Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 40 | Issue 5 Article 7

2015

Differentiated Instruction at Work. Reinforcing the art of classroom observation through the creation of a checklist for beginning and pre-service teachers

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Differentiated Instruction at Work

Reinforcing the Art of Classroom Observation Through the Creation of a Checklist for Beginning and Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract: Professional experience is viewed as integral to shaping philosophy and acquiring skills in the area of classroom teaching. Classrooms are complex places, with educators implementing differentiated strategies to cater for student diversity. Pre-service teachers who observe these lessons often miss the intuitive practices, as there is much to absorb during a typical observation session. Equipping them with a checklist enhances this experience, giving them intentional guidelines with regard to observation. The current study, utilized a qualitative approach, to gain an understanding of specific dynamics that impact on a pre-service teacher's professional experience. The intersection of data and the literature led to the creation of a checklist for use by beginning and pre-service teachers. The checklist may be used by teacher educators as an instrument to assist with the preparation of teachers, as it could help with honing in on key elements of observation of classroom practice and differentiated strategies.

Introduction

There is an integral need for teachers, across year levels, to cater for students of different ability levels, learning profiles and interests, through the use of differentiated strategies (Levy, 2010; Subban, 2006; Tobin & McInnes, 2008; Van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006). There is a growing need, additionally, for teachers to respond appropriately to the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007; Santamaria, 2009).Teachers intuitively know that students populations in contemporary classrooms are diverse, so it is important to plan formally for these differences as lessons and assessments are drawn together (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2003). Differentiated instruction, essentially means that teachers are responding constructively and proactively to student needs (Munro, 2012). Differentiation has become integral to the contemporary classroom, with many universities, educational governing bodies and administrators now advocating the practice as central to best practice in the current learning climate. Differentiation supports student diversity in 21st century classrooms, by recognizing differences, and accommodating different learning preferences and profiles (Levy, 2010; Sands & Barker, 2004; Tobin & McInnes, 2008; Tomlinson, 2003; Van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006). High quality teaching considers that every student has access to high quality instruction, and quality curriculum (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Learning,

within the differentiated classroom, is consequently maximized as both the teacher and student explore ways to demonstrate understanding (Levy, 2010; Opitz & Ford, 2008; Subban, 2006). More recent research points to teachers being aware of equity pedagogy which compels a consideration of varied learning profiles, especially with regard to cultural and language diversity (Van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006).

It follows, therefore, that emerging and pre-service teachers are aware of the practice of differentiation, especially when they are out on teaching placements, or receiving guidance in schools. Awareness and an understanding of the precepts and undergirding of this key practice, will inform their observation of teaching and learning. Since observation is so central to pre-service and beginning teachers, it is logical therefore to ensure that this technique is utilized effectively as a learning tool (Blackmore, 2005; J. C. Richards & T. S. C. Farrell, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the thinking behind the creation of a checklist for pre-service teachers to assist them to formulate a knowledgeable judgment of whether authentic differentiation is indeed at work in a classroom. Critiquing and reflecting on teaching practice in this manner focuses on essential skills to guide these individuals through their journey as effective educators in their own right. The checklist is intended to prompt discussion between and among mentor and host teachers, and pre-service teachers assigned to them. Observation checklists have long been used as tools within the teaching and learning setting, to enhance and extend teaching and learning skills(J. C. Richards & T. S. Farrell, 2011).

The impetus for this paper grew from our personal needs as teacher educators. We acknowledged that there was a need to see authentic differentiation in action. Pre-service teachers often enter classrooms bewildered and overwhelmed. Channeling their vision and sharpening their focus onto vital elements in their immediate landscape can have far-reaching benefits. The creation of this check-list was thus spurred as part of a teacher education program for students in their second and third years of teacher preparation.

The Creation of a Checklist

Thinking about checklists was prompted by Gawande's (2009) ideas, which propagate the view that checklists give individuals greater control in any situation. They allow people to become aware of the plethora of information available to them, and to sharpen their understanding of that which is pertinent. Speaking within the framework of medicine, Gawande (2009) explains that the information explosion has resulted in greater expertise in many sectors. We know more, and this information is often complex (Gawande, 2009). Becoming aware of essential skills offers a more targeted focus, and thus derives greater benefit and accuracy in execution. Teaching is a complex activity, and during any one particular lesson, many activities occur concurrently (J. C. Richards & T. S. C. Farrell, 2011). Novice teachers are in a more expedient position to benefit from close observation if they are appropriately equipped with the skills to observe (Hammersley - Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; J. C. Richards & T. S. C. Farrell, 2011).

