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Abstract

It goes without saying that the most critical component of preparing educators lies in their ability to competently teach. Differentiation provides a framework to develop classrooms where realities of genuine student variance can be addressed with curricular realities. The author describes a professional development project that differentiated a series of teacher workshops that were designed to increase teachers' perceived competency to differentiate instruction. The purpose here is to describe a collaboratively created and implemented professional development program designed to train staff in ways to differentiate instruction for all learners. Sample training activities, along with perceptions from participants and suggestions for realistic extensions are shared.

Introduction

Administrators and teachers alike face the difficult task of being educators during a time of ongoing reforms, increased expectations, and widening ranges of student needs. Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Thurlow (2000) point out that of all the critical issues in education today, one of the most dramatic is the curricular dilemma teachers face. Those curricular challenges reflect the essence of a schools' commitment to inclusive practices for all students. With the passage of federal legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990, PL 101-476), free education for students with disabilities is not only compulsory, the law mandates that it must be as similar as possible to the education provided to students without disabilities. Academic diversity for students with and without identified special needs has increased. The logistics of having students with challenging academic needs that can access and ultimately benefit from the general education curriculum is a reality in today's schools. To ensure that those logistics and realities are realized, Ivey (2000) calls for knowledgeable, reflective teachers who can respond to the diverse and ever-changing needs of individual students.

School Profile

The elementary school in which this project took place rests in a highly industrial community that is relatively depressed compared with much of the surrounding metropolitan area. About 68% of the students attending this school are enrolled in the free/reduced lunch program. The demographics of this school reveal a great deal of cultural and ethnic diversity. Of the 473 students enrolled, 59% are from Hispanic backgrounds. The medium average income of families within this school community is

$16,000. Over the last two years, this school district directed intensive staff development efforts at improved literacy scores for its' students. While gains have been reported at this school as well as across the district, 72% of the fifth graders in this school performed less than proficiently on the most current state writing assessment.

Through principal leadership, this particular school has participated in a university partnership for seven years. Key aims of this partnership are teacher preparation, professional development, research and inquiry and exemplary practice.

Setting the Context

Each year in schools across the district, staff collaboratively prioritized professional development needs for their building. Following a thorough analysis of student performance on recent standardized assessments, the school principal guided staff in prioritizing three student skill areas: 1) vocabulary development, 2) inferencing, and 3) written mechanics for focused attention. Though staff was confident those skill areas were being addressed, there was no denying that many students remained deficit in skill acquisition.

Under the leadership of the school principal, a group of teachers and a professor from the partnering university embarked on planning and implementing a series of trainings aimed at increasing teachers abilities to differentiate instruction, yet focused on those three areas of prioritized student need. Collaboratively this team designed the staff trainings based on the Tomlinson research-training model of differentiated instruction. Tomlinson (2001) maintains, "Differentiation, one facet of expert teaching, reminds us that these things are unlikely to happen for the full range of students unless curriculum and instruction fit each individual, unless students have choices about what to learn and how, unless students take part in setting learning goals, and unless the classroom connects with the experiences and interests of the individual" (p. 7). Supporting this premise, the planning team set out to design a series of inservices that not only enhanced teachers' understandings of differentiation but modeled those skills as well.

Professional Development Trainings

During the teams' initial planning meeting, the university professor took lead in reviewing the Tomlinson model (2000) to ensure that all members had a common foundation and shared understanding of the terms used and strategies recommended. This training package was implemented during four, two-hour after school sessions. To ensure project efficiency, a wide array of logistical details, (i.e. common language, personal interests, individual responsibilities) and project values (integrating theory/research with practical application and modeling differentiation for all learners) were identified and addressed. Given those variables, the team set about planning the inservices. Table 1 provides an overview of the content addressed in the initial planning session and the four inservices. Multiple resource materials (e.g. videos, readings, and handouts) were used during each session.

Each session began with a whole group anticipatory set activity designed not only to engage the participants after a long day of teaching, but also to serve as a model for highlighted instructional strategies. The "Daily Oral Language" (DOL) brainstorming is an example of one such activity. Nearly every teacher in the building indicated that they used DOL activities in their classroom. Having that background knowledge, the planning team created a handout listing nine suggested planning strategies for differentiation. In multi-grade level teams, teachers collaboratively generated suggestions for alternative ways to teach commonly practiced DOL skills in a more differentiated manner (See table 2).

