CONUNDRUMS IN THE DIFFERENTIATED LITERACY CLASSROOM

RUTHANNE TOBIN
University of Victoria

Based on extensive professional experiences in working with literacy teachers to develop their skills in differentiated instruction, the author identifies six conundrums or puzzling challenges that frequently arise as teachers adopt a more responsive approach to meeting the needs of at-risk literacy learners in their regular classroom. The six conundrums fall under two categories: foundational and instructional. Foundational conundrums include teaching for understanding versus teaching skills; universal design versus differentiated design and assessing growth versus comparative assessment. Instructional conundrums include providing a robust literacy program versus activities based program; flexible small group instruction versus whole class approach and literal feedback versus validating feedback. In addition to examining these challenges, the author also suggests some ways to navigate these dilemmas with the goal of better meeting the needs of all literacy learners.

Teachers are seeking practical and theoretically sound ways of responding to the diversity and range of literacy needs in the regular elementary classroom. In the past several years in my capacity as teacher educator, I have worked extensively with novice and experienced teachers to explore ways of feasibly addressing this range of needs and backgrounds. In doing so, I have drawn on a model of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999) to help teachers plan and enact responsive teaching in the language arts curriculum. During these initiatives, teachers learning to differentiate have encountered a number of conundrums. In this article, I identify six of the most common conundrums and examine how teachers may consider and deal with these as they develop the skills of differentiation.

What is Differentiated Literacy Instruction?

Differentiation instruction (DI) means that teachers create different levels of expectations for task completion, and emphasize the creation of environments where all learners can be successful (Waldron & McLeskey, 2001). DI addresses the “how to” question for teachers and calls upon educators to be responsive to learners. Examples of differentiating in language arts include:

1. using reading materials at varying levels
2. using literacy centers with varied tasks designed to match students’ readiness, interests and/or preferred modes of learning
3. meeting in small groups to re-teach an idea or skill (Tomlinson, 2003).
At the heart of differentiating instruction in language arts is the need to provide learners with choices about what they read and in the design of their work products so that they are a better match for learners. This is particularly important for struggling students who can most benefit from additional supports, tailored activities, and explicit and extended instructional reading time with the teacher. In DI all learners focus on the same essential understandings but are provided with multiple access routes to make sense of and demonstrate these understandings.

Differentiating does not mean that a teacher is taking into account the individual interests, profiles, and readiness of the thirty students five hours per day in every curricular and instructional decision. To suggest that would be ludicrous. Rather, differentiating means that a teacher is approaching the literacy curriculum and her students with a responsive disposition— an orientation to planning, decision-making, curriculum selection and instructional flow that is flexible and opportunistic.

Conundrums, Conundrums

While the principles and philosophy behind DI have been well-articulated (see for example Tomlinson, 2004; Tomlinson, & McTighe, 2006), less well documented are the challenges/dilemmas that typical teachers contend with as they shift from one-size-fits-all to a differentiated approach. The typical conundrums encountered fall under two categories: foundational and instructional. Foundational conundrums include teaching for understanding versus teaching skills; universal design versus differentiated design; assessing growth versus comparative assessment. Instructional conundrums include providing a robust literacy program versus an activities-based program; flexible small group instruction versus whole class approach; literal feedback versus validating feedback. Each of these dilemmas calls on teachers to consider both their beliefs and practices related to literacy learning and teaching.

**Foundational Conundrums**

**Teaching for understanding vs. teaching skills.** One of the most prevalent questions that arises in differentiated literacy classes is how to emphasize teaching for understanding while still addressing the many reading skills students need to become fluent comprehenders. A DI approach calls for teachers to be crystal clear on the essential understandings first, and then to design opportunities to practice or engage in skills to support the essential understandings. A critical finding related to accelerating the growth of struggling readers, suggests an instructional emphasis on the following components, fluency in reading connected text, comprehension of text, phonological awareness, and phonological decoding (Mathes, Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, Francis, & Schatschneider, 2005). A differentiated approach bases instruction on the observed needs of students in each of these areas. The teacher attends to behaviors that indicate the constructions/understandings that each student is forming and responds contingently through scaffolding (Mathes et al., 2005). In a recent small study of 13 teachers, suc-
cessful differentiators in literacy clearly identified essential understandings related to reading comprehensions (i.e. identifying story structure, connecting with story characters) as well as content goals (i.e. connecting plant growth with environmental conditions). They introduced targeted skills that they wished to develop with their students while carefully monitoring their students’ comprehension (Tobin, 2007). Teaching for understanding means that teachers clearly identified the big ideas/concepts related to literacy learning and content and realized that important skills such as decoding, picture cueing, question-posing were all taught in service to gaining an understanding of the concepts/ideas within the text.