Learning through observation is a powerful tool in teaching (Blackmore, 2005; Bradfield, 2012; Hammersley - Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; J. C. Richards & T. S. C. Farrell, 2011). Pre-service teachers need to be taught specifically what to look for in observing differentiation at work (Bradfield, 2012). This section investigates the factors that were borne in mind when creating the Differentiation Checklist. Pre-service teachers are often unarmed when they observe

their supervising teachers, yet observation is a vital tool in honing in on the strengths and weaknesses of one's own practice. Using a checklist will free up their working memories, allowing them to think more intentionally about their own teaching practice in a deliberately reflexive manner. The creation of a formal protocol such as a checklist, has the potential to create stronger teachers, who engage freely in community talk around best practice (Blackmore, 2005; Bradfield, 2012). Ultimately, it is the student who benefits as better teaching results in much better learning outcomes. The discussion here focuses on the nature of classroom observation. In order to make effective use of observation, pre-service teachers need to be equipped with skills to make notes of what they see (Blackmore, 2005). Checklists provide a clear focus for observation, however, with a view to distinguishing the features of differentiation contained in a lesson, this checklist adopts a different perspective. The checklist has been formulated through a thorough perusal of literature pertinent to differentiated instruction in the last decade.

Conceptual Framework

The study uses Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, as its point of departure. This widely used educational framework, postulates the view that human behaviour is a function of inner processes. Applying this theory to the current study, highlights the view that teachers are influenced by environmental factors, as they accommodate student diversity. Once teachers are equipped with strategies that empower them, they are more likely to implement these in their classrooms, and this is consequently likely to influence their attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, this section considers and investigates the academic strengths of using checklists as an instrument to assist pre-service teachers with refining their observation skills. It is anticipated that this will assist them with improving reflexive practice. Additionally, Bandura's (1997) views on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs reinforce the idea that individuals gauge their personal capabilities through experience. The success and/or failure of experiences in the classroom consolidate certain beliefs which then lead to particular behaviours (Bandura, 1997). The theory also reflects the notion that vicarious experiences have the power to influence beliefs and consequently behavior. As such, a teacher who views another's lesson/teaching makes comparisons with their own practice; this in turn leads to a judgement and evaluation of their own routines, techniques and approaches. Observation of this nature also has the potential to inspire valuable dialogue about practice. The end result may be to propel the teacher to enhance their own teaching, leading to improved student outcomes.

Methodology

This project utilized a qualitative approach, i.e., the use of focus group interviews. Focus groups were deemed appropriate in this context as it provided access to data that may not be obtained through one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 2013). This method allowed the researcher to observe a relatively large amount of interaction and discourse on a particular topic, in a relatively short time frame (Morgan, 2013). A focus group discussion also increased the potential for more honest, candid discussion among participants (Morgan, 2013). Furthermore, focus groups have the added benefit of being more loosely structured than individual interviews, and may thus tap

into more upfront points of view. They also have the ability to present more in-depth views as participants present, concur and counter each other's views.

The target group for the collection of data for this project was students enrolled in their second year of a teacher preparation program at a metropolitan university in Melbourne, Australia. These 120 students were completing a Bachelor of Education course that included a mandatory round of 10 full days of school placement each semester. This placement involved observation, small group teaching and whole class teaching, at both primary and secondary schools. Second year students were targeted as they had already been afforded some instruction in differentiation, and would be more likely to acknowledge such instructional techniques at work. Following school placements, and the acquisition of approval of the university ethics committee, students were invited to participate in focus group interviews. These invitations, along with explanatory statements outlining the purpose and format of the interviews, were issued following a lecture which most students attended. Participation was voluntary.

