

**How Can Teachers Differentiate their Instruction to Meet the Needs of Elementary Students with Varying Ability Levels?**

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....Page 3

Introduction.....Page 4

Theoretical Framework.....Pages 4-10

Synthesis of Research.....Pages 10-16

Methodology.....Pages 16-17

Setting.....Pages 17-21

Data Collection.....Pages 21-22

Data Analysis.....Pages 23-24

Findings/Analysis.....Pages 24-32

Conclusion.....Pages 32-33

Limitations.....Page 34

Implications and Future Research.....Page 34-35

References.....Page 36

**Abstract**

This six-month study on the importance of differentiated instruction focused on two sixth grade classrooms at a rural school in New York. This study analyzed classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and field journal entries. The three students included in this study were chosen by convenience to the researcher within her own classroom as they are classified with learning disabilities. The results of this study show that differentiated instruction allows teachers to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. The teacher who used daily differentiation within his classroom held student's attention and motivation more consistently than the teacher who did not use differentiated instruction on a lesson-to-lesson basis.

## **Introduction**

Working alongside students with disabilities my whole life has inspired me to conduct the research in this study. I have observed countless students in a variety of classrooms whose needs were not being met by the instructional activities being provided within their classrooms. I have also had the pleasure of working with and observing teachers who differentiate their instruction on a daily basis in order to meet the needs of all students within their classroom. As a first year, special education teacher in a sixth grade classroom, I have come to see the importance of differentiated instruction with all students, in particular those who have learning disabilities. My main goal for this study was to determine the best teaching practices that can be used to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities in an inclusion classroom. I also wanted to examine teacher's perceptions and opinions of differentiation within their own classrooms. It has become clear to me that when student's instructional needs are not being met, their retention of information is not as accurate as if the teacher had modified notes and/or class assignments. Every student comes from different cultural and home environments, which in turn provides them with different background knowledge and experiences that they bring to school. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for teachers to get to know their students and their student's ability levels so that they will be better able to implement differentiated activities to meet the needs of all students within their classroom.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Using the Sociocultural Theory to ground my research, I am seeking to examine how teachers can deliver differentiated instruction to elementary students of all ability

levels. Throughout my teaching experience, I have come to find that every child learns differently. These differences in learning have essential implications for teachers who instruct them everyday. My research takes cultural, demographic, and ability level variations into account when considering the best practices for teaching students who have different needs. Many teachers I have worked with have not taken these differences into account as they instruct their students with one learning style in mind. I have also worked with teachers who deliver differentiated instruction to their students and have seen great success in student learning. Researchers (Jimenez, 2006; Filippini, 2006; Gerber, 2006; Wing-Yin Chow, 2008; McBride-Chang, 2008; Cheung, 2008; Sze-Lok Chow, 2008; Roberts, 2005; Jurgens, 2005; Burchinal, 2005; Brice-Heath, 1982) have supported the idea that students come to school with differing literacy experiences and that those students who come to school with structured literacy practices at home have the most success. My research centers on finding the best teaching practices that teachers can use when delivering instruction to students of all ability levels.

Sociocultural Theory has been supported by a variety of theorists, such as Brice-Heath (1982), Meier (2003), Rogoff (1990) and Vygotsky (1978). The Sociocultural Theory centers on how children and people alike acquire language through their everyday experiences (Larson & Marsh, 2005). This theory seeks to examine what people can *do* with their acquired literacy/literacy's in their lives and how they use it to make sense of the world around them (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Meier (2003) believes that as a child is continually surrounded by a certain culture's/society's use of language and beliefs, he/she will start to acquire many of the same linguistic and social tendencies that they see modeled everyday. Meier (2003) further believes that oral language is the first aspect of

language that a child acquires through social interaction with their surrounding environment. Brice-Heath (1982) like Meier (2003) states, "...the culture children learn as they grow up is, in fact, 'ways of taking' meaning from the environment around them" (p.73). Brice-Heath (1982) has completed a study that examined how people's culture and the ideas, beliefs, and values that are included in it, influence the meaning they take away from a text or other oral literacy experience. Freebody and Luke (1990) state that as a child progresses onto and develops their knowledge of literacy, they become a text participant, trying to figure out the meaning behind a particular piece of language, a text user, as they figure out how to use the language at that moment in time, and finally a text analyst, as they work on critically analyzing a given text. Vygotsky (1978) contends that the development of the mind cannot be understood apart from the surrounding environment. Furthermore, in Dodici Draper, and Peterson's (2003) article entitled, *Early Parent-Child Interactions and Early Literacy Development*", Vygotsky (1978) is cited in his belief that children's behaviors and knowledge structures are formed with each experience in their environment, which includes daily interactions with adults during daily routines. In reference to the area of literacy development, Vygotsky (1978) states that "...social interactions with an adult within the cultural contexts of society are fundamental to cognitive development (Dodici et al., 2003, p.124). Rogoff (1990) builds off of Vygotsky's (1978) view on the Sociocultural Theory as she explains how skill development in young children can only exist if there is another person interacting with a child, which can include any adult. Rogoff (1990) refers to an adult-child relationship as a novice-professional type of relationship where involvement is scaffolded on a daily basis.

