

Utilizing a School-University Collaborative Partnership to Design, Present, and Support Pre-K-12 Coursework on Differentiated Instruction

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Abstract Differentiated instruction should be evident in every classroom; however, it is particularly critical in Professional Development Schools (PDS) that have the dual focus of instruction for both Pre-K-12 students and university students completing their final internship experience. In this article, the author illustrates a university and school district collaborative partnership, resulting in graduate coursework immediately applicable to Pre-K-12 differentiated teaching and learning. A model is presented for designing a skeletal graduate course syllabus, followed by an initial course offering involving selected master Pre-K-12 teachers and administrators to complete the final content, presentation, and projects. Additionally, the reasoning behind offering multiple sections of the course through PDS sites in order to maximize immediate implementation of differentiated instruction and responsive teaching is presented.

Differentiated instruction means that curriculum and instruction are tailored to meet individual needs, ensuring that all students have optimal learning opportunities within the core academic curriculum (Haager & Klinger, 2005; Schumm, 1999). It is not merely a set of tools, but in a broader sense, a philosophy that educators embrace to reach the unique needs of every learner (Gregory & Chapman, 2002). When this philosophy of reaching all students is firmly established, the teacher (aka craftsman) consequently is eager to expand the toolbox, knowing when and how to use each tool to maximize the desired outcomes of teaching and learning. Differentiated instruction may be a non-negotiable “assumption” in every classroom, yet the reality is that many teachers and administrators feel ill equipped to embed differentiated practices into their daily lessons and school communities. As classrooms become more diverse and assessment stakes elevate, this critical component of instruction must be addressed by teachers and administrators (Tom-

linson, 1999). This is particularly critical in Professional Development Schools (PDS), where mentor teachers are modeling and influencing interns, who will become tomorrow’s teaching workforce.

Background

During the 2007–2008 school year, in a school district in the northeastern portion of the United States, differentiated instruction was identified as an area of district focus when it was identified as one of the non-negotiable instructional elements in the Board of Education approved 2007 *Curriculum Management Plan*. Although responsive teaching strategies were to be included in all newly written and/or revised curriculum guides, professional development on this topic for the district’s newly hired and veteran teachers was also needed.

It was suggested that one method for increasing the skills and knowledge of general

and special education teachers and administrators in the area of differentiated instruction would be delivered through graduate course offerings. This approach would prove advantageous for a variety of reasons: (a) the 45 hours of graduate instruction would provide opportunity for detailed study, discussion, and application of differentiation theory and strategies throughout the semester; (b) weekly instructor assessment and feedback resulting in a final course grade would monitor fidelity of implementation of research-based instructional activities; (c) evening graduate classes would avoid interrupting instruction as a result of not taking teachers and administrators out of their buildings during the school day; (d) additional funding for substitute teachers would not be needed; and, (e) district staff from content and/or professional development offices would not be required to create and present the instruction.

Collaborative Partnership

For many years, the school district had been partnering with the local state university to establish PDSs and with the university's school district outreach office to address professional development needs in other areas. The mission of this university outreach office, established in 1997, is to work collaboratively with local school districts to meet the professional development needs of teachers through providing graduate courses and programs. The goals of the outreach office are to build capacity, increase sustainability, and support scalability in order to have a direct and lasting positive impact on student achievement. Professional Development School sites are often the most direct contact the outreach office has in determining specific needs and offering responsive coursework.

Approaching the university outreach office to offer a graduate course in differentiated instruction seemed to be the logical next step in the process for the school district. However, after reviewing the graduate course offerings of the graduate programs in the College of Education, it was discovered that an appropriate course did not exist. Consequently, the univer-

sity outreach office staff and college of education department chairpersons collaborated with the school district special education coordinator to create a special topics course, *Differentiated Instruction and Meaningful Application*.

Graduate Course Development

The backward mapping principles found in *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) were being implemented regularly in curriculum guides and lesson planning formats throughout the district. Therefore, the texts identified for the course were *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design* (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) and *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-ability Classrooms* (Tomlinson, 2001). Current supplemental readings of research-based articles were also assigned.

Topics for the 15-week course of study followed the text chapter presentation, with the addition of current educational topics that were particularly pertinent to the district. For example, response to intervention (RTI) practices assist educators in aligning classroom instruction and student performance data (CEC, 2007) more effectively. Legislation such as IDEA (2004) has recognized RTI to be one component of the decision-making process for identifying students with specific learning disabilities. However, it is also realized that the application of RTI is valuable for improving the overall quality of instruction for all students, not only those suspected of or identified as having exceptional learning needs educational handicaps (Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole, 2008). Therefore, RTI was a topic that was also addressed.

