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***Chapter 4: Differentiation in the Multilevel  
Classroom***

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## CHAPTER 4: DIFFERENTIATION IN THE MULTILEVEL CLASSROOM

### Planning for Differentiated Instruction

Teachers in a multilevel classroom teach “individually all at once” (Dorta, in Bingham *et al.* 123). All instruction is planned to accommodate a range of learning, teaching, and assessment methods in which students can engage according to their own developmental needs along the continuum of learning. Differentiated instruction allows teachers to meet students’ cognitive and developmental needs, as well as to accommodate their interests and learning styles. Planning for differentiated instruction, using instructional methods that are student centred and developmentally and culturally appropriate, is planning for success.

### Diverse Learning Needs and Multiple Curricula

As in a single-grade classroom, planning for differentiation is essential in the multilevel classroom. Meeting the learning needs of a wide range of students and managing multiple curricula are challenging tasks, however. To manage these two tasks, multilevel teachers may find it helpful to focus on learning outcomes from a mid-range grade as a *starting point* to guide their formative assessment and plans for differentiation. In a Grades 4 to 8 multilevel classroom, for example, the Grade 5 learning outcomes may be an appropriate starting point. Formative assessment will provide the teacher with information as to where each learner is in relation to the Grade 5 learning outcomes—below, at, or above the determined starting point. Multilevel classroom teachers will begin to see a *continuum of learning* evolve from the formative assessments and then plan accordingly to meet each learner’s needs along that continuum. (See Glossary.)

To meet the needs of a wide range of learners, a multilevel classroom requires

- an observant teacher
- assessment of prior knowledge
- developmental continua
- an inclusive learning environment
- student choice
- authentic materials and resources

A provincial Foundation for Implementation document for a mid-range grade in a multilevel classroom is a valuable tool for choosing appropriate learning and teaching strategies. The strategies, for the most part, are the same across the grades; however, the expectations, amount of scaffolding, and materials and resources often differ. A document from a mid-range grade is a manageable starting point in planning differentiation for students who are at a variety of points along the continuum of learning within the multilevel classroom.

It is understood, however, that planning for learners with exceptional learning needs will require careful attention to meet the specific learning outcomes identified in their *Individual Education Plan* (IEP). Students with exceptional learning needs may require instructional time in a different learning context from that of their classmates. This should occur when the specific learning outcomes identified in the IEP cannot be best met during strategic instruction and some project work within the classroom. The multilevel classroom is an ideal learning environment for inclusion, as all partners in the multilevel learning community can have their individual learning needs met when assessment and instruction are guided by a continuum of learning.

The most important steps in planning for differentiation are determining what the learner can do and setting achievable learning goals to inform instruction and guide new learning. Some students will require more instruction and guidance than others to meet their learning goals. Regardless of whether students move quickly to independence or require more support, they all can experience success through differentiation.

*Success for All Learners* (Manitoba Education and Training) provides a comprehensive discussion of strategies for differentiation appropriate for the multilevel classroom. For more information about inclusion, see the Department's Special Education website at <<http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/specedu/index.html>>.

**Considerations  
for  
Differentiating  
Instruction**

Teachers and students in the multilevel classroom will benefit from differentiating learning tasks and expectations, differentiating materials and resources, and organizing and managing the classroom for differentiation.

**Differentiating Learning Tasks and Expectations**

Due to the wide range of learners in the multilevel classroom, learning tasks are generally open-ended and have a continuum of expectations. Multilevel classroom teachers

- observe what each learner can do in order to plan for learning and teaching
- provide a variety of learning tasks representing the multiple intelligences and allowing for student choice
- plan open-ended tasks that can offer different developmentally and culturally appropriate challenges for a range of students
- allow for flexibility with timelines
- teach goal-setting skills for establishing achievable expectations

- instruct with the Model of Explicit Instruction in mind (see Chapter 2)
- use student-generated criteria to assess learning
- plan for oral assessments, or the assistance of a scribe, when students are unable to manage written responses

Manitoba's Foundation for Implementation documents offer many suggestions for instruction and assessment in each subject area. In a multilevel classroom, the teacher's task is to reference a mid-range grade document in order to place each student on the continuum of learning within the classroom.