Twenty students responded to the invitation. Interviews, which involved groups of about five students, took place at the university, with comments being recorded on sheets of paper placed on tables. This was offered as a means to facilitate discussion, and to allow different perspectives of the placement experience. The discussion was led by points on the sheets of paper but students were asked to also record points that they thought had been omitted. Offering a semi-structured discussion allowed for greater participation from pre-service teachers, and allowed them to input in the manner that they individually interpreted the points raised. The focus group discussion was recorded for research purposes; this was supplemented by observer notes taken during the discussion. This acted as a means of triangulation, and offered a form of validating the final themes. Axial coding was used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussion

Data analysis involved the classification and codifying of data into common themes. Responses were analysed using open, axial coding, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (Strauss, 1990). Participant responses, and their indications on paper, were broken down into discrete parts, then examined closely and analysed for similarities and differences (Strauss, 1990). Categories were identified through emerging ideas from the data (Strauss, 1990). Each category was named according to the data it represented, and then analysed individually, with a view to determining the conditions that gave rise to them and the context in which they occurred. The discussion following highlights each of the five emerging criteria, from the focus group interviews, and under each, the exchange and the written observations that were presented under the said classification.

Theme 1: The Structure, Organization and Development of a Lesson

Participants reported that the differentiated classroom was often structured and organized differently compared to a traditional classroom. They also indicated that there was a strong focus on group work, with classroom organization being adjusted to accommodate this. The discussion of participants suggested that the organization of the classroom allowed teachers to divide their time easily between whole-group teaching and small group or individualized

instruction. Consequently, lessons were structured and developed efficiently around student needs. Furthermore, respondent expressed views that underlined the success of differentiated techniques through flexible grouping and the setting of clear goals and expectations. Students were grouped according to similar interests, thereby enabling greater interaction and collaboration.

Focus group observations/exchange/notes:

- *Classrooms were often structured differently from the traditional classroom, to cater for different styles of teaching.*
- *Teachers adopted different techniques to accommodate groupwork.*
- *Because of the structure of the room, the teacher could move smoothly from small-group teaching to whole-class teaching.*
- *Flexibly grouping students created greater opportunities for independent work. Students worked better when they knew what the expectations were.*
- *Published schedules and task lists helped them to complete work more accurately.*
- *Students responded positively to flexible grouping, and appeared to gain more from working alongside peers with similar interests.*

Tomlinson (2003), a leading expert in differentiation, maintains that lesson structure, and classroom organization can be appropriately controlled to accommodate student variance. Varying the student's workspace, in terms of seating and location, may assist with meeting certain educational outcomes (Education Department Alberta, 2005; Opitz & Ford, 2008; Tomlinson, 2003). For example, a lesson that utilizes groupwork activities may benefit from the rearrangement of tables to facilitate group discussion. Other students, who are more solitary learners may profit from being seated separately from the group, for a short period. Gibson (2011) consolidates this view by explicitly stating that the physical environment of the classroom should be so divided to deliberately point students to areas of discussion and collaboration, and areas for quiet work. These workstations assist with the flow of a lesson, and once routines are established, has the potential to increase output, interest and engagement (Gibson, 2011).

Furthermore, in order to improve efficiency in the classroom, the classroom should be organized so that students are aware of expectations and roles (Gibson, 2011). Developing schedules that are clearly displayed, and which clearly let students know about when activities will occur, and their personal level of involvement in these activities, will assist not only with managing the group, but will improve the effectiveness of the lesson (Gibson, 2011). For example, creating a schedule for small group discussions, and at which workstation this discussion will take place, has the potential to assist both the teaching and learning processes. Similarly, a job chart which clearly outlines roles and expectations encourages good organization of the work space.

Research also supports the view that effective differentiated learning environments are developmentally appropriate for all students, and arranged taking particular student needs and capabilities into account (Renzulli & Reis, 2006; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2003; Van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006). Seating plans to support activities, interaction, discussion and independent study, consider not only the diverse needs of the group, but also creates a productive, respected working space that can be owned by all participants. Once students become aware of the logistics of their space, they are more likely to embrace and

support the set routines. Spaces and stations should be easily accessible, even labelled, to aid ease of use. Explicit modelling of the rules and the routine by the teacher inculcates this idea into students, thereby creating a cohesive environment that is dynamic, industrious and valuable.

