Implementing Differentiation
A School’s Journey
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**Abstract:** The focus of this case study is to provide an overview of a private school’s journey toward implementing differentiation in their classrooms. An introduction to the school along with background information leads to a relevant need to implement teaching strategies that ensure the success of students who are capable of learning above grade level. The journey that the school takes begins with putting differentiation into practice and describing, in a three-pathway approach, the direction taken for the implementation process. What is learned, along with specific and general issues to consider, exemplifies this work in progress. Helpful resources provide guidance to others interested in starting a similar journey.

**Keywords:** special school programs, differentiation, instructional strategies

The focus of this case study is to provide an overview of a private school’s journey toward implementing differentiation in their classrooms. An introduction to the school along with background information leads to a relevant need to implement teaching strategies that ensure the success of students who are capable of learning above grade level. The journey that the school takes begins with putting differentiation into practice and describing, in a three-pathway approach, the direction taken for the implementation process. Three types of questions that guided the process include the following: (a) What support do teachers need to develop and/or reflect upon their philosophy about differentiation? How does a school develop a philosophy about differentiation? (b) In what ways might teachers develop classroom practices that support the implementation of differentiation strategies in their classrooms? and (c) What major factors will support or impede the implementation of differentiation?

What is learned, along with specific and general issues to consider, exemplifies this work in progress. Helpful resources provide guidance to others interested in starting a similar journey.

**Relevant Need**
In September 2009, the administration and Board of Hendricks Day School (HDS) recognized that investigating the organization’s strengths and weaknesses and beginning to think strategically were essential for more effectively meeting the diverse needs of the students in addition for enhancing the health of the organization. HDS is an independent PreK3 to 8th-grade school in Jacksonville, Florida. The school was established in 1970 and is currently a member of Florida Council of Independent Schools, Florida Kindergarten Council, Southern Association of Independent Schools, and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. HDS has approximately 300 students, 35 faculty members, and 25 staff members. The mission of HDS is to provide a comprehensive and contemporary education in a moral and family supportive environment, which includes training for students in critical thinking and informed decision making, educating students for their future.

Admission into the school involves an entrance exam, teacher recommendations, and full examination of school records and educational psychological testing, if relevant. The students admitted into HDS are heterogeneous, including average students, students working below the curriculum, and students who are working above the curriculum. Eight percent of the student population is defined as “students of color.” About 6% to 8% of the student population is defined as “gifted,” whereas 14% of the school population has a diagnosed learning difference with 2% being identified as “gifted/learning disabled (LD).” While HDS has students who are classified by the formal definition of “gifted,” students are seen as talented in many areas. Many are truly high-ability learners in one area or more. Education is personalized to the student, in learning style, interest areas, and in personality. Differentiation is the preferred methodology for personalizing student education.

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at Hendricks. The Common Core State Standards are used to guide the curriculum with additional standards developed to increase depth.

By November 2009, the school’s board-approved Strategic Planning Committee, made up of board members, administration, and selected faculty members, determined five essential areas of need. Consequently, working committees to refine these areas were established. One of the specific areas identified was Enhanced Learning, a division of the school that has historically worked with students who are struggling in the classroom. As a result, more effective ways to support those students and teachers were found, but it was soon realized that a subset of students who were capable of learning above the grade-level curriculum needed more challenge. As learning specialists, Mrs. Shane Tripp (principal) and Dr. Linda Johnson (former elementary principal and now head of school) understood and implemented differentiation intuitively but needed a way to help their general educators learn to do the same. As in many organizations, an outside expert was needed to help guide the process. Several faculty members had previously worked with Dr. Christine Weber, while pursuing their gifted endorsement. Contact with her was reestablished and the process began.

The Journey

When I, as the outside expert, was first approached by the principal of elementary education at HDS about implementing differentiation, I knew we would need to develop a plan that would empower the teachers in their own classrooms. While often asked by the HDS faculty, “What is differentiation?” I always felt reluctant to reply, knowing that I wanted to encourage the teachers and administration to develop their own philosophy for the school. So, this question was left unanswered until a later time. I did ask teachers informally as I worked with them in small groups, what differentiation meant. Oftentimes, the response related to providing individualized instruction. I knew it was important to begin by helping teachers identify their own philosophy and/or reflect on their understanding about differentiation with the ultimate goal of developing a school philosophy. I hoped our work together would help them see the bigger picture.

