Differentiated Instruction: Three Teacher's Perspectives

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Abstract
The present study investigated "if" and "how" regular education classroom teachers differentiate their instruction during literacy events in their classroom. A questionnaire about differentiated instruction was sent to 24 teachers across the country to find out what was happening in their classrooms. Of the 14 teachers who responded and filled out the survey, it was found that only 3 teachers explained differentiated instruction similar to the literature and the researchers' understanding of what differentiated instruction means. These 3 teachers, 1 elementary and 2 high school were then interviewed and observed to find out "how" they differentiated instruction and what part of the lesson was differentiated. The researchers found that only 2 teachers differentiated the content they were teaching, while all 3 teachers differentiated the process that was used to help the students learn the content. None of the teachers differentiated the product, as they did not allow choice in how the students showed their understanding of the content being studied.

Introduction
For years, educators have dealt with issues related to meeting all students' needs in their classroom. An effective way to accomplish this task is through differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1995; 2001). Tomlinson (1995) stated: Differentiated instruction is a flexible approach to teaching in which the teacher plans and carries out varied approaches to the content, the process, and/or the product in anticipation of and in response to student differences in readiness, interests, and learning need (p. 10)
Through differentiated instruction and activities, students take a greater responsibility and ownership for their own learning via activities that are primarily focused on students’ multiple intelligences, higher-order thinking, and learning styles. With this in mind, differentiated instruction is an effective tool to implement in the classroom in order to meet students’ learning styles and multiple intelligences strengths which, in turn, encourages them to use higher-order thinking.

Differentiated instruction is important, but it is also important to remember that decisions on how the curriculum should be modified is based totally on each individual student’s needs (Feldusen, Hansen & Kennedy, 1989; Maker, 1982; TAG 1989; Tomlinson, 1995, 2001, 2003; VanTassel-Baska et al., 1988). In return, using differentiated instruction will provide educators with a way for all students to fit within-the-cracks instead of falling-through-the-cracks in order to become successful individuals in today’s society.

**Personal Perspective of Researchers**

**Dr. Jennifer Bailey**

Prior to coming to the university where I currently teach, I was a classroom teacher with eight years of teaching experience in first, second, third and fifth grades. I had many opportunities to “differentiate” instruction, but I never called it that. At times, I felt unsure of how to teach those students who did not fit into the “average” learning curve of the class, and I grappled for ways to meet their needs. My last teaching assignment was in a K-12 setting at a small magnet school for the arts where the work of Gardner was implemented daily into the lesson plans for the children while infusing the arts into the curriculum. I believed it was so important to meet all my students’ needs by planning lessons and activities using the multiple-intelligences theory (Gardner, 2000), that in time, it became almost second nature for me while planning lessons for all my students.

When I began working at the university, I was given an opportunity to teach a graduate class entitled, “Differentiated Instruction.” This became an on-going learning experience for me, as I became an active learner right along with my graduate students. We worked together to learn how to effectively differentiate instruction in one classroom full of students who had varying abilities and were on different grade levels. I modeled how to differentiate the content, the product and/or the process in my own lessons and assignments. As I taught this graduate class, I became interested in investigating what other teachers were doing to differentiate instruction in their classroom, as I wanted to find some concrete examples that I could share with my students.
**Dr. Thea H. Williams-Black**