Theme 2: Classroom Management

Respondents suggested that the use of differentiated instruction in classrooms they observed assisted with overall classroom management. Engaging students through intentional tasks, and ensuring their output was productive, ensured that they were active participants rather than passive recipients. This involvement assisted with managing the classroom. Furthermore, it was evident that respondents had viewed teachers within differentiated classrooms, using formative assessments quite productively. They reported that teachers kept notes on changing needs and profiles and these assisted with controlling and managing difficulties that may have arisen during a lesson. This strategy appeared to keep students busy and on task.
Focus group observations/exchange/notes:

- *Differentiated instruction worked well to address some classroom management issues.*
- *Accommodating different learning profiles meant that more students were engaged and their output was more productive.*
- *The teacher used multiple methods to become familiar with student learning profiles. She added to her notes constantly and sometimes modified individual plans for students. This significantly assisted with classroom management.*
- *It helped to provide instructions, explanations and notes in different forms. The teacher used the whiteboard, handouts and verbally read out instructions to the class. This assisted with getting and keeping students on task.*

Effective classroom management is central to authentic differentiation (Fox & Hoffman, 2011; Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003). For many teachers, management and discipline in classroom settings, proves to be a challenge (McDonald, 2013). In fact, modern classrooms differ markedly from classrooms of a decade ago (Fox & Hoffman, 2011), as students are exposed to more information, and the need for interaction appears to have increased. Fox and Hoffman (2011) maintain that classrooms which implement differentiated instruction have fewer behavioural problems. Students may behave poorly when they are bored, alienated or disengaged (Fox & Hoffman, 2011). Engaging students, connecting with them on a personal level, and meeting their needs within this setting, is vital to good instruction and organization (Fox & Hoffman, 2011; Hall et al., 2003). Within this setting, the likelihood of student success is increased, thereby reducing the risk of failure (Fox & Hoffman, 2011). Consequently, successful students want to be involved and will embrace the learning experience with greater enthusiasm.

King-Shaver and Hunter (2003) discuss the view that differentiation in a classroom helps the teacher to better manage students. They reflect on several noteworthy strategies that could be implemented to enhance the efficiency within everyday classroom operations. Among these is the need to know student learning profiles with great accuracy, as knowledge of this nature empowers and equips teachers to cater for every student (King-Shaver & Hunter, 2003). Gibson (2011) develops this idea as well, and extends this to include the view that the establishment of routines is essential to sound classroom management within the differentiated classroom.

Creating classroom and behavioural procedures is said to improve the flow of lessons, and allows the teacher to invest time in valuable small-group discussions (Gibson, 2011). Furthermore, clearly articulating expectations to students, in various forms both verbal and written, improves overall behavior and consequently assists with management and discipline(Gibson, 2011). For example, creating a wall chart which clearly outlines behavioural expectations and the consequences of conforming/non-conforming presents a powerful visual cue for good behavior to all participants.

Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) reflect wisely on the need to manage a classroom effectively and efficiently to ensure that differentiated instruction works to the benefit of the students. Classroom practice is to be treated as a learned art, one that is deliberately planned for, and one that teachers work hard at (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Within this intentionally planned setting, teachers are likely to be successful with differentiated techniques, as they will have more control and better direction. Fox and Hoffman (2011) suggest that adopting a more personalized approach, such as taking the time to learn individual names, and to know certain unique details about each child, allows students to feel respected and valued. Establishing this stronger relationship improves behavior and they are likely to perform better (Fox & Hoffman, 2011).

Theme 3: Differentiated Strategies/Techniques during Teaching

Respondents noted that students in differentiated classrooms were active participants in the lessons, as the use of differentiated techniques gave every one of them an opportunity to contribute and share in the lesson. Consequently, it would appear that every student felt that they were making a significant impact. Furthermore, the teacher's role within this setting shifted from the figure of authority to a facilitator of learning. The teacher's role was modified in that she became a participant, who expedited learning. The discussion also honed in on elements such as students taking lead roles, and steering discussion, teaching and learning as the lesson progressed. Information was presented in a variety of forms with students processing this in the manner that they found most accessible and most comfortable.