Other researchers have used the Sociocultural Theory to guide their research. Dodici, Draper and Peterson (2003) like Aukerman (2007) incorporate Vygotsky's view on the Sociocultural Theory as they use it as a base for their study on the relationship between parent-child interactions and the effect these experiences have on early literacy skills. When discussing their implications, Dodici et al. (2003) and Aukerman (2007) also reference Rogoff's (1990) belief that the interactions with parents at home is one of the most important indicators of a child's literacy development and success as children's first literacy experiences happen with the people who surround them at home. Aukerman (2007) further cites Vygotsky's theory on children's "zone of proximal development" as students in Aukerman's study learn to form and answer one another's questions during literacy practices at school with sporadic teacher guidance. Like Aukerman (2007), Purdy (2008) references Vygotsky's influence on her work as she bases her research on Vygotsky's theory of learning is a social practice where students are guided rather than forced into specific literacy practices. Purdy (2008) uses Vygotsky's influence to offer four ways in which teachers can improve their literacy instruction, which include "questioning, teaching vocabulary, engaging in collaborative talk, and recognizing that the culture and identity of the child are important to literacy learning" (2008, p.44).

Although not stated as having referenced the previously stated theorists (Brice-Heath, Meier, Rogoff, and Vygotsky), Pruitt, Wandry, and Hollums (1998) and Pruitt-Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) have clearly based their research on parent-educator communication on the Sociocultural Theory. Similarly, Lowrie's (2006), Adams and Christenson's (2000), and Roy-Katyal and Evers' (2007) research on teacher-parent communication and trust indicates, but does not specifically state, a grounding to the

Sociocultural perspective on children's literacy development as success in school is tied to a positive rapport between teachers and parents. Like Lowrie (2006), Wing-Yin Chow, McBride-Chang, Cheung, and Sze-Lok Chow (2008) and Roberts, Jurgens, and Burchinal (2005) clearly use the Sociocultural Theory to inform their research on the implications of parent-child home literacy practices. From the Sociocultural perspective, Wing-Yin Chow et al. (2008) investigate the effects of parent-child shared book reading on the literacy development of kindergartners in Hong Kong. Roberts et al. (2005) also use the sociocultural perspective as they observed the way in which home literacy practices, such as shared book reading and maternal sensitivity, influenced children's present and future literacy development and success.

Again, although not specifically stated, Flynn's (2007) study on effective, differentiated instruction for students is clearly grounded in the Sociocultural Theory on literacy development as she observes three teacher's literacy instruction that base their instruction around student conversations and questions. Like Flynn (2007), Polk (2006) grounds his research in the Sociocultural Theory as he examines various ways that teachers can effectively teach students that come from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Mctavish's (2007) research references Brice-Heath's (1983) research on the importance of emphasizing active literacy practices in the household, such as storybook reading. Mctavish's research investigates literacy as social experiences with a child's surrounding culture and community. Like Mctavish (2007), Hammer, Rodriguez, Lawrence, and Miccio (2007) ground their research in the Sociocultural Theory as they reference Heath (1983) in an attempt to investigate how cultural beliefs and values shape people's actions as they learn socially and culturally accepted literacy practices. These

culturally learned literacy experiences influence children's literacy development as they are constantly learning culturally appropriate ways to interact with and use text and oral language.

Saenz and Felix (2007) reference Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, and Mosier (1993) as they discuss how Latino children that are surrounded by the Latino culture at home will enhance their literacy development through social interaction. Grounding their research in the Sociocultural Theory, Jimenez, Filipini, and Gerber (2006) reference Brice-Heath (1982), Vygotsky (1978), and Rogoff (1994) in their study on shared reading within Latino households. Brice-Heath's (1982) research supports Jimenez's et al. (2006) claim that parent participation in their child's literacy practices at home stimulates children's language development. They also reference Vygotsky's theory on "children's zone of proximal development" and how interactive read alouds at home can expand a child's language development through social interaction (p.432). Jimenez et al. (2006) also reference Rogoff (1994) as they point out the benefits of shared literacy practices between a child and his/her parent as many literacy practices, such as read alouds, may be impossible without adult interaction and initiation.

I will be using the Sociocultural Theory in my research for the purpose of examining how cultural and environmental influences affect student learning. Furthermore, I will use this theory to investigate how elementary school teachers can use their knowledge of each student's cultural background in order to differentiate their instruction to teach all students. The main argument I wish to address is that every child comes from a variety of cultures and social groups, emphasizing different views on literacy and we, as teachers, must respect and embed these diverse backgrounds into our

instruction. The Sociocultural Theory has informed my emerging definition of literacy, as it describes the acquisition of literacy as something that is obtained through social interaction with people in their surrounding environment (Meier, 2003). My research will align with Meier's (2003) view on the Sociocultural Theory as he states, "Despite their diverse backgrounds, all children bring to school rich linguistic abilities acquired through social interaction in their homes and communities" (p. 242).

### **Synthesis of Research**

Research has shown that structured, home literacy practices can help students' literacy development (Jimenez, 2006; Filippini, 2006; Gerber, 2006; Wing-Yin Chow, 2008; McBride-Chang, 2008; Cheung, 2008; Sze-Lok Chow, 2008; Roberts, 2005; Jurgens, 2005; Burchinal, 2005; Brice-Heath, 1982). Jimenez (2006), like Filipini (2006) and Gerber (2006), offer an analysis of the present study on how shared reading at home with an adult(s) can affect children's language and literacy development. In a study on the effects of parent-child shared book reading and metalinguistic training, Wing-Yin Chow, McBride-Change, Cheung, and Sze-Lok Chow (2008) found that home literacy practices impact children's oral and written language development, as reading aloud and using questioning during reading at home allows children to further progress in their literacy development.

