Promising Practices

Role-Playing in an Inclusive Classroom
Using Realistic Simulation to Explore Differentiated Instruction

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Introduction

Students are sitting in pairs at their desks, practicing multiplication and division, taking turns asking each other questions. The teacher is circulating among the pairs, monitoring and redirecting students, as well as clarifying and reteaching the material. Meanwhile, Lucas is sitting by himself in one corner, quietly playing with his watch. In another corner, Monica also is sitting alone, rocking back and forth in her chair while humming to herself. Both children are left unattended. I am later told that Lucas, in keeping with goals outlined in his IEP, had been expected to be tracing numbers with a paraprofessional, who happened not to be in the room at that moment. Monica was to sit by herself, as she has difficulty working with others, and practice the math operations. It is clear, however, that neither child is being taught.

One of the major hurdles in preparing preservice teachers to differentiate instruction has been that they tend not to see much differentiated instruction in actual classrooms (Benjamin, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999). There always may be a contradiction in wanting to promote change in instructional practices while, at the same time, relying on a teacher education concept that is based on modeling by established teachers. The

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problem is especially obvious in the area of differentiated instruction because the practice is embedded in the contextual factors and dynamics of a classroom (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). As teacher educators, we rely on students to learn how to differentiate instruction through observation, mentoring, trial-and-error, and even differentiation that is inconsistently practiced in the schools where we place them (McBride, 2004). It is an important contradiction to resolve, as there is ample evidence to suggest that differentiating instruction allows us to better address the needs of our students, especially in the context of universal standards (Anderson, 2007; McTighe & Brown, 2005; Subban, 2006).

I have repeatedly encountered the issue of inadequate modeling in local schools while teaching courses on working with exceptional children in master's programs in elementary and secondary education. Because our students spend much of their week in public school classrooms while they take their graduate classes, it is especially important for us to connect our readings and discussions to practice by pointing to actual in-school models of the approaches that we study. At the same time, when asked to describe how her mentor teacher used differentiated instruction to meet the needs of her class, one student wrote:

> We are told to differentiate so all students can learn, but my mentor teacher doesn't differentiate. In fact, none of the teachers differentiate. They just hope the special ed kids will keep quiet. Eventually the special ed teacher will come and teach them something. Or so they hope.

Another student summed up the lesson that she took away from her placement by stating, "Mostly, differentiating means ignoring."

Given the demographic trends in our public schools, our increasingly explicit focus on addressing student diversity, the strict legal mandates to properly serve students considered to have special needs, the ongoing drive toward inclusion, and efforts to hold teachers responsible for the test scores of individual children, the lesson, "mostly, differentiating means ignoring," is troubling and runs counter to everything that we want our future teachers to learn. While, as teacher educators, we may speak to our students about the need to differentiate, this is not followed up in actual instruction, which is not differentiated in the ways that we propose. Thus, the concern is what we can do to ensure a focus on differentiated instruction in practice without relying entirely on actual classroom settings.

Literature Review

Differentiation has been presented in the literature as a promising way to target various facets of students' school-based learning. A

number of authors have emphasized how important it is for teachers to find ways to take advantage of each student's ability to learn as a means to facilitate their academic achievement (Anderson, 2007; Manning, Stanford, & Reeves, 2010; McTighe & Brown, 2005; Santamaria & Thousand, 2004; Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 1999). In addition, there is evidence that differentiated instruction also can be an effective tool for teachers and school programs to address students' social-emotional learning because such instruction considers the personal situation of each individual child (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007).

In keeping with the student-specific nature of the differentiation process, differentiated instruction is described in the literature not as a strategy or a formula but, rather, as a general way of approaching teaching and learning that can suggest possible methods and strategies. In a review of the research, Subban (2006) identified pressing reasons for seeking to differentiate instruction, including the need to address learning differences and the pitfalls of trying to "teach to the middle." Similarly, Anderson (2007) explained that differentiating instruction entails the recognition that every child is unique, with his or her own learning style and preferences.

For Cohen (2008), it is the very goals of education that should be reconsidered, so that we prioritize not only academic but also social, emotional, and ethical skill development. Neglecting these is, according to Cohen, a form of social injustice whereby the basic rights of the child are denied. In this regard, instruction that systematically embeds social-emotional learning into content area teaching can connect academic skills with abilities needed for success in other aspects of life (Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006). A focus on social-emotional learning helps the child to learn to regulate his or her own emotions enough to successfully establish and participate in a community (Payton et al., 2008).