My first task was to meet with the Enhanced Learning Committee, comprised of teachers representing different grade levels and the administration (Linda Johnson and Shane Tripp), who originally provided input toward this process. I offered some ideas on how to proceed and answered questions. Before this, I met with the elementary principal, and she had shared some thoughts from the faculty and this group, so I had a sense of what to expect. After this discussion, I developed a preassessment survey related to differentiation focusing on topics such as curriculum, instructional planning, and flexible instruction. It is important to ask teachers what they know about differentiation and what they need to know. I found Heacox’s “Teacher Inventory on Differentiation Practices and Strategies” from her book *Making Differentiation a Habit* (2009), an excellent place to start. I also contacted Dr. Cheryll Adams at the Center for Gifted Studies and Talent Development who shared several inventories that she had used with teachers. The survey I adapted ended by asking what differentiation strategies the teachers would like to learn. This afforded me an opportunity to identify any misconceptions from the faculty. These misconceptions included believing that differentiation is only for students needing special education and that differentiation is far too complicated and challenging for the general educator to implement. Additional misconceptions included the idea that differentiation is a different lesson plan for each student. It appeared that the teachers initially had little understanding of the types of differentiation strategies for high-ability and gifted students and therefore offered scarce input.

Grade-Level Meetings

A plan with three pathways (see Figure 1) was then decided upon. For the first route, I suggested that we use *Beyond Differentiated Instruction* (O’Meara, 2010) for a book walk. This was chosen as a nonthreatening way to introduce myself to the faculty and to learn more about their students and classrooms. We established smaller “communities of learning” based on grade levels with monthly meetings lasting from 45 min to 1 hr. We had book walks for communities of teachers in PreK for 3- and 4-year olds and Kindergarten, another for Grades 1 to 3, then Grades 4 to 5, and for Grades 6 to 8 with each group having the same recommended reading assignment from O’Meara’s (2010) book. While the elementary group was combined at first, it was determined to be too large of a group to ensure every voice was heard. It is crucial that all participants, especially new teachers, feel part of the group and have an opportunity to express their ideas and concerns. This also allowed me to tailor the discussion to particular grade-level needs and explore topics specific to the students. I assigned chapters for our readings and our grade-level discussions began. In this particular book, the author provided discussion questions, which were helpful in guiding the conversation. It was evident from our meetings that needs did vary by grade levels. Our numbers in the groups ranged anywhere from four to eight teachers and were held monthly. I would start the discussion by asking what questions they had about the topics introduced in the readings. From there, I used questions that I developed or used the author’s questions to lead us deeper into the issues presented. It was important to take notes during these discussions as they helped provide insight as to what needed further development during the large group instruction workshops.

It was interesting to note the similarities and differences of focus topics and questions among the grade levels. I found myself learning right along with the teachers and began to reflect on my own teaching practices. Several times I found myself saying, “I never thought about it that way.” These kinds of discoveries shared with the teachers seemed to strengthen our relationship. After several of these grade-
level meetings, teachers also began to ask for my guidance about specific students and specific issues. I began to feel a closer relationship with the teachers, which is so important for gaining their trust.

For our next grade-level meetings, teachers were asked to implement one strategy for pre-assessment based on our reading in the text by O'Meara (2010, chap 4) and be ready to share what worked and what did not work. The topic of pre-assessment was of great importance. Rakow (2012) suggested that the first question administrators should ask of teachers when observing their classrooms for differentiation is, "Where is pre-assessment?" Without pre-assessment there can be no significant differentiation. Questions that the teachers had not thought about previously included "How does the assessment of facts differ from the assessment of concepts?" What are the implications of assessing groups versus the individual?" and "How is assessing knowledge different from assessing processes?" As one PreK teacher in our learning community commented, "You are asking us to pre-assess because then you know we will need to do something [teach] next." She was so right in her assumption. It is not enough though to just pre-assess. Teachers need to see how pre-assessment is linked to the teaching and learning cycle. If every student is being taught the same lesson in the same way using the same materials, differentiation is not occurring. Pre-assessment is crucial for successfully implementing differentiation.

Teachers of the PreK for 3- and 4-year olds and Kindergarteners shared pictures students drew about what they knew before introducing a new unit of study (e.g., solar system, transportation, weather, the senses, President's Day). While sharing, teachers indicated surprise at what some of their students did know and just as importantly, what the students did not know. Teachers began to see examples of children's thinking at concrete, representational, and abstract levels. Connections were made to cognitive processes and teaching/learning strategies. A teacher noted certain individuals' use of color to represent distinct types of weather. With these data in hand, teachers began to understand the need to differentiate their curriculum. While they could "see" the facts and concepts that were part of their students' prior knowledge in the drawings, they could also begin to "see" which students were processing their understanding in various and unique ways. This was an opportune time to apply the constructs of critical and creative thinking (topics developed in past and current training workshops) to what was represented in their students' drawings. Postassessment results were to be obtained through similar drawings and analyzed for indications of growth.