Roberts, Jurgens, Burchinal (2005) analyze a study that focused on the role of home literacy practices, such as shared book reading frequency, maternal book reading strategies, child's enjoyment of reading, and maternal sensitivity have on preschool children's language and literacy development. Brice-Heath's (1982) studies on three different communities showed that the literacy practices conducted at home are key

predictors of children's performance at school. Studies show that children are taught many of their early literacy skills from the interactions with their parents and other adults they are surrounded with as they grow and develop (Dodici, 2003; Draper, 2003; Peterson, 2003). Dodici et al. (2003) explain the importance of informing parents of their role as teacher to their children's early literacy skills. Dodici, Draper, and Peterson (2003) explain that it is not only literacy practices, such as oral reading that influence later literacy skills in their children, but also their everyday interactions. Communicating with their children allows parents to teach their children the oral literacy skills that they learn to develop and use as they continue to grow in their understanding.

Research further supports how socioeconomic status and parenting influences a child's language development (Vernon-Feagans, 2008; Pancsofar, 2008; Willoughby, 2008; Odom, 2008; Quade, 2008; & Cox, 2008). Vernon-Feagans et al. (2008) explains how not only infant and parent characteristics, but also how diverse parenting styles and maternal language influence children's language development in both rural and suburban locations. The study also analyzes the influence that a mother's educational background has on her child's language acquisition. Vernon-Feagans's et al. (2008) research findings are consistent with the findings from studies done by Fish and Pinkerman (2003), which stated that children who have low socioeconomic status and who live in rural locations tend to have language delays.

Research has shown that parents and teachers' attitudes can affect a child's literacy development (Pruitt, 1998; Wandry, 1998; Hollums, 1998; Pruitt-Garriott, 2000; Wandry, 2000; Snyder, 2000; Adams, 2000; Christenson, 2000; Lowrie, 2006). After conducting formal interviews with participating families, Pruitt, Wandry, and Hollums (1998)

conclude that the attitudes between parents/guardians and special education teachers affect how a child perceives school and their motivation to learn, as students can become more concerned with the teacher-parent relationship than they are about their academics. The findings from this study revealed that parents of students in special education are troubled by the reluctance of teachers to listen to and consider their input about their children (Pruitt et al., 1998). Parents in Pruitt's et al. (1998) study also stated their concerns about the quality and frequency of communication with their child's teachers. In order to investigate the gap between parent and teacher communication, a similar study conducted by Pruitt-Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000). Pruitt-Garriott's et al. (2000) study used questionnaires in order to examine parent's perceptions of the IEP (Individualized Education Program) conferences with their child's educators (2000). The results from this study revealed that, although eighty-nine percent of the parents reported to be present at most IEP meetings/conferences for their child, they took on a more "passive" role in collaboration with their child's educators (Pruitt-Garriott et al., p.42). Related studies by Adams (2000) and Christenson (2000), found that trust between parents and teachers was at its highest at the elementary level and at its lowest at the junior high and high school level. Adams (2000) and Christenson (2000) findings show that parents trust teachers more than teachers trust parents. It is clear in the results of this study that parent-teacher communication is extremely important for student success in school. Lowrie (2006) on the other hand explores the family-school relationship in distance education where teacher-student interaction is minimal. Two families, who were included in the study, reported that they felt a stronger connection and communication system with teachers from the distance education program than they did with the teachers

in regular schools. It was argued that formal schooling can many times crush the parent-teacher relationship by creating borders between parents and teacher communication.

Research has indicated that parent and teacher communication is an important factor in determining a child's development (Katyal-Roy, 2007; Evers, 2007; Mctavish, 2007). Mctavish (2007) sought to reveal the connection between home literacy practices and the literacy practices presented to their children at school. Through observations and interviews of one working class family, Mctavish revealed the importance of having teachers work alongside parents to understand and connect with the home literacy practices in the school setting. Through participant observation and interviews in three Hong Kong schools, Katyal-Roy, and Evers (2007) conclude that many parents feel that the relationship between themselves and their children's teachers is that of "professional and client" and that instruction and education was the sole responsibility of the teachers in the school (Katyal et al., p.65).

Research has shown that teachers should consider the backgrounds (culture) of their students when delivering literacy instruction (Flynn, 2007; Purdy, 2008; Polk, 2006; Meier, 2003; Hammer, Rodriguez, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007). Flynn (2007) investigates the literacy practice and instruction of three teachers who have been recognized as "effective teacher" by expert nominations and high students literacy achievement (2007, p. 137). Polk (2006), like Flynn (2007), offers ten characteristics of effective teachers, which include "...good prior academic performance, communication skills, creativity, professionalism, pedagogical knowledge, thorough and appropriate student evaluation and assessment, self-development or lifelong learning, personality, talent or content area knowledge, and the ability to model concepts in their content area" (2006, p.23). Purdy

(2008), a social constructivist, explores the positive results of having small group discussions during reading activities through observations and coding of teacher-student interaction during a third-grade guided reading lesson (2008). Meier (2003) found that teachers who learn the cultural background of their students will be more successful in their literacy instruction. Research reveals that parent's viewpoints and traditions are not the same throughout every culture (Hammer, 2007; Rodriguez, 2007; Lawrence, 2007; Miccio, 2007). Research further supports the importance of having teachers extend educational programs that are not always built on the values and traditions of the Caucasian, middle-class culture living in America (Hammer et al., 2007).