Focus group observations/exchange/notes:

- *Varied techniques ensured that more students were active participants in the lesson.*
- *The use of differentiation gave all students a chance, and all felt like they were making some meaningful contribution.*
- *Using differentiation meant that the teacher became the facilitator, not just an authority figure.*
- *Differentiation allowed the teacher to become part of the discussion. She would often get students to lead and she would just mediate.*
- *Different means of presenting information meant that the students' working memories were not overloaded.*

The use of varied and differentiated strategies provides different ways of processing information, and accommodates a wider degree of learning preferences (Education Department Alberta, 2005; Opitz & Ford, 2008; Tobin & McInnes, 2008; Van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006). The use of tiered assignments, learning centres and individual goal-setting during a lesson, may prove to be valuable in meeting the needs of various students. Differentiated activities also increase the potential for active participation by more members of the classroom. Using small-

group and whole class teaching allows for less formal discussion and whole group instruction to consolidate ideas (Hall, 2009; Kosanovich, Ladinsky, Nelson, & Torgesen, 2007). In a typical literacy lesson, teachers could create opportunities for brainstorming, discussion, writing and proof-reading. This idea is supported by Gibson (2009) who maintains that small group instruction increases opportunities for interaction among participants.

Within the context of differentiated instruction, Tobin and McInnes (2008) point to research that supports the view that flexible small group instruction yields greater benefits when compared to large group instruction, within the literacy classroom. Similar results were reported by Algozzine and Anderson (2007) who reflect on the use of flexible grouping and student choice as key differentiated instructional techniques that have the potential to improve student outcomes. Transitions between parts of a lesson also allow for a varied mode, so that different paces and interests can be accommodated within a lesson. Providing students with schedules and routine plans is also effective, so that they are aware of changes. The creation of a learning community that supports questions and comments, adds to the ethos of a safe, respected learning environment. Student prior learning is essential to the teaching of new concepts, so creative ways should be considered to make links between existing and new knowledge and skills.

Presentation and delivery modes should be varied as part of good teaching (Education Department Alberta, 2005; Van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006). This meets the needs of various abilities and processing styles, and also enhances understanding through different perspectives. A reduction of the load on the working memory by using handouts, summaries on the board and other visual cues, assists students with retaining information. Furthermore, the repetition of instructions, and the mentioning of key points in different ways at different points of the lesson, will also assist with the recollection of information. Teachers could also have less attentive students repeat instructions or vital points. If students are expected to use key words, and remember core concepts, plan a variety of ways of reinforcing these ideas. During teaching, teachers avoid becoming the transmitters of knowledge, instead, they see themselves as facilitators who share and participate actively in the process by relating to the content and skills taught (Renzulli & Reis, 2006). This modelling and involvement has the potential to make real the subject matter (Renzulli & Reis, 2006).

Theme 4: Differentiated Activities, Materials and Teaching Aids

Respondents conveyed the view that the choice of appropriate material and the design of activities within the differentiated classroom contributed to keeping students engaged and on task. Students in this context were more likely to complete their tasks because the activities selected were suited to the interests and learning profiles. Furthermore, participants discussed how technology, where available, was used judiciously to keep students interested. The insertion of video clips and internet recordings were used to add interest to lessons. This incorporation of visual elements appeared to tap into student learning profiles.

Focus group observations/exchange/notes:

- *Once students were engaged, they remained committed to task completion.*
- *Resources were used quite judiciously to cater for student interests.*
- *The use of technology helped keep students engaged but they required a great deal of structure to ensure that they remain on task.*

- *The use of film and audio clips throughout the lesson offered variety and engaged students. It was different from the traditional lesson but very interesting.*

Within the metalanguage of differentiated instruction, "activities" and "resources" and often aligned with "process". However, as Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) point out, not all activities are created equally. Activities within the differentiated classroom should be meaningful, make significant connections between prior and new knowledge and extend student skills comfortably to a new level (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). Consequently, resources within this setting should be utilized to consolidate knowledge and understanding, enhance problem solving skills and allow students to use the information they have received in an expressive manner (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). The design of activities should consider presented information and skills from varied perspectives, encouraging students to become engaged and committed. A valuable activity captures the attention of students, maintains this attention, and compels them to persevere with a task, even when it proves to be challenging.