In science, for example, the learning outcomes themselves suggest differentiation with respect to student independence and assessment expectations:

- **Student independence:** Students in different grades may be asked to attain the same learning outcome with varying degrees of independence. Grade 5 students, for example, are asked to formulate a prediction/hypothesis identifying a cause and effect relationship with guidance from the teacher, whereas Grade 6 students are expected to complete this task on their own.
- **Assessment expectations:** Students in different grades can perform the same learning task with varying instructions and assessment criteria. Grade 1 students, for example, need to meet one criterion related to function when they construct an object or device, whereas Grade 2 students need to meet two criteria—function and aesthetics.

In multilevel classrooms, teachers will observe students working together with different developmentally appropriate expectations.

### **Differentiating Materials and Resources**

Multilevel classroom teachers pay close attention to the materials and resources necessary to support and maintain a collaborative classroom, including a wide variety of authentic materials and texts to foster inquiry and independent learning.

- **Supplies for learning centres, workstations, and workshops:** Individual students may each have a clipboard or coil-bound notebook to use at learning centres and during workshops. Colour-coded clipboards and folders are useful for managing cooperative learning groups. At many workstations, community supplies (e.g., pencils, pens, erasers, highlighters) are kept in accessible containers.

Provide *text sets* of several different stories, books, genres, magazines, images, and multimedia resources on the same topic or theme. This

- allows a broad range of students to participate at their own levels
- enriches class discussion by bringing varied perspectives to the topic
- stimulates interest in further reading and inquiry, as students are often motivated to read and view texts their friends have read and discussed

- **Resources for mathematics and science investigations:** Collections of authentic materials (e.g., buttons, keys, bread-bag tags, seashells, beans, rocks, nests, grains, containers, small boxes) and artifacts play an important role in observing and communicating concepts. Combining authentic materials and commercial manipulatives can enable a broad range of learners to work side-by-side to formulate a mathematical hypothesis or discover a scientific theory.
- **Art materials:** Readily available art materials are also necessary for a variety of learning styles, as well as supporting workshops for independent learners.
- **Text sets:** In the multilevel classroom, text sets are essential because they support a wide range of reading abilities and serve as instructional resources for reading, writing, and inquiry. Select a wide range of visual, print, and multimedia texts on a topic or theme from a content area that accommodates read-alouds, as well as shared, guided, and independent reading. Text sets need to include developmentally and culturally appropriate expository and literary texts. (Building text sets based on content topics or genre studies may be a whole-school project over several years.)

If students need support in reading a challenging text, they may join their cooperative group to listen while the “reader” reads the text aloud. For the purpose of inquiry, students commonly choose challenging texts to read and view, and they often gain valuable information from these texts to share with the class or to answer their questions. Learning to read in the content areas is an essential reading skill; thus, text sets also need to include appropriate texts for strategic instruction in content reading.

Resources and supplies need to be ready and accessible for several students who are engaged in a variety of learning tasks at one time.

### **Organizing and Managing for Differentiation**

The ways in which teachers organize and manage the multilevel classroom can accommodate differentiation for a wide range of learners. Establishing learning centres and a variety of groupings supports a range of learners and ensures classroom management:

- **Learning centres:** Learning centres are essential to the multilevel classroom, as they are to the single-grade classroom. They need to have a variety of hands-on materials and open-ended tasks or investigations to accommodate the wide developmental and cultural range of the students. It is important that learning

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centres align with targeted curricular outcomes and reflect the multiple intelligences.

- **Groupings:** A variety of groupings facilitate differentiation in a multilevel classroom, including *flexible* and *cooperative groups*:
  - **Flexible groups:** The purpose of flexible groups is to meet a particular need or interest of a small group of learners for strategic or explicit instruction, guided practice, or independent inquiry. These groups will change frequently throughout a day or a learning/teaching sequence. Flexible groups may be formed by and across developmental levels and by student choice.

**Suggestions for Forming Flexible Groups**

- Keep a class list on the computer with students' names organized in order of their place on the developmental continuum in an instructional area. Print a copy of the list for each week and use it in planning strategic instruction in flexible groups. These lists can easily be revised when a student makes a developmental leap.
- For some tasks, mentorship pairings may be desirable. Groups will operate more independently with the leadership of advanced students.
- Students may select their own partners on the basis of various considerations (e.g., friendship, choice of resources, choice of problem-solving methods).

