered instruction and assignments.

Teachers plan for the highest level in the class and then provide the support needed by other students to achieve the objectives of that class, a distinct departure from gearing instruction to the average student. Determining the needs of this range of students and how, specifically, to address those needs within the context of interdisciplinary instruction, is admittedly a daunting challenge.

Looking back to Ms. Gage's class, in the introduction, we can see how this process comes to life. Her objective was to focus on perspective and how that is formed and communicated. Her first step was to determine what her students knew about perspective. As a pre-assessment, Ms. Gage asked her students to describe the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," a story she knew, they were familiar with, from the point of view of each character. This exercise helped her determine whether students understood how point of view affected each character's reaction to a particular situation. She then used some figure/ground visuals to make the connection between how we see things and how we communicate ideas fixed on our perspective. Using student responses and knowledge of each student's reading level, she created mixed-ability groups. The ultimate task for each student was to examine how perspective is affected by experience, in particular through interaction with another culture. Students demonstrated mastery by choosing either to create a puppet show, write a children's book, or develop a cubed activity for the class.

In each case, students needed to incorporate evidence from their reading in their culminating project. In this particular assignment, the highest level activity is the cube, a six-side box, each facet describing an activity to be done related to the overall objective. It is easy to see how the design of the cube activities can be made more or less cognitively challenging; it is, therefore, an excellent vehicle for differentiation. By having students create the cube, the activity becomes more challenging because students must not only understand the material but must also be able to create a range of activities that will engage the other students at several levels. All students may choose to create the cube; however, for some students the activity will be required.



DIFFERENTIATION AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

Mixed ability grouping, such as that just described, requires a number of elements to be put into place in order for it to succeed. As a necessary first step, SSIMS has organized its instructional program around four themes: *Identity, Connections, Perspectives, and Responsibility*. These themes are woven into the fabric of the curriculum in all subjects. All students establish a Global Citizenry Reflection Portfolio that holds samples of their ongoing exploration of the essential question. During their third year at the school, all students participate in exhibitions of *their* individual response to the essential question. The audience for these exhibitions includes parents, students, teachers, community members, and members of appropriate professional communities.

To further facilitate differentiation and attention to the essential question and four themes, SSIMS has adopted an organizational structure based on small teams of students and staff that facilitates close working relationships and knowledge of students by their teachers. Each team is made up of approximately 100 students and teachers of English, science, world studies, foreign language, and enrichment courses. Mathematics, physical education, music, and visual arts teachers bridge the various teams and support the teams’ objectives. Students are placed in mathematics classes based on achievement level and are able to progress at an accelerated pace. Qualified students begin their study of a foreign language in grade six, while by grade seven nearly all students study a foreign language. Students who have participated in French or Spanish immersion programs in elementary school are taught world studies in their target foreign language beginning in grade six.

In all other subjects, students are placed in mixed ability groups and teachers differentiate instruction and assessment in order to meet each child at his or her level and to challenge him or her to stretch beyond current working levels.

Each school day begins with a thirty-minute Connect Time advisory period, followed by four 75-minute periods of instruction. Students are enrolled in seven classes that are rotated throughout the week. Rotating the periods gives teachers the opportunity to teach every student at his or her optimal learning time (Figure 1). Teachers report that the longer class periods allow for more student involvement that enables them to design instruction responsive to students’ needs (Figure 2). Each day ends with a “check-out time” during which students return to their advisory group to ensure that they have the necessary materials and information to prepare them for their school work at home and for the next day. We believe that bringing the school day to a positive close is as important as beginning it on a positive note.

Figure 1

SSIMS Sample Student Rotating Block Schedule							
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
7:55 - 8:25	Connect Time	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
8:30 - 9:45	Per 1 Math	Per 5 Sci	Per 2 French	Per 6 WS*	Per 3 Elective	Per 7 Eng	Per 4 PE
9:50 - 11:05	Per 2 French	Per 6 WS	Per 3 Elective	Per 7 Eng	Per 4 PE	Per 1 Math	Per 5 Sci
11:10 - 12:25	Per 3 Elective	Per 7 Eng	Per 4 PE	Per 1 Math	Per 5 Sci	Per 2 French	Per 6 WS
12:30 - 1:00	LUNCH	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
1:05 - 2:20	Per 4 PE	Per 1 Match	Per 5 Sci	Per 2 French	Per 6 WS	Per 3 Elective	Per 7 Eng
2:25 - 2:40	Connect Time	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

* World Studies



Figure 2

SSIMS Sample Teacher Rotating Block Schedule							
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
7:55 - 8:25	Connect Time	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
8:30 - 9:45	Per 1 Team Mtg	Per 5 Elective	Per 2 Eng	Per 6 Eng	Per 3 Eng	Per 7 Eng	Per 4 Planning
9:50 - 11:05	Per 2 Eng	Per 6 Eng	Per 3 Eng	Per 7 Eng	Per 4 Planning	Per 1 Team Mtg	Per 5 Elective
11:10 - 12:25	Per 3 Eng	Per 7 Eng	Per 4 Planning	Per 1 Team Mtg	Per 5 Elective	Per 2 Eng	Per 6 Eng
12:30 - 1:00	LUNCH	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
1:05 - 2:20	Per 4 Planning	Per 1 Team Mtg	Per 5 Elective	Per 2 Eng	Per 6 Eng	Per 3 Eng	Per 7 Eng
2:25 - 2:40	Connect Time	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

*** All teachers on the same team (and grade level) have 2 common planning periods. The teams determine how to divide them between team meetings/planning and individual planning time.

