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Differentiating Instruction

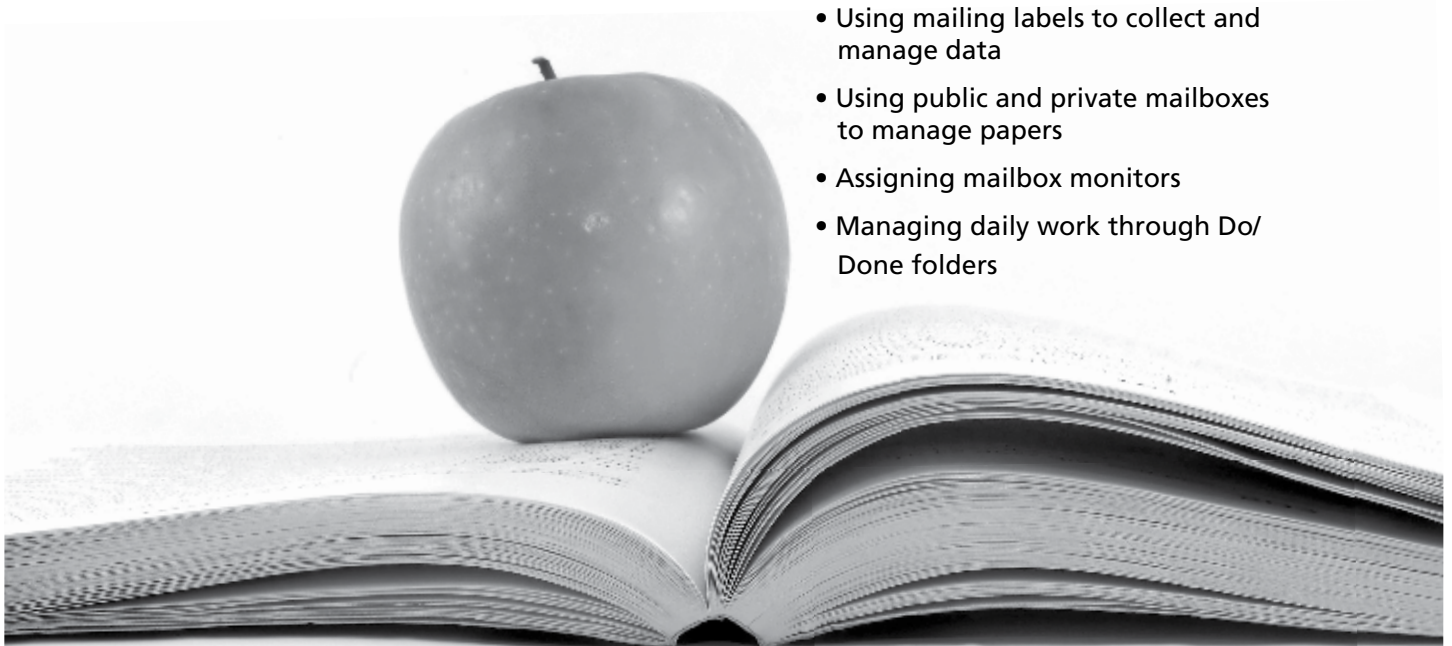
Guidelines for Implementation

MODULE 1

Gathering and Managing Data

Includes the following topics:

- Overview of research regarding differentiated instruction
- Implementing research-based methodologies
- Developing an Instruction Management System
- Collecting data for assessment
- Using mailing labels to collect and manage data
- Using public and private mailboxes to manage papers
- Assigning mailbox monitors
- Managing daily work through Do/ Done folders



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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

MODULE 1: GATHERING AND MANAGING DATA

INTRODUCTION

Today, teacher roles in regular education classrooms are more challenging due to increasing student variance and the inclusion of students with special needs. Teaching differently to accommodate the diversity in classrooms requires adjustments in classroom planning and practices. Although this may appear as a new concept or expectation for some educators, modifying instruction and practice has occurred in classrooms for quite some time. Special education services such as gifted and talented programs have used data to select and group students for different instruction for nearly two decades (Tilly, 2003; Tomlinson, 2000).