As a fifth-generation educator, teacher of gifted and regular education students, professor where I teach undergraduate and graduate level students' literacy and gifted education courses, literacy consultant and a former director for a nationally known gifted education program, I have had the experience of seeing and implementing differentiated instruction in a variety of ways. From implementing Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) to using Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (2000), I have exposed students and educators who have crossed my path with knowledge that I believe was differentiated in order to meet their academic needs. When teaching, my primary focus is to try to connect what I am teaching to each student in my class. Doing this requires me to seek personal information on my students, which is done by conducting interest inventories at the beginning of the year. Even though, at times, this is time consuming, I find it relevant in order to meet my students' needs. Although I feel this style of teaching is very important and relevant, I was not sure if ALL teachers felt differentiating instruction was relevant too. Therefore, the research study was to determine if teachers felt differentiating instruction was important enough to use in the classroom and how differentiating the content, the process, and/or the product was incorporated into the lesson plans in order to meet their students' needs.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is supported by the research in differentiated instruction (Berger, 2000; Heacox, 2002; Theroux, 2004; Tomlinson, 1995; Willis & Mann, 2000). In the past, research in differentiated instruction has primarily targeted gifted and talented students. However, it is now becoming an instructional tool that regular education classroom teachers can use in their lesson plans to meet the needs of all of their students. Several researchers (Berger, 2000; Heacox, 2002; Theroux, 2004; Tomlinson, 1995; Willis & Mann, 2000) identified three ways to modify the lesson plan in order to provide differentiate instruction effectively in the classroom. They were (a) differentiating the content/topic, (b) differentiating the process/activities, and (c) differentiating the product. Thus, to meet each student's individual needs in the classroom, the teacher can provide differentiated learning by providing choice in either or all of the areas listed above.

**Differentiating the Content**

One of the three ways to differentiate instruction is through changing the content. The content of the lesson is the curriculum that is being taught. Tomlinson (2001) identified this as the "input" of teaching and learning. When differentiating the content, teachers target what they want students to master. Differentiating the content requires teachers to either modify or adapt
how they give students access to the material they want the students to learn (Tomlinson, 2001).

Heacox (2002) identified several actions that teachers can take to differentiate the content for their students. One way teachers can differentiate the content or the curriculum they teach is by providing students with the opportunity to choose a subtopic within a main topic or unit. This allows students to explore in greater depth a topic of interest which will then be presented to the class. As each student presents the information on their subtopic, the whole class learns more about the topic in general. Another way to differentiate the content is to provide students with different resources that match their current reading level or level of understanding (Heacox, 2002). These levels are determined by preassessing both students’ skills and knowledge. In order to differentiate content, teachers need to be knowledgeable not only about their students’ skills and knowledge, and their content, but they also need to have access to a large variety of nonfiction content children’s books which are written at different reading levels on the content topic being studied.

There are several strategies that the teacher can use in order to implement differentiated instruction within the content of a lesson. Teachers can use acceleration, compacting, variety, reorganization, flexible pacing, advanced or complex concepts, abstractions, materials, and interdisciplinary or thematic approaches. While differentiating instruction within the content, it is encouraged, when relevant, that students move at their own pace (Berger, 2000); although, it is strongly encouraged for students to meet specified deadlines for projects even though students are working at their own pace.

**Differentiating the Process/Activities**

Differentiating the process/activities incorporates learning activities or strategies that provide appropriate methods for students to explore concepts of the content (Theroux, 2004). Tomlinson (2001) identified this procedure as “sense-making.” The process is differentiated not only by how the teacher decides to teach (lecture for auditory learners; centers for tactile learners; small group and whole group), but by the strategies the teacher has the students use to help them explore the content that is being taught.

In order to differentiate the process, Tomlinson (2001) believed that “activities should be interesting to the students, allow the students to think on a higher level, and allow the students to use key skills in order to understand the key ideas” (p. 79). She also emphasized that the activities be intellectually demanding. There are several strategies available that the teacher can use to differentiate instruction within the “activity” of a lesson. This can be done via higher-order thinking, open-ended thinking, discovery, reasoning, and research.
A few classroom strategies that a teacher can use to differentiate the process are literature circles, graphic organizers, learning logs, role playing, cooperative controversy, centers or workstations, interactive bulletin board and encouraging the students to use a variety of learning strategies within the classroom (Tomlinson, 2001). Children should be encouraged to choose the activity or strategy that best fits their learning style (Sprenger, 2003).

**Differentiating the Product**

A product is what a student develops to show their understanding of the content which was taught. Differentiating the product encourages students to demonstrate what they have learned in a wide variety of forms that reflect knowledge and ability to manipulate an idea. This phase of differentiating is identified as evaluation (Tomlinson, 2003). Differentiating the product allows students to self-select a way to show they have learned the material that was taught. When students self-select their product, they normally choose a method that will provide them success which most likely will coincide with their own learning style(s).