Universal design vs Differentiated instruction. Universal design and differentiated instruction are highly compatible concepts. Differentiated instruction falls under the larger category of universal design. In fact, the core of good differentiated literacy lessons is an understanding of the importance of universal design. Universal design refers to “designed-in” flexibility to accommodate the instructional needs of as many diverse learners as possible at the very beginning stages of planning and organizing for instruction. The underlying premise of universal design is that the largest number of people possible should benefit from the products and environments without the need for additional modifications beyond those incorporated in the original design. Universal design in literacy learning assumes and anticipates individual differences at the outset. For example, in a class enrolling a few English Language Learners (ELL); context cues, repetition, visual support, removal of extraneous words in instructions, vocabulary development and expansion of background knowledge are all critical to their success (Alvermann, 2000; Law & Eckes, 2000). A teacher using universal design draws on all of these components when instructing the whole class. This is similar to the easy grip handles on kitchen utensils that were originally developed for individuals with disabilities. It turns out we all find such utensils easier to use (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). Such is the case with the strategies for the ELL students — essential for them yet they also make learning easier for all students.

With universal design in place, teachers may then differentiate for individuals who need support beyond the considerations built-in for the whole class. In the example of the ELL students, some of them may need a pre-reading of less-complex text on the topic of inquiry before the unit begins as a more effective way of introducing the vocabulary and assessing their readiness for the unit. This would also enable the teacher to plan differentiated learning opportunities for these students in the upcoming theme or unit.

In summary, the sequence of planning needs to emphasize universal design first to advance the literacy of a maximum number of learners from the outset. Differentiated instruction goes a step further to tailor often small but significant adaptations to ensure success for individual students sometimes outside the whole group context.

Assessing growth vs Comparative assessment. Many teachers worry and wonder about the congruence of differen-
tiated practices with evaluation practices especially in a context of increasing standardization and testing. Exemplary literacy teachers evaluate student work and award grades based on effort and improvement not just achievement, ensuring that all students have a chance to get good grades (Allington, 2002). This implies that teachers have a sound knowledge of students to recognize growth and estimate student effort. Improvement can be noted by showing students where they began and where they ended using rubric-based evaluations. Pressures regarding evaluation should not blind teachers to the realities that students who are of the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their interests and their styles of learning (Tomlinson, 2003). More importantly such differences have a major impact on what students need to learn and the pace and support required to meet significant learning outcomes (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Tomlinson (2000) argues that educational approaches that ignore diversity in favor of standardization are unlikely to be successful in meeting the needs of the full range of students. Evaluation practices need to be examined in light of the effect they will have on academically diverse populations. Standards or learning outcomes are meant to inform and guide the curriculum not “be” the curriculum. Differentiation calls on literacy teachers to allow time, opportunities and support for making sense of text, ideas and skills. Differentiation shows us how to teach the same standard to a range of learners by using a variety of teaching and learning modes. Identifying the essential understandings and skills in language arts and intentionally targeting these during instruction bodes well for achieving outcomes or standards. Ignoring that students do not have prerequisite skills and carrying on with Grade level materials and concepts without addressing the gaps invites failure and frustration. This is akin to racing at breakneck speed to the airport to catch a flight ignoring the fact that you forgot to pick up your traveling passengers.

