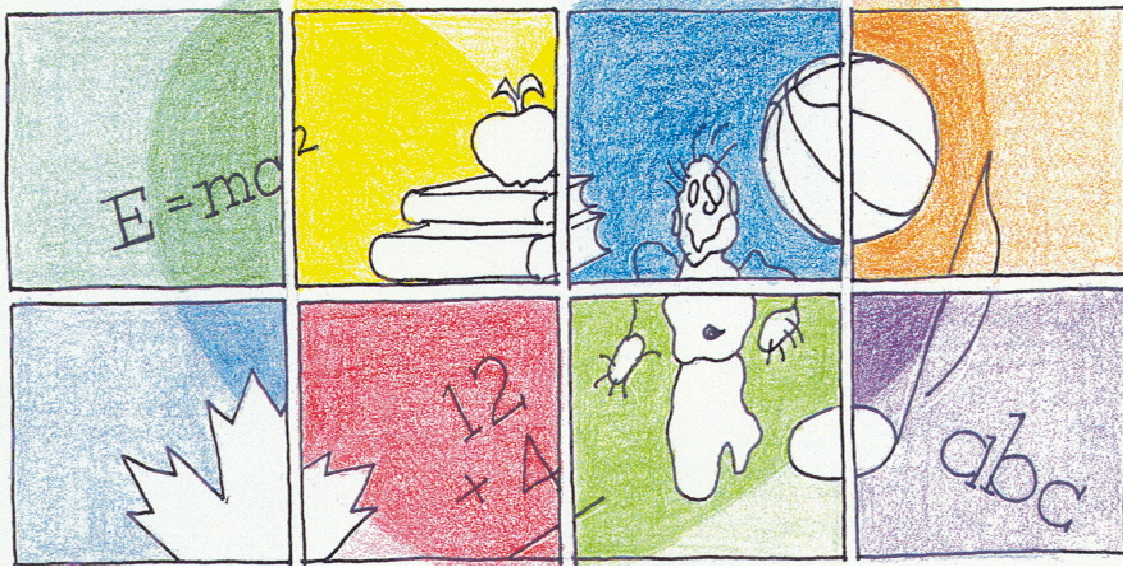


Volume VII - 2007

Passion

in

Professional Practice



Action Research in Grand Erie



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About This Book



Jackie DeLong

This seventh *Passion in Professional Practice* is the last volume that I will edit as I retire from 34 years as a professional educator in the Grand Erie District School Board. I believe these seven volumes represent a critical mass of original knowledge researched by practitioners in the district and in the community.

The work in this book is based on the work of Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath, UK where the “living educational theory” model of action research puts the researcher at the center of the research. “How can I improve my practice?” becomes the catalyst for the investigation by the teacher with students in the classroom. *Action! Research for Teaching Excellence* (DeLong, Black & Wideman, 2005) acted as a guidebook to new and experienced researchers in the application of the processes of action research.

This committed group met with me after school primarily with the addition of a few hours to write up their project.

Thank you to Cindy McMaster for her editing assistance and Karen McDonald for the cover design.

The content of this book is as follows:

Part I - About This Book sets the stage for the projects.

Part II - Teacher Research

How can I improve my strategies in the classroom by applying Differentiated Instruction, in order to assist my students in improving their self-confidence and overall achievement in Mathematics?
Barkev Poladian

Could differentiated instruction help me to ‘get their heads up’ and their minds ‘tuned in’?
Heather Linington

How can I use guided writing to help improve the writing skills of my senior kindergarten students?
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How can we improve students’ literacy and behavior in the classroom as well as on the playground, by using music?
Bob Radoja and Lyndie Kennedy

How can I improve student learning through the use of group encounters based on an independent novel choice?
Rose Huysentruyt-Closs

Congratulations to the authors of this book for your dedication and commitment to continuous professional growth and improving student learning.

DEDICATION

This seventh volume of *Passion In Professional Practice* is dedicated to Sharon Sienko Laidlaw who passed away on July 20, 2007. Another angel lives in heaven.



Sharon was the Program Coordinator of Special Education for the Grand Erie District School Board. This was her 18th year of teaching. She had an Honours Bachelor of Music, a Bachelor of Education, and a Master of Education. She published three action research projects (DeLong et al., 2003, 2005, 2006) and supported others to complete their own. This excerpt is from her third Action Research Project:

Final Thoughts

This was the most difficult paper that I have written. In January 2006 I was diagnosed with a reoccurrence of Uterine Cancer...The course of treatment was a trial drug which meant weekly trips to the Cancer Clinic for blood work and an hour long treatment. I continued to work fulltime and work on this research project because it was part of our Ministry proposal and because my integrity does not allow for not keeping my commitments. Throughout the next four months there was an increase of pain, fatigue, and tumor growth...I worked daily on this paper trying to get it done, even though I was on heavy pain medication and hooked up to an intravenous, nicknamed the 'mothership', for 6 hours a day. My first draft wasn't very good; it didn't even make sense most of the time. Thanks to some editing and a clearer mind, nine months later I finished the final draft.

I have had a lot of time to think about how we can improve education for students with learning differences since I have not yet returned to work.

I believe that every teacher needs to have Special Education training so that they can teach every student that walks through the door to their classroom. Special Education should be part of the Teacher Performance Review so that we can ensure that students are being taught according to their learning strengths and preferences. There is still work to do to ensure that programs are modified and accommodated.

Students with learning differences need a voice, a champion. I am hopefully returning to work in a few weeks; I am thinking and planning how I can be that voice for those students. I just hope I don't let them down.

To treat everyone fairly is to treat them unequally.

How can I improve my strategies in the classroom by applying Differentiated Instruction, in order to assist my students in improving their self-confidence and overall achievement in Mathematics?

Barkev Poladian



Biography

I am in my fourteenth year of teaching, eleven for Grand Erie District School Board. I currently teach Grade 6 at North Ward Public School in Paris, Ontario. I have a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Child Studies from Brock University and am currently enrolled in the Masters of Education Program with Brock University. I also have my specialist in Computers in the Classroom and Special Education. This is my first action research project. I intend on using my experiences in action research to help me in Instructional Leadership incentives with the Board, in my Masters degree, and for continued professional development.

Abstract

“Differentiated Instruction”: I thought that this was the buzz word that we had been hearing about and I felt like I wanted to learn more about it. The Action Research process inspired me in a variety of ways. Most notably, it gave me a venue that made me accountable for self-evaluating my practice. It gave me motivation and encouragement to follow through with a process that I realized was going to allow me the opportunity to analyze data for the purposes of evidence-based decision making about what strategies will allow my students to be successful. It also empowered me to follow through with my professional development in a way that has challenged me to be better at what I do. As I began this quest, my concerns were whether I could make this manageable, and whether I was capable of breaking out of “pre-existing patterns” with regards to how I teach. I discovered as the year progressed that my interest in Differentiated Instruction became less a matter of “re-inventing the wheel” and more about experiencing the excitement of watching my students grasp new concepts together. It inspired me to stick with my plan and to document my experiences. I learned that when it comes to learning, I reacted the same way as my students. A day that was successful was a day I was inspired to continue. Perhaps my own inspirations can become someone else’s.

In the Beginning

Having taught in the Junior Division for most of my career thus far, I felt like I needed to stay current in my practices. It would be too easy to fall into a groove and conduct my yearly lesson planning the same year after year. I wanted to offer my students the best possible opportunities to achieve, and in so doing, I established from the onset that since not all students are alike or learn the same, my program needed to reflect that. I wanted to ensure that the needs of all the

learners in my class were equally valued and equitably served. Therefore, it was important to me that my students would be able to utilize any possible strategy that recognized their individual needs and learning styles in my classroom. Based on this understanding, I chose to focus on differentiated instruction because it applies an approach to teaching and learning that understands that students have multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. Therefore, I wanted to learn more about how to differentiate my classroom to best meet the needs of my students and assist them in their studies.

My question and focus was very broad in the beginning and encompassed many different ideas and perspectives of what to measure in my research. I wondered, should I focus in on how differentiated instruction might improve over all test taking, Education, Quality, and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing, Comprehension, Attitude, Strategies and Interest (CASI) testing, or exemplar tasks? I wondered how Differentiated Learning and authentic assessment was connected? I wondered about all of the various other Learning Strategies many of us have come into contact with over our careers, such as First Steps, Schools Attuned, and Tribes to name a few, and how might Differentiated Instruction perhaps complement or quite possibly contradict any of these approaches. One thing that I knew for sure, was that I needed to broaden my understanding of differentiated learning before I could come up with an action plan.

I began my quest in mid October, and my preliminary introduction to Differentiated Learning in a Bureau of Education and Research workshop (BER), and with independent reading of materials by various researchers, most notably, Carol Ann Tomlinson. Additionally, I had the opportunity to work with Dr. Jack Whitehead of the University of Bath, United Kingdom, and several other educators and administrators from Boards of Education across Ontario during a two day working conference at the Ontario College of Teachers in Toronto. This experience solidified my plan of attack, and established my philosophy of making this project meaningful by keeping it manageable.

My question developed into: How can I improve my strategies in the classroom by applying Differentiated Instruction, in order to assist my students in improving their self-confidence and overall achievement in Mathematics?

Teaching sixth grade, I realized that EQAO was important data to provide evidence of student achievement. I wanted to develop ideas and strategies in the classroom that in the end, would impact their assessment results. I wanted my students to be better thinkers, and self-confident in their quests. I chose to focus specifically on using differentiated instruction in mathematics. I knew that many of my students had already developed a “self-fulfilling prophecy” with regards to math, and from the onset, I knew this could become an uphill battle. It was difficult trying to get many of them to do their assigned tasks. I listened to significant chants of “I can’t do this”, and “This is too hard!”

So, the process began. What was I going to do that would “revolutionize” my classroom? As I read more and more about differentiation, I realized that differentiation has been around for many years. The instructor of the BER conference that I attended started off her day-long

workshop by sharing a letter that was written by a teacher to a friend. In the letter, she discussed how she was using differentiation strategies in her classroom. The letter was written in the 1940's. Hence, differentiation isn't new or revolutionary because it has stood the test of time and has, according to advocates like Tomlinson (2006) entrenched itself in the processes of good teaching practice.

The Seminar and Getting Started

The seminar was by all accounts, a blast... it really was. It motivated me, and excited me about the strategies I walked away with to assist me in tapping into my students' learning potential. First and foremost, I walked away with the knowledge that I had to truly buy into the philosophy if this was all going to make sense to me. This philosophy is basically the building blocks of any successfully differentiated classroom. As Tomlinson writes in her book,

...in differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are, not the front of the curriculum guide. They accept that children learn in different ways. They are diagnosticians, providing the best possible instruction for their students. (Tomlinson, 2006)

My task needed to be manageable. After all, it was now early November, and I was in the heart of report cards and planning and organizing my school's Remembrance Day assembly. Like many of us, I am sure, I was scrambling to finish off units, and mark the remaining assignments, in order to complete my report cards. As excited as I was to begin, I knew my limitations. So, I decided that I was going to focus this year on one subject, math. I was about a week or so into my third strand of Geometry; yet, I decided to stop and do some scrambling and backtracking in order to begin the process effectively. My goal was to take this unit in Measurement and differentiate the **content, the process, and the product**.

Diagnostic Assessment

I spent valuable time early on in the diagnosing and assessing of each student in various ways, such as interest surveys and preliminary testing. This approach designed to assess individual student strengths and weaknesses from the onset also will better assist me in understanding student readiness, interests, and learning styles. And so, keeping in mind that I wanted to make this manageable and practical for my students, I decided to give them a pre-test. Perhaps my results would be skewed a little because we were already a week into the unit, but I felt the information, in any event, would be helpful.

The pre-test I designed was fairly short and it focused primarily on the preliminary knowledge students would have covered in Grade 5 as well as one application and one communication type question. I needed to gauge how much pre-teaching I needed to do at the onset, as well as which students I needed to identify with "mathematical readiness".

The results of the pre-test reinforced the argument for the benefits to differentiate. Some students had basic knowledge but lacked communication skills to explain a concept. Some students were able to communicate well, but had difficulty applying their knowledge. And there were 4 or 5 students out of 23 that demonstrated limited effectiveness in their knowledge, application and

communication skills in geometry. I had my work cut out for me.

DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTIONAL AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Term One

There are a number of ways to vary instructional and management strategies when you differentiate your classroom. Again, the key for me was to make it manageable. I would realistically not be employing every single way of differentiating into my lesson planning because it wouldn't be manageable. I had to select what I thought would be the most practical of the strategies. Furthermore, I was dealing with several students who appeared unmotivated to take the necessary risks to learn.

My conversations with fellow colleagues that assembled for a two day conference on November 20 and 21, 2006 to work with Dr. Jack Whitehead, discussed this "classroom symptom" during the discussions of the day. I remembered a quote that I wrote down where Jack referenced Joanne Rand Whitmore:

"The main difference between high ability achievers and high ability underachievers is that the achievers have learned the attitudes and strategies that enable them to be successful in a school setting." (Poladian, 2007)

Dr. Whitehead shared an anecdote at the Standards of Practice Institute that struck a chord, and sparked my motivation to setting up my own action research. He articulated it like this:

"A teacher once walked into the classroom and taught the lesson to a sea of dead faces. Who's problem is this? Mine or theirs? You could blame the students in your class as being impossible, not malleable enough to work with or to make a difference to. Sure, you might transfer to another school someday, but there again, you will come face to face with a sea of dead faces. This is the reality that it is you that has to change your practice." (Whitehead, 2006)

So, before trying any of the following strategies, it was important for me to begin by establishing the notion that treating my students differently was not unfair; it was respecting their differences. Students need to recognize that they are all different and that treating them the same is not always appropriate or effective. One way to motivate my students would be to build on their strengths first. Therefore, one strategy that I employed right from the onset was flexible grouping.

Flexible Grouping

Flexible grouping allowed me to give my students an environment to be appropriately challenged while at the same time avoiding the labeling of a student's lack of readiness. I recognized that even my Level 3 and 4 (higher achieving) students could benefit from working in flexible groups. In one instance, they would benefit from working with their peers and in another, they would be challenged to become leaders and assist members of the group in meeting its challenges. Initially, after a quick review lesson of some of the major skills covered in Grade 5, I set up flexible grouping teams in my classroom. I used summative type questions, similar to the pretest I gave them, and several other questions that I wanted my class to understand before I began teaching a new concept or skill. Within these groups was the student who had a particular need for one-on-

one assistance to comprehend a skill or concept. Flexible grouping allowed me to choose a student as the “resident expert” on a particular concept, to assist a peer to learn the concept.

I began to collect data over the final two weeks of November. I designed small activity based projects for my groups based on lessons that I had taught in Measurement; students worked with each other to develop approaches to solving the task. I then had the groups explain their project to the rest of the class and how the group worked together to reach a consensus. I suggested multiple ways of approaching the problem and encouraged members to suggest alternative ideas and strategies to their partners. I collected data from their explanations and answers to the following question at the conclusion of their group presentation to the class and soon discovered was that student readiness improved moderately in some of my students:

What were some of the benefits from working with others to solve your math problem?

I recorded several answers (some of the answers weren’t exactly what I was hoping to hear but it was still early in the process):

“He was smarter than me, so he told me how to do it.”

“If I didn’t understand something, maybe somebody else would.”

*“It was easy to understand [*student*] because he did it a different way than I did, and his way made more sense.”*

“I don’t like doing math questions by myself, because I don’t understand it.”

“Someone can see if you are doing something wrong and tell you.”

“As long as nobody is the boss, it’s ok... but if someone thinks they know everything, then they want to do all the work.”

“I like working in groups because sometimes people know different things than others. I might know something someone else doesn’t.” (Poladian, 2007)

I wondered if I could now move forward with some of the ideas I wanted to try. My goal was to improve student assessment in math, so my evidence would be collected throughout the next three weeks and with my summative evaluation at the end. As my week continued, I needed to identify the criteria I would use to set up further flexible grouping strategies in math. There were several approaches I could take, but in order to manage this effectively, I decided to choose just two: scaffolding and anchor activities.

Scaffolding

The scaffolding framework works hand in hand with flexible grouping. As Rottle (2006) outlines, scaffolding is “just like it sounds.... It is the build up of support around a student to help them succeed at the task or tasks at hand”. So in a sense, we are scaffolding all the time when we are showing kids how to do something. The four step framework that I used was adapted from Rottle (2006):

1. Teacher modeling (I do it. I demonstrate how to go about solving a difficult task. I encourage students to talk out loud about their thinking.)

2. Student modeling (through whole class discussion all of us work together to complete a difficult task.)
3. Group modeling (flexible groupings are assigned and small groups work with each other to problem solve a difficult task.)
4. Individual Modeling (my use of “exit cards”: This is where I can see who in the class has met the standard of a Level 3 or 4 in the given task.)

Anchor Activities

With anchor activities, I would better understand the readiness levels of my students to move on with the next concept or skill. I decided that I would use a technique called *exit cards*, introduced to me during the BER conference. They were introduced as a quick and easy way of assessing the students in the classroom. After a few days of teaching a concept or skill and providing students the opportunity to work through questions and apply their knowledge with various activities via scaffolding techniques outlined above, I would distribute an exit card. I made up a ½ page sheet with the skill represented with the question and passed it out. The sheet only took 5 minutes to complete. When I collected the sheets, I had a better understanding of who had developed that particular skill and who hadn't. I tracked this in my grade book. When I identified my students as levels 1 and 2 (lower achieving), I made it a point to set up flexible groups with them to re-teach the skill. The rest of the class had an alternative assignment that reinforced the skill, but with a higher level of complexity. This process really helped me explain where I needed to differentiate. When I tested the students again, I tested them all, even the ones that had been successful.

Diagram 1 shows the exit card tracking that I did for the unit on Measurement. The names of my students have been removed for privacy. It's fairly straightforward. I gave the exit card to each student on the first day noted. The students that scored a level 3 or higher were tagged with an “X”. On the next day, I gave the same exit card out with slightly different values to be calculated so that the answer couldn't simply be memorized. I wanted to ensure that the students were following a process. If the student received a Level 3 or 4 on the second attempt, the “X” was noted. By the third attempt, any student who did not demonstrate an understanding of the concept was tagged with a “O”. From these exit cards, I was able to set up my flexible groups of mixed abilities.

EXIT CARD TRACKING MEASUREMENT UNIT

Name	Nov 21	Nov 22	Nov 25	Notes	Dec 1	Dec 4	Dec 7
Student 1	X				X		
Student 2	X					X	
Student 3	X					X	
Student 4	X				X		
Student 5		X			X		
Student 6			O	away for Tuesday's lesson			O
Student 7			O				X
Student 8		X					X
Student 10	X			Absent:December 4 card was given on December 5		X	
Student 11			O				O
Student 12	X				X		
Student 13		X					X
Student 14	X					X	
Student 15	X				X		
Student 16			X				O
Student 17			O				O
Student 18	X				X		
Student 19	X				X		
Student 20			O	no attempt on 3 rd try (Dec 7)			O
Student 21			X				O

Ex 4 Area of Triangle

Ex 2b Surface Area of Rectangular Prism



Working with a group of students prepare for their second exit card while the rest of the class is in their flexible grouping working on a group problem.



Students who pass the second exit card become coaches for others. Positive feelings and the development of self-confidence is evident when a student succeeds in helping someone else understand a concept that a short time ago they were having difficulty with themselves.



Students working together on independent problems help each other to understand a concept and practice explaining the concept to each other in order to prepare their explanations for the class.

I found that setting up the groups after the first exit card to practice the skills benefitted my students in several ways. My higher level students seemed to reinforce their skills by teaching it to their peers and I believe based on some of the previous questioning I did, they appreciated an opportunity to work at a problem with others' perspectives. In various future activities, I found student responses encouraging:

“Can we work on this problem the way we did that other one?”

“Can we do these problems in our groups?”

“It’s easier to understand when someone is helping me.” (Poladian, 2007)

During the parent-teacher interview process, I spoke to several parents about how I was

differentiating the instruction for the students in the class in math to help them gain confidence in their skills. Parents for the most part were able to reflect on how they themselves learned math growing up and how they were never made to explain the processes behind the skills.

According to one parent, *“Helping my child at math is pointless, because it is not the same as what it was when I was young. I don’t really understand this stuff you guys do now anyways. I couldn’t even try to help explain it to my child.”*

Another parent said, *“Thank goodness my husband is better at math than I am. I do the Language homework help, and he does the math.”* (Poladian, 2007)

I realized that the fear of math was deeply entrenched with many parents today, and that student’s development of a self-fulfilling prophecy might stem from what they hear at home about math. For instance, one day I was getting annoyed with one of my students who didn’t feel like participating. It was one of those days that the things I learned didn’t seem to help. I was losing the battle with this student because he was steadfast that he was going to disrupt the grouping he was placed in. I was concerned that he would allow some of his friends in the class to lose focus too if I permitted him to continue his disruptive attitude. He obviously did not want to participate in the lesson, and any strategies I tried to refocus him weren’t working. Before he was removed to the hallway in order to not disrupt the others, he stated:

“I don’t need to know this stuff. My Dad has a job and he said he never got math when he was a kid. So I’ll get a job too.” (Poladian, 2007)

This particular day really bothered me. I wanted to chalk it up to Christmas holidays being around the corner, and the students were easily unfocused because of the impending two week break, but it made me realize that no matter how interesting the strategies I would introduce, it’s not going to be the magic elixir for everyone. I can only try again next time. As the weeks waned to vacation, I thought about the things that I did differently in my classroom thus far for this unit. It might not have been mind-altering or revolutionary, but it certainly gave me a sense of appreciation that for some, this tactic was showing me that some of my students were building their self-confidence when given the opportunity to work with others and be a part of a “thinking team”.

Time for Reflection

I needed a break, and some time to think about things and reflect. I wasn’t sure what form my reflecting was going to take. Although I felt like I was making some progress with some kids, there were still many that I was still having great difficulty reaching. There would be plenty of time to think about that and try alternative ideas later on. For the next two weeks, I wanted to recharge the batteries and enjoy the holidays. I had a great break. Santa was good to me.

I did get an opportunity to do some more self-reflection in the form of an interview in early January. I wrote about this interview during a writing session I had in March at the Teacher Resource Centre:

Kazuko Sawamoto, a Professor at Japan's Womans' University interviewed me on Jackie Delong's request back in January, 2007. Kazuko, or Kei as she is referred to was here to conduct research for her PhD to take back with her to Japan. Jackie thought it would be helpful for her to interview teachers who were in "reflection mode" as any educator conducting action research would be. So, I agreed, semi reluctantly not sure what I had actually agreed to. What I subsequently realized was that this interview would indeed be helpful for me, because it would force me to put my words, my thoughts, and my reflections down to "paper". (Since then, I received a transcribed version of the interview).

My apprehensions were eased almost immediately, after I met Kei. I was introduced to this educator of a different culture, with different experiences, and limited grasp of the English language, yet in all her differences, who shared with me one common denominator: that any educator (in my case, ME) can become better at what they do through research. Although, I only knew the bare minimum of what Kei's PhD was all about, it didn't take long to realize that in a very tangible way, her questions were actually helping me with my own action research, in that her questions to me were all based on the foundations of self-reflection. I was asked a question at the beginning of the interview about whether I felt uncomfortable that Jackie was in the room while the interview was taking place. I answered that I didn't, as I found myself explaining that since I have become more confident in my profession with each passing year, I have felt more comfortable in being able to speak freely and openly around my colleagues. Sometimes, you will have to agree to disagree, and being afraid to voice your opinion is counterproductive to building your own personal vision of what is truly important to you and your own practice. This declaration of sorts, kind of lit a spark to my action research project. I was in a very interesting spot to agree or disagree. My apprehensions of participating in an action research project suddenly became alleviated. I didn't have to worry as much about the results of my project, and whether the data would fall under my expected or desired parameters. Instead, my research would sort of guide itself, and my overall focus or desire would become more about how my self reflection practices will help me to become better at what I do. Student achievement would then become the evidence that helps to decide what works and what doesn't. That becomes the true success of action research and why I have grown to believe in this.

Term II

During Term 2, I remained steadfast and continued setting up flexible grouping with my students. Term 1 results were somewhat disappointing because I was hoping for a significant improvement with my class. However, working with individuals during this time helped me to improve the readiness levels of three students in my class so that they were able to achieve a Level 3 evaluation on Term 1 for Measurement. This was a small success for me but most definitely a huge one for the three students who did the achieving.