One concern shared by the teachers was the amount of time needed to meet with each child as she or he explained the drawings and take notes to identify specific objects. This was accomplished because aides were available to work with the rest of the class while the teachers met with individual students. It can be a challenge to find one-on-one time with each student on a regular basis. Although we were unable to complete the entire O'Meara (2010) book our 1st year, we did read and discuss the first 7 of 10 chapters and will begin the new school year finishing the book with a focus on the final chapters related to formative and summative assessments.

During these grade-level meetings, various video clips from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) staff development sets (see Helpful Resources) related to differentiation were shared so that teachers had an opportunity to discuss the characteristics of a differentiated classroom (see differentiation strategies in action and reflect on the effectiveness of the methods used). The clips selected aligned with the topics discussed in our book walk. The sets on instructional strategies covered topics such as learning contracts, tiered assignments, complex instruction, RAFT (role, audience, format, topic) assignments, and centers and will be shared more in depth during the 2nd year of the process. They provide excellent ideas for differentiation showing teachers and students in authentic settings.

**Large Group Instruction Workshops**

Our second route focused on three large group instruction workshops lasting anywhere from 2 to 2.5 hr. Some of the topics were based on areas of need identified by the teachers and administrators with input from me. I recommended that we start with creative thinking strategies as Dr. Robert Swartz, from the National Center for Teaching Thinking, had already trained the teachers on critical thinking skills. Teachers were not familiar with the productive thinking skills associated with creativity and the relationship between these two constructs (Baker, Rudd, & Pomeroy, 2001). Because these strategies require hands-on participation, they were bound to get the faculty actively involved. Every activity introduced in these workshops was chosen deliberately to model strategies for differentiation. The objectives for this workshop included the following:

- Define what creativity is and is not,
- Self-rate your creativity,
- Identify elements of creative thinking (e.g., fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration) and strategies for...
creative thinking (e.g., brainstorming, morphological matrix, SCAMPER),
• Participate in activities to enhance creative thinking,
• Identify one activity to try in your classroom to enhance creativity, and
• Compare and contrast critical and creative thinking.

Exit cards (Adams & Pierce, 2010, 2011) were used to gather data about the teachers' learning. Questions included "What did you learn about creativity that you did not already know?" and "What strategy(ies) will you apply to enhance creativity in your students? How?" It is interesting to note from the exit cards comments the understanding that "creativity does not just apply to artistic ability." Some of the strategies shared with teachers were unfamiliar but many indicated they were willing to try them with their students. These observations were then used as a review and for self-reflection in the next small group meetings. Exit cards also known as tickets to leave or passes to leave provide a quick overview of those who clearly understand and those who might still have gaps in knowledge. They also encouraged teachers to commit to trying something new and different in their classrooms and to be willing to share what they accomplished during the next grade-level meetings.

Another topic for our large group instruction was content differentiation focusing on the following:

• What is a differentiated curriculum?
• The Maker Model of Differentiation (Maker, 1982)—Content, Process, Product, Learning Environment,
• Structure of Knowledge (Erickson, 2007) and the Taba Model (Taba, 1962), and
• Differentiated Content—Elements of Depth and Complexity (Kaplan, Guzman, & Tomlinson, 2009).

It was important that the faculty begin to see that thinking skills are not something that should be taught in isolation but rather developed within the content knowledge (Willingham, 2007). The Structure of Knowledge (Erickson, 2007) and Hilda Taba's Model (1962) were shared and discussed. The Frayer Model (Frayer, Frederick, & Klausmeier, 1969), developed to analyze and assess attainment of concepts, consisting of a graphic organizer divided into four components for recording information related to the concept, and was used to explore the 11 elements of depth and complexity (Kaplan et al., 2009). The Frayer Model includes the concept word, the definition, characteristics of the concept word, examples of the concept word, and nonexamples of the concept word. It is essential to include examples and nonexamples, so participants are able to identify what the concept word is and what the concept word is not (see Figure 2). Teachers also practiced their understanding of depth and complexity by brainstorming activities for a specific concept or topic and in our case concrete concepts—popcorn and pretzels (our workshop snacks). The next step was to provide a planning worksheet for teachers to identify curricular topics and plan activities to differentiate content. While Kaplan's 11 components do not represent all that teachers need to know about differentiated content, they were a starting place for the teachers to begin thinking about what and how they taught in their classrooms. One excited science teacher shared that he was going to design lessons to introduce each one of the components to his middle school students.