Tobin & McInnes (2008) has shown the importance of providing modified, differentiated instruction to students in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade blended classrooms. As more teachers continue to provide additional guidance and modifications in their lessons for struggling learners, more students will begin to become more successful (Tobin & McInnes, 2008). Using qualitative research methods, Tobin and McInnes (2008) observe and interview multiple teachers, of which two the focus their studies on. The key questions posed for this research were "How do teachers come to understand and address the literacy needs of academically diverse learners?" and "How may differentiated instruction address the needs of struggling literacy learners in the regular classroom?" (Tobin & McInnes, p.5). This research not only centered on differentiating instruction for students with diverse cultural backgrounds, but also those who have varying levels of literacy development (2008). Tobin and McInnes' (2008) findings show that modified and differentiated instruction can facilitate student's comprehension and application of the subject matter being delivered by the classroom teacher. Like Tobin and McInnes

(2008), Aukerman (2007) offers alternative, differentiated approaches to teaching literacy in the classroom. Aukerman (2007) has outlined an alternative approach to reading instruction where all students, even those who struggled with reading, are the “primary knowers” in the classroom (p.56). Aukerman’s (2007) study investigates an approach to reading instruction where the teacher allows the students to actively guide their own reading instruction as they seek to ask and answer each other’s questions about a text. Aukerman’s (2007) study offers the idea that teaching should seek to grasp student’s questions and motivation to learn, rather than lead their learning with teacher-created lessons on what they deem as important to reading instruction.

Sociocultural Theory has supported my research, in that it has proven that children who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds need to have differentiated instruction in school in order to succeed. I have found that teachers who differentiate their instruction and keep Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development imbedded in their teaching philosophy, have greater student success. By exploring cultural and demographic variations within my own students, I have found that active involvement, modeling, and reinforcement of key concepts allows all students to succeed. Although students come to school with differing literacy experiences, it is essential for teachers to differentiate their instruction and explore their student’s background knowledge before delivering instruction.

Research indicates that there is a relationship between a student’s socioeconomic status and parenting influences a child’s literacy development (Vernon-Feagans, 2008; Pancsofar, 2008; Willoughby, 2008; Odom, 2008; Quade, 2008; & Cox, 2008). Therefore, given the theoretical stance that learning is a social practice (Heath, 1982), it

is necessary to analyze the relationship between the cultural environment that a child is surrounded with on a daily basis with the school environment where they are asked and expected to perform in a certain way. I will not only be observing and interviewing selected students in my classroom in order to seek their opinions on the relationship between home and school performance, but I will also be observing how the selected students react to certain teaching practices. Additionally, I will be interviewing teachers to ask them how their teaching methods address their student's varying ability levels. As such, this research asks, how can teachers differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of elementary students with varying ability levels?

### **Method**

#### *Researcher Stance*

I entered this school believing that students with disabilities needed differentiated instruction on a consistent basis in order to learn productively in the classroom. I currently co-teach in two inclusion classrooms consisting of two teachers who have differing teaching methods. I have observed classified students in both of these classrooms and have seen the positive impact of differentiated, modified instruction on their motivation and ability to learn.

I began this study with the strong belief that teachers must seek to modify and differentiate their instruction based on the instructional, emotional, and social needs of all students within their classroom. I view teaching and learning as an interactive, hands-on process where students participate and have important roles in their learning. Every student comes into school with different background experiences and knowledge, which

can affect the way they connect to and/or interact with current instruction. I believe that teachers need to modify not only their instruction to meet the instructional and emotional needs of students, but they also need to differentiate and modify their classroom and homework assignments.

### *Design*

My research question required qualitative methods of research, which consisted of multiple teacher and student observations, interviews, and reflections over a four month period of time. Through my teacher and student observations, I was able to observe the everyday teaching practices of the two, selected teachers as well as the student's interactions with these practices without disrupting the classroom environment. I observed each teacher's method, or mode of delivery of their instruction. I also interviewed the selected teachers about their perceptions of differentiated instruction within their own classrooms and how they incorporated it within their lessons.

I also observed the selected students within each classroom and how their physical and emotional responses changed and adapted to each teaching method and classroom activities within each lesson. I also interviewed each student in order to get a sense of their perceptions of how their instructional needs were or were not being met within each classroom.

### **Setting**

#### *School*

This study took place at Reap Middle School in Arymlap, New York. Although this is not a high needs school, there are forty-two students who currently receive free and -reduced lunches. In this district, there are one hundred thirty-seven students currently

enrolled in sixth grade and eight sixth-grade teachers, all of whom co-teach, with the exception of two teachers. The majority of students are Caucasian with one percent African Americans currently enrolled in the middle school.

There are four sixth-grade teams who have two or three teachers per team. Two of the sixth-grade teams have one consultant teacher who co-teaches each subject, while the other teams have only students who are not classified with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 program. The special education is responsible for planning with and teaching daily lessons in all subject areas with the general education teachers within each classroom. They are also responsible for keeping up-to-date records on each classified student's annual goals and daily interactions with teachers, lessons, and other students. The general education teacher's responsibilities are to plan with and co-teach their daily lessons with the special education teacher.

### *Classroom*

My research will take place in two different classrooms within Reap Middle School. Mr. Wilcox is a first year teacher who has recently graduated from college in May of 2008. He currently co-teaches Math, Science, and Reading at Reap Middle School with myself. Wilcox believes in the integration of technology in order to model and guide students throughout a lesson and that all students should be held accountable for the same amount of work that meets their individual needs. He works hard to differentiate his instruction to meet the needs of all students by modeling and supporting students with one-to-one assistance as needed. While planning daily lessons, Mr. Wilcox and I think about problems that each student may have with the planned assignments and activities before we create them. He constantly creates cloze notes for students who have

learning disabilities and guides them through the completion of these notes through modeling on the SMARTboard©. Wilcox also creates collaborative groups for class assignments, grouping higher functioning with lower functioning students. Science and Math class consists of hands-on, interactive activities where students are able to participate and take part in their learning.