There is evidence that programs in which teachers systematically differentiate social-emotional instruction have a positive effect both academically and socially (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007; Payton et al., 2008). Teachers can have a significant impact on students' well-being by establishing an environment in which prosocial behaviors are consistently modeled by both peers and adults and the situation of each child is emphasized (Kidron & Fleischman, 2006).

Further, there is evidence that differentiated instruction is needed to enable all students to meet the standards around which we currently build instruction (McTighe & Brown, 2005). While classrooms have always brought together students with a range of academic levels, traditionally, not everyone's learning received the same attention or was

held to the same standards (Ankrum & Bean, 2008; Patterson, Connolly, & Ritter, 2009). McTighe and Brown found, in fact, that differentiation and standards-based instruction are, in many ways, interdependent. If all students, with their differences in academic proficiency and learning styles, are to reach the same content standards, then the teacher must use different approaches for different students. At the same time, the process of differentiating for students' needs requires the guidance of a common set of standards.

The conceptualization and implementation of differentiated instruction is highly complex. Tobin (2008) presents a number of conundrums related to instructional rigor that might make it difficult for teachers to differentiate their instruction. The foundational conundrums that Tobin describes revolve around issues of rigor versus flexibility in academic content, instructional design, and assessment. They focus on providing a robust literacy program versus an activities-based program or groupings versus whole-class instruction as well as types of feedback. According to Tobin, however, these conundrums are based on false dichotomies, as providing flexibility in how academic content is planned, taught, and assessed based on the situation of individual learners helps to ensure that every student can be held to rigorous standards. To this end, a number of authors emphasize the need for individual learning plans and assessments to ensure that all students' learning is addressed through rigorous instruction (McTighe & Brown, 2005; Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008; Scigliano & Hipsky, 2010).

There is little consensus on how to differentiate instruction, in general, largely because differentiation relies on an analysis of individual learners that cannot be performed outside of the specific context (Scigliano & Hipsky, 2010; Tobin & McInnes, 2008). Grouping students to work collaboratively is recommended, although how these groupings should be structured depends on the particularities of the learners and the activities (Ankrum & Bea, 2008; Patterson, et al., 2009). Additionally, scaffolds and tiered instruction, important pieces of differentiated instruction, can be designed only in context (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Rock et al., 2008; Scigliano & Hipsky, 2010). In the literature, differentiated instruction is seen as necessary, complex, and impossible to design outside of a classroom and a group of students.

The complexities surrounding differentiation have contributed to, and have been compounded by, the inadequacy with which differentiated instruction has generally been addressed in teacher education. According to Tomlinson (1999), teacher education programs typically have not emphasized differentiated instruction in their coursework, and classes on teaching exceptional children have focused more on the

characteristics of the students than on approaches to teaching them. In one survey study, preservice teachers reported that teacher educators and mentor teachers discouraged them from differentiating instruction, supposedly because doing so was too difficult (Tomlinson, 1999). Sands and Barker (2004), however, believe that both the importance and complexity of differentiated instruction should make it an area of focus in the education of preservice teachers.

Sands and Barker (2004) recommended that modeling differentiated instruction be a central task for faculty in teacher education programs. However, few professors in these programs actually differentiate, leaving them unable to provide preservice teachers with experience with differentiation before they begin their classroom practice (Gould, 2004). As a result, few novice teachers possess an understanding of what differentiated instruction actually looks like (Tomlinson, 1999).

Tomlinson (1999) believes that teacher education programs should arrange early field experiences in which preservice teachers are partnered with mentors who effectively practice differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999). Such field placements also would have the benefit of exposing prospective teachers to student differences (Gould, 2004). According to Tomlinson, the few novice teachers who had been exposed to differentiated instruction during their student teaching were more likely to differentiate in their own classrooms. As such, exposure to differentiated instruction should be a central task for teacher education programs.

Context

The interventions described below have been implemented in the context of our two intensive one-year master's programs that lead to teacher certification in elementary and secondary education. For the most part, our programs serve a fairly homogeneous population in terms of age, race, and ethnicity. In the most recent cohorts, over 87% of students were White and over 75% were under 25 years old. Both cohorts of students begin their coursework at the beginning of one summer and finish in the summer of the following year. They take additional teacher certification classes, including a course on working with exceptional children, during the fall semester and student teach in two separate public school placements throughout the spring. Students also spend part of each week during the fall semester, prior to student teaching, observing, assisting, working with small groups, and engaging in a limited amount of classroom teaching in local public school classrooms. Due to the practical focus of the program, efforts are made to connect course and field work as much as possible.

