

**Putting It All Together: Lower Elementary Examples**[Kindergarten](#)[3<sup>rd</sup> Grade](#)**ANNE PENNINGTON, DELTA '01**

Kindergarten

**THE ANTIDOTE TO BOREDOM**

It's so frustrating to see kids in your classroom who are really bored with your lesson, sitting right next to kids who are completely lost. I think this is one of the biggest challenges you face as a teacher. After seeing this happen in my classroom my first year, I realized I needed to do something about it. I *had* to find a way to engage my lower-level kids and make sure

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they understood what I was saying, and I *had* to find a way to challenge my higher-level kids to stop yawning – literally. I started to take small steps towards differentiating my instruction.

Now, in my third year of teaching, I differentiate almost every lesson and I can definitely see a difference. I don't have kids this year who are bored, or kids who aren't understanding things – they're all engaged and excited. That's what differentiation means to me. It's meeting the specific needs of every student in your classroom, not just

because you need to prevent boredom or frustration, but because it's your job to teach every single student regardless of how difficult it seems. My refusal to let any child slip through the cracks led to differentiating my instruction, which I now believe is one of the most important things I do in the classroom.

**FOUNDATIONS FOR DIFFERENTIATION**

*I was trying to differentiate, but I knew something was missing – I had to know specifically where all my students were at any given time...I needed to have a system in place to keep track of their progress.*

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

While I had diagnosed my students at the beginning of my first year of teaching, I didn't do anything with the results of the diagnostic until towards the end of the year. I was trying to differentiate, but I knew something was missing – I had to know specifically where all my students were at any given time, and I didn't. I realized before starting my second year that before I even met my students, I needed to have a system in place to keep track of their progress. I decided to make a specific checklist for each subject to assess the specific skills and objectives I would be teaching them. This way, at any given time I know which students need to work on which letters, numbers, or phonemic awareness skills.

For example, I want all of my students to be able to recognize every letter in the alphabet by the end of the year, so I have a spreadsheet for “Letter Awareness” with my students' names down the left-hand side and the letters A – Z across the top. As my students prove to me that they recognize a letter, I check it off on my sheet. Simple, right? It takes such a short amount of time, but it has really changed the way I taught. Using my tracking sheets for various skills simultaneously, I know what level every single one of my students is on, and therefore what they need to move forward. When I'm planning a lesson, I can make a list of the students who have not

mastered a particular related skill, and I can use that list to think about those specific students while I'm planning how to differentiate my instruction in ways that would best help them learn.

I got the idea for the spreadsheets from a teacher in another kindergarten classroom. (Whenever you see a good idea in practice, borrow it! That's the nature of teaching.) I also looked at a few other resources when I was beginning to differentiate – like my favorite book of all time, *Joyful Learning in Kindergarten* by Bobbi Fisher – but I borrowed most of my ideas from my colleague. Having another kindergarten teacher to brainstorm and plan with, who was willing to share her experience with me, helped me so much. Reading academic literature on the subject may help you differentiate in your classroom, but some of the best ideas you can get are from other teachers.

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## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A DIFFERENTIATING CM

I think the best way to show you how I now differentiate in my classroom this year would be to run through a typical day with my kindergarten students:

*Having my students*

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*demonstrate the skills they know for the whole class make them feel successful.*

**8:00 am - 8:30 am:** Interactive writing activity. We will write a story together as a class; for example, we're currently "re-writing" *The Cat in the Hat*. I have my students summarize the plot, and then we put their words into sentences. I differentiate by calling individual students up to the board to help write the sentences for everyone, and I make sure to select those students based on their skills that they've already mastered in order for them to gain practice and build their confidence. For example, if I have a student that's very good at a particular sight word we want to use, I'll call that student up to write that word in the sentence. If I have another student who's good with punctuation, I'll ask them to come up and add in the period. Having my students demonstrate the skills they know for the whole class makes them feel successful.