Mr. Giffert is a veteran teacher who has been teaching for thirty-five years. He teaches English Language Arts (ELA), Reading, and Social Studies at Reap Middle School. His philosophy of teaching incorporates meeting the needs of students and having every student, regardless of ability level, held to the same standards of their fellow peers. Although differentiated instruction does occur in this classroom from time-to-time, it is at the prompting of the special education teacher that cloze notes, modified instruction and activities are provide on a daily basis. ELA and Social Studies classes are primarily lecture-based with occasional cooperative working groups that consist of working on the completion of a given worksheet. In Social Studies classes, the teacher uses textbooks and worksheets as the primary resources in learning about related topics.

### *Participants*

*Students.* Throughout this study, I have researched three, English-speaking, sixth-grade students within my own classroom who have Individualized Education Programs (I.E.P.'s). Each of these students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities that prevent them from learning content material at the same rate as their fellow peers.

Laren, Christina, and Tammy have been selected according to convenience and readiness to participate in this study. In order to include these students in my study, I sent home a parent permission letter that not only explained the research topic in question, but it also

asked parents to either approve or disapprove of their child participating in this study.

After receiving consent from each of the parents, I began to conduct classroom observations of Laren, Christina, and Tammy within each classroom. I also interviewed each student individually about their home life as well as their view on learning.

I have observed their lack of motivation to learn and their low self-confidence in school which shows in their completion of homework and class work assignments.

Laren, Christina, and Tammy are constantly seen with poor posture and lack of participation during Social Studies and ELA classes, but tend to show better posture and participation in Science and Math. Laren, Christina, and Tammy all participate more frequently in lessons that are interactive, hands-on, and collaborative than those that are primarily lecture based.

*Teachers.* Throughout my time teaching sixth grade at Reap Middle School, I have had the opportunity to work with two general education teachers; Mr. Wilcox and Mr. Giffert. Each teacher plans and co-teaches with the special education teacher, myself. Mr. Giffert and Mr. Wilcox teach three content areas each. Mr. Giffert teaches ELA, Social Studies, and a section of Reading. When walking into Mr. Giffert's classroom on a typical day, an observer will see the teacher introducing a lesson in primarily lecture form as the students listen. The teacher will then have students reading out of textbooks, completing worksheets, and/or taking notes independently in their notebooks while Mr. Giffert makes occasional circulations around the room to make sure that students are reading, completing their worksheets, and/or filling in their notebooks with content on the assigned section in the textbook. Occasional graphic organizer notes will be handed out for students to fill in independently during Social Studies class with

unstructured modeling on the chalkboard. At the conclusion of a lesson, students will then be instructed to take out their agendas to write down any homework for the night and will be handed a worksheet to be completed by the next class meeting.

When walking into Mr. Wilcox's classroom on a typical day, an observer will see the teacher in the front of the room, modeling cloze notes on the SMARTboard as students actively raise their hands to offer thoughts, ideas, and questions about a topic/concept. Mr. Wilcox and the special education teacher also demonstrate a variety of experiments and have kids perform hands-on activities in Science and many times in Math class as well. Wilcox will then give students a follow-up activity that reinforces the topic/concept introduced as a whole group to be completed in small groups or in partners. At the conclusion of the class, the teacher will allow students to offer any questions or ideas they may have after participating in the lesson.

### **Data Collection**

In order to conduct my research I used three sources of data collection; observations, interviews, and occasional journal reflections. The primary source of data collection was observations, which were supported with personal interviews and journal reflections.

#### *Observations*

Each of the selected classrooms were observed twice throughout the study for approximately sixty minutes. During each observation I focused on both the method of instruction from the teacher as well as the student reaction to the delivery of instruction. I acted as an observer within the classroom throughout the class time whereas I am usually co-teaching the lesson. I paid close attention to the physical and emotional

reactions to the way the teachers were delivering their instruction by recording their posture and verbal comments at various points within the lesson. I sat in the back of the classroom at a table and recorded both teacher and student interactions throughout the lesson. I looked at how often and when the student participated in each of the two classrooms with differing teaching methods. In order to formally record these observations, I took highly structured field notes on the selected students and teachers.

### *Interviews*

I conducted individualized student interviews that lasted approximately five to seven minutes in length that focused on their home environment and their ability to learn in school. I asked questions such as, “What is a typical weekday routine for you?”, “How do you learn best?”, “What can your teachers do to help you learn better in school?”, and “What are some things that prevent you from learning in school?” As students responded to these questions, I recorded their answers verbatim on a piece of paper.

I also conducted formal teacher interviews that lasted approximately five to seven minutes which focused on their own teaching methods and personal views on differentiated instruction. I asked questions such as, “If I were to walk into your classroom on a random day, what would I see from both the teacher and students?”, “What are your views on differentiated instruction within your own classroom?” , and “What types of classroom activities do you find are the most engaging for students? The least? At the request of the participating teachers and students a tape recorder was not used during these interviews as it would have been distracting to the participants involved.