The use of different teaching tools, materials and activities has been found to better accommodate student needs, as opposed to a unilateral method (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007; Education Department Alberta, 2005; Fox & Hoffman, 2011; Tomlinson; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). Tomlinson (2004) highlights the view that different learning preferences in the differentiated classroom appear to favour specific activities and particular presentations. Using visual cues, and providing external storage methods that summarise content on whiteboards, charts, or data screens, all allow a different means of presenting information that will assist learners. These multiple methods of presentation are products of rethinking the traditional classroom (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Furthermore, the use of varied activities, gives students more choices, and consequently a sense of increased control over their learning (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007). This has the potential to improve student responsibility and accountability with regard to their learning (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007). For example, students in contemporary classrooms in the developed world are exposed to a range of technology, using social media sites and the internet. Using both print and non-print texts within these mediums capitalizes on their partiality for technology, while keeping them engaged and interested (Walsh, 2010). Student activities should ideally be contextualized to student experiences. For example, the use of a community newspaper to investigate news items may be preferable to a larger national broadsheet. Using adapted means of presenting material, ideas or texts, also accommodates different learning preferences. For example, the use of audio books, or film adaptations of texts may enhance understanding of the complex underlying issues contained therein. Lessons which incorporate differentiated techniques often permit students to utilize the internet for controlled periods, allowing students who have a penchant for such skill to rise to the challenge.

The use of visual mediums appears to be quite pertinent to contemporary classrooms. Using different means of presenting concepts and skills, such as short video clips, or filming students reciting poetry or using an audio book alongside a written text, all appear to have greater degrees of success in today's classrooms (Fox & Hoffman, 2011).

Theme 5: Differentiated Assessments and Application

Participants reflected on how assessment tasks were varied to suit student needs. It would appear that teachers within the differentiated learning environment were flexible, and offered students alternate means of demonstrating whether they had acquired the skills and mastered the content. One respondent reflected that the teacher she observed had used the Multiple Intelligences model quite effectively to assess students, not just to teach. Respondents also recounted that teachers in these settings assessed students constantly. They were keen to meet student needs, and as such, it was important to monitor their progress and meet them at their individual point of need. Assessments were not a mere formality but used productively by teachers to assist the process of learning and to inform their teaching.

Focus group observations/exchange/notes:

- *Assessment tasks that were varied and adapted in relation to student interests had greater success than just one means of assessment.*
- *The teacher used the multiple intelligences to assess – as a result, students could demonstrate their understanding using the means most suited to them.*
- *The teacher used ongoing assessment constantly – there was evidence of formative and summative assessment throughout the teaching of a unit.*
- *Assessments were interesting in that they did not merely ask students to reproduce information, they had to use the information to answer question, and apply their skills and knowledge in different contexts.*

Differentiating the means by which students demonstrate their understanding of concepts and skills, is essential to this model of learning and teaching (Renzulli & Reis, 2006; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). This type of assessment or evaluation of student learning should hone in on essential student learning and skills. They should propel students toward an application of what they have learned. In designing the task to test student understanding, teachers should consider the use of clear, challenging criteria that is based on grade-level expectations and that capture student interests and that promote student success (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). In a differentiated setting, evaluation of this nature has the potential to be quite impacting as it can be quite sensitive to student diversity. Most schools in the developed, contemporary world are driven by test-taking. While tests are one form of ascertaining and measuring student understanding and skills, it is not the only form. A reliable and true test of skills and knowledge considers how students can apply learning rather than merely restate information (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005).

Furthermore, assessment within the differentiated classroom is ongoing (Hall et al., 2003). Consequently, a teacher within this context may negotiate a different assessment plan that is commensurate with student needs, interests and profiles (Fox & Hoffman, 2011). Within a differentiated classroom, students may be offered various means of demonstrating their understanding of a particular concept or a skill learned. Varying the level of complexity of an assessment task will meet the needs of different ability levels (Education Department Alberta, 2005). Offering students choices in this manner accommodates their learning preferences, abilities and interests. In this regard, practitioners should consider varying the task itself rather than just decreasing the quantity/volume of a task. Students may be allowed to vary the mode of delivery in presenting an assessment task, if this is appropriate (Fox & Hoffman, 2011). For

example, a teacher could permit the use of an oral presentation instead of a written presentation, or the presentation using a word-processor instead of a hand-written submission. Some students, with slower processing skills, who are keen to complete a task, may be allocated additional time. Other students may prefer to work within teams – within this context, a teacher may wish to consider a team presentation instead of an individual presentation. Within the differentiated, inclusive setting, teachers may choose to modify assessment tasks for students with disabilities by using tape-recorded elements that allows a movement away from the more laborious written assessment (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). Differentiating assessments and the application of knowledge has the potential to enhance student's communication skills, by encouraging them to express themselves in a variety of ways (Renzulli & Reis, 2006).