The courses on working with exceptional children address notions of difference, exceptionality, and disability as well as the special education system and differentiated instruction. The program assumes that our students will eventually be working as general education teachers in inclusion settings and will therefore be expected to address the IEP goals of students with disabilities. Differentiated teaching is presented in the latter part of the course, during the final classes before student teaching, as a strategy that is needed when working with special education students and a best practice for all students. Preservice teachers are instructed in a variety of differentiation strategies.

It is believed that, by the end of the program, the combination of graduate school instruction, school observations, forays into working with children, and modeling or mentoring by veteran teachers will have provided preservice teachers with the conceptual understanding and tools to begin teaching. It is in their classroom teaching, however, where the lack of consistent models of effective differentiated instruction in public school classrooms leaves a gap.

Intervention: Objective and Description

To address differentiated instruction within the contextual reality of a classroom in a graduate school seminar, rather than in the actual public school itself, students are presented with an elaborate simulation exercise on differentiated planning and instruction. The activity has five explicit student goals:

1. To design a lesson in which the learning process, outcomes, and factors of each child are the focus;

2. To practice implementing such a lesson;

3. To experience, in a "safe"—simulated—context, teaching as a series of adjustments to often unexpected individual student behavior;

4. To undergo how individual students might experience a lesson; and

5. To reflect on and make sense of teaching and learning as differentiated processes.

To achieve these goals, each cohort is given a list of fictitious students, with basic individual characteristics, whom they are to view as a class in the grade and subject of their choice. They are also asked to identify a concept or skill area that is appropriate for this grade and, within the structure of the subject area, of fundamental importance for subsequent curricular units. They are, in other words, asked to choose lesson content that none of their students can be allowed to skip. Table

1 presents the characteristics of the fictitious students that are given as part of the assignment.

Differentiated Lesson Planning

The activity is then split into two parts. First, students are asked to write a lesson plan to address the learning situation of each child. So far in their coursework, students have planned a number of lessons for anonymous groups identified only by grade and subject matter (such as "10th grade physics" or "3rd grade reading"). For such assignments, they are asked to take into consideration what they know about the subject matter, developmental generalizations for the age group, and best educational practices. Thus, until this point, lessons had not been planned on the level of the individual child.

The object here is to specify the learning objectives of each child and

Table 1
Student Characteristics

Name	*Characteristics*
Ariana	Is strong in all subject areas, Spanish-English bilingual; is often tired
Barbara	Has a receptive language disorder, slow verbal reasoning skills, very low self-esteem, and suffers from the taunting of others; has an IEP [Language Disorder]
Chandra	Has weak basic skills and strong inference skills; has difficulties concentrating, staying on task, and organizing her work and her materials; has an IEP [Other Health Impaired for ADHD]
Dennis	Is on grade-level and attributes this to his hard work
Gabriel	Has low proficiency in English and limited literacy skills in his native Spanish; has dysgraphia; is very withdrawn; has an IEP [Specific Learning Disabilities]
Hannah	Has extremely weak reading, writing, and basic math skills; gets easily frustrated and has angry outbursts; has an IEP [Emotional Disturbance]
Jennifer	Is on grade-level; is easily bored
Marcus	Is seen as being able to do the work, but never does his homework and is frequently absent
Martha	Is strong in all subject areas, but works only when she is interested
Michael	Is strong in all subject areas, but is afraid of making mistakes
Ramaisa	Is diligent, on grade-level, Arabic-English bilingual; struggles with some of the reading due to her limited English skills
Samuel	Is strong and interested in your subject area only
Santos	Is on grade-level, Spanish-English bilingual, struggles with some of the reading due to his limited English skills

to design a lesson that meets these learning objectives for students in the same classroom with one teacher. This represents a shift in focus from a whole group defined by commonality to an assortment of individuals, a focus that runs counter to the approaches to which preservice teachers have been exposed. Thus, they are asked to first submit a draft lesson plan aimed at a specified group of students. Typically, this first attempt ends up as a fairly standard lesson plan, whereby the inclusion of diverse students is an afterthought rather than the premise, and differentiation is an addendum to the plan rather than the initial approach. In response to this first draft, students then receive detailed feedback that addresses how each phase of the lesson targets each of the students on the list. Generally, the feedback steers preservice teachers' attention toward students who might be disengaged during a whole-class activity.

Students revise these initial drafts and end up with plans that, while naturally varying in quality, take into consideration each student at each point. Figure 1 presents excerpts from the draft and revised lesson plans by a preservice teacher in the elementary education program. The point of the assignment is not so much the final quality of the plan but, rather, the degree to which the plan addresses each student instructionally.