This can be accomplished by incorporating Gardner's (2000) Multiple Intelligences or focusing on students' learning styles. Gardner identified eight intelligences which enable teachers to better understand and teach all children successfully. These intelligences are: (1) verbal-linguistic, which is the understanding of graphophonics, syntax and semantics of language; (2) logical-mathematical, which means one uses logical structures such as patterns while thinking and writing; (3) musical, which is the ability to express one's thoughts and ideas in melody and rhythmic patterns; (4) spatial intelligence is the ability to perceive the visual world accurately; (5) bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is the ability to control one's bodily motions and handle objects skillfully; (6) interpersonal intelligence is the ability to read people's body language and determine their moods; (7) intrapersonal intelligence means you have the ability to understand yourself; and (8) the naturalist intelligence means to have the ability to recognize and classify various plants and animals in the environment and to adapt to living in any type of environment.

**Purpose of the Study**

This mixed-method study was done in order to answer the following questions: (a) How many teachers use differentiated instruction in their classroom? (b) What type of differentiated instruction is taking place in elementary and secondary classrooms? (c) How are the unique methods or strategies being used to differentiate the content, the process, and the product related to literacy instruction?
Methods
Participants

The researchers sent a survey to a purposeful sample of 24 elementary and secondary classroom teachers. These teachers were known by the researchers, and they were currently teaching in Florida, Mississippi, California, and Virginia. These teachers had varying degrees of classroom experiences, as they had been teaching anywhere from 1-13 years. They either held a master's degree in reading or are currently working on an advanced reading degree. The teachers were all female and Caucasian. Even though each teacher was asked to pass a copy of the survey on to a teacher in their building, this did not appear to have happened, as only 14 completed surveys were returned (56%). However, the survey responses came from teachers who represented all four states.

After analyzing the data from the surveys, the researchers concluded that only 3 classroom teachers' descriptions of classroom happenings matched the researchers' understanding of differentiated instruction while teaching literacy, as they described two or more "unique" reading activities that differentiated the product, process, and/or content. They used instructional methods that allowed their students to use their best learning style(s) or preferred learning to adjust assignments, assessments, and activities while still adhering to the state-mandated standards. Thus, these 3 classroom teachers, 2 of whom were Dr. Bailey's former graduate students, were further interviewed and observed while teaching by the researchers. These 3 teachers included 1 elementary teacher in a California school and 2 secondary teachers in a Florida school. The descriptions of their classrooms are below.

Background of Three Main Participants

Sharon's Class

Sharon, a third-year teacher, held a bachelor's degree in business and a master's degree in Reading Instruction. She had certifications in secondary English and in exceptional student education. Sharon taught tenth-grade English in a suburban school in the Florida Panhandle where only 8% of the student population received free and reduced lunch rates. Sixteen percent of the students qualified for special education services. However, most of these students were in an inclusion class where they were taught the specific benchmarks and content area materials by either one teacher with a reading certification or two teachers in a coteaching situation. Eighty-six percent of the students were Caucasian, while 14% of the students were considered minority and none had limited English proficiency rates.

Sharon was in an inclusion, coteaching class wherein she was the Special education/English teacher and her coteacher was the official "reading"
teacher. Together their goal was to help the students in their Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) deficient class pass the state required test. Students in this class had to pass the test in order to graduate. There were 20 students in the class during the observation. Two of the students were of Hispanic/Latino decent, 1 student was African American, and 17 students were Caucasian.

In her own words Sharon said,

Although we are an English class, our focus is on reading strategies that will improve their reading skills. My students do not use “good reader” practices. They can answer surface questions, but not deep, inferential questions. They are afraid of giving the wrong answer and do not take responsibility for their learning.

Keisha’s Class

Keisha, a first-year teacher, taught at the same school as Sharon. She was asked by her principal to take the “Fast Track” reading endorsement program; so she could proficiently teach students who needed remedial work in content area reading. She had a bachelor’s degree in business and was working on her master’s degree in reading instruction.

Keisha’s class was a 9th and 10th grade reading and world history combination class in a high school in the Florida Panhandle. Her 15 students were mainly Caucasian and consisted of 8 boys and 7 girls. These students had not passed the FCAT and were placed in remedial classes because of their poor grades. The passing score for the FCAT was 300 and the students’ average scores were 221. The students were labeled “level one” because of their academic history and had shown little to no gain the year before.

