

Multiple Paths to Testable Content? Differentiation in a High-stakes Testing Context

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This qualitative case study explores how one secondary world history teacher, teaching in a high-stakes testing context in a district pushing teachers to utilize differentiated instruction, makes sense of this pedagogical approach. We examine teacher sense-making within a conceptual framework of policy realization and ambitious teaching and learning. The teacher made no claims to being an expert on differentiation; yet, the findings indicated that she did possess an understanding of differentiation congruent with the literature and, whether she recognized it or not, used many strategies suggested by Tomlinson and other experts on differentiation. Her thinking about differentiation also appeared to be shaped by relational and contextual issues. Stated differently, the Virginia Standards of Learning exams and the pressure from administration for high pass rates appeared to shape how the teacher thought about her students, her content, her instruction and, ultimately, her approach to differentiation.

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Introduction

Within the current educational context of standards and high-stakes accountability, as goals for student learning become increasingly ambitious, education reform movements and educational policy-makers are calling for changes in classroom practice (Bransford, et. al., 2005; Tomlinson, et. al. 2003). As Tomlinson, et. al. (2003) assert, “throughout the literature of the current school reform movement is a call for teachers to adjust curriculum, materials and support to ensure that every student has equity of access to high-quality learning” (p. 120).

Differentiated instruction, a pedagogical approach designed to meet the needs of diverse learners in a classroom, is increasingly being touted as a “best practice” that can help teachers reach all students in their classroom and, by extension, improve pupil achievement (Brighton, 2002; Gamoran, 1989; Moon, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Yet, as Brighton (2002) argues, “the challenge to differentiate instruction is complicated by the pressure to create learning experiences exclusively tied to standards and testing preparation” (p. 31). That is, in states like Virginia, teachers have to prepare all of their students to take the same fact-recall, multiple-choice, high-stakes, end-of-year test. How do history teachers begin to make sense of,

and negotiate, differentiated instruction in a high-stakes testing context? Currently, little research examines this issue, the intersection of differentiated history instruction and standards-based high-stakes testing. This study explores how one secondary world history teacher, in a high-stakes testing context in a district pushing teachers to utilize differentiated instruction, makes sense of this way of thinking about teaching and learning.

Conceptual Framework

To examine this question, we draw on literature associated with differentiation (e.g., Tomlinson 2001) and ambitious teaching and learning (e.g., Grant, 2003). Additionally, we turn to policy sociology to understand the “messy” work of policy realization in schools and classrooms. Ball (2008) reminds us that educational policy realization (policies that include national/state standards-based accountability measures and local initiatives such as differentiation) are not one-sided affairs pushed down, accepted, and implemented in a specific way. Rather, policy realization is a contingent, localized, and messy process that is “ongoing, interactional, and unstable” (Ball, 2008, p. 7). Ball (2006) also suggests that policies can serve as generators of opportunities, “policies pose problems to their subjects, problems that must be solved in context” (p. 21). This perspective recognizes the room and opportunity teachers have as “curriculum gatekeepers” (Thornton, 2005) to examine, interpret, and determine the form and extent of policy realization as they make the day-to-day decisions concerning subject matter and instructional experiences for students. And, as “local conditions, resources, histories, commitment... differ...policy realizations will differ accordingly” (Ball, 2006, p. 17). These ideas of policy realization and curricular gate-keeping provide a useful frame for examining how teachers begin to understand and negotiate educational policies and initiatives in the context of their school and classroom.