**8:30 am - 9:00 am:** Phonics. I'm sure a lot of you have required phonics programs like I do, and I'm sure that like me, you've found them very difficult to differentiate. We use the Saxon program at my school, and I have to give the same lesson or worksheet to every student during my daily phonics lessons. However, I've found that while you're giving the Saxon lesson, you can differentiate in small ways – like specifically calling on students who need reinforcement with a particular skill. For example, when you're having your students make a sound, you can have them all make the sound as a class and then call on one student to give you that sound again. I've also been able to differentiate for my higher-level students on the Saxon sound tests; when I give them a sound and they write the letter that corresponds with that sound, I have some of my students also write a word that begins with that letter. It's a great way to give them something challenging that has them think creatively.

**9:00 am - 10:00 am:** Writer's Workshop. During this time, my students work in heterogeneous groups of four or five at the tables in my classroom (as opposed to centers or the Saxon lesson, when the students are grouped homogeneously by skill level). I've found

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that having my students work this way when writing has forced me to work with *all* of my students to push them to higher levels; it was always so tempting for me to work only with students who were really struggling. When students are in heterogeneous groups, I can rotate between groups and find different ways to push individual students – with some I will help them sound out a word and with others I will support them in writing a paragraph. Also during Writer's Workshop, I see each of my students individually from one to three times a week for a mini-conference, where I use rubrics to measure their literacy levels. I keep those rubrics in the files I have for each of my students, which are also filled with their writing samples and records of what we discussed in each conference: how they're doing, what they need to work on, what they do well, etc.

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**10:00 am - 11:00 am:** Centers. I use my checklist of skills every night to assign which students will be going to which center the next day. For example, I have a math center in place right now where my students work on activities to help them learn numbers 15-20; those students who are still working on numbers 11-15 will still be going to my math workshop instead. It doesn't make sense to have those students working at that center, or my students who are already working on numbers 20-25. It's easy for me to know exactly where each student should be working because of my checklist system and knowing where my students are.

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All of my centers vary greatly in level. I have my assistant at one table working with students on letter-sound correspondence, helping them match letters and pictures, and I have much more challenging ones like the writing center, where my higher-level students can work on making sentences using prompts. I also have centers that every student goes to because they differentiate themselves automatically, like the listening center, the library center, and the computer center. Finally, I have a guided reading center using Saxon readers, which are leveled. I have a chart with all the leveled books listed on it in columns and each student's name in the rows, and whenever a student finishes reading a book successfully, I check it off. (By "successfully," I mean that student proves comprehension to me as well during a discussion with me about the book afterwards.)

**11:00 am - 11:20 am:** Lunch.

**11:20 am - 11:50 am:** Read-Aloud and Shared Reading, both of which are usually in a whole-group setting. All of my students who have the ability to read along with me during shared reading (in which I use a big book) do so. We usually read the same big book 4-5 times a week, so by the end of the week all of my students have memorized it, and even those with lower skill levels can read along.

**11:50 am - 1:15 pm:** My students leave me during this time for their Specials (i.e. Art, Music), rest period, and a bathroom break.

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**1:15 pm - 2:15 pm:** Math. I use the Saxon program for my math instruction as well, so basically most of my students work independently

*tremendously since I switched my focus from whole-group instruction.*

on a worksheet during this period. I have assignments or projects ready for my advanced students who finish early, so they can work on extra addition problems for enrichment. My lower-performing students receive much more personalized instruction, since I have the same group of them working with me at a table during this time every day. Unfortunately, I just don't prioritize math in my classroom right now so I don't differentiate it as well as I think I could; if I were planning to teach again next year, I would definitely figure out a way to teach it better.

You see that my students spend quite a bit of time doing small group work or with me in one-on-one instruction. That's the main difference in the appearance of my classroom and how it's evolved over my three years of teaching; I realized that the impact I had on my students was far greater when I was working with one or a few of them rather than the whole class. Their rate of progress has increased tremendously since I switched my focus from whole-group instruction.

#### "CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT & CULTURE"

Of course, my students didn't just jump right in to the schedule above and know what was expected of them – I spent several weeks in the beginning of the year teaching them classroom systems and procedures. I started my centers with very simple activities and had my students do a lot of modeling, working slowly up to the point where we are today. It was a couple of months before I could really let them go in centers, since I needed to be sure most of the class could work independently before I could effectively with a small group of students who needed targeted instruction.