<u>Staff Perceptions</u>

At the onset and the conclusion of the school year, thirty-four staff members engaged in a pre and post-assessment that focused on their perceived competencies in planning for and implementing strategies for differentiated instruction. Staff responses in the pre-assessment revealed a need for training across all nine of the identified instructional strategies: compacting, independent study, interest centers, tiered assignments, flexible groupings, learning centers, adjusting questions, mentorships and learning contracts.

Post-assessment data revealed marked gains in teachers' perceived competency across all nine instructional strategies. Notable in the pre-assessment and post-assessment analysis was a significant decrease in need (a self-reported competence level of 1 or 2 out of a possible 5) for staff training in the following areas: compacting reduced from 70% to 6%; independent study reduced from 58% to 18%; interest centers reduced from 55% to 11%; learning centers reduced from 50% to 9%; mentorships reduced from 56% to 38%; and learning contracts reduced form 49% to 21%. Clearly the eight hours of inservicing contributed to a substantial increase in teachers perceived competencies to differentiate.

A snapshot of teacher comments across the year showed a remarkable level of enthusiasm for the content and delivery of the inservices, and a commitment for expansion of this content. Representative comments include:

- *The video and simulated activities really made me think about how I assess and plan.*
- *Wonderful job. I like that you always include an activity that 'activates my own background knowledge'.*
- *Great attention to the theory shared in the video and the reading, then samples from teachers of how they are using this in their classrooms. That mesh of theory and practice is appreciated and I know it is how I learn best.*
- *Staff identified inferencing, written mechanics and vocabulary development as priorities and you are sticking with it. Thanks for using the topic of differentiated instruction within this context.*
- *Information is relevant, breakout sessions are informative and organization is evident.*
- *I'm leaving with ideas and things that I'll use in my classroom TOMORROW.*
- *Thanks for practicing what you are preaching. Centers and grouping choices truly demonstrate practical ways to differentiate.*

- *The centers rocked. Seeing what teachers in this building are doing is awesome. I just wish there was even more time.*
- *The "daily oral language" activity demonstrated that sharing information and brainstorming together produced powerful new ideas. I've incorporated fairly traditional DOL activities, like "correct the sentence on board" into my planning for years and to be honest, I'm bored with it and I'm sure my students are as well. I'm leaving today with more meaningful ways to teach those skills.*

Sharing the Vision

This professional development project illustrates how school and university faculty can pull together in a shared vision to make school improvement real. Meeting the academic diversity of students is a national concern shared by teacher preparation programs, administrators, teachers and parents. Efforts such as this guide teachers who are interested in nurturing environments that address the diversity typical of today's classrooms. Additionally projects such as the one described here provide a realistic and practical way of delivering such training.

For administrators and teachers to be effective planners and facilitators of differentiation, structured opportunities to engage in dialogue with one another must take place. The professional development plan described here offers just such an opportunity for a school community to create and reexamine their shared values and visions. In our case, we were committed to 1) modeling differentiation in our inservices; 2) maintaining a focus on school goals; 3) maximizing the expertise of in-house colleagues; and 4) illustrating practical applications. Additionally, evaluation plans such as this aid schools in objectively tracking the progress of one intervention approach over another. This project and the evaluation components might serve as guidelines as administrators, teachers and parents come together to understand and support a unified approach to professional development that aims for equity and excellence in classrooms.

Next Steps

Based on our experiences a series of recommendations have been implemented to help us take advantage of the benefits of this program. We have begun by critically reevaluating an array of logistical issues. Scheduling, materials and application of newly taught skills surfaced as paramount issues. With administrative support, a group of self-nominated teachers and the professor from a partnering university assumed responsibility for all of these issues. This support has included more strategic mentoring assistance to teachers and teacher candidates. In addition to regularly scheduled mentoring sessions, the university professor works with individual teachers to ensure a program focus for individual classrooms. This also enables the university professor to serve as a resource for materials and ideas.

This urban elementary school faced a number of barriers as staff planned to address their students' academic diversity. This project documents the efforts of a principal, teachers, and university professor in a collaborative, realistic partnership.

Together they contributed staff development, classroom and research expertise to collectively enhance the competencies of teachers. School faculty took a hard look at themselves asking if their current efforts were really making a difference. A benefit of this self-examination has been a more confident defense and promotion of their professional development program. This awareness is critical as schools everywhere struggle to formulate intervention plans for students at risk. Creatively and collaboratively using university/school partnership resources along with the expertise within the building enhances the quality of instructional practices for all learners.