Students need to develop confidence that teachers are teaching and evaluating for success, not to catch them at what they don’t do well. To ensure success for all students requires a knowledge of the curriculum and familiarity with students’ understanding, skills, interests and background. Without this, teachers are ill-equipped to successfully teach such learners. The primary purpose of evaluation — giving feedback about what students do well and how to improve on their weaknesses needs to be kept at the forefront. The grades need to reflect the degree of growth and achievement. Tomlinson (2005) suggests aligning student tasks with student needs and noting that the assignment or task has been differentiated. I echo her advocacy of report cards that include checklists of escalating competencies and indications of growth in combination with comparative marks or levels (such as 1,2,3) to indicate below, at, or above grade level. If the current report card does not facilitate this type of equity, ensure that a note on the report card calls attention to this complete picture. Ultimately evaluation should require each individual to be their personal best not someone else’s.
Instructional Conundrums

Robust literacy program vs. Activities based program. Assessment of the robustness or substance of the overall literacy program as teachers strive to be more responsive often involves a move away from using literacy activities as the driving force behind instruction. An activity-based program often has children engaged in many different language and literacy activities but these are often disconnected from the overarching understandings and goals of the program. They are also frequently not based on students' needs, interests or profiles. Research clearly shows that responsive literacy teaching plays a critical role in the success of diverse learners (Vaughn, Bos & Schumm, 2000; Mathes, et al., 2005). Responsive literacy teaching focuses on an apprenticeship to model, guide, coach, scaffold and fade strategies and prompts to accelerate independence while the students engage in reading and writing meaningful texts. As teachers become clear about their goals, they match these up with meaningful, varied literacy response options and strategies that promote critical thinking and problem-solving. In a recent study of differentiated instruction in language arts, researchers found that teachers often mistakenly viewed a lesson as adequately differentiated as long as students were doing something related to the theme with little consideration of whether or how the students were reaching particular outcomes or practicing the targeted skill. In fact, at times the activity was incongruent with the overall goals of the lesson (Tobin & McInnes, 2008). For example, in some of these researched Grade 3/4 classrooms, teachers would often have struggling students draw a picture in response to their readings. The stated goal was to engage children in writing authentic text that connected their lives to the characters in the story. While drawing can be a worthwhile response option when embedded within a robust literacy lesson, children are not engaging in writing and may be further marginalized in their writing development because of an inappropriately differentiated lesson. A better option is to give reluctant or struggling writers a model of a written response which scaffolds their learning as well as providing them with fading prompts. The robustness of a literacy program can be assessed by asking a couple of key questions:

1. Are students' literacy learning opportunities connected to my goals/outcomes?
2. Are these opportunities likely to result in meaning making?

Flexible small group instruction vs Whole class instruction. In most classrooms, whole class instruction remains the predominant instructional grouping format. Whole group instruction plays an important role in literacy learning; in fact it is a critical aspect of instruction for presenting particular kinds of concepts and skills. However, it may be unrealistic to expect struggling literacy learners to receive the support they need to navigate difficult text that leads to growth in reading in the whole group setting only. Whole group instruction remains the dominant choice of teachers regardless of the profile of students enrolled in the class and despite ample research documenting the benefits of collaborative groupings and small group
instruction in which student voices are privileged and learning is augmented (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Schumm, 2000).

Use of a variety of organizational formats is a key underpinning of differentiated instruction. The literature clearly indicates that it is the small grouping and individual context in which optimum, desirable reading and writing behaviors are most likely to occur (Greenwood, Tapia, Abbott, & Walton, 2003). Flexible small groups and a focus on student interest as a means of maximizing acceleration of reading have shown very positive results (Cunningham, Hall & Defee, 1998; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Kouzakanani, Pedrotty, Dickson & Blozis, 2003). The latter researchers found small group instruction (3 students) to be just as effective as 1-1 instruction in developing reading skills such as phoneme segmentation, fluency and comprehension, while the former study documents the success of mixed ability groupings (4-5 students) to achieve fluency and comprehension in primary students. As a further incentive to work in a variety of organizational formats with young literacy learners, a longitudinal study of primary students, found that desirable reading behaviors occurred most often in the presence of peer tutors, reading partners, or teacher-led one-on-one, small-group, or independent instructional arrangements as compared to entire group, teacher-led instruction (Greenwood et al., 2003).