I want to summarize the remainder of my term with a few journal entries (Poladian, 2007) I recorded that helped to keep me focused on my project when there were days I just wanted to forget about it!

January 22

It's Day 1 so I have some time on break here to jot down a few ideas I have. I have the same three students working on the same math concept for three days in a row now. This is getting frustrating. I am going to have to move on after today or I am going to seriously fall behind. I am

going to use the National Library of Math Manipulatives site on the Internet tomorrow. My red group gets pretty excited about using that site. I like it because it gives them an interactive fun way of reinforcing the basic concepts.

February 5

I was going to do some more writing this past weekend, but instead I did some more reflecting. With all the reading that I have done to date, I decided to pick apart what I felt were the most important things that I wanted to remember. As it turns out, these are the parameters I will always have to keep in my head. Content, Process and Product. These are the three things in my control, of which I can differentiate. So this week my goal was to identify how I did that. I managed two. **Content:** My flexible groupings were set up where I had a group at my white table working on creating equivalent fractions. **Process:** I gave three of my students fraction pieces and a template to lay the pieces on. I had another group use number lines. I took one group with me to the white table and went through the steps one at a time, and had them repeat it back to me. I tried to get one of my students to re-teach to me, but she struggled with explaining with words. It's truly amazing how some people can follow an instruction, but to retell it is like pulling teeth!

March 5

I used my review day allowing my students to work in small groups to research a math topic of interest, such as how geometry applies to architecture or how math is used in art. I wanted to work with six of my students on building some strategies for the test on Tuesday. I think it's important that I model for them specifically how to study for this test. I have four kids that I am going to do something new with. I am going to break the test up into two parts. I'll give the first part to them in the morning, and the second part in the afternoon. Maybe if I break it down into two parts, they won't be so quick to shut down part way through a test. I should have kept the last round of exit cards instead of handing them back, because then I could have seen how much was retained in a week and a half. Oh well.. I'll know better for next time.

April 12, 2007

Very pleased with my exit card results this time around. The students I worked with on Tuesday obviously remembered the techniques and concepts behind the patterning lesson. I had only two students who did not pass the exit card at the second attempt. In any event, I am hoping that maybe they are feeling more of a responsibility to setting individual goals to pass the quiz so that they can proclaim their readiness for the next task.

May 3, 2007

Danielle told me that she felt so much better about her homework today. She has been getting extra help at home, but going over the tasks at school has provided her an opportunity to show "a different" way to her peers about how she works with and understands fractions. I enjoyed listening to how she explained to her partner how she went about tackling a problem solving question. *"Usually I don't get it, but I get fractions. It's easy for me to explain it because it is starting to make sense to me."*

Danielle passed her exit card the first time this week. Although she held back any emotion in front of her class, she told me afterwards she was happy she did well.

Findings and Next Steps

I realize that there is much more that can be implemented in differentiated instruction, and I intend on further developing my strategies in the coming year. I am going to give myself the opportunity to read more extensively, and further develop new strategies of implementation for next year. I think starting in September will be a bonus. Changing overall attitude in math for my students will prove to be the determining factor for additional success. In the final few months, in preparing for EQAO, it is my hope that if nothing else, my students have learned how to strategize. Problem solving with each other was a way to build self-confidence together. Although a marked improvement in test scores will no doubt solidify any claims I may have that my strategies made a difference, I can without hesitation say right now that the strategies I used in the classroom became easier to administer the more students became familiar with the routines, with their own group and with individual expectations. As I embark in my Masters studies, action research will take on a focal point to my degree. I envision an opportunity to build on my current reflections and continue to foster and improve my practice.

Summary

In the end, I feel that I have devoted considerable time to bettering my practice this year. I learned a great deal about myself in the process. Initially, I was unsure if I had the courage to be critical of myself to the point where I felt compelled to make a change. I decided in the end that despite the extra hours this process would require in planning, research and implementation, the end result would make it all worthwhile. I reaffirmed that as teachers, we all play an important role in the lives of our students. If we expect our students to be the best that we can be, and we continue to hold steadfast to our universal mantra that “education is a life-long process” we owe it ourselves and the students under our charge to grow along side of them. We model the importance of education to our students every day, and we bring who we are into our classrooms. I want my students to be excited about the learning process because I am. I want my students to strive for excellence. All it may take for some is the development of self confidence and the encouragement they receive from those around them that are truly influential. This, above all else motivates me to forge ahead.

I would like to thank everyone involved during the Action Research Process. I have had many opportunities to share my ideas and thoughts with a terrific staff at North Ward School, and have had engaging conversations with my facilitator, Jackie Delong, as well as many of my colleagues conducting their own Action Research projects. They’re contributions in many of our reflective conversations, as well as their interest in my own pursuits were invaluable and appreciated. This has truly been an inspiring journey.

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Could differentiated instruction help me to 'get their heads up' and their minds 'tuned in'?

Heather Linington



Biography

Heather is a graduate of the University of Guelph (Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, 1980) and the University of Western Ontario (Bachelor of Education) with additional qualifications in Special Education from the University of Western and Nipissing University. She worked for 12 years in the agricultural field working with adult and youth extension education. She has been a teacher with the Grand Erie District School Board since 2003 and is currently a grade 2/3 teacher at Echo Place Public School. This is her first action research project.

Abstract

In May and June of 2006, teachers and administrators in the Grand Erie District School Board attended a workshop on Differentiated Instruction. The reaction of staff to the program varied from "this is just a new name for something we have always been doing" to "Wow, this is great. It gives us permission to differentiate our programming even for non-identified students!". As a reasonably new teacher I wanted to understand and learn more about how a differentiated program can help students achieve their goals and meet the curriculum expectations.

The real question is, how do I know if differentiated instruction is making any difference to the student's success? It did not take long for me to see the difference in the work that was differentiated to work done in grade 2 (from the Ontario Student Record) and to work done as recent as September and October of the current year. The evaluation went from an R (not enough information presented to be assessed) or a level 1 to a solid level 2 and in some cases a level 3 or level 4. The positive attitude that was displayed by these students about the choices of tasks was also an important indicator of the fact that the differentiated tasks was working. In this project I share how I came to these conclusions.

School Context

Echo Place School is a small, close-knit community of about 150 students, K to grade 8. Every class is a split grade. We are identified as a compensatory school based on the socio-economic profiles as developed by the Grand Erie District School Board. Our strength is our sense of community and the mutual respect of staff and students. All students are known by all staff which encourages collaboration on effective practices to meet individual needs.

The Group of Students With Whom I Work

I have found that in my experience, one of the greatest obstacles to achievement is motivation. I think that some students know the information but they just are not motivated to effectively demonstrate their knowledge or to effectively apply previous knowledge and background to new situations. I have always been challenged by reaching the students in a classroom who just don't learn by reading and writing responses.

With a ratio of 13 boys to 6 girls in 2006/2007 I had a class that really did not respond to "book learning". Lessons where students were expected to write what they knew were met with mixed reactions. Helena, an excellent writer, completed such tasks with detail, metaphors and ideas well beyond the expectations. Damein and Devon would look at those tasks and would put their heads in their hands. Jake would look at the task and would do nothing. He appeared to not know where to start. Forty minutes later, even with numerous prompts, they still would have minimal, if anything written on their paper.

I have focused my study on Damein, Jake and Devon. I intend to follow these students throughout the year as I try to differentiate instruction.

Jake: Jake has been identified this year as having a language disability for both receptive and expressive language. He is in grade 3 but testing reveals that he is comprehending below grade 1. This has been a challenge with his learning and it has resulted in many assessments of "performing below grade level". He was not experiencing much success at school. This is my second year with Jake as I had him the previous school year when he was in grade 2.

Damein: Damein was moved from another school into my class in October due to some behaviour issues. Damein has some emotional and behavioural needs which impede his learning. He is often moody and just won't do the work. A variety of strategies have been tried. My goal, knowing that he was being moved into a new environment, was to build a rapport and to get to know what does motivate him.

Devon: Devon is an ADHD child who I had the previous year for grade 2 and I requested to keep him for grade 3. He is a perfectionist who, due to his focusing issues, gets very frustrated with not being able to get something to work just right. He had great difficulty in grade 2 solving word problems because, although he knew the answer, he could not organize and focus himself to get the work down on paper. He often said "I hate these problems". He is extremely bright and brings extensive background information to the class discussions. My goal, knowing I was having Devon again in grade 3, was to develop a way to help him succeed at the math word problems.

How can I differentiate instruction to help to 'get their heads up' and their minds 'tuned in'?

Data Collection Process

The majority of the data collection was done through student observation, collecting photos and student work. I also interviewed some parents. Of the parents who received the permission form for me to use their child's work as part of this action research only 1 parent of the 19 showed any

interest in the research. She stated that it was good that I was doing that and has asked when I've been away on a workshop if it was for my research. We also had colleague collaboration as all the teachers, grades 1 to 5, were involved with the action research. We reassured each other that we were on the right track. Important feedback and data was gained at our action research meetings. I also had students do some written evaluations of the different units of study with their input on what they liked about the unit and how they learned. The Differentiated Workshop which I attended in London provided valuable dialogue and information which formed the basis of my approach to differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction in a Nutshell:

Carol Ann Tomlinson, author of *Differentiated Classroom-Responding to the Needs of All Learners*, states that, in a differentiated classroom, teachers begin where the students are, not in front of the curriculum guide. They accept that children learn in different ways and they provide the best possible instruction for their students. The teacher needs to know where each student is in their learning. This is done through diagnosing and assessing each student before teaching the unit. The teacher needs to know the interests of the students. They need to know the preferred learning style of the student (Gardner's Multiple Intelligences). The teacher needs to know the essential curriculum for each grade. Differentiated Instruction is data driven instruction!

Patti Drapeau, author of *Differentiated Instruction Making it Work*, states that there are six different types of learners. They are: Academic Learner (learns quickly), Creative Learner (needs time to create), Invisible Learner (may not have a preferred style or rate of learning), Perfectionist Learner (doesn't like to move too quickly-needs time to complete work perfectly), High energy learner (sometimes likes to hurry through work and move on), and the Struggling Learner (may need work repeated and reviewed in a variety of ways).

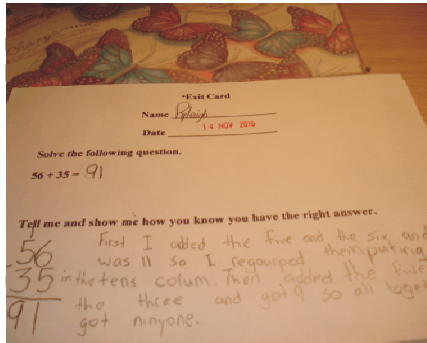
Through a Bureau of Education and Research (BER) workshop on Differentiated Instruction I learned there are three things that can be differentiated. You can differentiate the content (what you are teaching), the process (how you are teaching) and the product (what the students do to demonstrate their knowledge). The two most motivating comments from the instructor, Jeani Rottle, were "Differentiated Instruction is not individual instruction" and "Start small. Do some easy things to start to differentiate your program". These were important to me because many people are turned off by thoughts of having to teach everything in 10 different ways to accommodate all of the different needs and learning styles in the classroom.

Armed with this knowledge I set out to make a difference in my classroom.

Using the Differentiated Learning Strategies

i) Flexible Groups

In September and October I did many whole class lessons and learning activities as I was getting to know the students in my class. I did an interest inventory by interviewing each student and I observed their behaviours during individual, group and class activity times. I had a few challenges.



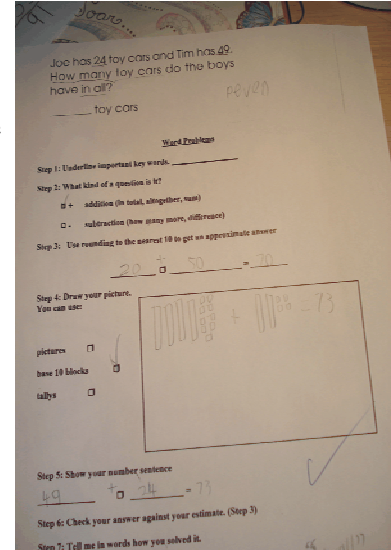
An exit card allows you to quickly assess the grasp of a specific concept and can be used for flexible groupings

One of the bases of Differentiated Instruction is having flexible groups. These groups change often as they can be formed on the basis of interest, skill or preferred learning style. The first strategy I implemented was an exit card. An exit card is a quick snapshot of whether the student has grasped the concept. It can be used as a pre-test, to determine if students are ready for a test or it can be used to determine your flexible groups. I often use an exit test to group my instruction for the next day. It can be used in all subject areas; however, I tend to mostly use it for math. Identifying students who have grasped the concept and can move on and those students who need to spend more time on it in a smaller group really helps to determine work groups for math during the next day.