Becky’s Class

Becky had been teaching for eight years in both Florida and California. She had a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a master’s degree in reading instruction. She participated in several district led inservice training sessions on differentiated instruction.

Becky taught in a self-contained third-grade classroom in a Title I school in the city limits of Los Angeles, California. Her 19 students, which consisted of 9 girls and 10 boys, were mainly Latino with 5 English as a Second Language (ESL) students, 1 gifted and talented student and 1 special education student. Three were performing above grade level, 9 were performing at grade level, and 7 were performing below grade level.
Materials

This study consisted of the researchers’ self-designed survey, informal interviews, and instructional documentation. Each instrument was used so the researchers could gain a better understanding of “if” and “how” teachers differentiated instruction within their classroom.

Survey

The survey (See Appendix A) asked the teachers how long they had taught, what type of school they taught in, how they defined differentiated instruction, how receptive students, parents and administrators were to differentiated instruction and what literacy activities they did with their students. The researchers wanted to gain an understanding of what teachers actually understood about differentiated instruction and if they truly valued it as an instructional tool. There was also an interest in finding out the different perspectives on differentiating instruction at various school sites.

Informal Interviews

During each of the classroom observations, time was set aside to meet informally with each teacher. Each teacher was asked to reflect on the particular lesson or activity, that was observed and to explain how they felt this activity differentiated instruction. Teachers were also asked how they planned for each activity including any types of needs assessment. Student work samples and/or other types of instructional material were available for the researcher to peruse. All three conversations were informal, yet very informative as to how they each planned for instruction based on the needs of their students.

Instructional Documentation

While observing Sharon, the primary focus was on gaining a better understanding of how she had implemented the “Mystery Monday” activity as well as viewing student writing samples. Sharon was able to show several different mysteries and the students’ writing notebooks. She had changed the activity several times since the beginning of the year and she would continue to change and make adjustments either for the whole class or for small groups of students.

In Keisha’s class, observation of the actual work pieces the students produced at each of the work stations was available. The researcher was introduced to the READ 180 (Scholastic) program they used on the computers and the lexiled material that went with the program. The researcher was also interested in seeing the passages they read for the fluency checks and the charts used to graph their results.

Observation of the actual spelling assessment in Becky’s classroom was not available; however, the researcher was able to observe the state man-
dated text and examples of the Super Star Speller assignments and tests. Classroom bulletin boards and other learning areas/centers around the classroom, as well as examples of student work that had been completed at the different centers, were available to view.

**Researcher's Observation**

The researcher wanted to observe each teacher in their natural setting. Thus, the researcher set up purposeful observations to see particular lessons of interest revealed in the surveys. When the researcher entered Sharon's classroom she was interested in seeing the entire “Mystery Monday” lesson. The researcher was able to observe Sharon’s classroom several times throughout the year due to her proximity to the university. Every time the researcher arrived in Sharon’s classroom, she purposely came in between periods so students were just entering the classroom. This way the researcher was able to sit in the back and observe Sharon’s lesson as a nonparticipant. The entire lesson was observed and time was allotted to wander around the classroom, as the students were involved in solving the mystery and writing their conclusions.

Keisha and Sharon taught at the same school; therefore, it was easy to access their classrooms. Observation of Keisha occurred on two different occasions. As with Sharon, the researcher arrived in between classes as not to disturb the students. On the first visit, the researcher was able to sit in the back of the class and watch as she informally assessed three different students using a 1 minute fluency check. Then an observation of Keisha administering informal conferences with each of these students occurred. She discussed with each student how they each raised their fluency level. They each graphed their new fluency level on a chart and discussed future goals, such as working on prosody or voice inflection as they read. Each assessment and conference lasted no more than 5 minutes. On the second visit, the researcher was able to observe Keisha’s students in their work stations. She chose a group of four students to read with her while she allowed the other students to choose a work station, such as: computer, word wall, partner reading or independent reading. Observations of these students occurred for approximately 20 minutes at the station of their choice, after which a small group lesson/conference session was observed.