- **Cooperative groups:** The main purpose of cooperative groups in the multilevel classroom is to develop a collaborative “micro” learning community within the larger classroom community (Johnson and Johnson). It takes time for these heterogeneous groups to develop interdependence. Cooperative groups may stay together for an entire term.

Cooperative groups offer valuable opportunities for independent learning, thereby also allowing the teacher more time to work with flexible groups. Because of the wider developmental range in the multilevel classroom, thoughtful role assignment in cooperative groups is essential so that younger students are not overshadowed by older ones. Assign roles that are based on students' skills (e.g., reader, recorder, reporter, helper) and rotate them. Alternatively, suggest a “share-the-pen” strategy, with each member taking a turn at recording an idea while the others are coaches, assisting with spelling, and encouraging thinking.

Cooperative groups may be formed across developmental levels. Select students who have a range of social and academic abilities that will foster interdependence.

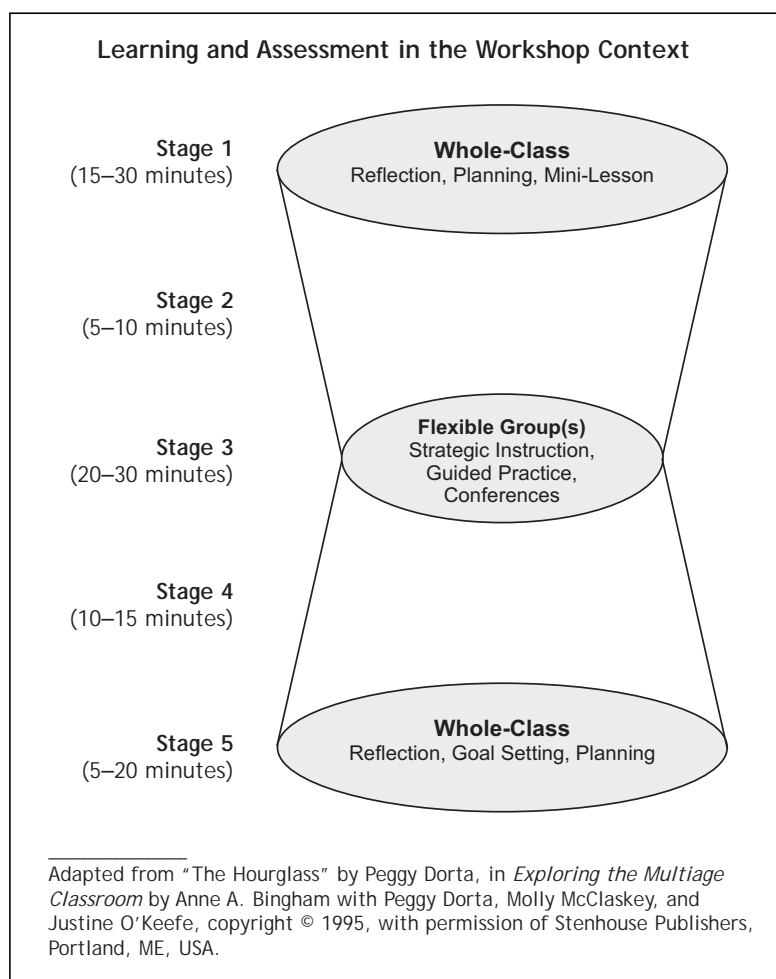
## The Workshop Format

A large block of uninterrupted time (60 to 90 minutes) is necessary for successful workshops in multilevel classrooms. (Times will vary from classroom to classroom and from day to day within a classroom.)

Learning in a multilevel classroom is often accomplished through a workshop format that uses a variety of groupings and allows the multilevel teacher to teach “individually all at once” (Dorta, in Bingham *et al.* 123). Dorta suggests that teachers use an “hourglass” model for workshops, following these stages:

- Stage 1: Whole-class setting for reflection, planning, and initial instruction
- Stage 2: Cooperative and flexible groups to prepare for learning
- Stage 3: Flexible group(s) for strategic instruction, guided practice, and/or conferences
- Stage 4: Cooperative and flexible groups to practise and apply learning
- Stage 5: Whole-class setting for sharing, reflection, goal setting, and further planning

These workshop stages are discussed on the following pages.