Grouping criteria in a differentiated classroom is flexible, sometimes according to their reading level or needs, while at other times, students would be grouped according to interest. One of the ways of keeping small groups functional and dynamic is to be clear about the purpose of the group and to change the group’s composition often. Novice teachers of differentiation mistakenly assume that DI merely is an old model of smart and slow groups as opposed to a flexible instructional approach to respond to student needs. If this misunderstanding takes hold, reproducing tracking within the classroom can be an unintended consequence of the change effort (Tobin, 2007). An important emphasis needs to be placed on actively avoiding fixed groups while still providing the benefits of small group instruction. This would avoid problems associated with low expectations for students in the “low group”.

Flexible groupings for strategic purposes such as organizing an interest group on spiders or an enactment group of a favorite evocative story is likely to facilitate comprehension and engagement. Enactment groups bring text alive and provide much-needed redundancy giving readers another opportunity to make meaning of text – sometimes as a bridge to written responses. In addition to interest groups, students also benefit from frequent heterogeneous groupings which have been found to achieve higher measures on reading vocabulary, comprehension and reading fluency than those grouped solely in homogenous groups (Cunningham, et al. 1998; Jackson, Paratore, Chard, & Garnick, 1999).

Homogenous groupings are often useful with beginning readers in the format of Guided Reading which gives teachers the opportunity to work with small groups
of readers with similar needs. This is particularly practical in contributing to early reading fluency since readers need to encounter text with which they are highly familiar (95% known words) in order to develop fluency. If Guided Reading using homogenous groupings is adopted, it is critical that students belong to a variety of other groups that are organized according to other criteria. A further cautionary note is to ensure that students' reading diet is composed of more than leveled books from the Guided Reading program.

Explicit demonstrations of the cognitive strategies that good readers use was found to be a key feature among exemplary literacy teachers (Allington, 2002). The whole group approach (which Allington terms “watch me” or “let me demonstrate”) speaks to the important role that explicit demonstration of skills and strategies play. However, in a differentiated classroom teachers do not expect the whole group demonstration to be sufficient for all learners. Typical among successful differentiators in one study (Tobin, 2007) was an acceptance that some students would need instructions and demonstrations given to them individually, or more than once, with some students still needing the first steps in their reading or writing modeled or scribed to get them started. Central to enabling these kinds of individual and small group interactions and demonstrations is the skillful use of flexible groupings that anticipate and acknowledge misunderstandings and needs for redundancy.

Validating feedback vs Literal feedback. While teachers are called upon to give accurate feedback to their students so that they can improve their performance, teachers sometimes interpret this as a need to provide very literal feedback regarding students’ task engagement or work-in-progress. Such literal feedback, for example, involves comments on students’ not commencing their work in a timely manner, or not following the teachers’ instructions and expectations. Such comments as: “You haven’t even put the date down yet,” “Did you listen to instructions?”, or “Get working” do little to accelerate task engagement. An alternative approach involves adopting a validating stance or nudging approach toward students who appear reluctant or disengaged. Such comments as, “What do you do first, next, now?” and “I’ll be back in a few minutes to see how you are doing,” nudge children in ways likely to protect the learning relationship.