Observation of Becky’s class in Los Angeles, California, took place right before the winter break. Only one chance was allotted to conduct this observation due to its location. While observing, the researcher became more of a participant-observer, as the students were very interested in the stranger in their classroom especially at this time of year. Observations of shared reading, a read-aloud and circle time were conducted during this time. Unfortunately, the researcher was not able to see the actual Super Star Speller activity but was able to view student work samples, teacher-made interactive
bulletin boards, and center areas around the room. Additional data was collected through in-depth teacher interviews.

**Data Collection**

Data for this research was collected in several different ways. The initial data was collected through a survey that was e-mailed to a purposeful sample of 24 classroom teachers who were known to the researchers (See Appendix A). They were also asked to share the survey with fellow teachers in their building. However, this did not seem to occur, as only 14 surveys were filled out and returned. Once the surveys were returned, they were read several times by the researchers and a discussion took place to determine “if” and “how” each teacher perceived differentiated instruction.

The “if” gave quantitative results. It was determined that only three teachers out of the 14 who responded to the survey had the same understanding of differentiated instruction that the researchers had. The “how” was determined by qualitative data. For the qualitative data, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria was used to verify data collection, analysis, and reporting. The participants in the study judged the credibility of the research. Member checks were used with the teachers to confirm the content of the information collected from their informal interviews. To ensure credibility of the data, triangulation procedures were followed by obtaining multiple sources of evidence such as interviews, observations from the teachers and the researcher as a participant observer. Lincoln and Guba identify transferability as the degree to which the results of qualitative research may be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. Transferability is the responsibility of the researchers. The transferability was enhanced by describing the research context and key issues, such as patterns and themes, which were important to the study. Dependability was maintained by describing any changes that occurred in the setting and how the changes affected the way the researchers approached the study. The researchers checked and rechecked the data collected throughout the study. All participants in the study were given the opportunity to confirm the findings of the study. The researchers also used peer analysis to verify themes that emerged from the data and to verify interpretations that were made throughout the process of data collection. Interview data were transcribed by the researchers and destroyed when the study was completed.

Eleven of the 14 teachers listed activities that did not meet characteristics that the researchers were looking for based on Tomlinson’s (2001) work (differentiating the content, differentiating the process, and differentiating the product). From the analyzed data and the in-depth discussions on several surveys, three teachers were chosen for a further interview and a time was
set up to both observe the happenings in the classroom and have an in depth discussion with the classroom teachers. Work samples, lesson plans, photographs, and other instructional materials were collected from each of these teachers during the interview and observation process.

**Data Analysis**

Marshall and Rossman (1995) suggest four procedures for data analysis. These procedures include (a) organizing the data; (b) generating themes and patterns; (c) checking the emerging theories, inferences and postulations against the data; and (d) searching for alternative explanations. These procedures were used to analyze the data collected throughout the research. Initially, the surveys were analyzed by reading and rereading the information provided to see if any answers matched what the research suggested were “good” or unique differentiated instructional strategies. Once the data were highlighted the researchers developed a list of strategies and determined who submitted the particular strategy or suggestion of interest. Next, they determined which researcher would visit each classroom. Depending on if the teacher was easily accessible, one or more classroom visits and informal interviews with that teacher were planned.

After completing each visit, each researcher separately reviewed and analyzed the work samples, pictures, anecdotal and observational data collected from each of the three teachers. As they did this, they were able to organize the information into three themes that matched the work of Tomlinson (2001). The themes included how each teacher differentiated instruction through the use of either one or more of the following: (a) differentiating the content/topic; (b) differentiating the process/activities; and (c) differentiating the product. The researchers discussed how each piece of data fit into one of the categories above as methods of differentiated instruction. The data were rechecked several times before forming a conclusion. Table 1 identifies the happenings in the classroom and how each teacher differentiated the content, the process, and/or the product through their literacy activities and how they differentiated through the use of learning profiles such as Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Bloom, 1956) and Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 2000).