## Workshop Stages

The workshop embeds learning in five stages.

- **Stage 1: Whole-Class:** Workshops usually open with whole-class reflection, planning (goal setting), and/or a mini-lesson on a concept, theme, text, or strategy to which all students can respond. The goals at this stage of the workshop may be to
  - explore students' prior knowledge
  - give direct instruction in a concept that activates learning for all students and supports exploration of concepts
  - present mini-lessons on strategies (e.g., for content reading, spelling, mathematics, scientific processes, group processes)
  - plan (e.g., for inquiry)

After this whole-class discussion or mini-lesson, students move or are guided into a variety of group or individual learning contexts.

- **Stage 2: Cooperative and Flexible Groups:** At this stage in the workshop, there is a great deal of movement. Depending on the students' level of independence and their goal or task for the workshop, some students may move into cooperative learning groups, some may choose a partner, and some may work individually. Other students may be assigned to flexible groupings of two to five students for guided practice or further strategic instruction.

For example:

- In a reading/writing workshop, students may engage in silent and oral reading, literature circles, reader response, revision, editing, or a conference with the teacher.
- During an inquiry workshop, students who need more practice with a concept may continue with materials at learning centres, and those who need to move ahead may be directed to work with open-ended frames such as concept maps or KWL (Know, Want to know, Learned) charts (Ogle). Other independent engaging experiences may include a problem-solving task, a design project, ongoing inquiry, or a textbook activity for practice.

Continuous formative assessment is vital to determine flexible groupings at this stage. Teachers need to know which students have grasped specific concepts in order to decide on the combinations and learning/teaching experiences that would best advance their learning.



The groups for Stage 2 of the workshop may be chosen by the teacher as part of instructional planning, or may be spontaneously formed by the teacher or students to take advantage of a strategic teaching opportunity. On occasion, students may work individually.

While students are preparing to work in cooperative groups and individual inquiry, the teacher will choose to work with a flexible group for further instruction or guided practice. As this group prepares for learning, the teacher will also check that the remainder of the students know what is expected of them and are engaged in on-task learning. Teachers will develop a routine for this part of the workshop, which may include the following steps:

- Meet with one flexible group at a designated workstation for further instruction.
  - Move around the room, ensuring that all students understand their task and are engaged in it.
  - Proceed with a mini-lesson or strategic lesson with the group awaiting instruction at the designated workstation.
- **Stage 3: Flexible Group(s):** Most students will be engaged at this stage of the workshop. The teacher may provide further instruction for the flexible group identified in Stage 2, and then assign a practice task that the group will be able to manage independently. The teacher may then work with another flexible group or confer with two or three individual students for focused formative assessment.
  - **Stage 4: Cooperative and Flexible Groups:** This stage of the workshop is a valuable time to watch and listen to students at work. By moving around the room again, touching base with each group and observing and assessing the progress of each student, the teacher is able to offer over-the-shoulder conferences, record observations, and gain more valuable information about students' learning.
  - **Stage 5: Whole-Class:** Students return to the whole-class grouping to bring the workshop to closure and celebration. Closure is generally kept brief, although it may vary from 5 to 20 minutes. Students may report on or synthesize their learning, reflect, or plan their next step(s). Teachers may facilitate student reflection through questions such as the following:
    - What did you learn today?
    - What strategy worked well for you?

- Would you like to share it with us?
- What was easy? What was hard?
- What do we/you need to do next?

At celebration time the teacher usually reflects on positive observations, offers constructive feedback for future learning, or may guide students in constructing or using assessment criteria.

Students may write personal reflections in their learning logs to assess their progress at the workshop and to revise their learning goals if necessary. This reflective response serves as a start-up cue for the next day's workshop.

### **Differentiating for Student Success**

Successful multilevel classrooms are a result of differentiated instruction that meets the needs of diverse learners within a learning community. Teachers' understanding of developmental learning, knowledge of curricula, and skills in practising formative assessment are instrumental in planning for differentiation. It is recommended that at the outset teachers choose to focus on one aspect of differentiation at a time. Developing skills and confidence in ongoing daily assessment is helpful in differentiating for students' success, and a good starting point for teachers new to the multilevel classroom. Multilevel classroom teachers realize that it takes time to acquire and apply these best practices.

### **Resources**

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