## **Data Analysis**

The data collected throughout this study was analyzed using an interpretive approach. As I observed and interviewed both students and teachers, I sought to find student reactions to the inclusion of or lack of inclusion of differentiated instruction within two different classrooms. I examined the teaching methods being delivered along with the motivation of selected students to learn within this setting. After conducting teacher and student interviews and observations, I looked for patterns that aligned with one another, such as teaching resources, student reactions to instruction, and teaching methods and modes of delivery. I considered correlations and relationships among these patterns and developed a coding system that classified each notation from observations and journal reflections, as well as interview question responses. Using the patterns and relationships developed through my coding system, I was able to make comparisons between the two classrooms, associating certain student responses with classroom activities and/or the method of teaching instruction. Throughout my research I was able to develop two overriding themes, which are that students come to school with differing learning styles and levels and that students react to differentiated instruction. Through the development of student interviews, I developed an idea as to each student's home and cultural environment and how it may impact their comprehension and confidence in the content being delivered by the teacher. Through both field observations, reflections, and personal interviews, I was also able to find correlations between each teacher's method of instruction and how it related to student motivation and participation within the classroom. As I examined each student's posture, physical reactions, and verbal

comments throughout class, I was able to examine how their attitudes and reactions to instruction related to the way each teacher was delivering their instruction.

### **Findings/Analysis**

It is important to understand the environment in which students are surrounded with outside of school in order to understand their behavior and attitudes in school. As students come into school with varying ability levels and learning styles, they must be provided with differentiated instruction and assignments as it relates to their individual ability level.

### **Students Come to School with Differing Learning Styles and Levels**

It is important for teachers to know their audience of students and what type of support they are receiving at home. Laren, who is currently reading at a third grade reading level in sixth grade, states that an adult never has read or written with her at home and that when she gets home, she "...plays games outside, watches T.V., and (sometimes) does homework." Laren lives in a farmhouse in rural, Arymlap, New York with his five younger brothers and sisters. She has frequently stated that she gets little sleep because of the lack of heat, sleeping space, and hunger that keeps him up. She stated that no adults are typically home and that she must look after her five younger brothers and sisters while her parents are at work. In a field observation journal entry, I took note that Laren came into school very tired after a night of "babysitting" her younger brothers and sisters. She stated, "My eyes keep losing my place in the book, Miss Scheg!" Laren's inability to focus and remain engaged was due to home factors that are out of her control at the moment. In passing, she said to me, "...a lot of stuff is going on at home that I can't control," which told me that her lack of focus and

enthusiasm throughout the past few weeks were due to problems and issues at home. Laren stated that the lack of sleep and nourishment prevent him from learning in school, and that she wishes things were “different” at home.

Tammy is currently reading at a third grade reading level in sixth grade. She currently lives with her mom, dad, younger brother, and older sister in rural, Nodecam, New York. She claims to never read or write at home and that her parents have never read aloud to her at home. When asked why she does not read or write at home, she stated, “There are other things I could do” which demonstrates her disinterest with reading and writing on a normal day basis. A typical day for Tammy during the week is to “Eat a snack, go outside to play (not during the winter), play Playstation©, and do homework”. She went on to claim that she does her homework by herself because her parents always seem too “busy” to help her. It is obvious that the knowledge gained at school is only reinforced by Tammy at home and that parental involvement is infrequent. When asked what factors prevent her from learning in school, she replied, “Thoughts I have during class, like stuff from home”. When asked to explain about “stuff from home”, Tammy went on to say that he thinks about his parents fighting and the distractions of his brothers and sisters. It is clear to see that Tammy’s home life is less than supportive of in-school learning practices.

Christina is currently reading at a third grade reading level in sixth grade. She currently lives at home in rural Nodecam, New York with her mom, dad, and younger brother. At home, Christina claims that he does not read or write at home, but that his mom sometimes reads the newspaper out loud during breakfast. Christina reads a chapter book independently once a week at home. On a typical weekday, Christina comes home

from school to eat a snack, watch television, play the Wii®, eats dinner, and does her homework with little to no parent help. She claimed that her parents both work that they are too tired to help her with her homework at night. It is clear that Christina's home environment, alike to Tammy and Laren's, does not have significant parental involvement of the skills and content taught at school.

Supporting Shirley Brice-Heath's (1982) claim that children learn to take away meaning from their home environment, data from the participants in this study urge us to consider a student's home environment and the culture that surrounds them outside of school in order to inform teachers of the means in which they are forced to learn at home. Many times teachers expect all students to learn through the same lenses. However, in creating this platform of expectations, teachers can unintentionally disregard each individual student's personal struggle to meet these expectations.

Although teachers would like to think that all students receive equal amounts of support at home to complete their schoolwork, the data in this research points out the reality that not all students come from the same cultural home life and that each student has their own personal struggles that they must battle with both inside and outside of school. Teachers must learn of these struggles through getting to know their students so that they can create lessons that meet the cultural, social, emotional, and academic needs of each student.

### **Students respond to differentiated instruction**

A number of researchers believe in the importance of modifying and differentiating their instruction to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. Two out of the two teachers interviewed had similar feelings when asked about their feelings

on differentiating their instruction. Mr. Wilcox and Mr. Giffert both agreed that differentiation within the classrooms was a vital part of each lesson they taught. Although both of these teachers agreed in their belief about differentiated instruction, observations of their teaching methods and resources proved otherwise.