I also taught my students a great deal about respect in the beginning of the year; as a result of that, students don't worry about the fact that everyone is doing something different. They love their different activities and centers, and they're very excited about whatever they are able to do. They're still very little right now, and it makes them feel big to work independently. Differentiating my classroom has never had a negative impact on our culture; if anything, it's strengthened our little community. For example, my center activities are based on working together and helping each other, so my students don't get to do what's "fun" unless they can learn to work as a team and be supportive.

#### FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT

Differentiating my instruction has made light-years of progress with my students' self-esteem and self-confidence. When I know their levels, they are always successful; this feeling of accomplishment encourages them to take risks and removes the fear of failure. Yet I can certainly understand why you may not be differentiating in your own classroom yet. It's overwhelming, especially as a first-year teacher. For me, I was always too busy trying to figure out how to manage my kids and control

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my classroom to differentiate, but now I know that those two are strongly related. Seeing that link and starting to differentiate has really improved my classroom management, simply because I'm now able to keep every student engaged – not bored, not lost, but on task.

*For me, I was always too busy trying to figure out how to manage my kids and control my classroom to differentiate, but now I know that those two are strongly related.*

If you're feeling overwhelmed like I was, just remember that nobody's asking you to revolutionize your classroom overnight. Start with something really small, like knowing the specific skills you want to teach and your students' ability levels on those skills (which is important for other reasons besides differentiating, too). Once you've assessed your students, and you know where they are and where you want to take them, you can start trying to figure out how to meet their individual needs. If you begin by taking small steps, you'll see the effect that differentiation can have on your

classroom, and the rest will come naturally.

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## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

**SHARON RUBRIGHT, DC '00**

Third Grade

## THE “AHA” MOMENT

I remember the moment I realized I needed to differentiate in my classroom: it was during my first year of teaching when I was working with my third graders on multiplication, and I saw

*At the time, I didn't even know I was differentiating – I was just thinking of how I could get this concept across to my students who weren't understanding it.*

that the rote way of teaching the times tables was not working for my kids. I had to start thinking of different strategies (mostly using manipulatives) of how to teach a few of my particular students. At the time, I didn't even know I was differentiating – I was just thinking of how I could get this concept across to my students who weren't understanding it. It wasn't until I got more involved in TFA workshops and my graduate school coursework that

I learned the appropriate terminology, but I started differentiating my instruction after that “aha” moment during my first year of teaching.

As I've learned more about differentiation and how to do it effectively, I've been better able to see the specific strengths and weaknesses in different students and address their needs using different types of instruction. I came up with my first differentiation strategies out of pure necessity, but as time went on and my eyes were opened to other teachers' practices like guided reading and reader's workshop, I learned a lot more about focusing on kids' particular needs in order to move them forward. It's made a significant difference in my classroom and what my students have been able to accomplish.

## STEP BY STEP

When I started to approach differentiation from a more serious, formal perspective, I knew the first thing I had to do was formalize my tracking system; in order for me to teach students at their individual levels, I had to first know what levels they were on. Assessment is a key element to my differentiation strategies. I break down all my assessments throughout the year, compare them to my curriculum and determine what skills my students have demonstrated mastery of, and think critically about where I want my students to go and how they should get there based on where they are starting. I had to organize my assessments in a way that would make it easy for me to get the information I needed from them, so as my system developed, I began using a spreadsheet to keep track of which students had mastered which standards I wanted to teach. This is a great way to start small – when I first began differentiating, I didn't have anything complicated; I just had a sheet of paper with my students' names and columns for me to check off as they moved through the multiplication tables. I also had a separate sheet where I marked down which students were understanding the times tables in which ways –

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like if a student was getting the concept better when she used manipulatives, for example. After I saw how well this worked, I started to build upon this practice and use similar sheets in other subjects.

Next, it was crucial for me to create an appropriate classroom management system – especially because I planned on using centers to differentiate. I had to make sure that before I introduced my students to center activities, there were routines in place and I had modeled for my students what I wanted them to be doing. I already had my classroom set up in a “table” format (3 or 4 students pushed their desks together to form tables around the room), but I had to teach my students how to rotate using a timer so that they could do it smoothly once we actually started working in centers. We went through an entire mini-lesson on sitting down quietly, where to move next when the timer beeped, where to turn in your work, and how to clean up before leaving a center. That took a lot of time in the beginning, but it definitely paid off in how smoothly they run now.