Within this context however, teachers are often driven by a pre-determined set of criteria or benchmarks which students are forced to meet as part of a wider, state-led directive (Ankrum & Bean, 2007). Assessments thus, should incorporate and be informed by these gauges. In Australia for example, teachers are directed by the Australian National Curriculum, which advocates that progression into the next year level requires students to achieve certain targets and meet specific standards. Differentiation does not prompt a movement away from these standards, in fact, responsible differentiation considers these aspects closely, assimilates these elements into the assessment procedure, thereby allowing for a more comprehensive measurement and consideration of student growth.

The final checklist presents the discussion of items in random order, and was adapted from an itemized observational checklist created by Richards and Farrell (2011). The checklist also drew heavily on the views of leading proponents in the field of differentiation, and scholarly and instructional material offered to support practitioners. Depending on the sequence and organization of a lesson, teachers may choose to differentiate instruction with the product (application or assessment of skills or content taught), the process (activities which the student engages in during a lesson or strategies used by the teachers to transmit skills or content) and/or the content (skills or information that the student will need to know). A literary search through various educational databases of both scholarly and anecdotal practitioner reports, that combined differentiated instruction and items relating to Richards and Farrell's (2011) observational checklist, yielded a plethora of ideas.

	YES	NO	COMMENT
The structure, organization and development of a lesson			
Are tables and seating arrangements varied to accommodate student groupwork?			
Are there areas for collaborative activities and other areas for solitary, independent work?			
Has the lesson been structured in a particular way to accommodate student differences?			
Are there explicit displays of classroom roles, expectations and routines?			
Are there schedules on display that indicate a systematic plan for the lesson's activities?			
Is there a statement of the rules and behavioural expectations within the classroom?			
Classroom Management			
Is there evidence of overt and explicit classroom management strategies in place?			
Are there procedures in place to minimize unacceptable behavior and to reinforce acceptable behavior?			
Are there visual cues (for example wall charts) that outline the consequences of unacceptable behavior?			
Is the teacher's role one of a facilitator and participant in this setting?			
Has the flow of the lesson been timed to allow for smooth transitions between activities and teaching?			
Differentiated strategies/techniques during teaching			
Have varied activities and techniques been utilized during the teaching segment of the lesson?			
Is there a combination of whole-group and small group teaching as part of the lesson?			
Are groups formed flexibly or along ability levels?			
Is the lesson paced appropriately to accommodate different ability levels and learning styles?			
Is key information presented in different ways repetitively during the course of the lesson?			
Differentiated activities, materials and teaching aids			
Are the activities and materials used during the lesson age/grade-appropriate and engaging to students?			
Have the activities considered the varying interests/learning profiles and ability levels in the classroom?			
Is technology used as part of the lesson?			
Is the use of technology (such as iPads, laptops and computers) negotiated well to accommodate different learning profiles?			

Are the activities an extension of the lesson, and do they reinforce skills taught?
Differentiated assessments and application
Are there different assessment tasks offered to students to demonstrate their understanding of the knowledge or concept?
Are the assessment tasks sensitive to student diversity?
Are students permitted to demonstrate understanding using different mediums (for example, presenting information through a video clip as opposed to a written piece?).
Is the assessment task mindful of the relevant policy documents that govern evaluation and progression at different grade/year levels?
Are tasks modified to accommodate students with additional learning needs?

Table 1: The Product: The Checklist to Observe Differentiated Instruction at Work

The Protocols of Classroom Observation

In conclusion, as both teachers and teacher-educators, we feel compelled to add a personal note about the etiquette of classroom observation. The checklist should certainly not be viewed as an instrument to critique a teacher at work in a critical or judgemental sense. The checklist is a tool to foster productive and constructive dialogue between mentor teachers and novice/pre-service teachers. It is intended to spark conversations within learning communities. It should be used in a completely non-invasive manner. Lesson observation is vital to best practice, but both the observer and the practitioner should bear in mind, that teaching is very often intuitive. Decisions about planning and management are often intuitive and can be justified within a collegial setting where all participants feel respected and valued. Beginning teachers should supplement the checklist with personal annotations, thus creating points for discussion in the conversation following observation. This also allows for a movement away from "checking the boxes". Observation is an active process, it is participatory and involved. Both the novice and mentor teacher need to be contributing to this process. The checklist should therefore be used intentionally as a tool to affirm, encourage and build the skills of both the beginning and mentor teachers.

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