Teaching differently to accommodate the diversity in classrooms requires adjustments in classroom planning and practices.

In the past many special activities or lessons were provided for students demonstrating exceptional performance. Assessment data and teacher recommendations were used to identify and select students who qualified for special services based on their high performance or low achievement. Then, differentiating instruction meant attending small group lessons taught by another teacher in locations other than the students' assigned classrooms. Differentiating included changes in teaching in terms of location, work assignments, and progress monitoring. Classroom teachers were not expected to provide instruction specific to the diverse needs of all students.

Currently, teachers are expected to diagnostically and prescriptively teach all the students in their class. They must develop skill sets that help them differentiate instruction by modifying classroom environment, behaviors, and instruction. This type of differentiation is not simple; it is a constant and complex challenge even for master teachers. Teachers need tools to help them manage instruction and satisfy instructional demands. They need proven methods for instruction management so that opportunities for effective teaching and positive learning outcomes can occur.

Developing an Instruction Management System

Teachers readily admit they struggle with *instruction management*, especially when embracing whole class and small group differentiated instruction. The two questions most frequently asked by teachers involve management concerns. Teachers want to know: (1) how they are supposed to get everything done, and (2) what the rest of their students are doing when they are working with a small group.

An instruction management system creates routines and procedures that simplify instructional delivery and help teachers use resources efficiently and effectively. In order to utilize a management system, teachers need professional development that provides teaching tools for the following:

1. **Collecting and using data** for diagnostic and prescriptive decision-making about placement in curricula, grouping students for instruction, and monitoring student progress or evaluating achievement.
2. **Making decisions** for selecting content, teaching strategies, materials, and activities that address student variance and are skills-focused and academically profitable.
3. **Using flexible grouping practices and patterns** for managing whole class and small groups to differentiate instruction, and for providing more student engagement with repeated practice opportunities to enhance student progress and achievement.

We will address each of these needs throughout the modules. In Module 1, we will focus on management tools for data collection, as well as distribution and paper management.

Management tools help teachers organize data and establish the routines and procedures necessary to ensure that every student has daily exposure to teacher-led small group instruction. This is one hallmark of successful teaching. Many teachers need professional development, coaching, and support so they can efficiently manage whole class and small group instruction. Management tools support teachers and create opportunities for grouping and differentiating instruction. A daily schedule, job chart, rotation chart, mailboxes, and Do/Done folders all contribute to effective time management and overall classroom organization. Teachers use these tools to differentiate instruction and get everything done.

Collecting Data for Assessment

Teachers become data-informed by collecting and using many kinds of information to make instructional decisions. This module suggests nonintrusive ways to integrate *assessment* with instruction and establish baseline data for students. This data may be used to group students, select materials and activities, and deliver instruction. This module does not examine individual assessment tools or describe how to use data from specific assessments. Excellent resources are available online and in print from publishers that

provide teachers with that information (Florida Center for Reading Research; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Hall, 2004; Tomlinson, 2000a; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003; Tyner & Green, 2004; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2004 & 2007).

Successfully differentiating instruction begins and ends with a clear understanding of two things: first, students' capabilities and needs as defined by their current skill performance, and second, what district and state standards require. Observing and assessing student performance helps teachers understand *what to teach* and *where to begin instruction*. Teachers must know where a student's skill set breaks down so meaningful instruction can be provided. This information may be attained through both formal and informal assessments. Analyzing patterns of error on written assignments or work samples is also helpful for decision-making.

Developing a system for integrating assessment with instruction and managing data to inform practice is important for four reasons:

- 1. It identifies student variance.**
- 2. It helps teachers align instruction to needs.**
- 3. It informs practice to enhance learning.**
- 4. It assists in reporting progress and achievement.**

Data and Paper Management

Most school systems have adopted standards and schedules for collecting assessment data. Data is collected throughout the year and used to monitor students' progress at preset intervals. However, collecting informal data during instruction provides helpful information because it is collected in authentic settings as teachers observe students perform in the context of a lesson.

