

Differentiation in Middle Level Literacy Classrooms: The Students Speak

Mary F. Roe
Washington State University

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In understanding classroom literacy events in middle schools, researchers most often turn their analytic gaze to teachers and seek to either understand or influence their classroom practices (e.g., Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007). Too few extend comparable attention to students. When they do, they tend to look at their school lives in a general sense (e.g., Perlstein, 2003) or attend to specific students in order to understand teachers' practices (e.g., Hynds, 1997). In this study, I promote a different path that places the students' viewpoints center stage. Specifically, I take a practice of interest, differentiation, and examine it exclusively from the perspectives of urban, rural, and suburban middle school students. This investigation includes the following specific purposes: (1) to identify students' understandings of differentiation, (2) to understand their responses to differentiated literacy instruction provided in their classrooms and schools, and (3) to understand students' views of the challenges and successes of their teachers' differentiation attempts. Overall, it adds student voices to the previous paths that research in this area has followed.

Guiding Premises

Several pieces of scholarship and theoretical positions inform this work. The first addresses an overall commitment to empowering students by obtaining insights into their opinions and preferences. This orientation finds a place in the current attention to sociocultural research and its acknowledged importance of carving out space for the lived experiences for whom events matter (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Germane to this study, and as scholars like Lee (2007) asserts, the learning expected in schools should not remain distanced from students' cultures and preferences. I agree. Like Wilhelm (1997), I turn directly to students. While he

closely studied students' approaches to understanding text in his classroom, I look at a specific feature of current importance, differentiation, across a variety of classrooms and locations. Second, and as expected, the scholarship on differentiation provides a key line of inquiry for this project. From it I identified many proposals about what teachers might do. These proposals include the importance of acquiring information about students' achievements and needs. While these assessments matter, students serve as objects of teachers' actions. However, directly acquiring students' perceptions and opinions about classroom practices and teacher actions matters, too.

The definition of differentiation obviously plays a central role in this investigation. Turning to existing scholarship does not prove helpful since it falls short of a definitive set of attributes. Instead, as Roe and Egbert (in press) note, at least four categories of definitions emerge. The first includes those who simply encourage differentiation without offering a specific way to accomplish it. For example, some scholars indirectly refer to differentiation without specifically setting a path for including it (e.g., Turner, 2005; Jimenez, 1997). In the second category, scholars explicitly offer suggestions to teachers for accomplishing differentiation (e.g., Gregory & Chapman, 2007). Proponents of a third direction explore differentiation as a process. Tomlinson, with her recommendations to consider categories such as content, process, and product, typifies this group. Walpole and McKenna (2007) also view differentiation as a process and emphasize assessment as a necessary feature. Roe and Egbert label the final category innovators. This group proposes technology as a vehicle to enact differentiation (Egbert, 2007). For this investigation, I cast a broad net and will turn to students' views and perceptions to further frame differentiation's definition.

Finally, the scholarship that addresses the many dimensions of literacy learning and instruction for middle level students matters. From it, we learn about general processes such as cognitive flexibility that undergird literacy learning (e.g., Cartwright, 2008). It also pinpoints specific practices of overall importance for middle level students (e.g., Irvin, 1998; Wood & Blanton, 2009). In addition, it alerts us to issues of equity and the forces beyond the school that impact practices within it (e.g., Kinloch, 2010). Finally, it alerts us to issues of gender that distinguishes literacy learning for male and female middle school students (e.g., Bettis & Roe, 2008; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In combination, it forms a varied and strong base for positioning the ideas and views of the middle school student participants in this investigation.

These combined understandings and perspectives hold importance. However, a return to a sociocultural orientation makes one point evident: the relative exclusion of important participants in our understanding and implementation of differentiation - students. I initiate their inclusion by closely conversing with them to add their understandings to the mix. In the end, the findings from this study forge a path for a fuller and richer understanding and definition of differentiation - one that views students as central players rather than objects of its goals.

Research Method

Background

This study stemmed from a wider study that focused on teachers' understanding and implementation of differentiation (Roe, 2010). In that study, the students offered a supporting cast at best. Here, they take center stage. As with the wider study, I employed a qualitative design (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to unveil students' experiences, opinions, and stances regarding differentiation. To maximize variation and expand the breadth of

understandings, the research locales included nine, seventh grade, middle school classrooms in the northwest: one in an urban area, two in suburban, and one rural. Depending on the school, the classrooms offered a language arts block (reading and writing) and a separate social studies class or a block that combined social studies and the language arts. To reiterate, the students in these classrooms became the targeted participants in this study and subsidiary to one related to their teachers' implementation of differentiation practices (Roe, 2010). While initially intended to simply be part of the overall investigation, their ideas became too insightful to not receive a more full and rich attention.