Data analysis procedures found that each teacher truly used unique activities to differentiate instruction. They used one or more of the methods outlined by Tomlinson (2001) to differentiate their literacy instruction. Several of the activities used met the needs of the students’ learning styles.
Findings

How Sharon Differentiated Instruction

Sharon found that her students had trouble reading and identifying with the grade level reading textbook that had been provided by the school district. The textbook not only contained stories that were too long, but they were written at a higher reading level than her students could read. Thus, Sharon wanted to locate some high interest, low reading level material. While attending a workshop, she learned about www.mystery.net, which is an online resource containing a variety of short mystery scenarios. Sharon felt that these stories would help her students develop a larger vocabulary and motivate them to work on their comprehension skills. Therefore, Sharon developed “Mystery Mondays” as a way to meet the needs of her students and keep them motivated while working on building their vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension.

Each Monday, the students received a new, short, one-to-two page, high-interest low-reading level mystery scenario. Prior to their reading of the mystery, Sharon and her coteacher helped the students determine the meaning of key vocabulary words that they felt would cause the students trouble. On the day that the first observation occurred, the words “strangulation,” “Medical Examiner,” “indicate,” “compact” (from a lady’s purse), “belligerent,” and “bigamist” were being taught during the vocabulary instruction.

After the vocabulary instruction occurred, the students were instructed to read and solve the mystery. At the beginning of the year, Sharon read the mystery scenario to the students and had them work as a class to solve the mysteries. However, as the year progressed, the students worked in small groups, and then independently read and solved the mystery and determined who had committed the crime.

Based on her students’ needs, Sharon developed and introduced a content frame (See Appendix B) graphic organizer to assist her students with their comprehension while reading the mystery scenarios. At first, the content frame was used as a scaffolding tool that the students used to write down the clues. This provided the students with a visual representation of the story so they could write down and examine the details in order to analyze and piece together the information accurately and determine who committed the crime. However, as the year went on and the students became better at solving the mysteries, they could decide if they would continue to use the content frame to help them in their quest.

When the second observation took place at the end of March, the researchers noticed that the process had changed since their first observation in January. Now, the students were grouped together and there was no discussion prior to reading the mystery scenario. Plus, Sharon had divided the mystery into parts, and the first task of each group was to reassemble it in the correct order. Even with this extra task, the students still effortlessly com-
completed the activity within the class period. It was quite evident that they could not wait to find out who committed the crime. The researchers also noticed that fewer students relied on the content frames to organize their thoughts. When Sharon was asked about the success of this activity she stated,

I don’t really care if they ‘solve’ the mystery correctly. I am looking to see if they have clear, coherent ideas and can back them up. That is why I introduced the content frame. I wanted them to use the tool to organize their thoughts and writing.

**How Keisha Differentiated Instruction**

Keisha presented unique activities which helped her differentiate instruction for comprehension and fluency for her high school students. These students were in class an extended period of time to allow for more instruction in both history and reading.

At the beginning of each new world history theme, Keisha introduced the text chapter to the whole class. This whole group instruction included such activities as defining the vocabulary terms given in the chapter, giving supporting details of the particular era being studied, or discussing any other facts that she felt the students needed to know before reading. Groups were then determined. Each group was assigned a different task while they were reading the text chapter. For instance, one group may need to use a specific strategy such as Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review (SQ3R) (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984) to assist with their comprehension of the story. Another group may need to gather more background knowledge on the topic through either library or computer research. Keisha used three different work stations in her classroom as a means to help her work either one-on-one or in small groups with the students. The stations consisted of independent reading, computer time, and small groups. Station time was approximately 30 minutes every day. The school used the READ 180 Program (Scholastic); so the independent station and computer stations were developed with materials from that program.

The day of observation, the group working on the computer station was reading a passage about the “Harlem Renaissance.” They worked through a short (5 minute) vocabulary lesson then read a passage. They were asked a series of 10 comprehension questions and were guided to a story at a particular lexile level. Keisha had these books in various “cozy corners” around the room. After completing the computer activity, the students would select a book and head to a self-chosen area to read quietly. Many students started by reading their books. At various times throughout the chapter books, students were prompted to do a “quick write” on the computer based on what they read. Keisha had the ability to view each student’s file to read and track the quick writes and assessments. The program provided instructional recommendations that Keisha could use to help match her instruction to the assessment data she gathered about the students.
Keisha selected other students to work with in small groups or one-on-one during the third station time. She worked on specific strategies that they needed during this time by taking anecdotal records and noting patterns of behaviors for each student weekly during the small group station time. These notes also helped guide her instruction and place students into groups to work on specific strategies or to review content material.