In another lesson plan, pairs of students were asked to solve math problems on individual white boards before going over them as a class.

Figure 1
Initial and Revised Lesson Plans

Initial (Draft) Lesson Plan	*Revised Lesson Plan*
OBJECTIVE: Students will be able to tell time with fluency. •The teacher introduces the vocabulary for the animals in The Grouchy Ladybug. • The teacher reads the story. She stops at each page and asks students to say what time it is. • In pairs, students practice telling the time.	• Chandra and Marcus are asked to write on the board. Spanish-speaking students are asked to say or write the words in Spanish, and Ramaisa in Arabic. They teach their classmates. • Gabriel and Barbara are asked to show the time to their classmates with their hands, following the book. Volunteers are asked questions about the story. Hannah, Chandra, and Marcus (at least) are asked to say the repeated line of the grouchy ladybug. • Pairings: Ariana-Gabriel Dennis-Marcus Martha-Hannah Michael-Barbara Jennifer-Samuel Ramaisa-Santos Chandra (on her own)

For example, after a preservice teacher received feedback that Gabriel might not be able to solve the problem quickly enough and could instead rely on his partner to do all the work, the preservice teacher reworked the activity so that Gabriel would instead be the scribe for the teacher on the large class white board. Similarly, a preservice teacher had planned a foreign language lesson during which students were to watch a video segment in French. Upon receiving feedback that Barbara and Chandra, for example, might have difficulties following and remaining attentive, the teacher devised a study guide on which all students had to circle information during the viewing. Here, scaffolding intended for some students ended up helping the entire class. Feedback also helped students to utilize grouping possibilities to address the needs of specific students. When told that a math activity could be too difficult for Gabriel, another preservice teacher modified her lesson plan so he would be paired with another Spanish-speaking student who might be able to re-explain the concept or directions.

Role Play: Implementing the Differentiated Lesson

The second part of the activity takes the form of a dual practice teaching and role-playing activity. Students are asked to teach part of their lesson to the rest of the class, who assume the roles of the children. The latter are given name tags and colored cards with which to indicate when they think that the specific child they are role-playing would be either off-task (e.g., a blue card) or disruptive (e.g., a purple card). The goal of the student teacher, while implementing their lesson plan, is to minimize the instances and length of time these colored cards are in evidence. The experience is discussed at length after each mini-lesson. If, for example, a student is playing the role of Barbara, who has a receptive language disorder, and is asked to listen to a long, unscaffolded lecture on a difficult topic, she or he may well pull out a blue "off-task" card early on. Should this happen, it is the responsibility of the student teacher to recognize Barbara's behavior and to address it in a way that would seem appropriate, given the needs of the rest of the class and other characteristics that were given for Barbara. Similarly, if the teacher overly scaffolds a particular concept for the whole class, a more advanced student such as Martha could become disruptive and show a purple card. As would be the case in an actual classroom with actual students, the teacher is never able to fully predict how a student will respond and has to accept that her or his knowledge of the students will always be incomplete.

This is in keeping with the view of Tobin and McInnes (2008) that differentiated instruction can only be designed with regard to the actual

classroom context. That the student who role-plays the child gives a personal interpretation that somewhat differs from that of the student teacher only underscores the need to be watchful and adaptable during instruction. During this role-playing activity, preservice teachers are explicitly steered away from engaging in single-minded, faithful implementation of the script of their lesson plan and toward addressing the immediate needs and learning processes of individual students. After a subsequent group discussion of the instructional simulation, preservice teachers exchange roles and name tags. Then the next lesson begins.

Discussion: Student Learning

Peer Feedback

As noted, part of the purpose of the activity is to steer preservice teachers' attention away from a regard for the collective needs of a group of students and, instead, toward attention to individual learning needs, processes, and behavior, knowing that this entails an in-the-moment attentiveness to children's reactions and a readiness to address learning requirements as they manifest themselves. This is tied in to Anderson's (2007) emphasis on how instruction needs to be based on the fact that each child, and, therefore, each child's learning process, is unique. This shift in attention is reflected in the written feedback that students give each other after their lessons. Indeed, in their reflections, they emphasized the situations of individual children. Specifically, participating in and reflecting on the role-plays helped preservice teachers to focus on particular instructional issues. Thus, scaffolding was emphasized in terms of its effect on individual learning experiences, which relates to McTighe and Brown's (2005) assertion that individualized scaffolding results in effective learning. One student's feedback, for example, was, "Giving Barbara the material beforehand was good so she could follow along." However, another wrote, "The story was overwhelming for some of us. Provide extra scaffolding for Barbara while reading the story." In both cases, scaffolding as a need in a particular activity was emphasized through the personal role-playing experience of the preservice teacher.