The Students

Beyond the urban, rural, and suburban placement of these students' schools, they differed in terms of their first languages, SES status as judged by their eligibility for free and reduced lunch, ethnic variations, and cultural diversity. As Merriam (2002) suggests, an intentional inclusion of a breadth of factors increases the possibility for results to apply to a greater range of situations. From this larger group of students in the nine classrooms, 30 students, selected to represent the wider population and also maximize the range of students' backgrounds and experiences across these locations, participated in individually conducted interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data source included semi-structured and individually conducted interviews with the students. However, the observations of these students in their classrooms from the larger study resurfaced here to confirm and provide examples of the ideas they reported. In the end, I interviewed 30 students. I conducted the interviews at the conclusion of the school year. The transcriptions of the interviews provided notes for subsequent analysis. (See Appendix for the

interview protocol.)

Data analysis included the processes typical of qualitative interviews (e.g., Spradley, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For this analysis, I initially labeled sections of the interview for the information that it was designed to elicit: (1) how students define themselves as middle level students, (2) the things that support and challenge these students' classroom success, (3) their ideas about the variability and likenesses of students' classroom activities, (4) the consistency of their teachers' practices across the academic year, (5) their views on their teachers' current and possible practices that support students' learning, and (6) the contributions of home and school to their learning. Other section labels emerged as the interviews unfolded. Then, I identified the features associated with each section and coded for them. Again, the codes continued to grow as needed to capture the students' responses. Next, I combined the data across locations and students. At this point, I used frequency counts to better understand the students' experiences with differentiated practices and their responses to them. I further collapsed these categories as appropriate. To assure the accuracy and sufficiency of the labels for each category, I narrowed or expanded the codings to better represent and finely tune the categories. In the end, these students' accounts of their experiences with differentiation across a school year provided insight into my intentions to understand students' characterization of differentiation, their responses to it, and their impressions regarding its challenges and benefits. Finally, I considered these findings in light of existing research.

Results

An overall intention to address differentiation from these students' perception must include their views of themselves. Academic differentiation would fall in importance if the

students themselves did not differ. Therefore, understanding more about them becomes an important first step. Then, these self-descriptions set the stage for presenting subsequent findings more specifically linked to differentiation: their intentions to be good students, their impressions of what contribute to and distract from these intentions, their stances regarding class activities, and the input of their teachers.

Managing Busy Lives: Students' Descriptions of Themselves

For the large majority of these students, their descriptions include sports. Whether male or female, they engage in school athletic events. Many of them extend this involvement with the same or different sports done at school to community clubs and organizations. Many pride themselves on placement in advanced classes for math or science. Others mention the ways which family responsibilities (such as doing a range of chores and tending to younger brothers and sisters) and other outside interests (e.g., computer games, scrapbooking, hunting) further define them. They add to these events time with friends. Only one student defined himself by singularly mentioning school academics. Overall, and as one student explained, they want to “just be kids.”

Being Good Students

Included in this overall goal to “just be kids” is an oft mentioned hope to be “good students.” Accomplishing this involves a myriad of intertwining pieces of things they do, events they need to countermand, and the contributions of others at school and home.

Doing for themselves. Students appreciate the opportunity to take charge of their academic efforts. As one student explains, “It would be kind of interesting to figure out what you did wrong - to figure out what you can improve on.” In responding directly to the things that they

have identified that help them do well in school, these students discuss four pervasive notions: (1) stay focused, (2) balance the pull of peers between things that help them and things that don't, (3) stay organized, and (4) follow directions. In staying focused, they discuss the benefits of remaining attentive, maximizing the availability of class time to get work done (and as a result avoiding the need to take work home), and, as the above descriptions suggest, balancing school and out-of-school commitments. All of these students mention the helpfulness of interacting with peers. They view the chance to work with each other as simultaneously providing that important blend of sociability and helpfulness. Staying organized includes keeping due dates and expectations in mind. For many students, the availability of rubrics contributes to their personal organization. At two of the schools, students can take classes designed to overcoming organizational glitches. At another, they can choose a study hall type class in lieu of an elective where they can complete class assignments under the supervision and helpfulness of a teacher. To better follow directions, they discuss the role of questions which they willingly pose to teachers and peers. In the end, one student believes that "if I know what an assignment is and I understand it and I start working ahead I get it done. I just get it done."