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In my original TFA placement school, I only used centers during math, since we had a big chunk of time for that and my reading instruction followed a scripted curriculum. My next move was to find ways to differentiate writing, science, and social studies during a shorter time-period, which necessitated differentiating within a whole group setting. I approached each subject differently; for writing, I would look at my assessments and spreadsheets to determine which students did/did not know how to use quotation marks, and then I would pull aside the struggling students for a mini-lesson. I also used Writer’s Workshop and conferences to hone in on my individual students’ writing needs. With social studies and science, I tried to teach the same concept to the group in several different ways to address my students’ different types of learning. It was relatively simple to show everything in a multitude of ways, and it ensured more of my kids could access what I was teaching.

Now I’m at a different school that does not use a scripted reading program, so I have been able to differentiate my reading instruction through literacy centers as well. Students work in homogenous and heterogeneous groups depending on the task, their assignments are always varied, and I’m constantly pulling aside small groups or individuals for guided tasks. I’ve also stepped up my science and social studies differentiation by adding centers and utilizing a lot of multi-media tools, since my diagnostics in the beginning of the year told me most of my students learn best visually or actively. I’m constantly assessing my students and shifting their grouping, activities, and instruction accordingly. In general, I’m always updating and adjusting my differentiation methods to meet my students’ needs – after all, that’s what it’s all about!

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## THE CULTURE OF MY CLASSROOM

I think (and hope!) that if you were to ask my students about the differentiation that goes on in my classroom, they would simply explain that they're all working on the same things, they're just doing it in different ways. Like for spelling – they all go through a similar “spelling routine” and do the same amount of work; the only difference is that some students have different lists of words.

I've taught both second and third grade, and my second graders are clueless about most of the differences in their instruction. However, during my first year of teaching third grade, my students asked me a lot about why some of them were working on different things, and unfortunately there was some teasing as a result of that awareness. I learned the hard way about differentiating while still preserving a classroom culture of respect: I watched my third graders get teased for using “baby toys” (manipulatives) to learn.

each year since then. In the beginning of the year I take great care to set the tone, which I do by talking about how I've personally struggled with some ways of learning and that it's okay – and good – that we all don't start from the same place or learn the same way. I teach my kids to be respectful of each other and these differences. This is an essential piece on the road to a differentiated classroom: respect for different learning styles and starting points must be part of your expectations. I can honestly say that my current students respect each other's work and they celebrate each other's successes – which is a huge motivator. When you have a student who is good at drama, and you give that student an opportunity to show you his knowledge through drama and be recognized for this strength by you and his classmates, you'll see a difference in that student's motivation to learn.

## FINAL ADVICE

Of course, differentiating your instruction is incredibly challenging, which is why I would say that another important aspect of getting started on differentiation is working with your colleagues. I have some really great teammates, including a colleague that I design lessons with, and we divide up the work based on our own strengths and weaknesses (in a way, differentiating for ourselves). You don't have to work with someone else through the entire process, but I strongly recommend developing a unit with a colleague and having that person help you think through what information you want to convey, and how to figure out if your kids have grasped it. To do so by yourself can be incredibly overwhelming.

*Please take this message to heart: just starting with one particular subject area is a huge step forward in differentiating.*

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I bet I can guess how you are feeling. Differentiation seems like a ton of work, and you may lack confidence in your instructional ability. It may seem out of your league to manage your classroom when there are centers going on. You may also be feeling stressed out and like you don't have time to sleep, much less to pore over every assessment and devise six ways to teach every lesson. But please take this message to heart: just starting with one particular subject area is a huge step forward in differentiating. Once you see differentiation working, you'll be motivated to introduce those same strategies in other subject areas. As for the confidence issue (I too was hesitant to differentiate because I didn't think I could do it), my advice would be to follow my lead and just take a risk. I knew that what I was doing wasn't working. I started to differentiate because I was desperate, and that risk has paid off. Look at people who have struggled through this before you (like me) and say to yourself, "Maybe I'll give this a try." I really believe you'll be glad you did.

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