Math is a good area for me to differentiate because during that time block I have the help of a Cooperative (Co-op) Education student as well as an Educational Assistant (EA) who is assigned to my class because of the behaviours in the class. I often have the Co-op student troubleshooting with the “have it” group while the EA and myself work with the group of students who don’t have it. This grouping has to be flexible between the EA and myself as she may have to withdraw one of the behaviour children, her first priority. If the exit card reveals that most students “don’t have it”, then I know that I need to re-teach the concept the next day with a different approach.

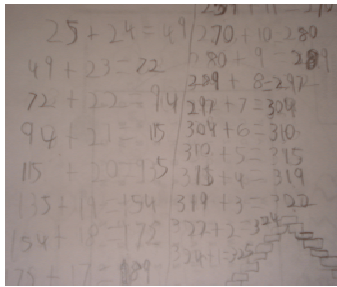
In order to help students like Devon succeed at doing math word problems I needed to develop a template to help them do the steps. The goal, of course, is that once they do enough problems they can do the steps without the template, but the template would always be there for the students who need it. I developed a template that can be adjusted throughout the year. When we started multiplication I added multiplication to ‘What kind of a question is it’?

The template was amazing! I made a “big deal” for Devon (as he loves attention) telling him and the class that this was going to make all math problems so easy for them. Devon and all the students are doing well with it. Most students continued to use the template until Christmas. After Christmas, students knew it was there if they needed it but they could do the question on their own, following the steps in their head. When I asked Devon how he feels about math word problems now, he says, “Can we do another problem, Mrs. Linington?”(Linington,H., November 8, 2006).



This math template allows students to independently work through the problem solving steps

Devon now loves math, asking for more math word problems. During a math class in March when we were doing a particularly difficult patterning question we had the students work on part of it on their own after the initial lesson. Of course the question asks “how many blocks would



Knowing the individual strengths of the student results in greater success

there be when it was 25 stories high?”. None of the students could extrapolate that far. Next day, armed with calculators we began to do it together. “Mrs. Linington, don’t tell me. I want to figure it out myself” says Devon. Knowing the perfectionist nature of Devon, and his new confidence in doing math problems, I sent him on his way with the Co-op student to supervise while he solved the problem on his own outside of the classroom. He came back 40 minutes later with the right answer, all done by hand! It was so exciting for both of us.”(Linington, H. March 6, 2007) <Insert photo DSC01223.JPG With caption “Knowing the individual strengths of the student results in greater success >. He was rewarded with seeing his work on the math word wall under patterning, and a star of the day for being a

persistent and patient learner.

ii) Mind Maps

At my special education course in the fall, a special education student spoke about how technology

has helped her to succeed at school. In her talk, she mentioned that doing mind maps really helped her and how she could do them better than students with no special needs. I was intrigued and asked her to show me how they worked. Mind maps are study notes without words. I felt that they could help students who were more visual learners.

Could they help students remember details and study? We were reading Charlotte’s Web as a read-a-loud. I decided to model and do a shared mind map for the story of Charlotte’s Web. The



Allowing a student with a language identification to use mind maps to retell a story resulted in a more thorough comprehension

kids loved it. We talked about drawing one picture, symbol or word, which would help them remember 3 or 4 important details of the story. We did the whole story with 11 pictures. The children were so enthused they wanted to do their own mind map of the story.

(Linington, H., December 14, 2007)

I reinforced mind maps by having the January Book Report (student choice of book) done as a mind map. They would then do an oral book report to me by pointing to the picture and then telling me what the story was about. The students were motivated to complete this book report. Success story: Jake, who has never been able to recall any part of a story even after multiple readings, (as indicated by his DRA level of F) drew pictures and told the whole story with great detail. He got a level 3+, the first in his life!!(Linington, H. February 1, 2007) I need to work with him on organizing and numbering his

pictures because that was a problem, but he remembered the story.

I then took what I had learned and when it was time to study for a unit test on magnets, I helped the students to make a mind map. We modeled what the important things were that they had to remember about magnets and then the students used their notebook to make a mind map for the magnet unit. They were able to use the mind map during the test. All of the students, except one, got an A on the test. Powerful tool! After the test was marked we had a class meeting to try to determine what we did that helped us to get such great marks (metacognition). Over half of the students said that it was the mind map (Linington, H. March 8, 2007). Students will have the option of doing a mind map for other units of study. Some students, like Jake, recognize that it is a useful tool to help them to study. Jake’s success with his book report and then his Science test has turned him back on to school. His confidence has improved and, even though he has special learning needs, he has tasted success. Jake used mind maps to understand and compare the life today with the life of the pioneer child during the Social Studies unit on Pioneers.

iii) Different Products: Choice Based On Interest

The grade 3 social studies project was to research a rural and an urban community of their choice and compare the two using a graphic organizer. The project was to be completed at school as I wanted to use it as a tool to teach the children how to research and identify important facts. I felt that by allowing them to choose their own communities their interest would increase. Devon picked Tobermory and Ottawa because his family hikes along the Bruce Peninsula and they camped in that area.

Damein, after 2 weeks and many attempts to get him started, had two sentences written. I knew that this was not going to work for Damein and I could not afford to waste the next 4 weeks with him. I told him that I had an idea: he could do his project as posters, using the same subtitles but drawing two pictures for each title, one of his urban community and what he would see and one for his rural community. “Okay, he says”. The next day he came in to school wanting to work immediately on his project. ‘I know why you wanted me to do this by pictures,’ he said. ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Because I’m a good drawer’, he said. I said that not only was he a good drawer but that I knew that he would do a super job on this project if he was allowed to show me with pictures.” (Linington, H. January 24, 2007) Every morning he worked on this project as soon as he arrived at school. I had found books for him with pictures and information of the different communities. He provided great detail and really captured the differences between rural and urban communities. His mom told me that Damein was really proud of his project.(minutes of case meeting, February 7, 2007) He keeps talking about it at home and he can’t wait to show it to me. Damein got a B on his project and it was displayed alongside the other students who did their projects in the book format that I had originally envisioned. In this case, I differentiated the product. By looking at the way Damein learns best I was able to motivate him to produce work and demonstrate knowledge which I otherwise would not have got.



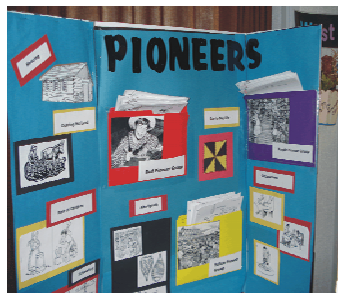
Damein was able to demonstrate the differences between a rural and urban community through pictures

Devon took his rural community of Tobermory and used family photos and other sources to complete his research. He was so taken by what he learned about Tobermory that he completed a picture board about interesting facts about Tobermory including, he says,

“that it is the shipwreck capital of Canada!”(Linington, H. February 12, 2007) By allowing choice based on interest I received far superior work than I would have if I had just assigned two communities. I also had children who were excited to learn. They poured over books and maps, did internet searches and went to information centres and the library.

iv) Learning Centres

One of the other ideas presented at the workshop in London was to do learning centres that can be changed easily. They used a display board with different pockets of activities. The task cards could be based on activities, interest, learning styles or readiness level. I really liked this idea even though there would be a high investment of time initially. It would be student managed, allowing for students to then become independent learners. It should also increase the motivation and interest as the students have choice in what they are doing.



Making one centre a year provides a manageable way to have independence while differentiating the activities

The instructor suggested doing one board and centre a year. I chose to do the Social Studies unit on Pioneers as there is such a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate student knowledge with that unit. It is also a high interest topic and one which I really love. I prepared the board and was happy to be able to use photos and props as anchors for the students. Activities in the board can be changed every few days and with flexible groupings; sometimes a student would be working out of the yellow file folder if it is a language-based activity and at other times the activities would be based on their interests (one researching farming practices, one doing apprenticeships, one doing household chores). This unit was a success as evidenced by the interest in the tasks and the careful consideration students gave to choosing which task best suited them. Students were even choosing to work on tasks

during other times of the day. Students learned to manage their task completion with a tracking sheet. For a few struggling students, I did need to hand select each day, with their input, a task and work with them to get them started. Students had a thorough understanding of pioneer life and how it compares with their life.

I wanted to provide students with different ways of learning when we got to our life cycles unit of Science. I was not going to invest the time to do another display board with centres but I did want to address the different learning styles. The students were given the choice doing their culminating activity as a booklet, poster or diorama. Students were also able to choose the animal for their study. In this case I have differentiated the topic (their choice based on their interest) and the product.

Students completed an evaluation at the completion of the unit. When the project/task was presented to the students on April 5, 2007 the enthusiasm was high. There were even cheers! (Linington,H. April 5, 2007) On May 7, at the completion of the unit I had the students do a written evaluation of what they learned and how they learned it. When asked to identify their favourite part of the unit, students wrote: (Helena): ‘Learning about an animal of your choice and making a book’ (Ryleigh) ‘To get choices between a book, diorama or poster’ (Jake): ‘The best part was gluing the pictures and riteing(SIC) about the tigers’ (Devon): ‘The best part was making

the diorama. It took long, really long' (Damein) The best part was do resrch'(SIC). (Linington,H. May 7, 2007)

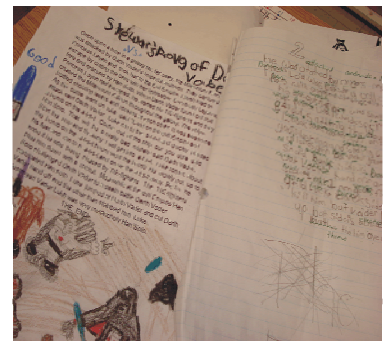
Findings

I have found that once I got started on this differentiated bandwagon I was looking more and more for ways to reach students and to provide a forum through which they can best demonstrate their knowledge and, more importantly, where they can achieve success. When I began to plan my adventure writing unit I wanted the students to do a picture walk of what was going to happen in their story showing which of the adventure plots they were going to use. I was afraid that not all of them would succeed at providing the depth of story that I was looking for. Fortunately for me, Lee Nikiforuk, the LRT for our school and another member of the Action Research group, was in the photocopy room at the end of the day. I showed her what I was thinking and got some ideas from her on how to present the information in different ways.(Linington, H. April 6, 2007)We ended up with visual plot cards for some, story examples for others, and for a few students a blank sheet for them to start with.

Before the time unit of math, I administered a pretest on April 7th (Linington, H. April 7, 2007). The results of the pretest then allowed me to divide the students into 3 groups based on their level of understanding. This grouping resulted in the high group being able to work at more complex time questions while the low group (for this unit of study) worked on the basics of telling time. Damein and Jake were both in this group where they are used clocks to try to understand how to tell time. The high group was not getting bored as they were challenged with problems involving elapsed time.

I have found that in order for differentiated instruction to succeed, students have to be self-managed. I have always provided 3 bins of activities for early finishers (one bin of language, one bin of mathematics and one bin of other). I found, though, that some of those tasks required more than one person and students did disturb others as they went to the bins/drawers to get an activity. Jeannie Rotti (2006) suggested a choices board with page activities for the children to do right at their desk. I have made "choices books" for everyone, changed seasonally. These books contain a variety of activities from phonics, crossword puzzles, math facts to more seasonal activities. The students know that if they are done early they can always read a book, write a story or work in their choices book. This has been a very important tool for me to manage the varying speeds at which students work.

With Damein, I know that if he has some say in how he is going to present the information, and the topic, he will be on task, excited and he will learn and retain an amazing amount of information as demonstrated by his Social Studies project and his Science project on the King Snake. Damein has also forced me to learn some of the assistive technology. We had our itinerant learning resource teacher do a class lesson to teach the students how to use Co-Writer and Write-Out-Loud. All of the class was amazed by the program, but Damein has embraced it and he is writing his current adventure



Making use of software programs can allow students to experience greater success and less frustration

story with this technology. He is providing “show and tell” to other teachers in the school and he is really proud of his story. (Linington, H. May 8, 2007) A learning success for Damein. For Damein, the differentiated instruction has certainly lifted his head up and engaged his mind.

