Rebecca Sitton's APPLESEED

PLANT THE SEEDS TO GROW SPELLING AND WORD-SKILL LITERACY.

What's Current?

Differentiation—What, Why, and How?

One thing we know for sure, students who cannot keep pace with the curriculum in a regular education classroom usually fall further behind when they do not get extra help. We've seen it happen and extensive studies verify this. At the other end of the performance curve, students who excel are often not provided with learning adaptations to challenge them. Research suggests that the result may be disengagement. This tends to mask their extraordinary ability and decelerates their achievement. We've seen this happen, too.

There is federal legislation that provides for students who fall outside the mainstream of the regular education classroom. Among them is the No Child Left Behind Act, which is designed to ensure student achievement. It holds states and schools accountable for progress for all students.

So now more than ever, teachers are asked to identify the learning level of each student and to target instruction to meet students' specific learning needs. Not only does legislation and research provide us a reason to do so, but we know from experience that students differ, and they often need instructional adaptations to ensure their steady development.

This diversity in curriculum planning and implementation is called in today's terminology *differentiating*. Teachers are asked to accommodate learning diversity through differentiated instruction.

But wait! There is only so much time! It takes time to determine which students need what. It takes time to create alternative learning materials. It takes time to implement lesson adaptations within subject time frames. Large class sizes and a lack of teaching assistants complicate a genuine desire to offer curriculum diversity to meet all learning needs. Differentiation is a fine idea, but there are obstacles that limit its practicability. Right?

You might be surprised! There are three main ways differentiation is achieved. You are probably already differentiating in many ways! When I wrote the Sourcebooks, one major goal was to provide you with efficient strategies to achieve differentiated instruction without extra work on your part. At first, I wasn't sure how to do it, but it came together with much-appreciated input from teachers who helped me achieve it in practical ways.

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What's Current? (continued)

Following are the three differentiation techniques, each with an example of how it is accomplished through your routine Sourcebook teaching. The examples are taken from Level 4, Unit 17, Concept One (pages 162-163), wherein the /əl/ ending sound is explored with words spelled *le*, *el*, *al*, *ul* (in words that end in the *ful* suffix), and the less frequent *il* and *ol* spellings.

First, the topic can be opened with a class activity that engages all students in Activity 1A, a rhyme that high-lights /əl/ words. Then the differentiation strategies begin.

You can differentiate through <u>content</u>. *Students can have a different task to do on the subject you're teaching.*

> Spell *el* for camel, nickel, jewel, and for tunnel, level, cruel.
>
> Spell *al* for several, loyal, formal, and for local, total, normal.
>
> Spell *le* for eagle, needle, jungle—
> For these there are a bundle!

To follow up the rhyme, students do different tasks geared to their ability. Most students find and write more /əl/ words sorted by spelling pattern. The least capable students need guidance hearing /əl/ so Activity 1C is selected for them. The teacher asks students to identify /əl/ animal names from clues (e.g., cattle, beagle, poodle, turtle, eagle, squirrel, camel, and weasel). The teacher writes the animal names on the chalkboard as students identify them, with students predicting their spellings. All the while, the most capable students are assigned either of these activity choices. They may enjoy Activity 1D that springs from the /əl/ word *level*, which is a palindrome in that it is spelled the same forward and backward. Students find and write more palindromes. Or Activity 1F might be chosen that asks students to list /əl/ words for every letter of the alphabet (apple, bottle, channel, etc.).

You can differentiate through <u>process</u>. *Students complete their work through different learning formats.*

As the majority of students create their word sorts, they may do so independently or perhaps in pairs. The same format would be appropriate for the higher achievers' task. However, the teacher works with the students who are engaged in Activity 1C who need assistance for success.

What's Current? (continued)

You can differentiate through <u>outcome</u>. Students' tasks can have different products.

The product for the majority of the students might be a paper folded twice so the creases outline four boxes on each side of the paper. They can use one box for each spelling pattern of /əl/ words collected. These students can pair and share their work for self-checking. The students who needed challenge can first share their results with each other, and then present a composite of their work to the class using a format of their choosing (that's part of the challenge!). And the students who worked with the teacher can write the animal names in alphabetical order, as the activity idea suggests in the Sourcebook.

Initially, it may seem like differentiation is a "stretch" even for the veteran teacher. Yet, when teachers have teaching materials at their fingertips that offer a menu of activities that vary in *content, process,* and *outcome,* then differentiation is achievable. When students are engaged in developmentally appropriate activities, life for them and the teacher is easier. Classroom management is unproblematic. Most important, learning is taking place among all ability levels. This clearly helps you meet the goal of "progress for all."