From the Authors

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Differentiating Instruction in the Preschool Classroom: Bridging Emergent Literacy Instruction and Developmentally Appropriate Practice

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In recent years preschool teachers have been under pressure to infuse literacy instruction into their daily routines. Fueled by research that continues to underscore the importance of literacy instruction during the preschool years (Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006; NAEYC/IRA, 1998; Pianta, 2006; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), preschool teachers have struggled with the question, "How do I teach literacy to preschool children in developmentally appropriate ways?" In other words, "How do I differentiate instruction?" Knowing *how* to differentiate instruction means that teachers should understand what differentiation is and why it is important in early literacy teaching.

What Is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction is a philosophy of teaching and learning that recognizes and responds to student differences in readiness, interests, and learner profiles (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Teachers who practice differentiated instruction plan, teach, and arrange the classroom environment to accommodate each child's unique needs and interests.

Teachers who successfully differentiate instruction are sensitive to the developmental differences among children (Salinger, 2006; Walpole, Justice, & Invernizzi, 2004); they regularly monitor student progress in order to modify instruction and meet each student's needs. In this type of program, instruction is based on established learning goals, child assessments, and observations. Whole-group instruction is minimized, and teachers spend more time working with children in small groups and individually. By working in smaller, more flexible groups, teachers strive to teach within each child's optimal learning level, or "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD is based on the understanding that learning will not occur at its optimal level if children are not challenged enough (Tomlinson et al., 2003) or if they are over-challenged and frustrated (Kapusnick & Hauslein, 2001).

What Do Teachers Need to Know to Implement Differentiated Instruction?

Meeting children *where they are* requires teachers to understand what to teach, how to modify instruction in ways that promote excitement for learning, and how to use assessment data.

Understanding What to Teach

Before instruction begins, teachers should have a solid understanding of literacy goals and the developmental progression of important literacy skills (Hollins, 1993). When teachers know where they are to take children instructionally, it becomes easy for them to recognize which children will need more support to meet the desired goals. Teachers should refer to their state standards; schoolwide core curriculum; relevant research and position statements (e.g., Joint Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association, NAEYC/IRA, 1998); and student assessment instruments. Together these resources will provide a view of what needs to be taught, the expected benchmarks for students, the instructional plans, and how students will be assessed.

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Understanding How to Modify Instruction

Children learn and develop at varying rates and will benefit from different levels of support. Providing that support requires teachers to be willing and able to modify their instruction so that all children benefit from it. Instruction can only be modified successfully if it

- begins with a high quality curriculum that addresses key concepts, ideas, and skills (Tomlinson et al., 2003).
- promotes active learning and incorporates real-life experiences.
- connects to a child's interests.

Teachers can maximize learning for all children by tiering instruction to provide additional support for children who need it and extension activities for those children ready to move ahead more quickly.

Understanding How to Arrange the Environment

Because choice is a powerful motivator (Ginsberg, 2005), teachers can excite children with the materials and activities available in the classroom. In order to provide rich learning experiences for a broad range of children, teachers must have a wide range of materials to accommodate each student's unique readiness, interests, and learning styles. For instance, the classroom library should be stocked with smaller cardboard books, hard- and softcover books, big books, and interactive books—all in a variety of genres, with interesting topics and varying levels of difficulty.

The activities in the environment are important to differentiated instruction: they support children's development by allowing for student creativity—students mold activities to their interests (Turner & Paris, 1995)—and by reinforcing student knowledge—students practice on their own what has been learned in small-group instruction (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel, & Gunnewig, 2006).

Understanding the Importance of Small-Group Instruction

Teachers also support differentiation when they emphasize small, flexible groups. Flexible grouping is an organizational strategy for teaching and supporting a wide range of ability levels within a single classroom (Castle, Deniz, & Tortora, 2005). In this classroom setting, the teacher organizes students in ways that will optimize their learning. For instance, the teacher uses whole-group instruction when introducing a specific concept to the entire class (through stories and other activities). The teacher creates smaller instructional groups of students when targeting specific skills. Finally, the teacher provides students with many opportunities for partner or independent exploration in learning centers to practice and extend their knowledge of important concepts and skills.

Understanding How to Use Assessment Data

The cornerstone of differentiated instruction and effective teaching is the use of valid and reliable assessments (Moon, 2005). Assessment data inform teachers about what students know and what they need to learn. This knowledge allows teachers to understand the variability within their classrooms and to plan targeted instruction for various groups. In addition to using assessment instruments, teachers should assess students informally through observations and monitoring in the day-to-day teaching and individual activities of the classroom. Teachers who assess their students regularly are readily able to alter instruction and vary grouping patterns to meet children's changing needs.

Practical Suggestions for Differentiating Instruction

Getting started with differentiated instruction can be a daunting task because it takes time and careful planning. Although there is no "right" way to differentiate instruction (Tomlinson et al., 2003), here are a few practical suggestions to consider.

Continually Monitor Progress and Regroup Children

Assess students often and organize the assessment data that are collected on each student (McGee & Richgels, 2003). Create a separate assessment folder for each child or a class notebook with a tab for each child. Within each folder or tabbed section, store assessment information that helps paint a picture of that child's development, including benchmarks. Refer to this information to ensure that you are designing instruction that targets each child's needs.

Create a Supportive Environment That Engages All Learners

Plan the environment for all learners. Because the environment is a source of support for children's learning, differentiated instruction can only occur in well-organized classrooms in which children are encouraged to work both collaboratively and independently. In such classrooms, materials are easily accessible to children and literacy centers are stocked with activities and materials that appeal to a range of student interests and developmental needs.

Plan and Start Slowly

Don't be in a hurry! Creating flexible groupings and a differentiated classroom environment can be overwhelming because it requires multilevel planning for

- whole-group instruction (to introduce new concepts and skills).
- small-group instruction (to provide further targeted instruction).
- centers (to allow for independent practice).

Allow yourself and your students time to practice and manage these new routines. Start slowly by focusing on the elements of differentiated instruction that are already in place. For most preschool teachers, this includes learning centers where you can set the stage for independent exploration and practice. At the centers you will also be able to monitor children's learning and make necessary adjustments that will promote increased levels of success and/or interest.

Plan for Transitions

Finally, planned transition activities will help reduce the feeling of chaos in the classroom. Clearly present expectations to children and provide them with ample practice in moving from one station to another. For instance, children need clear directions for how to clean up their center areas, how to transition to a new learning center, and how to respond to classroom signals from the teacher.

Conclusion

Preschool children enter school with a wide range of literacy skills. By embracing differentiated instruction, you can build on their knowledge and create an instructional program that meets children *where they are*. Teaching emergent literacy in this manner supports developmentally appropriate practices because each child is encouraged to work at his or her level of comfort and pacing. This environment creates curious and active learners consistently engaged in activities and learning experiences in which they can feel successful.

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