Since her goal was to help her students pass the FCAT while learning social studies content, the other part of the class time was devoted to specific reading strategy instruction. On Fluency Fridays, students tracked their own progress on a chart where they graphed their words per minute. Then, they were given teacher input during individual conference time. Keisha stated that many of her students knew exactly what they used (voice inflection, using a faster pace, being more familiar with high frequency words) to increase their fluency rates. Students were then paired together to work on increasing their fluency rates. Each quarter Keisha placed the students in groups based on their fluency rates to perform a reader's theatre presentation for the class. Sometimes she would mix the students of various rates and other times they were at approximately the same level. The plays were performed orally for the class. After the performance, the class discussed together how fluently each student performed and how fluency could be improved.

In order to differentiate instruction effectively, Keisha recommends:

Use strategies that you can vary to fit the learning styles and comprehension level of the students in your class. Provide instruction of new material to the whole class; then tailor it to the individual abilities during small group time. Remember, it's not about what you teach, but what students learn and how they grow.

Literacy stations helped Keisha differentiate the content. She had three different stations including the READ 180 (Scholastic) station, independent reading and a teacher/student conferencing station. During the conferences, the student and Keisha worked together to make goals for learning based on self-analysis and teacher anecdotal records. Weekly fluency checks were a big part of the assessment analysis process, as Keisha found that this was a large area of need based on initial assessments and state test scores.

Keisha also had the students write scripts and perform in reader's theatre, which differentiated the process of her students' learning. Each student was placed in a group based on their fluency rate and prosody. The students either were given scripts, or they wrote their own script depending on their ability level and interests. Each group performed the reader's theatre production for a class, and then self-evaluated their performance.
How Becky Differentiated Instruction

Becky differentiated her spelling instruction through an activity she called, “Super Star Speller (SSS).” On Fridays all of her students would take a pretest on the next week's spelling list from the district’s adopted text. If 100% was earned on the test, then the students were allowed to choose five words from their reading, science, or social studies text glossary or from the dictionary. This became their spelling list for the next week. Students brought the words each Monday for the teacher to approve for the spelling test on Friday. Students still received a grade that week based on their state mandated list and were required to do spelling lessons with the class based on their Super Star Speller (SSS) list. However, students worked on spelling words that interested them, as long as they knew the spelling patterns that were important.

Becky also used literacy centers and interactive bulletin boards as a means to differentiate literacy instruction in her classroom. According to Tomlinson (2001), the use of centers assists with providing small-group instructional time. She used word game centers where the students could choose games independently, or she would choose for them, based on a particular need she saw (working with word families or spelling). One bulletin board in the classroom was used as her word wall. During center time, the students would use pointers and clipboards and play games related to the words as a means to practice high frequency words. Becky used transparency activities on an overhead projector in order for the whole class to have the opportunity to see the lesson as it was being taught. The students would read poems, circle parts of speech, word patterns, sentence parts or whatever designated activity she let them choose from for that day. While small groups were participating in the centers, she held guided-reading groups or individual conferences to work on particular strategies the students' needed. One whole area of the room was designated as “Our Literacy Corner” and one bulletin board in the corner caught the researcher’s eye. It said, “We’re Growing Our Reading Tree.” Becky had placed definitions of different genres of books: folk tales, biographies, non-fiction on leaves. As students read a particular book of that genre, they wrote the title on a cut-out leaf and placed it on the tree. Becky shared that students were encouraged to read from every genre throughout the year. Students who placed leaves on the tree were encouraged to share with their classmates about their book. Becky found out which students were interested in certain topics or genres through informal discussions and placed students into groups based on their interest, as Tomlinson (2001) suggests.

According to Becky, “Differentiation is what we have always done. It is really just taking responsibility for helping all students and meeting their needs. You have to provide something for all of them. You have to keep everyone motivated.”