Other materials that were shared during the workshop were the depth and complexity icon templates (http://www.huensd.k12.ca.us/Page/2952) and depth and complexity cube.

Teachers completed an exit card before leaving this session answering, "What did you learn about differentiated content that you did not already know?" and "What strategy(ies) will you apply to enhance depth and complexity in your lessons? How?" Fifteen of the 23 teachers present responded on their exit cards that they found the Frayer Model a strategy they wanted to implement in their classrooms as a vehicle for pre- or post-assessing the understanding of their students' concepts. This was an excellent example to help the teachers understand the relationship among the three elements of the student, the desired outcome, and the learning strategy and that this relationship "is the platform on which differentiated instruction can occur" (O’Meara, 2010, p. 62).

The third topic of misconceptions, discussed by O’Meara (2010, chap 5) under assessing background conceptual knowledge, was the focus of the third large group instruction workshop. We began with an activity related to the Concrete–Representational–Abstract (CRA) Instructional Approach grounded in the work of Jerome Bruner, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget (among others) about children’s learning.
of mathematical ideas, and Bruner’s (1966) research on the cognitive development of children proposing three modes of representation: Enactive representation (action based), Iconic representation (image based), and Symbolic representation (language based) found in Chapter 6 (O’Meara, 2010). Teachers could begin to see the different instructional strategies emphasizing each stage when teaching facts, skills, and concepts. This set the foundation for further discussions related to preconceptions and misconceptions. O’Meara referenced A Private Universe (Sahiner & Filisky, 1987), where well-educated students and graduates were asked to explain the concept of the moon’s phases or the seasons with serious misconceptions, which I was able to show to the faculty, at their request. The objective of this session was to help teachers understand the importance of their students’ prior knowledge and preconceptions and what misconceptions were evident before planning a lesson. The suggested “workshop plan” found in the Teacher’s Guide accompanying the DVD was very helpful in developing the focus of this session. The exit card completed included answers to the questions, “What did you learn about prior knowledge that you did not already know? Which are the most important preconceptions/ misconceptions to confront in your classroom and why?” and “How do you plan on addressing the issues presented in this workshop?” Responses from teachers included a better understanding of the difference between preconceptions and misconceptions, never assume that students know the basic content (accurately) before you begin teaching, and the importance of pre-testing not just facts but also concepts and generalizations to identify misconceptions. Teachers also shared the need to confront all misconceptions, especially those related to different cultures as very important.

With the school year quickly ending, the final workshop focusing on tiered assignments (Adams & Pierce, 2006) was not able to be scheduled until the following fall. It was felt that the faculty was embracing differentiated instruction and needed some more practical classroom strategies to implement it. Tiered lessons will be taught step by step as another method to develop instruction appropriate to students’ stages of development, learning styles, strength, and needs. It was also determined that this would be a great way to kick off the new school year. Other topics under consideration for future workshops involve additional differentiation strategies for content and process, differentiated learning environments, differentiated products, and differentiated assessments.

Classroom Visits

The third route provided an opportunity to work with individual teachers or grade levels on specific topics of study. While teachers oftentimes felt overwhelmed by other school requirements, I wanted to be sure that they felt they had me as a resource to help them with implementing differentiation. It was then that I began pulling activities, researching materials, and suggesting websites to visit. For example, I shared sources about assessing learning styles, using Cornell notes, designing choice boards (Adams & Pierce, 2010, 2011), and implementing creative thinking activities. As teachers began sharing their units of study, I began providing ideas and suggestions to help meet the needs of high-ability learners in their classrooms. I was also available to visit individual classrooms and work with teachers one on one. When asking a middle school teacher what she would like the focus of my visit to be, she stated, “We are currently studying ratios and proportions. Our lesson will involve an application of proportion that scientists actually use to solve real-life problems (Across the Disciplines).” We often discussed the need for common language (her reference to Kaplan’s Depth and Complexity Component) to describe the implementation of differentiation not just for use among the faculty but beyond the school community to include parents and constituents. With great satisfaction, I was continuing to see evidence of our work together. In addition, our state conference for the gifted (Florida Association for the Gifted) provided an opportunity to present our progress to date.