Avoiding pitfalls. As much as students appreciate the chances to learn with and from peers, they also acknowledge that they sometimes need to stand firm to avoid being pulled from the task at hand. They need to block out students talking, being loud, passing notes, and just generally bothering them. However, talking wins out as the main disruption. A student explains the challenge: "We get caught up in a lot of things. If someone is talking and they bring up a subject, then it's something random. And I think it's just talking that kind of blows everybody off . . ." Another student explains how he meets this challenge: "I try to just zone them out and get

my work done.” While one student can “just get back to work. It’s pretty easy to do,” another realizes that “lots of people can’t handle that (kids talking), but I can.” On other occasions, “the students are really disrespectful, so I just turn around and say, be quiet, and they will, and it’s a safe environment so you can ask anything and no one’s going to judge you for it.”

Others talk about the temptation to “push out” school work by thinking about an upcoming camping trip or concert or other things linked to the busyness of their lives that ultimately leads to procrastinating. One student’s comments express a tendency held by many: “I’m kind of a procrastinator on my project and stuff. Sometimes, I get it done in the end, but usually it’s pretty close to the deadline.”

As much as students value participation in sports, they also realize the tension of time. For one student this means that “sometimes I have too many sports, and I have to drop one of those sports to get my grades back up, but usually I do just fine.” Another student mentioned moving from a player to a manager in order to “give herself time to study.” In the main, and as one student summarizes, “talking and procrastinating” pose the biggest challenges.

Welcoming assistance: School success as more than an individual pursuit. These students often mention the benefits of school practices such as classes or after school study clubs that help them keep their school work on a positive track. However, many also include the support of family. Some need to overcome the negative impressions established by older siblings. As one explains, “my brothers have made a really bad influence on the school because of all the bad stuff they’ve done. I’m proving everybody that I’m not like that.” Others need to meet family expectations. For some, this involves keeping a schedule. “When we come home we have a certain schedule - we just do our sports and stuff, but when we come home we can’t go out to

play until we have our homework done. We have to do all of our homework first.” For others, it’s the expectation for good grades. “My mom requires us to have really good grades because my whole family is like required - like As. We’re supposed to have a 4.0, so that kind of gets me up to the top because we’re supposed to have good grades or else we get in trouble.” Less often, students mention the direct help that they receive from a parent or older sibling. “Whenever I get stuck with my math or something, my family really does help me out at home. My brother’s really good at math and my mom is a fairly good writer.”

From commenting on themselves and their attempts to be good students, students’ interviews turned to their understandings of classroom practices. They shared their beliefs about whether classrooms alter or should alter the things that students do. They then turned to the things that teachers do and could do to help them and other students learn better. In the following sections, I characterize their explanations.

Doing the Same Things Differently

These students present a united front on whether students’ in-class activities remain the same for all students. As they repeatedly assert, the teachers assign activities to the whole class and the students complete them. The following sample of comments explains these classroom practices:

We’re assigned the same thing. We might have different ideas on how to do the project and answers, but we’re pretty much sticking to the same outline. Like, if she says, use power point, we use power point.

All the students do the same thing. The same deal. Same spelling. Same everything.

It’s pretty normal to me because we usually always do the same work.

Students hold the same opinion about students doing same or different things during class. For them, it makes sense for students to do the same things. Again, the students' voices across various classrooms explain these views:

We do (the same thing) and I think it's great because if you're having struggles, everyone's always helpful.

Everybody works on the same thing and helps each other and everything. I think that everybody should be equal in the classes. If someone thinks they need to do harder work, then they should get in a more advanced class, but I think everyone should do the same thing.

Um, if someone is doing something that is not as up the road as something else, then they're not going to learn as much and in the long run they're not going to learn as much and know as much. So, if I'm learning something way above and they're learning something that's lower, then they're not going to learn what I'm learning and I'll be further and they won't know as much.

The agreement about the current comparability of assignments for all students and their justifications for this practice do not set aside their belief that teachers should provide individual assistance when they or their classmates falter.