Jake has become a master of the mind map. He chooses to do his work with a mind map when possible and he has learned to number his pictures to help to keep things organized and in order. He has experienced much more success with his work. For the work he did on May 7, a story retell, he drew 4 boxes, numbered them and then drew his mind map pictures inside. (Linington, H. May 7, 2007). He also did two independent mind maps during the pioneer unit to assist him in remembering the details.

Devon just needs some tools to help him through the steps needed to solve a problem. He is very bright; he knows the answer, and often the questions: he just needs to be given some tools and some space.

Conclusions:

This action research has helped me to see myself as a learner and it has helped me to embrace a new teaching strategy. I know that I would have worked with differentiated learning to some extent, even without the action research, but the action research forced me to be more reflective on different practices. I have been extremely pleased with the success I have experienced this year with children who are challenging learners and, as is often the case, their frustration with learning has resulted in some behaviour issues.

The successes of these three boys has encouraged me to try to differentiate more lessons, more units and more activities. Sometimes it is as simple as thinking about each student and identifying in my mind whether they will have success. If not, what can I do to change it so that they will? I find that when I look at curriculum documents now, I look with the idea of questioning the best way to teach the expectation. How can I differentiate the activity so that all students will find a task that motivates them? I no longer have only one idea for a summative task.

Not every day is perfect. Not every lesson is differentiated. Not every lesson has 100% of their attention. I just know that the more I can do to address the individual learning styles, the more success we will all have.

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How can I use guided writing to help improve the writing skills of my senior kindergarten students?

Heather McKay



Biography

Heather McKay currently teaches kindergarten at St. George-German School. She attended Queen's University where she obtained her honours BA in English and Psychology, and the University of Ottawa for her pre-service teacher education. She is currently working towards her specialist in Primary Education and in Reading. This is her first action research project.

Abstract

I am passionate about my way of teaching, and strongly believe that I do the best I can to help my students' achieve. My goal as a kindergarten teacher has always been to give my students the confidence and the enthusiasm necessary to "write" freely. I chose to do my action research project on Guided Writing after seeing the results of daily meaningful journal writing in my students. After I read KidWriting (Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999), I worked to fit in journal writing every day, instead of once every two or three days. Using formative assessment to guide my teaching has certainly had an effect on my students as writers. Journal time continues to be my favourite time of the day in school. I saw the students' confidence soar, and I saw the enthusiasm grow.

How did I come to action research?

I have never thought of myself as an action researcher. To me, action research was always something that other people did. I felt as though I was meant to be a teacher, was comfortable in that role, and took pride in the rapport I developed with my students. I loved watching my young students grow and to marvel at what they could accomplish! To me, an action researcher was someone who had a strong theoretical background, who was great at keeping records and organizing data, and who had years of teaching experience in many grades. My world as a teacher has been about kindergarten for many years. I had my own grumbles about keeping data, and I certainly wasn't organized enough to manage a plethora of it. Action Research was never something that I thought I could do.

Little did I realize that action research is, in fact, a perfect vehicle for someone like me. I love what I do. I am passionate about my way of teaching, and strongly believe that I do the best I can to help my students' achieve. I am a lifelong learner who believes that a teacher's job can never be boring. Teaching is about so much more than the written curriculum. We have the unique opportunity to help shape the lives of the students we work with. We guide them as they grow in confidence and in self esteem. We watch them as the lights "turn on!" We hear the words "I can write!" (McKay journal, Sept 2006) and watch their little faces light up as they hand you their "very best work" (McKay journal, Sept 2006). One can't help but feel regenerated when you are part of such a monumental occasion.

How did I get to my question?

My goal as a kindergarten teacher has always been to give my students the confidence and the enthusiasm necessary to “write” freely. For me, this has meant writing at a level that is comfortable to them. On the first day of school I asked my students to put their hand up in the air if they thought they knew how to write. I looked around the room and saw my SK students raising their hands high. Most of my JK students were sitting quietly, or saying aloud “I don’t know HOW to write!” (McKay, September 2006). That day I said I was going to change their minds. If I ask that same question today, all of my students will tell me they are writers; “ ‘I want to write about my new video game! Will we do journals today?’” (McKay Journal, April, 2007) “ ‘I’m excellent at using lowercase letters when I’m writing. I’ll help another writer today’” (McKay, May 10, 2007). This is very exciting.

If you look around the classroom during journal time, you will see all kinds of “writing” going on. One child will write four or five sentences; some will write two or three. Others write one sentence, and some will label their pictures. Most will draw a picture, and some will find word cards and copy print. Some will write a string of random letters, and others will print their name. Some will make a line on the page. All of these things are writing if the child identifies him/herself as a writer who is trying his/her best. “The first step in introducing children to writing is to build their confidence in themselves as writers” and to honour “their writing in ways that are developmentally appropriate to the range of the children in the class” (Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999).

I chose to do my action research project on guided writing after seeing the results of daily meaningful journal writing in my students. After a summer read a few years ago, *KidWriting*, by Feldgus and Cardonick (1999) I worked to fit in journal writing every day, instead of once every two or three days. I saw the confidence soar and I saw the enthusiasm grow. I found myself asking the grade one teachers how to approach different things because my students were taking off into a level I had not seen before. I needed to find something to help guide my students as they made these strides. I needed to look at each child individually and find out where their strengths were as writers and where there were specific points for growth. Gone was the notion that I could teach to an entire class as one homogenous group.

My focus for the project was to use Guided Writing to improve the writing skills in my senior kindergarten students. I needed to find a way to pull a teaching point for learning from each student, and provide them with meaningful, guided opportunities to help them improve as a writer.

How can I use guided writing to help improve the writing skills of my senior kindergarten students?

Where do I Begin?

I knew that in order to engage in action research I needed data to support my claims. I was leery about putting so much energy into data collection. The parents of my students have often marveled at how much I seem to know about their child. Any classroom teacher will tell you that it doesn’t take long to know your students. I’ve often thought that much of the data I need to collect has very little meaning to me as a teacher. Our students are more to us than numbers on a page. However, I have since learned that data CAN be meaningful. You need to find the right data that can help you to shape and guide your practice. In fact, as I reflect upon obtaining data that is meaningful to me, I recognize that on several occasions, data itself has brought back my enthusiasm. It has reminded me that a child I may perceive as having stalled in his/her learning,

is really learning over time. We tend to fall into the trap of relativity and compare our students to each other at any given point in time. While one student may prove to write at a level more basic than his/her peers, my data reminds me that he/she has steadily grown from the first day (see data below).

The Data

I needed data that I could use that would be meaningful to me as a facilitator. I searched the internet for different means of data collections that teachers used, and perused each with my question in mind. I needed data that could help to guide my teaching, and that I could pull from as I looked to find teaching points for guided writing. I settled on two forms of collection; The Monster Test (Gentry, 2006), and the Conventions of Writing Developmental Scale (Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999).

The Monster test is a spelling test of sorts but not administrated in the traditional way. Students are not given words to memorize and then spell for their teacher. Instead, they are presented with a list of ten words they are asked to try their best to write. The teacher then reviews student responses for patterns that exist. The stages of spelling development are identified by Richard Gentry as Precommunicative, Semiphonetic, Phonetic, Transitional and Conventional.

The Conventions of Writing Developmental Scale can be used by teachers to apply to a sample of writing such as a journal entry or story. Teachers rate a student's work based on a selection of anchor papers with identifiable traits that are characteristic of a particular stage along a continuum in writing. Students move from Emerging, Pictorial, Precommunicative, Semiphonetic, Phonetic, Transitional, Conventional and Advanced. The stages mirror to some degree the stages in the Monster test. However, the use of context in writing beyond the isolation of a spelling test, gives a teacher more data to work with.

The voices of my students are perhaps the most meaningful for me as a teacher. My decision to engage in research was driven by the pride the students feel when they recognize themselves as writers, "Can I be the author today?" (McKay, March 2007).

What does whole group writing look like in our class?

Each day my students sit on the carpet and wiggle to the chart stand. I begin to draw a picture to share with them, which will evolve into some story that the children can relate to, "Today I stepped on a raisin" (McKay Journal, March 2007). I then tell the story behind the picture and ask my students to come up with a sentence for me. Several raise their hands to give me an idea. I praise all sentences and we pump each one out on our fingers to count the words and visualize the spaces (in between our fingers).

We share the pen. Students volunteer to come to the journal to be either a writer or a space holder. We always have a reader. We work together to stretch out the words with our imaginary elastics, to tap the words into our hand, or to find a word in our popcorn song (high frequency words sung to the tune of Mary Had a Little Lamb). Children offer suggestions for letters, or for using a magic line if we can't come up with a sound.

One friend may hold the “spaceman” to remind our writer to leave spaces between his/her words as shown below.



When our writing is complete, the students use their “meters” to show how well we did with our writing! Often you’ll see two big thumbs up from each member of the class!

Where do we go from here?

Students then move to their tables to share their own stories in their individual journals. They use their mini offices, find words on our word charts, or find their friends name cards when needed. The children work together to help each other, and engage in meaningful oral discussion as they illustrate and ultimately write in their journals “Hey! You did the same thing as me! I keep forgetting to write in lowercase letters” (McKay, May 2007).

Kidwriting

Each child does their best “writing” and then finds an adult to read their story to. The adult will write using adult writing below the child’s work. The concept of adult writing and kidwriting is described by Feldgus and Cardonnick in KidWriting (1999):

”It is important that children know they are not expected to write exactly as adults do. Success occurs not in perfection but as children’s writing begins to more closely approximate conventional writing.”

The adult praises all that is wonderful in the writing “I like the way you use spaces in your work...You remembered to use a capital at the beginning of your sentence...You heard a lot of sounds in that word” (McKay, 2007). The adult makes no mention of what is not “right” in the writing. He/she then finds one teaching point to draw the child’s attention to. “Your story will be easy to read when you leave a space in between your words...When you need a word from the popcorn song, you don’t have to sound it out! You can just look in your mini office!” (McKay, 2007).

Children then have an opportunity to share. They often read their story to a friend, a volunteer, or the teacher. As the year progressed, our sharing moved to “three stars and a wish”.

Three stars and wish

Students reflect on a peer’s writing by offering three stars and one wish. Each star is something wonderful in the writing. “Lindsay remembered to use spaces so her words didn’t squish together...Sasha has a nice illustration...Kenny remembered to listen for the sounds in his words.” (McKay journal, February 2007) The one wish is a kind suggestion for improvement. ‘She forgot to wipe off her capital monster! I could be her partner to help her keep it away!’ (McKay, February 2007).

The capital monster

In February, we introduced the Capital Monster! My own reflection on my students’ journals led me to recognize that some students seemed stuck on writing in capital letters instead of lowercase

letters. Even though we spoke of this regularly, it just wasn't transferring to their written work. Each day before we begin to write, we check our shoulder for our imaginary capital monster. If it's sitting on there, we have to gently wipe it off! The students giggle as they perform this necessary task! Use of the capital monster has proven to strengthen the awareness of the proper use of capitals in our writing. " 'Don't squish it! You need it for the beginning of your sentence!'" (McKay journal, April 2007). " 'Lindsay is on the capital monster team so I'm the helper! I'm excellent at using lowercase letters!'" (McKay, April 2007).

The popcorn song and the bang song

All of the words from the pre primer dolch list (and some other high frequency words) are mixed up into these two songs. Every day we sing them to their familiar tune. We sing our way to a word, and the students happily raise their hands or perform some action to match the word they find. Using the song helps build confidence in the young learners. If a child does not feel comfortable sounding out words, he/she may copy print from these songs. On the other hand, a child with confidence stretching out words may look to the song to verify their traditional spelling.



Mini Offices

We use mini offices to help students make use of written materials in the room. Students love these file folder offices with our sight words and their songs, colour words, number words, jolly phonics cues and more. " 'I'm a writer because I use the mini office thingys'" (McKay, June 21).