As we move forward, there may be other routes to consider. It will be time to reflect with the faculty about our headway this 1st year, and discuss where we want to be in Year 2 of our journey. This is a good point to stop and consider what differentiation looks like and sounds like in the classroom as we begin to conceptualize a philosophy for HDS. A helpful resource to consider for our next book walk, Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010), would be useful in facilitating this next leg of our journey. Developing teachers as confident and effective leaders for differentiated classrooms is our ultimate goal.

To determine direction for future professional development topics, we may want to consider utilizing the Classroom Observation Scales–Revised (COS-R) and Student Observation Scales (SOS; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2003). Each subscale has three to five corresponding items that target certain teacher behaviors exhibited during classroom instruction. Each behavior focuses on research-based best practices in the field of gifted education. The scales focus on teacher practice requiring “differentiated” services for high-ability and gifted learners and how this criterion translates into expectations for teacher performance and accountability. The authors indicate that the scales are meant to be used as growth tools and baseline data on which to base professional development decisions.
What Was Learned

The process of truly implementing differentiation will be a long journey. At the present moment, the faculty is struggling with conceptualizing and implementing the strategies, while wrestling with time and energy constraints, as well as philosophical debates. In the multiyear process we hope to employ, it is our goal that the time and energy needed to implement this essential process will be forthcoming. In the process, we should be able to, in safe dialogues, come to consensus on how differentiation fits into the philosophy and culture held by the school. Implementing differentiation is a course of action that requires a long-term commitment.

While each faculty probably has members who have researched philosophies, strategies, and best practice, you need someone with expertise to help. Contacting a local university professor was the best way to make sure that differentiation would be taken seriously and not another phase in education. Experts in differentiation know which materials are designed for the needs and developmental level of your faculty. Administrative support is a must when strong curricular change and growth is going to occur. We all know how change can create uncertainty and stress in a faculty.

Getting an expert on board with leading the charge is a must, but trust needs to be earned by all involved. Open, safe dialogue is the only way that a faculty is going to invest in differentiated instruction and be willing to put aside the misconceptions and discomfort and begin the journey to a more personalized education for all students. If a top-down mandate is given, the faculty investment is going to be superficial and meaningless behind classroom doors. A plan for implementing differentiation must be in place, which includes input from the faculty.

Needing more time is always a concern of a faculty when implementing anything new. Creating time within the school day to meet in divisions, teams, and/or departments is necessary for total commitment of a faculty. If time is not being carved out of the school day and only provided after school hours, the investment of the faculty will be viewed as an add-on and not essential to the curricular development of the school. Creative scheduling and coverage needs to be a priority for administrators to ensure that differentiated instruction is taken seriously and considered an important curricular investment.

At some point, clear teaching and assessing objectives will be identified that will be included in the HDS Faculty Self-Evaluation process. Teachers self-evaluate twice each year and meet with their supervisor to plan goals. The self-evaluation tool is a summary of the core values, attitudes, and skills needed for teachers of excellence at HDS.

Further Consideration

As with any long-term project, there are always additional issues to address, some specific to the school setting and some universal. Specifically, HDS needs to address whether it is time to revisit the Critical Thinking Model adopted and the ways that it is applied in the classroom. Also to consider are what standards should be addressed in the curriculum because we are a private school and what is the best way to communicate with parents and community about what we are trying to accomplish.

The consultant recently had the opportunity to speak with the School Board about the process and answer any questions that arose. It is crucial to obtain the support of all involved to create a learning community that respects individual differences. A school philosophy continues to evolve about providing curriculum and instruction that ensures the needs of all learners are met.

Additional issues to contemplate for any school interested in implementing differentiation in general may include not only what the plan should look like but also questions such as “With changes in staff and administration, how can you ensure the continuity of a philosophy of differentiation?” “How might leadership impede or support the implementation of differentiation?” “What resources are available to support faculty training?” “How do teachers manage a differentiated classroom?” and “How should teachers be held accountable for implementing differentiation in their classrooms?”

While the responsibility for supporting change toward student-focused instruction lies with the entire faculty at HDS, we know that the role of the teacher is vital to implementing differentiation. A team approach can lead us on a successful mission. As we continue our journey together, we hope to provide additional updates on our progress.

For more information about HDS, visit www.hendricksdayschool.org

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**Some Helpful Resources for Implementing Differentiation**


**Bios**

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