Most teachers are natural data collectors and they perform informal assessment tasks automatically when they work with students. Teachers observe, listen, and think about what is working or needs modification. Often teachers adjust instruction based on their interactions with students, but charting their observations or recording their modifications to inform practice does not always occur. Many teachers report they do not have time to accomplish those tasks. However, informal assessment data collected in authentic teaching situations helps teachers make important diagnostic and prescriptive decisions. Thus, recording collected data is vital for students' on-going progress.

There are several ways for teachers to informally collect and analyze data during instruction to determine next steps for *skills-focused teaching*. Teachers should think about their purpose for collecting data and how that data will be used in order to determine the best method for collecting and managing data. Data helps teachers identify both how to teach students and what to teach.

Collecting Data While Teaching and from Work Samples

At first, collecting *data* from observations during small group instruction may sound overwhelming. Actually, the process of simultaneously teaching while also monitoring comprehension ensures instruction is meaningful and useful. Before assessing a skill, it is important for teachers to select an activity that allows students to demonstrate the skills they want to observe. For example, teachers may want to choose an activity that allows

discussion so they can listen and analyze students' thinking *before* assigning a written assignment. Assigning peer reading partners is one way that teachers can listen and assess skills applied while students are reading text. Teachers listen while students read aloud to each other and then discuss or summarize what the text means.

Observing students' task approach helps teachers estimate students' feelings of confidence in their competence. This helps teachers determine if sufficient instruction has been provided.

Closely observing students' *task approach* helps teachers estimate students' feelings of confidence in their competence. This helps teachers determine if sufficient instruction has been provided and students can use the information. For example, simply observing and judging students' timing is helpful. In other words, how quickly students begin working on an assignment and complete it with minimal support indicates their skill competency and confidence in what they think they know. Listening to students' comments and questions helps teachers determine who needs additional instruction or more guided practice.

Suggestions for Informal Data Collection

Here are some helpful **suggestions for informal data collection** while working with students in small groups:

- Observe student performance to determine what students know and need.
- Observe student responses to different activities and determine what activity formats make instruction make sense—either whole class and small group activi-

ties; and whether students benefit most from collaborative experiences with peer support or working with a partner or independently.

- Observe performance to determine if performance expectations were clear and students have the skills to complete the activity.
- Review multiple work samples to analyze error patterns and use personal observations of students working in small groups to verify your assessments.
- Observe often and collect data from multiple sources: including informal observations, work samples, and formal assessments to make summative decisions about progress and achievement.

Setting a Purpose for Collecting Data

Listing a purpose for assessment helps teachers remain consistent and focused when working with each small group. Typically, the purpose for collecting data in small groups is to monitor student progress and determine if adjustments are needed for instruction, curriculum, or grouping patterns. However, day to day there may be specific skills or behaviors needing particular focus. For example, if students are soon to be tested for mastery on particular skills, teachers may want to informally assess students using those skills in a small group activity so that constructive feedback may be provided before final assessment occurs.

To help **focus assessment opportunities**:

1. Determine the purpose of assessment by identifying specific skill(s) to be observed.
2. Determine which students will be observed, when they will be observed, and how they will be observed (in a small group or individually).
3. Identify a baseline or benchmark for acceptable performance or what defines mastery for that skill at that specific time of introduction, practice, or development.
4. Model and review the concept or skill to clarify expectations to the students.
5. Provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate skills with a partner before assessing them independently.

Charting Observational Comments on Mailing Labels

Teachers can use sheets of adhesive *mailing labels*, standard size or larger, clipped to a clipboard to chart their observational comments. Individual comments may or may not be written for every student each time a skill is assessed.

Charting observational comments should not be intrusive to instruction. The behavior for observing and charting comments occurs as if teachers are making a quick note to themselves on a notepad. The mailing labels must be easily accessible. Keep a clipboard with sheets of mailing labels near the teaching table. As students interact, observe their work habits and skills, and chart comments. During a small group instruction, use the last few minutes to ask questions and determine students' understanding of the content or concept that was taught or practiced. Listen and chart comments on labels, using one label for each student targeted for assessment on that day.