Target Points

Early in the year, students were grouped according to target points I searched for in their journals. Each week, I reviewed student writing with a list of teaching points in mind. These teaching points were essentially comprised of concepts of print, letter/sound knowledge and sentence building.

Does my student use...

Capitals at the beginning of the sentence

Lowercase letters throughout the sentence

Spaces between words

Left to right progression

Top to bottom progression

Return sweep

Use of punctuation

Use of Jolly Phonics

Use of beginning consonant, final consonant, medial consonant or vowels

Use of symbols, random letters, copied print, phonetic or traditional spelling

Word endings (ed, ing, s)

Blends (th, sh, ch)

Magic "e" (bike, make, hole)

Labels, simple sentences, complex sentences?

I searched journals for specific targets and worked with small groups of students focusing on various skills. Students who consistently wrote sentences without spaces would work with me for a series of mini lessons on that specific target. I had students copy a short sentence from a set of Guided Readers. Most wrote them without spaces. I then asked them to define their words by taping a toothpick where the space should be. Another lesson included my writing out a familiar sentence on individual sentence strips for each child in the target group (i.e. I see a big red cat.) All words were familiar to the student; however, my sentence included no spaces. Students poured over their sentence together to find any hidden words. I then laid out a strip with spaces. Students instantly read the sentence. All students then cut their strips in the appropriate spots, and glued their strips to a page (McKay, December 2007).

I had mini lessons for all of the skills in my list. As the year progressed, the students began to monitor their own writing for these skills. I no longer felt the need to work in isolated groupings, but encouraged children to recognize their own goals in their writing prior to beginning a journal entry. Students would help each other, or would work independently with a specific goal in mind.

Assessment Results

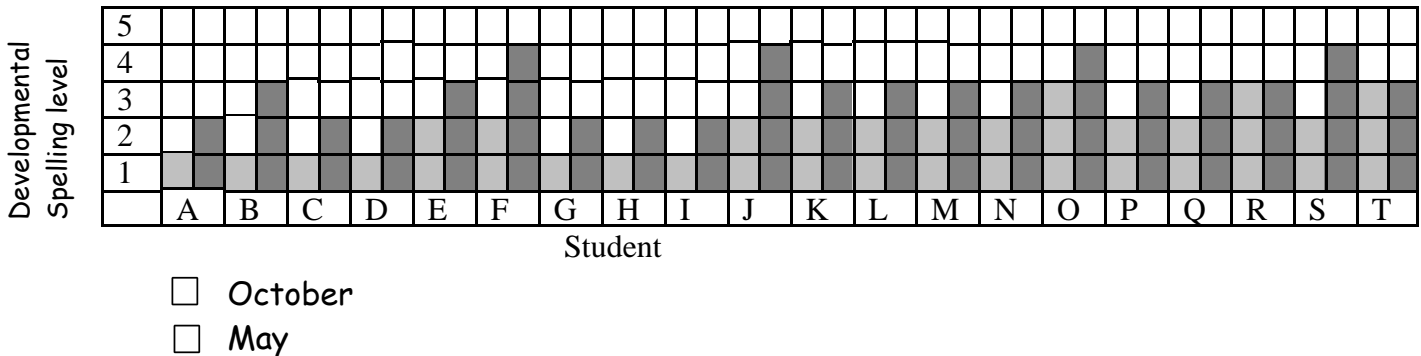
Students took part in the Monster Test early and late in the school year. Their scores were recorded after each session.

Monster Test Scores		
	Number of children scoring at the developmental level	
	October	April
Precommunicative	7	0
Semiphonetic	10	6
Phonetic	3	10
Transitional	0	4
Conventional	0	0







While seven students were spelling words at a pre-communicative level in October, none were doing so in April. Fourteen students out of twenty were spelling words at a phonetic level or higher in April, while only three were spelling at a phonetic level in October.

Six of my phonetic writers spelled five words transitionally. Six words are needed to move up to the transitional level. Clearly, the students are becoming better writers.

The Monster Test Scores

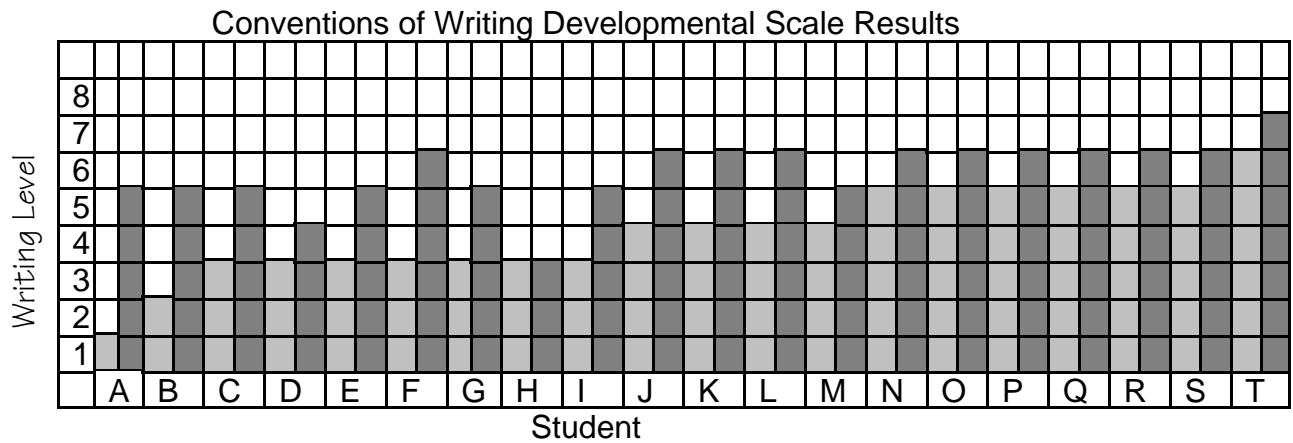


I assessed their journals using The Conventions of Writing Developmental Scale ((Feldgus & Cardonick, 1999) after their first journal entry in September, and then finally in May. The scores using this scale reflect the changes in my students’ developmental spelling level. I enjoyed partaking in this assessment because it reminded me just how far my students had come since their first day of school!

May	September	
		<p>Here are two journal stories written by the same student. Initially, there is very little letter/sound correspondence, and many random letters combined to tell a story. The second piece demonstrates the student's use of high frequency words, spaces, and phonetic spelling.</p>
		<p>Here are two journal stories written by the same student. In September, you can see the student writes using random letters. In May, the student spells several high frequency words, and is able to sound out unknown words phonetically.</p>
		<p>The first journal entry shows the students use of random letters and loose pencil grip. When asked to read her story, the student was unable to do so. In May, The student demonstrates creativity by writing about a tree that is "starting to boogie!"</p>

Conventions of Writing Developmental Scale		
	Number of Children Scoring at the Developmental Level	
	September	May
Emerging	1	0
Pictorial	1	0
Precommunicative	7	1
Semiphonetic	4	1
Phonetic	6	9
Transitional	1	8
Conventional	0	1
Advanced	0	0

All students improved in their writing skills. There were no students in the emerging or pictorial level in May, and 18 out of 20 students writing at a phonetic level or higher! In September, only 7 students were writing at a phonetic level or higher.



- October
- May

Overall, the trend in these results indicates a growth in the writing ability of my senior kindergarten students.

Look how far we’ve come!

Our final week of school, we sat in our familiar community circle forum. We passed around a beanbag with the intent of sharing with each other what makes us a writer. I marvel at their pride, and their security in the group. I travel back in time to the first day where most students hide

their hands in their laps and put their head down, or who worry out loud that they “‘don’t know HOW to write!’” (McKay, Sept 2006) I watch my class, comfortable and proud, sharing with each other and appreciating the strides they have made. I love how one can applaud another, and how two friends squeeze their hands because they have conquered the same fear (McKay, May 2007).

My little group will move on to grade one as writers. All fall at different places on the continuum, but all are moving in the same direction.

The Voices of My Students

The last week of school, my students were asked one question that would hopefully define their recognition of themselves as writers. This exercise is one that certainly inspired me, and also brought me laughter and humility! Below is a sample of the many responses from students in my class.

“What Makes You a Writer?” (McKay, June 21, and 22, 2007)

“I just think writing. I’ll read up on books because I’m now six. I write about my Mom and stuff. I sound out words, leave spaces, put capitals at the beginning of my sentence, and no capitals in the middle” (EF, June 22)

“I work hard. I make my picture and then I think of what to write. It’s hard to spell sometimes. Ms. McKay says we need spaces, capital letters, and a period or question mark. I sound out the words.” (KT, June 22)

“I sound out, when I mess up I erase stuff. I try to write nice and neat. I like the drawing in my journal and don’t use crayons to write my words. I write about cars, Grandma and soccer” (KC)

“I like to write about things that happen, my goldfish and losing my tooth... I have to remember to use upper case letters at the beginning and put an exclamation point at the end” (AF).

“I’m a writer because I leave spaces, and I don’t have any capital monsters. I like to write about happy things, picnics, and things we do. If I don’t know a word I stretch it out, or use the songs, or look at the words” (CG).

“I like writing because it’s fun. I’m a good writer because I practice writing at home. I write about movies, robots and aliens. I did five words in a row! It’s easy!” (JB)

“I stretch out words, look at other words, sing to words in the popcorn and bang songs.” (LK)

“I leave spaces. I put periods and stretch out words. I use the popcorn and the bang song. I do words all by myself and I am good at it.” (AJ)

“We learn about things at school. Because I have been writing for a lot of years I feel good when I write. I get my ideas from my brain. It tells my arm to move.” (BS)

Ultimately, as the students grew more comfortable as writers, their appropriate use of the concepts of print became more apparent. When I started this project, I felt as though I could help my students internalize these targets with mini lessons tailored to each child. I went into this project with a confidence that this new strategy was the one that would make the biggest change I had seen in my years of teaching. What I found, instead, was that while my students did improve in their writing abilities, they did not necessarily improve in their use of specific targets (McKay Journal, May 2007). As indicated in personal interviews with each student (McKay Journal, June 2007), all students have a solid awareness of these targets, and can identify their use of them in writing, or of a need to use them in writing. All students, however, did not grow to use these concepts consistently. As my project moved along, and as the year wrapped to a close, I grew to recognize that my hopes for my students were not so much based on their perfection of a craft, but on their confidence and their comfort and their passion for one.

Conclusion

Overall, the trend in student results indicates a growth in the writing ability of my senior kindergarten students. While I had hoped to see more fine tuning in their writing, I realized that what I really needed to see was the confidence and the sense of purpose and drive. The students in my class enjoy writing, and undoubtedly express regret or concern if we don't write "But we didn't write in our journals today" lamented one student at home time on a day where our routine was thrown off (McKay journal, March 2007). Using formative assessment to guide my teaching has certainly had an effect on my students as writers. Journal time continues to be my favourite time of the day in school. It is remarkable to me, just how much growth these little people exhibit in their writing abilities. Despite having several students this year who had challenges in letter/sound correspondence after a year of JK, each child was able to improve in their writing ability! Another year, a new group of writers moving up to grade one!

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How can we improve students' literacy and behavior in the classroom as well as on the playground, by using music?

By Bob Radoja and Lyndie Kennedy



Biographies

Bob Radoja

Bob Radoja has worked with children who have special needs since the late 1970's. He volunteered his time with the physically challenged students, as part of the Physical Education program at Sir Wilfrid Laurier Secondary in Hamilton. New friendships with students that were not integrated in the regular education stream developed and this passion has continued ever since. He graduated from McMaster with a degree in Geography and pursued a second degree from the University of Waterloo in Economics while he was still working at Dofasco. After leaving Dofasco, Bob attended the University of Western Ontario, Faculty of Education: Althouse College. He was then fortunate enough to be hired by The Haldimand Board of Education.

He began his teaching career at Dunnville Secondary for one semester and then he was hired at Cayuga Secondary School. Bob worked there for eighteen years in many departments including Geography, English and Economics. He then became Special Education Department Head and again renewed his passion for working with students who had special needs. Presently Bob is a Teacher Consultant for Special Education in the Grand Erie District School Board in the Cayuga Family of Schools.