*Mr. Wilcox's Teaching Methods*

In an interview with Mr. Wilcox, he stated, "I have always seen the need to differentiate my instruction even with students who do not have I.E.P.'s, because every student has different needs." This belief was apparent when entering Mr. Wilcox's classroom during one of my classroom observations. Additionally, Wilcox believes that the most engaging lessons for students are those where they are, "...doing something like hands-on or interactive activities where they are up and moving." It is clear that he incorporates this belief as I observed his Science lesson on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008. He opened his lesson asking students their background knowledge on rotation versus revolution in a whole class discussion. Students were given the opportunity to offer their ideas and knowledge about this topic as Mr. Wilcox made guiding questions and comments. Wilcox then demonstrated rotation versus revolution using a bat, asking kids to then take turns rotating with and revolving around the bat as he asked guiding questions. Class was then ended with a ball toss review on the topic discussed in that day's lesson. Students sat on their desks and excitedly raised their hands to answer each question that was asked by the teacher. Mr. Wilcox was careful to provide wait time for each question so that all students had a chance to process the question and raise their hand to answer it.

Furthermore, in an interview with Mr. Wilcox, he additionally stated that he also differentiates his assignments and classroom activities by eliminating an answer(s) on tests, modifying the length and difficulty level on homework assignments, and highlighting key words in questions and directions on a given homework assignment and/or test.

*Mr. Giffert's Teaching Methods*

Although Mr. Giffert shared Mr. Wilcox's belief in incorporating differentiated instruction into his own classroom, an observation of Giffert's Social Studies lesson on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008 showed otherwise. Giffert opened class telling kids to open their notebooks where they were asked to record that days vocabulary about the Ancient Egyptian civilization. Students were instructed to complete this independently with little to no guidance or modeling from the teacher. Mr. Giffert then told students to open up their textbooks and record notes on a Q.A.D. (Question, Answer, Description) chart with one verbal example of how to complete the chart. Students had to generate questions, find the answers, and elaborate on the concept selected within this chart with only one verbal example. Each student completed this activity independently as the teacher circulated twice around the room. Class ended with Giffert instructing students to close their textbooks, put their notes away, and record in their agendas to study for an upcoming quiz. (Students were given no outline for the quiz.)

Mr. Giffert also stated in his interview that he frequently modifies his instruction and class/homework assignments. He states that he not only cuts many assignment's in half, but that he also gives special seating to students, pairing higher students in groups

with lower performing students. He also stated that he “sometimes” gives cloze notes during class.

*Student Reactions Throughout Mr. Wilcox’s Lesson*

In a Science lesson taught by Mr. Wilcox, students were engaged in a hands-on activity where students were to revolve and rotate around a baseball bat in order to understand the difference between rotation versus revolution (as previously explained).

Tammy entered the classroom with all the necessary materials for the activity (notebook, pencil, highlighters) but had a very uninterested attitude about Science class as seen by her mumbling under her breath, frown on her face, and hood pulled over her head in a slouching manner at her desk. Christina came into Mr. Wilcox’s room in a similar manner to Tammy’s, as she entered walking very slow, with a frown on her face. She then put her head on her desk and pulled her hood over her eyes. When asked to sit up by Mr. Wilcox, Christina stated, “Ugh, I’m so tired.” Laren, on the other hand, came into class very upbeat with a smile on her face and a ready-to-learn attitude as observed by her upbeat question to Mr. Wilcox, “What are we doing today?!” As soon as Mr. Wilcox began to show the demonstration of rotation versus revolution using the baseball bat, both Christina and Tammy began to sit up in their seats and raise their hands to offer their thoughts and ideas about the activity. Laren was almost jumping out of her seat to volunteer to participate in making the solar and lunar eclipses. When asked to help demonstrate a solar eclipse, she instantly became engaged as shown by the smile on her face. She also stated, “This is awesome!” When it came time for the cloze notes portion of the lesson, Tammy, Laren, and Christina were all able to successfully fill in each part of the notes being modeled in front of them on the SMARTboard©. Although Laren

remained fairly engaged throughout the majority of the lesson, her participation and questioning began to slow down during the note-taking portion of this lesson. Christina, however, began to become more engaged throughout the note-taking portion of the lesson, asking questions such as, “Wait...How does the Earth go around the sun again?” Although each of the students needed one or two reminders to stay focused during the note-taking, they remained fairly engaged throughout the majority of the lesson, successfully completing notes about the concept.

*Student Reactions Throughout Mr. Giffert’s Lesson*

In an observation done during a Social Studies lesson with Mr. Giffert on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008, students were asked to read independently from a text book and record notes about the section of the chapter on a Q.A.D. chart (as previously explained). Although Laren came into the class very upbeat with a smile on her face and asking many questions about that day’s content, she instantly became “unengaged and uninvolved” in the lesson as soon as Mr. Giffert instructed for students to take out and read their textbooks. She began to slouch in her chair and look around the room instead of reading her textbook and taking notes. At the conclusion of this activity, she only had one question written down on her Q.A.D. chart and was observed with a very red, scornful face when asked why she did not have her chart filled in by Mr. Giffert. As Christina entered the same classroom on the same day, she was observed looking very sullen with a frown on her face, mumbling under her breath, “I hate Social Studies.” While reading the pages in the textbook, as instructed, she was noted having difficulty filling in the Q.A.D. chart, raising her hand for help multiple times. After Mr. Giffert left her side, Christina mumbled, “This is so dumb. I hate reading from this book.” After raising her hand for

help the last time, Christina began to slouch in her chair, take apart her pencil, and ceased reading in the textbook. At that moment, it appeared that Christina had completely shutdown, focusing on everything but reading the textbook. Her notes were incomplete at the end of class with only three questions filled in the Q.A.D. chart.