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Table 1. Inservice topics.

Initial Planning Meeting	• Professional Development Initiative: Discuss D.I. objectives • Pre-assessment survey: Where are we with our own understandings of differentiation? • Making the connection between our legal obligations and our instruction • Article jigsaw • Overview and rationale of Tomlinson model • Examples of content, process and activities in action • Collaborative action planning for the school-wide initiative
September Inservice	• Pre-assessment survey • Debrief pre-assessment activity • Article Jigsaw • Overview and rationale of Tomlinson model • Differentiating Instruction for Mixed-Ability Classrooms: Video Clip • Illustrating the "graphing" activity • Self-ratings of instructional management strategies
November Inservice	• Look at your teaching through my eyes: Role Play • Discussion on groupings and space in the classroom. • What's happening in some or our classroom in this building? • Center: Reference Skills (independent study) • Center: Inferencing (tiered assignments) • Center: Constructed Responses (learning contracts) • Center: Vocabulary building (tiered assignments) • Center: Constructed Response (interest centers) • Center: Inferencing (compacting)
February Inservice	• Anticipatory set: D.O.L. activity • Center: Note taking (independent study) • Center: Inferencing (tiered assignments) • Center: Video Clips and discussion • Center: Inferencing (tiered assignments) • Center: Constructed Responses (learning contracts) • Center: Vocabulary building (tiered assignments) • Center: Constructed Response (interest centers) • Center: Inferencing (compacting)
April Inservice	• Panel discussion of other school visits. • Brainstorming session for grant ideas. • Carousal brainstorming activity: Differentiated instruction involves planning for differences across not only ability level but cultural, linguistic, racial, and religious differences as well. Identify professional development training needs to assist in your enhanced competency in all areas.

Table 2. <u>Differentiating daily oral language (DOL) activities</u>

STRATEGY	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
Compacting	• Using magazines, students highlight examples of more advanced grammatical skills, i.e.: **; , "…"** (…).
Independent Study	• Students generate sentences that apply to a specific area of focus. • At the primary level, students can used the circled words from the "morning message" when writing in their journals. • Teacher develops individual activities that focus on student's particular need (i.e. vocabulary enhancement, punctuation skills)
Interest Centers or Interest Groups	• Teacher prepares sentences using school name, students' interests or hobbies, current events, and sports, television and/or music star references. • Teacher uses the sentence or "morning message" to serve as an anticipatory set for a curriculum topic (math, science, history, or reading) being covered later in the day. • Proofreading center. Students leave work at center for others to proofread. • Students create their own sentences on small white boards for other students to solve. • Read the Room. • Teacher creates a sentence that reinforces an social/behavioral strategy previously taught (i.e. a problem solving strategy).
Tiered Assignments	• Personalized index cards. To ensure more meaningful distribution of attention and checks for understanding, code each student's name card with 2 or 3 needed skills. • Maximizing the "daily message". More advanced learners are cued to circle identified words, others are cued to search for sounds, while others focus on vocabulary development. • Word Wall. Students match synonyms/antonyms or vocabulary words from novels or texts. • Oral presentation. Present sentences with word usage errors orally as opposed to visually written on the board.
Flexible Grouping	• Students are assigned to color coded groups based on targeted skill and level. • Carousel Brainstorming. Together in small groups, students rotate about the room to the 4 or 5 samples the teacher has posted. Cooperatively one reads, while another facilitates, while others discuss and another writes down the correct answer.
Learning Centers	• Teacher provides varied levels by color coding for ability levels (i.e. strategically increasing the number and type of spelling, word usage or grammatical errors). Incorporate pictorial accommodations when needed (i.e. Rebus sentences). • Utilize commercially available DOL resources to reinforce current curricula topics covered throughout the day.

Adjusting questions	• Personalized index cards. To ensure more meaningful "checks for understanding", code each student's name card with their needed skills accompanied by a needed level of critical thinking, i.e. knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
Mentorships	• Job applications, resumes, job postings, and/or interest inventories materials are incorporated in the lesson.
Learning Contracts	• The teacher and student agree on a percentage of accuracy for the required task prior to moving onto the next level. • Together the teacher and student will choose/create/determine a method for how the student will correct him/herself.