Students' Views of the Challenges and Successes of their Teachers' Differentiation Attempts

Making learning fun. For these students, assistance can take various forms. However, the fun factor assumes prime importance. Simply stated, "They [the teachers] make the class fun. And they're nice." Another student adds this: "He [the teacher] just has a way of making things fun . . . he's more fun with it and makes it interesting and makes you want to do it more. Instead

of dreading going to school and doing your work, it's fun and you enjoy it." Another student expresses agreement when she adds, "He makes everything fun so that I want to do it rather than have to do it. He is like - energetic. He always comes with a good mood toward us. Sometimes we go outside for our lessons which is another thing I like to do because I just sit at my desk and get worksheet after worksheet after worksheet after worksheet." Students also appreciate the insertion of things beyond the ordinary as a way of adding fun. In one teacher's class, "We get to use paint sometimes which is fun because we sometimes get to be artistic." A different teacher "gives us lots of examples. He has us act things out. He tells us stories that involve different topics." When students don't consider their learning fun, they wish for it and explain why: "I wish my teacher would be a little more exciting, more fun. I mean not all the time you want to be sitting there and they're explaining something else and go on to something else and it's all boring. And boring things don't always get kids motivated to learn more fully and I think being more fun and exciting would help." Students don't consider the insertion of fun into a classroom event overly demanding. As one student suggests, "Instead of simply explaining it fully like an exercise, I would make it more entertaining. So, it becomes pretty fun." The insertion of a lighthearted touch does not come without risks. According to one student, "Sometimes when we get entertained some kids take advantage and they want the teacher to be fun all the time, but we do need to work. So, sometimes we do get off task." Seemingly, it is worth the risk. A final student captures students' appreciation of the fun factor and underscores its benefits when she says, "He just makes things funner. Like sometimes you don't want to be at school because you're tired and you just want to go back to bed, but like you come to school and he's energetic and you just say, 'Ok, let's just do it'."

Explain, ask, and answer. As I noted in the study of teachers' differentiation practices (Roe, 2010), teacher assistance, a nod to differentiation, invariably links to the task at hand. In addition to having choices within the completion of the same activity, teachers also offer help along the way. For these students, their helpfulness begins with the assigning of a product and continues from there. According to one student, "All teachers explain about what to do and if you have a question they answer it." The following examples from an array of students further capture the circularity of this process:

She explains it really well the first time and she keeps going over it so everybody understands it.

She'll explain it nicely and early and we can keep asking her questions.

Before we do the project she explains it really well and goes over what we need to do and then she lets us go to work on it. And then if we have any questions we can just come and ask her.

They [the teachers] explain the directions before you start working on something. Then, if you ask them a question, they'll tell you a section of the book it's in and you can look it up and figure out how to find it.

Students also appreciate the availability of models and rubrics. "Like she'll like - projects that we're doing, she'll have one already done from the past year so we can look at it and see what we're supposed to do. And that makes it easier to see what you're required to do. And she has the rubric for us all laid out so we know exactly what to do."

As students' work progresses, these students recognize that "people can't get it as equally as other people." When those student confusions and questions arise, these students appreciate

their teachers' availability. One student describes it this way: "She's like able to stop everything that she's doing and just come over and ask you what don't you get, how can we help you get it, what have you missed." These in-the-moment explanations often involve explaining it "in a different way" as teachers attempt to "think of different things to do with different people." At times, these teachers will "bring it into more modern times, explain it in modern life, break it down and help us understand it better." They also respond to individuals. For one student, this personalization of a response involves "drawing it out." As she explains, "If I'm having trouble I sometimes ask her to draw it out for me. I was having a problem with a question. It had some bigger and more advanced words in it. She kind of dumbed it down for me and drew it out for me. Like, ok, slow it down, and she helped me understand it and she'd explain it more."

At times, the individual explanations turn into whole class directions. "If lots of people don't get it then she'll explain it again a couple more times to the whole class. She just gives us the straight answer. Or sometimes she'll give us the answer and how to do it. She just helps pretty good." Students appreciate the "straight answer" which sometimes involves a reference to specific texts or web sites. They also see the value in forthright feedback (e.g., "And she'll correct me if I'm wrong.")

When a teacher explanation falls short, students turn to each other. "I asked my friend, 'What are we supposed to do? I don't get that'." On other occasions, the teacher recognizes that his or her response falls short and requests another student to offer assistance. "Well, [the teacher] will sit down with him personally and he'll try to explain it to them in more detail and help them with ways that they can do it. And then, sometimes he'll have someone like me or one of my friends or another student go through and try and help them with it. Work it out for them."

A student offers this example:

Yea, we have this student from Russia, Sergei. He just came last year from Russia, and he still is having a little bit of trouble understanding English and stuff like that. So for one of our assignments in history, [the teacher] had me go back and help explain the questions we had to answer to him and what they meant and stuff like that.

Overall, and in these students' views, "they [the teachers] just really help you and don't say, 'Just do it'."