DIFFERENTIATION AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

According to Tomlinson (1995), a critical element in the successful implementation of a differentiated program, and another crucial step in ensuring the success of mixed ability grouping, is the commitment and training of staff. Because SSIMS is a new school, it was possible to give all prospective staff a comprehensive overview of the school prior to interviewing. During the interviews, candidates were asked to provide examples of how they would teach subject matter using differentiation strategies. The staff chosen for the school was committed to differentiated instruction and multicultural education as primary vehicles for engaging all students in learning. While the threads of multiculturalism and global citizenry ran through the school's priorities, it was decided that differentiation would be the initial and primary focus of staff development.

A major result of this extensive staff development has been the creation of this staff committed to putting students in control of their learning and helping them achieve at their highest level. The staff development effort has also been differentiated according to teacher needs and is based on their learning preferences. Prior to the beginning of the school year, all teachers were involved in a week-long differentiation academy led by the school system's Department of Enriched and Innovative Instruction. Both required and optional sessions were tailored to teachers' individual needs. Teachers maintained a learning log in which they noted new ideas and areas to explore. Using travel as a metaphor, they recorded aspects of their journey in this log.

During the school year, training opportunities, based on a needs, survey administered to staff, have been expanded from groundwork laid by the summer academy. Using team planning time, teachers have participated in workshops on tiering, learning centers, cubing, peer coaching, and classroom management. School system funds for staff development and a Goals 2000 Grant have provided funds for this training. The establishment of SSIMS as a Professional Development School (PDS) in partnership with Johns Hopkins University (JHU) has provided a source of trainers for some of the workshops, in addition to other collaborative benefits. The PDS arrangement has also enhanced the development of professional portfolios for all SSIMS teachers and JHU interns. Additionally, SSIMS teachers serve as supervising teachers for the JHU interns.



DIFFERENTIATION BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The framework of differentiation also extends beyond the classroom. The student advisory program, Connect Time, provides another way of creating small communities of learners within the larger team organization. About 15 students meet for 30 minutes daily with their Connect Time advisor; emphasis is placed on team building, problem solving, communication, character education, and academic skill development. SSIMS has adopted six keys to character: caring, citizenship, respect, responsibility, integrity, and perseverance. These traits are stressed in all classes and activities as well as in Connect Time groups. Students and advisors also work on Global Citizenry Portfolios during Connect Time. Additionally, the advisor is responsible for regular parent contact for each advisee. What is different at SSIMS is that students are trained to describe and evaluate their progress and to set their own learning goals; they also lead their own parent conferences. We believe that by empowering students in these ways they will become more effective self-advocates.

The Goals 2000 Grant also provides for hiring a summer program coordinator. Being a PDS, the school has access to over 30 JHU interns who will work with SSIMS students in a multi-dimension, differentiated summer school program. The goals of the program provide for appropriate enrichment and remediation. Some students will be able to pursue their interests through accelerated activities, while others will be invited to attend programs addressing specific academic needs.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

While opening a new school is a formidable task, the assembling of a faculty committed to differentiation is perhaps more easily accomplished than would be in an established school. Nonetheless, a determined principal, working through the school's leadership or improvement team, should be able to introduce the value of differentiation as an organizing framework and strategy for the school.

In the results-charged atmosphere of today's schools, the acid test of differentiation will be its effect on student achievement. Because Silver Spring International Middle School is so new, no test data currently exist. Anecdotally, experienced SSIMS teachers (all who have come from other schools) note improved student motivation and behavior. Teachers also report that student products are of a consistently higher quality than they have previously experienced. More objective data will be available after school system and state testing in the spring.

REFERENCE

Tomlinson, C. A. (1995). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Silver Spring International Middle School, one of Montgomery County Public School's newest schools, opened in September 1999, housed in a newly renovated portion of one of the school system's oldest high school buildings. The traditional Georgian architecture belies the innovative, state-of-the-art instruction going on inside. Of the school's 973 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, 34.5% are Hispanic (including students from throughout the Americas and Europe), 29.3% are Black (including students from the Americas, Africa, and the Caribbean), 28.2% are White, and 8% are Asian-Pacific (including students from Asia and the Pacific Islands). About 5% of the students receive services from the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program; about 37% qualify for free or reduced-cost meals. The annual mobility rate of the student population is 20.6%.



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