Similarly, the importance of addressing the needs of the more advanced students, who are easily overlooked in a classroom with many students who are struggling academically, was made clear through the experiential learning approach. One student suggested to a peer, "Since you did this yesterday, as Martha, I was bored." Another stated, "There was some downtime while you were working with Barbara, and Jennifer had nothing to do." In addition to addressing students' academic needs, preservice teachers noted how the emotional situation of the child whom

they were role-playing had been addressed, which served as a reminder to focus on social-emotional learning, as suggested in the literature (Payton et al., 2008). One student noted, "Gabriel is withdrawn, and calling on him as you did could be embarrassing," while another student's feedback included, "He also integrated Gabriel's Spanish into his teaching, making him feel important and smart." By playing the roles of the students, preservice teachers experienced how instruction felt and worked, given the individual characteristics that they had been assigned.

A number of themes emerged from the peer feedback, which provided an understanding of what most paid attention to during the teaching and role-playing activity and which areas of differentiated instruction were thus highlighted. Ensuring student engagement, addressing learning styles, and providing scaffolding instruction were singled out as positive features in individual lessons and, as such, as important features of instruction. This is in keeping with the literature (Anderson, 2007; McTighe & Brown, 2005; Tomlinson, 1999).

Student Reflections

This increased attentiveness to students' well-being and, consequently, the need to focus on individual learning situations and scaffold accordingly, was confirmed in students' summative reflections on their own learning. While there are no longitudinal data as of yet to determine the long-term effect of this activity on students' future teaching, these reflections confirm how these lessons changed students' outlooks. One student stated, "I simply can't plan lessons the same anymore. . . . Now I know what I will be working on for years to come." When asked what questions and principles they now thought should guide how instruction is implemented as a consequence of the activity, these preservice teachers emphasized social-emotional well-being and equitable academic challenge and engagement, which echoes Tomlinson's (1999) views and research on social-emotional learning (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006; Weismann et al., 2008). Below is a representative sample of their responses:

- "Do the students understand the main ideas that you are trying to convey and/or are you okay if there is a lot of imbalance?"
- "Is the learning environment safe for all to participate in?"
- "Are certain students regularly disengaged? How do you engage them?"
- "Is there an appropriate level of challenge for all students?"
- "If the students are engaged in the lesson, it will be easier for them to follow the teacher's directions than to be disruptive."

• "Planning the lesson carefully means that the teacher can focus on the students instead of the content of the lesson."

How students felt was mentioned by many as a concern, given that the characters that they played had just experienced instances of being included and validated or excluded and discouraged. Students also were made aware of patterns of learning and participation and, in response, understood that they needed to watch for consistent student disengagement and to focus on the inclusion of all. Student behavior was, thus, not regarded as coming entirely from the student, but also as feedback to the instruction they were given and the quality of the learning experience. Consistent with McTighe and Brown's (2008) connection between differentiation and academic rigor, students learned to see the importance of each student being equally challenged by instruction. Finally, students saw that it is the responsibility of the teacher to engage in differentiation and to include all students and that the main focus is ultimately on the learner rather than the content.

Conclusion

As Tobin (2008) noted, one of the most obvious challenges of differentiated instruction is the time and difficulty involved in planning lessons that branch into different directions. Indeed, these require careful planning for individual students and may lead to difficulties in classroom management. The activity presented here gives students opportunities to address the challenges that Tobin described. By asking preservice teachers to focus their instructional imagination and lesson planning on students within the safety of the role-play, they are able to puzzle, make attempts, reflect on, and experience for themselves what effective and ineffective instruction look like and their consequences.

Lucas and Monica, somehow overlooked in their actual classroom, would have been considered, thought about, planned for, addressed, and discussed in the context of the intervention. The instructional bar for these two children would not have been set in a school world that is still in the process of making sense of the fact that different students have different needs but, rather, by the explicit requirement that their needs be emphasized. The use of the simulation activity allowed us to place the teacher's obligation to address individual needs front-and-center and made the design of differentiation strategies an urgent pragmatic concern. In a larger sense, the activity provides a model for how we can expose future teachers to real-life needs and instructional approaches that schools are still unevenly tackling and, thus, allow teachers to be true agents of change.

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