Tammy had similar reactions to this lesson as Laren, as she came into class with a smile on her face, talking and laughing with her friends until Mr. Giffert gave the instruction to get out the textbooks. She then refused to take notes in the Q.A.D. chart unless the teacher was right next to her and was frequently asked to stop slouching in her chair. She told Mr. Giffert, "I hate reading from this book. Why can't we watch a movie or work with a partner or something?" Alike to Laren and Christina, Tammy's notes were incomplete with only two questions written in by the end of class.

Supporting Tobin and McInnes' (2008) claim that differentiated modes of instruction help to meet the needs of all students, data gained from interviewing and observing the selected teachers and students in this study shows the importance of not only modifying our activities to meet the needs of students within a classroom, but also modifying and differentiating the mode of delivery of instruction. This research further demonstrates the need for every teacher, whether or not they are special education teachers or general education teachers, to seriously consider differentiating their instruction to meet the needs of every learning style from auditory to kinesthetic learners.

It is clear to see that in Mr. Wilcox's classroom where differentiated instruction was an *everyday* occurrence within each lesson, students were more apt to pay attention and remain engaged throughout the lesson than those in Mr. Giffert's classroom where differentiated instruction was not an everyday occurrence. Mr. Wilcox differentiated his

instruction by using cloze notes and the technology of the SMARTboard to model and guide students throughout their learning. He also differentiated his instructional practices by encompassing the kinesthetic learner through hands-on, physical activities in Science class, as well as the visual and auditory learners through open discussion during cloze note-taking.

It is interesting to note that although students, such as Laren in this study, claim that they learn a certain way “better”, it is not always true when seeing how they react to a certain mode of instruction. For instance, Laren claimed in her interview that she learned the most when reading a textbook or doing a worksheet. However, this was not true in the two observations of her in Mr. Giffert and Mr. Wilcox’s classrooms as she remained engaged throughout the majority of the hands-on activities in Mr. Wilcox’s classroom and unengaged throughout the majority of the textbook reading and note-taking in Mr. Giffert’s classroom.

### **Conclusion**

The most important philosophy when teaching students is to get to know each student within a classroom. It can be easy to forget that every student comes from a different culture and home environment that can affect the way they learn in school. Meier (2003) states, “Despite their diverse backgrounds, all children bring to school rich linguistic abilities acquired through social interaction in their homes and communities” (p. 242). It is vital for teachers to get to know not only their student’s home environment, but also their unique learning styles and ability levels. Without knowing where a child has come from, how can teachers know where to start with them in school on an academic, emotional, and social level?

The findings of my research support Freebody and Luke (1990) as they state that as a child progresses onto and develops their knowledge of literacy, they become a text participant, trying to figure out the meaning behind a particular piece of language, a text user, as they figure out how to use the language at that moment in time, and finally a text analyst, as they work on critically analyzing a given text. It is important for teachers to understand the cultural and home environment barriers that may cause a child to process and/or comprehend a topic that is not familiar to them due to a lack of exposure to such concepts at home. Understanding what and how a child has learned will inform teachers on where what aspects of their instruction need to be modified or adapted for such students.

In a research study conducted by Tobin and McInnes' (2008), they found that modified and differentiated instruction can facilitate student's comprehension and application of the subject matter being delivered by the classroom teacher. It was clear through student and teacher observations that students who were engaged in the interactive material in Mr. Wilcox's classroom were more apt to participate and take part in their own learning than they were in Mr. Giffert's classroom where they were asked to read from textbooks and complete lengthy worksheets. Mr. Wilcox incorporated multiple, consistent ways of differentiated instruction as he provided cloze notes on a daily basis, hands-on activities that demonstrated important concepts, and guiding questions for students to reflect on and think about throughout the lesson. It was clear to see that students in Mr. Wilcox's classroom were more apt to participate and pay attention to the speaker than in Mr. Giffert's room where they struggled to keep up with the instructional activity being assigned.

### **Limitations**

This research took place in two classrooms in a rural community, therefore results from this study cannot be applied to all schools or classrooms across the world. Although I did conduct interviews with students about their home environments, I did not observe their homes directly and therefore responses may have not been completely accurate. I selected and researched only three students with learning disabilities, whereas results may be different with a broader range of ability levels within a classroom.

### **Implications and Future Research**

This study provides a restricted amount of information regarding the methods of differentiation that can be used in a classroom to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. As seen in the classroom observations and interviews with the selected students in this study, students are not always provided with differentiated learning to meet their learning style. Students who are perceived as “inattentive” or “distracting” in class are many times those who have learning disabilities, whose academic, social, and/or emotional needs are not being met. If a student is not provided with the proper modifications and adaptations to meet their instructional needs, how are they suppose to pay attention or participate in class activities that appear incomprehensible?

The results from this study clearly highlight the importance of getting to know one’s students in their classrooms, in particular their home environment and how they are supported at home. Teachers must plan for differentiated learning in order to meet the needs of each student within a classroom, whether it is through preferential seating, daily cloze notes, or modified classroom (and/or homework) assignments. In order to better

understand if these modifications meet the needs of their students, teachers must use informal, as well as formal assessments as indicators for future lesson activities.

It is interesting to note that one of the teachers, Mr. Giffert, was interviewed about his differentiated teaching practices. However, his responses during the interview did not necessarily mirror the classroom observations done during a regular school day.

Although he claimed to use a variety of modes of differentiation, he used only one or two when observed by the researcher in this study. Future researchers may seek to compare and contrast teachers' perceptions on best teaching practices for differentiated learning and their actual, day-to-day teaching practices within their own classroom. Many times knowing how to differentiate learning within a classroom does not always mean that a teacher will use their knowledge of differentiated learning within their classroom.

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