Use the following steps to **write positively stated comments** that summarize observations or identify student needs:

1. Write the purpose of the observation on the first mailing label to maintain focus during the time of assessment.
2. Use one label per student to be assessed. Write each student's name or initials on a label with the date of observation.
3. Write positively stated comments on each label to summarize individual performance or identify needs for additional instruction.
4. Later, peel off each mailing label and attach it to a separate sheet of paper. File each student's paper with the mailing label in his/her portfolio or mailbox. The process is similar to maintaining running records, only the teacher is using mailing labels to capture and store comments. Each label becomes a data point used to monitor student progress over time.
5. Use the comments to plan lessons, select materials and activities, group students for instruction, and monitor or report progress.

Comments written on mailing labels become important to students, too. Sharing your purpose for charting observations helps students feel supported. When they learn that a teacher is collecting information that will be used to improve decision-making about their specific needs, students will dictate what to write. Recalling a personal experience, a young elementary student once told me during a summer school remediation class, "Teacher, write down that I need help with times and I don't mean times like on a clock." He was requesting help with multiplication facts.

Writing Positive, Personalized, and Proactive Comments

It is important to write positively stated comments on the mailing labels. Comments need to communicate the desire to provide meaningful instruction for each student. The comments are kept in student portfolios or mailboxes so many eyes may have access to them. Writing supportive, helpful comments to direct instruction or to compliment progress is informative to other teachers working with a student. Parents are also encouraged to read the comments. Teachers may also use these comments to write a summary statement about a student's progress on their report card.

Suggestions for **writing comments about observations**:

- Use positive words and present tense verbs: *Sam blends /e/ words.*
- Use specific language that communicates what the student needs: *Marissa needs help with spelling CVC words.*
- Use specific language to chart success: *Wow! Ian learned to blend CVC words using /a/ and /o/.*
- Write personal comments in the presence of each student, then read and share your comments with the student to build trusting relationships.
- Read your comments to students before filing labels in their portfolio or mailbox. Ask for their input or suggestions to discuss, compliment, and encourage student progress.
- Review comments periodically with individual students and encourage them to make comments about their progress and achievement. Help students set goals using the data that has been collected.

Creating Mailboxes for Data and Paper Management

Teachers save instructional time by developing a system for data and paper management. They can create order by establishing consistent routines and procedures for managing papers such as homework assignments, report cards or assessments, or general communication such as newsletters.

The system works best when it is applied as a standard across all grade levels on a campus. Students learn how to be responsible and accountable as they perform these

tasks. Students develop organizational behaviors using routines for bringing papers to school, taking them home, and filing them properly for review. These routines become habits for successful school behaviors.

We have already suggested a simple system for collecting data using mailing labels. We mentioned that these labels are filed in student portfolios or “mailboxes”. Our recommendation for efficient paper management revolves around the concept of mailboxes. Some of these mailboxes are considered “public” and others “private.” Papers, assignments, notes, or other forms of communication are kept in the mailboxes, which are created using standard hanging file folders. Teachers can organize the mailboxes by printing students’ first and/or last names on each file folder and placing them in alphabetical order in a plastic file box.

Every student, teacher, or paraprofessional has a mailbox with her/his name on it. Everyone develops the routine of checking her/his mailbox daily upon entry and departure from the classroom. All assignments and papers originate from and are returned to the mailboxes. Teachers put assignments in mailboxes so students can retrieve them and add them to their Do/Done Folders (explained in later in this module).

When students complete assignments, they follow teacher directions for turning them in for review. Students either put individual assignments in their mailbox upon leaving the classroom, or they put their Do/Done Folder in the mailbox for review. The mailboxes become a filing system that helps students organize information and develop responsible organizational skills. Students learn an important habit. Checking and retrieving their mail on a daily basis keeps them informed and up-to-date on performance expectations.

Creating procedures for paper management has many advantages:

- **Students become more accountable for their work and responsible for submitting assignments on time.**
- **Students learn to organize materials, assignments, lunch money, report cards, etc., in one place for easy retrieval and use.**
- **Students learn to file incomplete or complete assignments in one place for continued work, completion as homework, or for teacher review.**
- **Students learn the importance of establishing routines for responsibly handling important documents such as work assignments.**