Lyndie Kennedy

Lyndie graduated in 1990 from the University of Guelph where she majored in Psychology and Child Studies. She then attended Lakehead University in Thunder Bay for Teachers' College. From there she taught in a private school in Richmond Hill for one year and then decided to open up her own school. She ran this along with a summer day camp and a tutoring business for three years. She has taught for the Waterloo County Board of Education, the Bluewater District School Board, and the Niagara District School Board and was fortunate enough to be hired by the Grand Erie District School Board. Lyndie's teaching career has mostly been centered on special education and she has a deep passion for these children. She is presently working at Seneca Central Public School teaching grade 1.

This is Bob's and Lyndie's second Action Research project.

Abstract

We believed that if we introduce the power, passion and unification of music in conjunction with Yoga, and instruction in KELSO where available, that we will be able to make a visible difference in student's lives. If we could help students feel good through music, it might be easier for them to learn and may help them be their "best selves" as they participated in something positive together. We researched this theory in practice in Lyndie's Grade One classroom during the 2006-2007 school year. Based on the data collected, the combination of strategies proved to improve student learning and behaviour.

Our Shared Philosophy

We are both passionate about music and believe that music touches all of us. We believe that music can be used to help students learn. Music is a universal tool where people can feel connected. It can help them to feel better and we believe that it helps to make learning easier for students and helps them to be the best that they can be.

We believe that if we can introduce the power, passion and unification of music in conjunction with the written form where available, we will be able to make a visible difference in students' lives.

Learning can and should be fun. We want the students to enjoy the activities that they are doing every day. Singing and playing together is a great way to connect with our students. Music is a universal language that can connect us all together despite our differences.

Research Question

How can we improve students' literacy and behavior in the classroom, as well as on the playground, by using music?

The Partnership

This is our second year working together. We both have a passion for music and for special education. We wanted to explore how music can increase student's literacy and behaviour.

As partners, we have always worked well together and we enjoy discussing ways of making learning more enjoyable for the students. When new ideas came up we were both willing to try them.

We both enjoy seeing the improvement in the student's learning and we are constantly sharing the progress and disappointments that come along.

Data Collection

As we observed this group of students and our own behaviours, data included journals kept by both of us, assessment data such as Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), classroom assignments, report cards, student and parents comments.

The Eight Different Strategies Implemented

1. Bob's Visits (coming in, singing and talking with the students)

Bob, our Special Education Consultant, came in about once a month and brought his guitar and sang with the students. The children looked forward to his visits and couldn't wait to see what was planned. We tried to change things around so that it would be different each time and for each visit. Bob would play his guitar and sometimes the students would use instruments and share them with each other. There were not enough to go around and this was done on purpose so that the students would have to share when the music stopped. The students were conscious that everyone should get a turn. They sang and danced and had a great time. They loved the songs that Bob sang with them and they even wanted to write their own.

Sometimes Bob would talk about the environment and we would talk about how to keep our classroom and schoolyard clean. The students took his talks seriously. If they found garbage out on the playground, they would pick it up. Sometimes they would even ask if they could have garbage bags so that they could clean up the whole schoolyard. They did want to make a difference. They were leaders in this area. Other students from other classes wanted to also get involved.

Bob also talked about good behaviour in the classroom as well as on the playground. He talked about how to get along with each other and that we should stick together as a class. If there were problems on the playground, the whole class felt it. They knew that if they saw something wrong we would discuss it together.

Bob encouraged the students in many areas and they looked forward to his coming in and we found that the incidences of fighting and bickering decreased. The students worked really hard to be good and they knew that if they did, then they would have lots of good stories to tell Bob when he arrived. They wanted to please him and they wanted him to know that they were listening to what he was teaching them and that they were being good. They wanted to work as a team and show Bob that they had listened to what he had taught them.

After the visits, we would make pictures of things that we liked about the visit and things that we didn't like. Sometimes there were problems with sharing and we would discuss these and brainstorm how we could make it better for next time. We sometimes made books together and the students enjoyed drawing the pictures.

Many times after the visits from Bob, I could hear the students talking about working together and that they should listen with their eyes and their ears, and that they have to keep practicing something if they are going to get better. I would sometimes overhear them talking to each other about what they had learned when Bob had visited. His visits really did have a big impact on them.

2. Funky Phonics

Funky Phonics is a CD with some really catchy songs on it and a songbook that the students follow along in. The songs start off very simply with teaching the students the vowels, short sounds and then their long sounds. It progresses at a slow and steady pace and the students learn the songs quite quickly.

They are encouraged to follow along in their books and point to the words as they are singing them. We made some special rulers and had some fancy pencils that they could use for this activity. There is also a workbook where pages can be photocopied and the students can practice what they have learned.

They really enjoyed this activity and if we didn't have time during the day because there had been something special going on at the school, they would be quite upset. They would almost beg me to just sing a couple of songs. They were really hooked on it and they learned a lot from all of the different songs that they were singing.

You could hear them throughout the day singing the songs that they learned and they would be discussing with their friends what ones they liked. When they were sitting in the classroom and their favourite song came on, they would yell "I love this song. It's my favourite".

Most of the students were engaged during this activity and occasionally a few would have to be reminded to follow along. The students who had trouble reading found this activity difficult at first but it didn't take them long to feel comfortable with it.

Many parents would comment to me that their child would come home and teach them the songs that they had learned at school. The parents were also saying that it was hard to get their children to stop singing. What a neat problem. They were happy and enjoying themselves and bringing home that excitement to their families.

3. Yoga

In October we had Angela Johnstone come in and show the students how to do yoga. They really enjoyed this but some found it hard. We would go to the gym every morning and stretch, relax and concentrate. At first they found it difficult but then they started to really look forward to it and if we happened to miss a day, then they would be quite upset.

In the classroom if the students were getting noisy, I would clap my hands and then they would take three yoga breaths. As they were doing this there was silence in the classroom. It worked really well and we

discovered that they couldn't do two things at the same time. Once they took their breaths, they were then able to focus on what we were saying.

If someone got upset or had hurt themselves, we would get them to calm down by having them take a yoga breath. This helped them to concentrate on something else and then we were able to see what was bothering them.

We also used yoga cards. There were times when the gym was booked so we did yoga in the classroom.

We used yoga cards and on one side of the card it had instructions on how to do a pose. We would read these to the students and then they would follow along. They liked doing this and at the end of the activity, they would stay in the pose and I would turn the card over so they could see the picture of how they should look. Some would say "I got it", and some would laugh because they didn't really get the correct pose. They also enjoyed this activity and would ask if we could do this often.

At the beginning of the term, some students could not stay still and relax. They had to move, talk and fidget. By the end of the term, they were able to relax and there was no talking during this activity. Some students almost fell asleep during this time.

Their behaviour translated into more concentration in the classroom and the classroom was quieter. If a student was upset during the day or had hurt themselves, I would tell them to take a yoga breath. This would help them to calm down. You could even hear them reminding each other to take a yoga breath if they were upset about something.

4. Kelso

Tanya Haist, the Child and Youth Worker, came in at the beginning of the year for six sessions and talked to the students about Kelso. Kelso, the puppet frog, teaches the students how to behave and react in different conflicts. He talks about bullying and how to deal with it. The program is about conflict resolution and problem solving.

Kelso teaches the students about how to solve little problems and big problems and he teaches them the strategies to do this. If they run into a conflict that they cannot handle, and they have tried three different Kelso strategies, then they are allowed to approach a teacher for help.

The students also did role-playing in the classroom and this helped them to visual how they should handle a situation if it came up on the playground.

5. **Emailing**

Emailing was a very positive activity for the students. We first of all taught them how to use the computers and then we taught them how to email. They would write to Bob and he would write back to them. They would start off with just writing a little on their own and they would use very simple words or non-words. Then they would start to sound out some words and try to type them.

The students all had computer journals and they enjoyed writing in them first and then they would send their story to Bob. Sometimes they would sound out the words and sometimes they would use dictionaries. They would tell him something important that had happened during the day and they were always so eager to share. They knew that Bob was interested in what they were doing and they wanted to tell him about it.

Many times in the classroom when they had free time, they would ask me if they could write in their computer journals. They wanted to put something in there so that next time that we went to the computer lab, they would be ready to write.

When we did go down to the computer lab they were excited about what they were doing. They stayed on task and they tried their best. Occasionally they would be allowed to play computer games but they preferred to email Bob. They loved to get emails back from him. You could hear them shouting "I've got mail". Then would come the task of reading their email. I would ask them if they wanted me to help but most of the time they wanted to do it on their own. You could hear them sounding out the words and trying their best to read it. Sometimes there would be a difficult word in it and they would run and get a dictionary to see what the word meant. They wanted to discover on their own. They didn't want to be told the answer. After they were finished, they would get busy and write another email so that they could get another response. They were very engaged in what they were doing and very motivated to read and write.

6. **Songwriting**

The students enjoyed the songs that Bob sang for them and they wanted to know if they could write a song like the class did last year. We picked the song Man on the Moon that Bob had sung with them because it was familiar to them.

We first of all looked at the song the Man on the Moon and we talked about the rhyming and the tense and we then took one verse at a time and the students wrote their own words for the new song. It took them about a month to learn the words and they were very proud when Bob came in the next time. They sang it flawlessly for him and they were beaming.

We then made a big book to go along with the song. The words that the students had written were typed onto paper, run off and then the students decorated each page. We also wrote sentences from the words of the song. They really enjoyed this activity and they had fun trying to make up long sentences. Once they had their sentences completed, they wrote them down in their journals. We made up flash cards, and learned

the words together. This was also a good way to see if the students really did know the words on their own or if they had just memorized them.

The reading and writing in this area was definitely driven by the fact that they had wrote their own song and were proud of it. (Appendix I)

7. Penny Whistles

One day Bob emailed me and said that he wanted the students to do some research. He wanted them to find out what the difference was between a 'penny whistle' and a 'recorder'. We did some brainstorming together to see what the ideas were and no one really knew what the difference was.

One of the students replied that a penny whistle is something that you blow into and it makes a noise, and that a recorder is something that you talk into and it will play back what you have said. I realized at that moment that I had to be a little clearer in what I wanted them to do.

We went down to the library and worked on the computers. I taught the students how to use the Internet and we started to Google "recorders" and "penny whistles". We printed out pictures of both of them and then printed out some information on the two different kinds.

We gathered up all of the information and took it back to class. The students were very excited and they broke into groups, looked at their pictures and the information that they had found and they talked about in their groups.

I then called them back to the carpet and they were so excited about sharing. When we talked about how they were different, many ideas came up such as one has more holes than the other, one is longer and then finally Brody said in a clear, confident voice "hey, the penny whistle is made out of gold". All the students agreed with him and then Maddi declared in a loud voice, "it's shiny. It's made out of metal". Were they ever proud of themselves.

The next day we went down to the computer lab to email our answers to Bob. They were so excited to share these and they were sure that they had figured it out. They were right and Bob came in and visited about a week later and talked with the students about their findings. Once again they were excited about sharing and they expressed their findings in a very mature manner. They told Bob the whole process that they had gone through and they were proud of themselves that they come up with the answer on their own. I did not tell them the answer. I encouraged and directed and facilitated, but they did the research on their own.

After Bob talked to the students about what they had found, he gave them each a penny whistle to take home and play. Parents reports came flooding in the next day stating that their children would not put the penny whistles down and that they wanted to learn how to play them. We had sent a sheet home along with the penny whistle with directions on it so that they could start to learn.

Parents also talked about how their children were teaching everyone else in the household about the penny whistles and what the difference was between them and a recorder. The students had really gotten excited about this activity and they were willing to share with everyone. They worked on their computer skills, their research skills, reading and writing. Many academic aspects were brought into this activity. They were so motivated because they were doing something that interested them and they were very excited about the whole process.

Atmosphere of the Classroom

Parker J. Palmer states that it is important to have open dialogues with students. Bob and I do this naturally. It is so amazing when students coming in first thing in the morning all excited about what they did last night. The energy and excitement is contagious. I have seen teachers just sweep this behaviour under the rug and I find it hurtful. The child is so excited about what is happening in their lives and some teachers just put it aside like it doesn't really matter (Palmer, P.J., 1998). We wanted to make sure that the classroom was accepting and that the children felt comfortable.

It can be hospitable and yet charged (Palmer, P.J., 1998) Activities are always going on and the children are always excited about something. There is constantly energy there. The students have so many years of schooling ahead of them. It is important that we make it fun for them so that they will be engaged in the activities that they are involved in and enjoy what they are doing. The classroom should be accepting and comfortable so that the students feel that they can share their thoughts and ideas openly.