Discussion

The insertion of students' voices adds a pathway for understanding literacy differentiation research beyond the more primary focus on teachers that the majority of research follows.

Several pieces warrant a final note.

First, variations in students' backgrounds, circumstances, and literacy achievements make varied approaches - differentiation - crucial in helping all students read and write better. As Neuman (2008) notes, life opportunities matter. When they support students' academic growth, we must capitalize on them. When they make learning difficult, we must work to ameliorate them.

Second, teachers must not set aside the power of the fun factor and the many ways that literacy education can embrace it. Reading *can* contribute to the fixing of Chevys (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). As a student in Kinloch's (2010) study notes, "Being involved in things we interested in gives us life lessons that never go [a]way" (p. 175). Beyond the things that these students define as "fun," teachers might also consider extending their classroom materials and experiences to embrace their students' cultures. (See Hill, 2009, as an example of this

suggestion.)

Further, the perception of fairness and equity in the consideration of differentiation warrants reconsideration. For these students, choosing within a standard activity was acceptable while changing activities introduced reservations. Their reservations, while important to consider, warrant a softened stance. As Wormeli (2006) reminds us, fair isn't always equal.

Third, and without exception, these students express a desire to be good students. These students recognize and appreciate the assistance that their teachers offer and the different paths that the assistance often takes to make their success probable. However, we also want these students to be good students of life and enjoy success beyond a specific class or product. This is not a far-fetched goal. However, it does suggest a shift in the assistance that these students note and receive from their teachers. Specifically, these students do not insert the acquisition of literacy processes that apply across products into their descriptions of what they find helpful and what their teachers do (Robb, 2000). This can truncate the potential of teachers' assistance to transcend a specific activity. Attending to this lapse in addressing process doesn't disregard the helpfulness and appropriateness of helping students to acceptably complete an assignment. However, this omission does suggest a void to fill. These students' teachers could attend to process in their initial explanations. They could balance their reference to a product with the processes that support its completion during their in-the-moment responses. And, they could follow the recommendations of Opitz and Ford (2008) and frontload those ongoing areas of need that most students face. For example, these students often noted difficulty with vocabulary. This invites an attention to the many strategies that can assist the learning of unknown words (e.g., Harmon, Wood, & Medina, 2009) These students often requested help with understanding the

various texts and on-line sources that they read. Here, an attention to text structure plays a role (e.g., Irvin, 1998). These students repeatedly requested assistance answering questions. Again, empirically driven processes exist for this task, too (e.g., Raphael, 1986). For now, these are missed opportunities. Defining differentiation as the things that teachers do to support the completion of a task invites the inclusion of an attention to those general and more specific underlying processes that support its successful completion. And, including processes in the mix does more to have widespread and long-lasting impact on students' future successes. Teachers care about this future impact. This research points a direction for doing more to achieve it. For these teachers, taking this direction would demand a broadening of the many good things they currently do as well as reorienting their responses to a student's call for assistance. These shifts are both doable and practical. They warrant attention and further investigation.

In the end, this research contributes students' insights to inform the definition, use, and responses to existing differentiation activities and attempts. Consequently, it further connects differentiation research and practice to the group for whom it all matters - students.

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Appendix

Student Interview Questions

I am interested in learning from you about how you describe yourself as a middle school student. I'm particularly interested in hearing you talk about your participation in your language arts and social studies classes and what you and your teacher do to help you succeed. In fact, sometimes I may ask about specific events that I have observed. I am the only one who will know that the comments came from you. Then, so I can concentrate on what you're saying, I would like your permission to tape record our conversation. Is that OK with you?

Specific Questions:

Tell me about yourself as a middle school student.

(Clarify as necessary and use prompts to obtain a fuller account of their ideas.)

Do you consider yourself to be a good student?

Tell me about the materials you use in class. How do you feel about them?

(Probe titles and their use of these materials.)

Does every student in your class do the same thing? If yes, ask if they think that is a good idea. If no, ask how students differ in what they do.

What do you do that allows you to do well in class? What interferes with your ability to do well?

What does your teacher do that you find helpful in learning from the class?

What do you wish your teacher would do to help you learn better?

Did you notice any changes that the teacher made over the year that helped you learn better? (If yes, have them explain. If no, ask if they ever wished the teacher had done something differently for them.)

Educators use the term, differentiation, to talk about what they do to help each student succeed. If you were a teacher, how would you differentiate in your language arts and social studies classes?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about you as a student and what a teacher might do to help you learn better that my previous questions didn't cover?