An initial, skeletal syllabus was developed by district special education personnel. The syllabus included instructional topics, readings, assignments, projects, and assessments. These course elements were designed with the dual foci addressing both teacher/classroom and administrator/school instructional and implementation issues.

Differentiated Instruction and Meaningful Application was piloted during the spring 2008

semester. Working in collaboration with the university outreach office, the district was given permission to individually select the participants of the first course. At the recommendation of district principals, department chairpersons, and curriculum content directors, 22 special and general educators were enrolled in the first course. These participants included master teachers and administrators who were currently working in Pre-K through 12 settings where differentiated instruction and practices were effectively implemented on a daily basis. As the course topics were presented each week, these master educators provided recommendations for supplemental readings and best practices in responsive teaching instruction and techniques that were applicable to elementary, middle, and high school students and classrooms. This innovative “think-tank” approach resulted in (a) dynamic discussions and sharing of effective practices among educators across grades, (b) networking of professionals that extended well beyond the graduate classroom, and (c) a cohort of special and general education professionals who took ownership and pride in having an active role in moving the district forward with this differentiated instruction initiative. A major emphasis of the course was the vision to introduce theory into practice and application each week, and the information these educators provided enabled that vision to come to fruition. As a result of their input, the syllabus was finalized and a course manual was created which included a variety of instructional handouts, activities, video clips, readings, projects, assessments, and rubrics pertinent to Pre-K through 12 environments that was accessible in both paper and digital format. Many of these participants from the first course also comprised the instructor pool for future course offerings, either as an individual instructor or as general educator/special educator teaching teams.

Dissemination Plan Utilizing PDS Sites

The school district involved in this project is a very large district, divided into five distinct

geographic areas. The original intent was to make the course as accessible as possible by offering one section in each geographic area every semester. By doing so, the capacity to enroll approximately 125 classroom teachers, related services personnel, and/or administrators (25 per class) in the graduate course during each semester was established.

In addition to the convenience of locating the five course sections in close proximity to the participants’ work sites, the outreach office collaborated with the leadership team at a PDS in each geographic area to establish the need for professional development in the area of differentiated instruction. With the approval of the district’s Office of Professional Development, a direct billing arrangement was established. This arrangement, outlined in a formal Memorandum of Understanding, provided for participants at the five PDS sites to pay a \$100 closed contract processing fee. The tuition for each PDS participant, which was reduced to match the district’s negotiated rate of reimbursement, was billed by the university directly to the district. Thus, each PDS participant paid only \$100 for the three credit graduate course. The need for the differentiated instruction course content, the convenience of the geographic locations, and the nominal cost made the course very appealing and resulted in strong enrollment.

Outcomes

The result of this successful collaborative partnership between a school district and local university yielded positive results for both institutions. The district was provided a graduate course in differentiated instruction which focused on pertinent classroom and school issues. The design of the course required immediate application of differentiated principles by the participants each week, resulting in positive changes to instruction and the learning environment for students. Many of the course participants were PDS mentors. As they applied new strategies to their “toolbox” that were presented in the readings, discussions, activities

and/or instruction, daily lesson planning and classroom instruction changed. The mentor-intern discussions during planning sessions began to naturally incorporate reflection on individual student performance, as responsive teaching practices to content, process, and product were imbedded into each lesson. Teachers reported the “celebrations” of the mentor-intern teams as they reviewed the academic gains of the students, who were responding so positively to the accommodations and modifications provided. Additionally, since many of the participants of the course were teaching in the same school, faculty room “differentiation chatter” became a hot topic. Reportedly, teachers not currently participating in the course began consulting with course participants to expand their teaching repertoire, as well. Overall, this graduate course format delivered high quality instruction on differentiation, without additional professional development funding. As an added benefit, this course could also be imbedded into other custom district cohorts arranged by the outreach office and offered by the university. Furthermore, the model could be used to design other graduate course offerings benefits to the district.

The university experienced positive outcomes from the creation of *Differentiation and Meaningful Application*, as well. The pilot class offered in spring 2008 provided a bank of proficient part-time instructors to teach the course, not only in the original school district, but also in neighboring districts, where it has been offered each semester. Offering multiple sections of the course brought a positive and significant revenue flow to the university, a portion of which is directed back to the Special Education Department budget. This model for graduate level special topic course design is being shared with other school districts in the state to be used to address issues that are district-wide or specific to individual PDS sites.

It is believed that by working collaboratively and looking for unique solutions to instructional challenges, university and school PDS/professional development partnerships will definitely result in positive impact on the performance of the mentors and the university

interns, which ultimately affects the achievement of students in their Pre-K-12 classrooms.

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