While teaching, Becky differentiated both the content she taught and the process she used to help her students learn. She differentiated the content and
helped her “higher” spellers who had already passed the state-mandated tests by encouraging them to create their own spelling lists. As students showed proficiency on their weekly spelling list, they were allowed to choose their own words in other content books to use with the spelling assignments they created also.

To differentiate the process, Becky used literacy centers and interactive bulletin boards. This helped her work with small guided-reading groups as other students read independently or in small groups in literacy centers around the room. Students could choose centers based on their interest and many of the centers contained activities at various ability levels based on the needs of the students. She encouraged the students to read books based on their interests by providing opportunities for every student to share orally. The goal of this sharing was to help those students who had a hard time choosing books on their own to learn about books that they might enjoy. Through an interactive bulletin board, the students were able to identify books in different genres.

Table 1. “How” Teachers Showed Differentiated Instruction

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<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Differentiating the Content/Topic</th>
<th>Differentiating the Process/Activities</th>
<th>Differentiating the Product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>• Developed content frame to aid with comprehension and writing a reflection</td>
<td>• Various levels of scaffolding for each student</td>
<td>• Students worked with linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Students who passed a prespelling test with a 100% were able to choose new words to work with that week based on their interests and readiness</td>
<td>• Asked multiple levels of questions and expected students to make inferences (HOTS)</td>
<td>• Literacy Workstations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>• Workstations</td>
<td>• Students worked in small groups based on their fluency rates and abilities as found in the weekly assessments, to practice and perform a Reader’s Theatre of their choice based on their ability levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td>• Students who passed a prespelling test with a 100% were able to choose new words to work with that week based on their interests and readiness</td>
<td>• Centers for guided reading and individual conferences to work on strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Centers for guided reading and individual conferences to work on strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interactive Bulletin Boards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Breaking the data into the three themes of differentiating instruction through the content, process, and product assisted the researchers with data analysis and conclusions. When reviewing the collected data from each teacher, we found that teachers were using a variety of activities to teach all students in a way that motivated, challenged, and excited the students at the same time. These three teachers are taking the time to differentiate their instruction in order to meet the needs of each student, while still focusing on the standards and skills that need to be taught.

The researchers were impressed by how two of the teachers used the students' interests and readiness to differentiate the content. All three used different grouping methods and provided additional scaffolding, including content frames, multiple levels of questioning, work stations, and centers to differentiate the process. Although the teachers did not directly identify Multiple Intelligences theory, they each provided students with multiple methods of reaching state benchmarks for their grade level.

Need For Further Study

As the researchers analyzed the data further, it was identified that the observed teachers did not formulate activities to differentiate the product, as the researchers projected. According to Tomlinson (2001), products should cause students to think about, apply and expand what they understand about what they have learned. There are multiple ways to differentiate the product that will challenge, create structure, or clarify the purpose for the learning.

Further studies are needed in examining practical ways teachers are differentiating the product, as it will be a beneficial addition to the current literacy research. There is also a desire to examine how universities are preparing preservice teachers to differentiate instruction. Further examination needs to determine what classroom factors hinder or stop teachers from using differentiating instruction in the classroom. A limitation of this study was the sample size. Future research should include a wider sample of teachers in different regions of the country.
References


Appendix A. Teacher's Perception on Differentiated Instruction

1. Grade level:
2. School Type (public, private, magnet . . .):
3. Years of teaching:
4. How do you define differentiated instruction?
5. How do you differentiate instruction in your classroom?
6. How do teachers in your school differentiate instruction?
7. How receptive are students to you differentiating instruction?
8. How receptive are parents to you differentiating instruction?
9. How receptive are teachers in your school to differentiating instruction?
10. Does your principal support you differentiating instruction in your classroom? 
    How do you know he/she supports you?
11. Do you feel differentiated instruction should only be incorporated for gifted and 
    talented students? Why or why not?
12. How do you assess and assign grades with differentiation in mind?

Appendix B.

Name: __________________________
Date: __________________________ Period: __________________________

Mystery Monday

Title: __________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VICTIM</th>
<th>INFORMATION ABOUT VICTIM</th>
<th>INFORMATION ABOUT CRIME</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>RELATIONSHIP TO VICTIM</td>
<td>OPPORTUNITY</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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