Differentiation

Tomlinson (2000) emphasizes that differentiation is not an instructional strategy; rather, it is a way of thinking about teaching and learning based on a set of beliefs currently embraced and sanctioned by professional organizations (ASCD, formerly the *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*), school districts and schools:

- Students who are the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their interests, their styles of learning, their experiences, and their life circumstances.
- The differences in students are significant enough to make a major impact on what students need to learn, the pace at which they need to learn it, and the support they need from teachers and others to learn it well.
- Students will learn best when supportive adults push them slightly beyond where they can work without assistance.
- Students will learn best when they can make a connection between the curriculum and their interests and life experiences.
- Students will learn best when learning opportunities are natural.
- Students are more effective learners when classrooms and schools create a sense of community in which students feel significant and respected.
- The central job of schools is to maximize the capacity of each student. (p. 6)

Three curricular components that can be differentiated are delineated by Tomlinson, et al.: content, process, and product. Content is the “input” of teaching and learning, the curriculum,

the facts, understandings, and skills to be taught. Process is a sense-making activity, the “opportunity for students to process the content and skills to which they have been introduced” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 79). Examples of processing strategies include learning logs, concept attainment, role playing, think-pair-share, mind-mapping, learning centers, and keeping journals. Products are assignments that “represent your students’ understandings and applications” and assess student knowledge, understanding and skill (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 85). Examples of products include writing assignments, plays, artwork, projects, presentations, and songs. Differentiation thus can be defined as

an approach to teaching in which teachers proactively modify curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address the diverse needs of individual students and small groups of students to maximize the learning opportunity for each student in a classroom. (p. 121)

According to the literature, effective differentiated instruction includes the following hallmarks: proactive, rather than reactive planning for students’ needs; focus on knowledge-centered and learner-centered teaching; flexible use of small teaching/learning groups; use of varied materials by individuals and small groups; employment of variable pacing; utilization of assessment to guide instructional decision-making; provision of multiple approaches to content, process, and product; attention to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs; and emphasis on enduring understandings and central concepts (Brighton, 2002; Cannon, 2002; Kaplan, 2002; Moon, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, et. al., 2003; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Troxclair, 2000).

The current context of standards and accompanying high-stakes testing complicates meaningful differentiation of instruction (Brighton, 2002). The very nature of differentiation should make teachers wary of approaches to teaching and learning that standardize (Tomlinson, 2000). To examine this dichotomy, Tomlinson asserts, we must ask questions about how standards influence the quality of teaching and learning, understanding that teachers’ primary obligation is to make sure that standards-based teaching practice does not conflict with best teaching practice:

- Do the standards reflect the knowledge, understandings, and skills valued most by experts in the disciplines they represent?
- Are we using standards as a curriculum, or are they reflected in the curriculum?
- Are we slavishly covering standards at breakneck pace, or have we found ways to organize and connect the standards within our curriculum so that students have time to make sense of ideas and skills that can be applied in multiple contexts?
- Does our current focus on standards enliven classrooms, or does it eliminate joy, creativity, and inquiry?
- Do standards make learning more or less relevant and alluring to students?
- Does our use of standards remind us that we are teaching human beings, or does it cause us to forget that fact? (p. 7)

Very little research, however, examines the intersection of differentiated instruction and high-stakes testing. While a large (and growing) body of literature provides “how-to” details and practical suggestions about these hallmarks of differentiated instruction (e.g., Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006), the empirical research in this area has focused almost exclusively on promising approaches for gifted and talented teachers/students (e.g., Callahan, et.al., 2003; Little, et. al., 2007), special education teachers and/or students identified with disabilities (e.g.,

Schumm & Vaughn, 1991; 1992; Mastropieri et al., 2006), or school-wide change (e.g., Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez). But, what about social studies teachers' experiences with differentiated instruction? How does it impact them? A study by Valli and Buese (2007) concluded that the impact of federal, state, and local policy directives on teachers, including those related to the complex demands of differentiated instruction, often had unexpected and adverse consequences for teachers on many levels, including increased teacher anxiety about staying on schedule and covering the required curriculum in order to meet the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements. Other negative impacts on teachers included the heavy workload, the lack of time for planning and collaboration with colleagues, and frustration with managing a large volume of student data. Additional research in this area, with implications for both policy and practice, is needed.