Teachers who perceive students to be low achievers (as is the case for many struggling students) often come to think of these students solely in behavioral terms. Teachers have fewer interactions with them and the interactions they do have lack instructional content because they feel they do not know how to address their unique characteristics and needs (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Jordan & Stanovich, 2001). Teachers’ attitudes toward at-risk and struggling students have been described as simply giving up (Cook, et al., 2000). Yet, the latest research indicates that the learning process is highly modifiable and shaped by individual student characteristics in interaction with context. Student-teacher discourse is of utmost importance in identifying students as capable members of a classroom literacy culture (Baker, Gersten, & Scanlon,
Teachers need tangible ideas for how to interact in positive and productive ways with students who are sometimes challenging to instruct. The teacher's talking can position vulnerable students for academic success by carrying out what Rex (2000) describes as interactional inclusion. In such a context, vulnerable students are positioned to be observed as capable classroom members. The teacher exercises discretion by carefully using her own voice to elevate struggling students' status in the classroom. The teacher's role is to create the conditions of active participation and to validate students' sense of themselves as successful learners. For example, one teacher and her teacher assistant in working with exceptional students would frequently tell them: “You're onto something,” as well as encouraging them to show others what they were “onto” by preparing an aesthetic or creative response to the text, such as a taped conversation, a tableau, or a picture. The idea that they could be “onto something,” without completion of a single paragraph, seemed to motivate them to construct something with their ideas that related to the text, while temporarily freeing them up from the rigor and criteria of text-based formats (Tobin, 2006). Nudging students through validating discourse, assuming best intentions (“I see you’re still thinking about what to put down first.”) often produces better results than literal feedback about their disengagement (Tobin, 2006). Using prompting and inquiring comments about the next step in which the teacher assumes the best intentions sometimes in light of contradictory evidence is also useful. For example, the teacher may say: “When you’re finished working on the first part, could you share yours with me?” It may be that the student is not working on the first part but this may get him started. This type of communication with at-risk students sends the important message that their intellect and contributions are valued.

In working with reluctant students, letting them ‘off the hook’ by owning misunderstandings or offering alternative explanations such as: “Let’s try this a different way”, “I probably didn’t explain this too well” “Let me try it again, okay?”, or “I didn’t put this exactly right” helps learners save face and re-engage with the learning task. Routine prompting phrases such as the following may go a long way in encouraging students who are stalled, confused, or unmotivated: “Tell me one thing you understand about it [the assignment].”; “You probably have lots of good ideas. Tell me the first one and I’ll write it down for you.”; “Let’s use one of your graphic organizers.”; “I’ll be back in a few minutes to see the first part.”; “What’s the next thing you need to do? Could you start here?” (Tobin, 2005a). This dimension of classroom interactions is particularly critical for at-risk students, whose perceptions of how others will respond to their requests for help actually determine who they ask for assistance, or from whom they will accept help (Marshall, 2001; Tobin, 2005a).

Teachers need to engage students in public conversations about their literacy learning in ways that validate their worth and position them favorably within the power relationships of the classroom. In
Tomlinson’s encompassing work on differentiated instruction, she refers to this as the ‘assignment of status’ in which teachers seek key moments in small group work when a student makes a worthwhile comment or suggestion. The teacher repeats what she heard the student say and why she feels it is a contribution to the work of the group causing the group to see their peer in a different light.

Empowering and considerate teacher talk shows a commitment to students’ academic growth. As Fairclough (1995) purported, teachers’ talk powerfully shapes who students think they are, who they think they can be, and who they ultimately can become. This is particularly true for at-risk populations because of their already tenuous status as students challenged by traditional curriculum and sometimes constructed by educators and researchers as deficit and inadequate.

Summary

My professional development work with teachers suggests that they may encounter predictable dilemmas that need to be examined in order to make the change to a more responsive literacy program. The first three focus teachers’ energies on essential understandings, universal design and assessing growth in literacy. The next three highlight the importance of offering a robust literacy program, using flexible groupings and providing validating feedback to ensure the success of all students.

Winebrenner (2001), in reference to the most frequent complaint she hears about underachievers ---“ They won’t do their work”--- suggests that the reality may be closer to “They won’t do the teacher’s work, but would be more than willing to work on what is meaningful for them.” I suggest the same may be said of struggling students who find that the work lacks meaning because of its complexity, abstractness or disinterest combined with the absence of appropriate scaffolding. Ultimately, teachers need to consider how they share power in the classroom and whether students’ needs, interest and readiness levels are respected. Providing choices that considers both complexity and student interest is critical. While teachers often consider complexity in their matching of texts and materials with students, they sometimes overlook the significance of matching these with student interest. This is a little like considering the nutritional value of food with little concern for taste. Offering literacy response options that include equally substantive assignments and tasks but draw on students’ preferences to work with a variety of materials in interesting ways is a critical feature of a differentiated classroom. Adopting a more responsive literacy model (fully aware of the knotty conundrums) may result in maximum gain for children and maximum flexibility in the literacy classroom.
Reference


Copyright of Reading Improvement is the property of Project Innovation, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.