We want them to be able to learn how to live successfully and how to get along with other people (Henderson & Gornik, 1994). Preparing students for the real world is so important. They need the social skills as well as the academics to do this. Henderson & Gornik (1994) state that it is very important for them to get along with other people and to be socially successful in life.

Sanders & Horn (1994) state that if a student spends a year with a weak or poor teacher then that teacher will have a huge impact on the student. It will also trickle up to all of the other teachers that the student encounters. A teacher can harm a child for a long time. As teachers, we take on this great responsibility. We have to be so careful in how we treat children.

Results

The main results that we looked at were the DRA, the report card marks and the observations of the researchers.

The DRA results were incredible. The students were learning by leaps and bounds. They were excited about what they were doing and they were doing well at them. Many students increased from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Some of the results were quite significant. Some students progressed by two DRA levels while others increased by eight or more DRA levels. (Appendix II)

The report card marks also increased. The students were enjoying what they were doing and the results on their test scores was showing it. The report card marks went up considerably with some students. Some students were receiving Rs on their report cards in reading but by the end of the year, these had disappeared.

We found that the students became more focused throughout the year. They enjoyed all of the activities that they were introduced to and they embraced each one with enthusiasm.

There was more positive behaviour in the classroom and the students were getting together as a positive unit. They enjoyed working together and they were confident that they could solve their own problems. They were now willing to work with each other and they respected each other.

Since the three sources show similar results, we believe that there is some substantial evidence that the data is valid.

Next steps

Next year we are going to be implementing the “Roots of Empathy” program (Gordon, 1996) into the classroom. This is an excellent program, which helps students to develop empathy towards each other and hopefully throughout the school community.

We are also going to be starting up a mentoring program. The grade one students will be paired up with older students. If they have difficulties on the playground, then they will be able to go to their mentors for help.

The programs that were used this year such as Kelso, Yoga, Funky Phonics, singing, song-writing and emailing will be continued again.

Conclusion

We are careful not to suggest that one thing increased the literacy of the students and improved their behaviour. Many different activities were tried throughout the year. Their learning has improved. Improvement has been shown in the DRA scores, the report card marks and the observations that were made by the researchers. This research project is going to continue on keeping the projects that work, and adding some new ones.

We found that it is very important to remain flexible. We must be willing to change, reflect on what works and what doesn't and then be willing to try new things.

The atmosphere of the classroom definitely changed. The students felt comfortable in their classroom and they found that it was a warm and accepting environment. The students were always willing to try new things and were enthusiastic about it. They loved coming to school,

and their parents were very supportive in what we were doing. They could see the changes in their children and were excited about that.

The research will be continued on next year. We have seen so many positive results and we feel that all the different programs that were implemented had a positive affect on the students. The students learned a lot and had fun doing it. We showed them that learning can be fun and that their thoughts and feelings are valued and respected. We hope that we have instilled in them a love for learning. We want them to know that learning is a process, not a destination.

Appendix I (Man on the Moon words)

Appendix II (DRA graph)

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How can I improve student learning through the use of group encounters based on an independent novel choice?

Rose Huysentruyt-Closs



Biography

I am presently teaching a Grade 7 class at Branlyn School. I team teach with Pam McEwan who teaches the science and math for the two groups, while I teach the language, history and geography. In my career, I have taught primary and junior grades. This has given me the luxury of understanding the steps my students took before they arrived in Grade 7.

Abstract

I had used the literature circle format for several years at different grade levels, (grades 4, 5, 6, and 7) and was becoming less enthusiastic about its effectiveness after each experience. After learning about another model at a conference, I created my own version of novel study groups: "Novel Encounters". The success of this approach is evident in the students' eyes as they become engaged in their own books, and also those of others. Reading is shared, fostered, encouraged.

Data Collection - Rationale

I have used the literature circle format for several years at different grade levels, (grades 4, 5, 6, and 7). I was becoming less enthusiastic about its effectiveness after each experience. Yes, it is a great tool for making each child responsible for contributing to the discussion. The different roles address a range of intelligences (e.g. "Artful Artist" vs. "Word Wizard"). Students are led through the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy as they work through the roles (e.g. "Mapmaker", lower level vs "Discussion Director", higher level). As Harvey Daniels (1994) states: "Teachers who implement literature circles in their classroom are recreating for their students the kind of close, playful interaction that scaffolds learning so productively elsewhere in life." (p.25)

I dialogued with Linda McLean, the teacher librarian, who was a strong supporter of the Literature Circle as a strategy to promote the love of reading. We discussed the pros and cons of the literature circle. Linda pointed out the positives of this format: the students have individual choice within a teacher selection of texts; they are held accountable and responsible for their portion of the session based on their role; consequently, they are taking control of their own learning - the metacognition step. Linda felt that the opportunity for rich discussions was apparent. I agreed with this in theory.

"Yet as the teacher, I saw too many "cracks": students presenting their roles as quickly as possible. "Cody, 'the artful artist', quickly sketching the cover of the book; Jason, the 'connector', making one statement 'this reminds me of when I was a kid,' and not engaging the other group members to respond." (Huysentruyt - Closs, R. Journal, February 2006). In short,

they were doing as little as possible just to get it done. “There were few lively discussions; too few students who showed evidence of really enjoying reading. I did not feel that as the teacher, I was meeting my goal of fostering a love of reading and discussion. I found myself trying to madly connect with each group and feeling unsuccessful everywhere I went.” (Huysentruyt-Closs, R. Journal, March, 2006)

I attended the *Reading for the Love of it* conference in February, 2006 and was introduced to the concept of “Grand Conversations” by Faye Brownlie (2004). This sounded much more exciting. Each child reads a different book, yet is able to come together to discuss and share. I purchased the book and had to read more. “You, as the teacher, are responsible for running the literature circle discussion groups. But your challenge is to participate as a group member and not to put yourself in the position of group leader and the hub of all discussion.” (p.19) The concept was great. However, when I looked at the personalities of my classes, I started to wrestle with classroom management issues. How was I going to track this? How would I assign marks? How would I know that students were engaged and not just taking advantage of some less structured time? I needed to find a solution that would fit my needs.

A year has passed and I have created my own version of novel study groups: “Novel Encounters”. I am ready to put my idea to the test with the students. Let my learning begin.

Before we begin

Read aloud is an important part of my Reading program. Through this venue, I model what will be expected when we later meet in our groups. We discuss character, plot, setting, turning point, climax, point of view. We make connections. I introduce text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world connections. We define the genre and identify its features. I model organizers (t-charts, web maps). I teach students about choosing a book that is “just right for them”. Consider the interest, the number of pages, chapters, pictures, features. I talk about my book choices and share book talks so that they can see what a passionate reader looks like and sounds like. This is ongoing throughout the year.

Novel Encounters

Step One: In the Library

The class goes to the library and each student is asked to choose a book that is just right for them. This is to be a book that is new to them, i.e. they have never read it, nor seen a movie etc. I give the students lots of time to make their choices. I remind them that they will be reading the book “cover to cover” and they must be sure that the book will hold their interest. I chat with each student to ensure myself that the book is appropriate for them. “After a few minutes of quiet reading time, Jesse says ‘ Mrs. Huysentruyt-Closs, this book is really good’, I am thrilled because getting Jesse to read anything this year has been a struggle.” (Huysentruyt-Closs, R. Journal, February 12 ‘07).

When all the books have been selected, the books are placed on a round table and each student stands behind his/her book. I then ask if they see any books that look similar, that might have connections with each other. The students identify a similarity in themes, topics. Through this process, we create our reading groups. “Spencer says, ‘these are all about history, and these are all mysteries. Shea says ‘these are all about sports’. Morgan comments ‘these all take place in the

future.’ Students are labeling their groups as genre groups. I hadn’t planned this, but this has become a genre lesson!” (Huysentruyt-Closs, R. Journal, February 12, ‘07).

Step Two: Organizing the Schedule

Back in the classroom, I give each student a bookmark (a strip of construction paper). Each student writes his/her name, the book title and author of the book. I tell them that they will have 4 weeks to read the book. Once a cycle, I have a double reading period with each class. We then divide. This is done by dividing the total number of pages by four. Students write on their bookmark the date and the page number of the required reading. For example, if a book has 200 pages, then the student writes: Session 1, Feb. 20, page 50. Similarly, students indicated the dates and the page numbers for sessions 2, 3, and 4. This clearly made the students responsible for their reading. They were also instructed not to read past the page number indicated, since as a group, we would be discussing the development of the novel.

Feedback from parents to this system was positive. “Jessica’s mom commented that this made it easier for her at home to monitor her daughter’s reading. She appreciated the specific, prescribed assignment, as opposed to the homework task of 20 minutes per day of independent reading.” (Huysentruyt-Closs,R. Journal, March 1, ‘07).

Step 3: Session 1

As I had previously worked in my guided reading groups, students had seat work to do as they waited for their turn “at the table”. Students complete a journal entry as was modeled during the read aloud. I like the t-chart with headings : I read and I think. They also write an “I wonder”, showing their predictions and analysis and a character sketch using the organizer that has been modeled.

Session 1 “encounters” are important. I learn that each student’s book choice needs to be validated. As the teacher sitting in on all the sessions, I work hard to ensure that this happens. I model how to listen to other people talk about their book. I ask questions to clarify. I encourage other students to articulate their thoughts. As we move around the circle, I draw attention to parallels and differences presented in the group. It starts off a little stilted, but by the 2nd or 3rd student, they are all anxious to talk about their book. “The guiding reading format is such a great strategy. I get almost 1-on-1 time with each student. Everyone gets a chance to talk. I could feel Marty and Jesse taking interest. For these grade 7’s, reading is not cool. When Shea says ‘that’s just like my book...’ I feel that I have them hooked” (Huysentruyt - Closs, R. Journal, February 20, ‘07).

The session ends, and then comes the marking. As soon as possible, following the session, I make anecdotal comments about each student. I collect their t-charts, and character sketches, giving me 3 three pieces of evidence of their reading.

Step 4: Sessions 2, 3, and 4

The students look forward to the novel reading group day. The seat work always includes the ‘I read, I think’ assignment. Students are now directed to refer back to their last session’s note and comment on the I wonder from the previous session. Were any questions answered? Was it what was expected ? I ask them to make new I wonder statements. (They are predicting and modifying predictions based on evidence from the text – a skill that Comprehensive Assessment

Skills Inventory (CASI) results showed me needed to be addressed.) Other seat work includes a second character sketch using a different organizer, a prediction of the ending. (see samples)

Meanwhile at the table, students are anxious to share what is happening in their book. They are “butting” in to say: “I can make a text-to-text connection with my book and yours because...”; “Mrs. H. this is a text-to-self connection because that character is just like me. I like...” (Huysentruyt - Closs, R. Journal, March 1, '07). We talk about the relationships in their novels, between peers, adults and children, family, nature, pets, love. “Sarah points out that she would not let a boy speak to her like that. My grade 7 girls are very aware of changing relationships.” (Huysentruyt - Closs, R. Journal, March 1, '07). We discuss how these relationships affect the plot. I leave them with the idea of thinking about their relationships and how they affect their personal lives.

Each session has given me data for establishing report card grades and comments, as well as giving me evidence of their growth. I am learning so much about them as readers and thinkers

Step 5

I ask each student to prepare a written summary of the novel. This requires a review of this skill. (CASI results were low on this one as well.) This gives me another opportunity to revisit my past teaching of summarizing. These will be collected for assessment purposes. When the students come to the table this time, I ask them to trade books with another person within their group. They will have 1 week to read this second book. The next session will take place in the library. Students will meet with their novel partner. Each will bring along the I read, I think, I wonder journal entries he/she had made. This acts as an entry point for discussions about these books.

Findings

The success of this approach is evident in the students’ eyes as they become engaged in their own books, and also those of others. Reading is shared, fostered, encouraged. I feel that out of the 50 students with whom I worked, only two students did not reach level 3. Possible reasons for this might be absenteeism (2 students in particular missed half of the sessions), or possibly a preference for non-fiction or personal life issues.

Next Steps

Next time I will divide the novels into 3 parts (and not 4), since the engagement with the reading was so strong, students wanted to read ahead. I would like to plan a comparable study using non-fiction material, to see if student engagement is constant. I am thinking that the 2 students who did not reach level 3, might be more successful with a non-fiction text.

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