Ambitious Teaching and Learning

While differentiation is recognized as good instructional practice, it is not domain-specific. Within the field of social studies, a growing body of literature includes attention to domain-specific "effective instruction" or "best practice." The National Council for the Social Studies (2008), for example, articulated a vision of powerful teaching and learning that is meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. The National Standards for History (1996) emphasize the importance of teaching students both historical understandings and historical thinking skills. The National Research Council (2000) argues that

For expert history teachers, their knowledge of the discipline and belief about its structure interacts with their teaching strategies. Rather than simply introduce students to sets of facts to be learned, these teachers help people to understand the problematic nature of historical interpretation and analysis and to appreciate the relevance of history for their everyday lives (p. 159).

While these, and other, descriptions are useful, they often neglect attention to the complex environment in which teachers work. S.G. Grant's (2003) notion of ambitious teaching, however, situates history practice firmly within the schooling context. He argues that ambitious teaching develops when:

- (1) Teachers know well their subject matter and see within it the potential to enrich their students' lives;
- (2) Teachers know their students well, which includes understanding the kinds of lives they lead, how they think about and perceive the world, and that they are capable of far more than they and most others believe;
- (3) Teachers know how to create the necessary space for themselves and their students in environments that may not appreciate the efforts of either (p. xi).

Thus, Grant's (2003) conception of ambitious teaching includes attention to teachers' understanding of subject matter and students as well as to a frame of mind, a willingness to engage in and create opportunities for powerful teaching and learning despite contextual factors. He argues that ambitious teaching is "less about the instructional practices a teacher uses than it is about what a teachers knows and how she or he interacts with ideas, with students, and with the conditions of schooling" (Grant & Gradwell, 2010, p. vii).

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, the "conditions of schooling" include an accountability system with three main components: content standards, high-stakes testing, and standards of school accreditation (Duke & Reck, 2003). The Virginia History and Social Science

Standards of Learning (SOLs) provide a curriculum framework for instruction across the state. The accompanying SOL high-stakes history tests are 70-item, four-choice multiple-choice exams that emphasize the recall of factual content. Although the sequence varies by district, courses offered and tested at the high school level include World History I, World History II, World Geography, and United States and Virginia History. Virginia and United States Government, taught in the twelfth grade, do not have an end-of-course test. Seventy percent of students who take the SOL tests must pass in order for a school to be considered for accreditation and, at the high school level, students need to pass a certain number of tests to earn a diploma.

While a growing body of empirical research within social studies education explores the impact of high-stakes testing on instructional practice at the national level (e.g., Au, 2007; Grant, 2003, 2006; Grant & Gradwell, 2010; Grant & Salinas, 2008; Yeager & Davis, 2005) and in Virginia (e.g., Fore, 1995; Smith, 2006; van Hover, 2006; van Hover & Heinecke, 2005; van Hover, Hicks, Stoddard, & Lisanti, 2010; van Hover, Hicks, & Irwin, 2007; Yeager & van Hover, 2006), none of this work pays explicit attention to differentiated instruction. As noted earlier, the question is important within a context of policy realization (Ball, 2008), where teachers serve as instructional gatekeepers, making day-to-day decisions about subject matter and instruction (Thornton, 1991), and directly influence how and what students learn about history (Smith & Niemi, 2001). Thus, if “teachers need to be increasingly effective in enabling a diverse group of students to learn ever more complex material and to develop a wider range of skills” (Bransford, et. al., 2005, p. 2) within a high-stakes environment, we need to understand whether and how teachers make sense of and implement instructional approaches (like differentiated instruction) that purport to address the varied needs of students. Accordingly, this study explores how one secondary world history teacher, teaching in a high-stakes testing context in a district pushing teachers to utilize differentiated instruction, makes sense of this pedagogical approach.

Methods

Because this research centered on sense-making and meaning perspectives, we used a case study methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995) to study one secondary World History II teacher (identified by the pseudonym Lucy) in great depth. A case study allowed the richness and complexity of Lucy's teaching to emerge from the data (Stake, 1995). Our study examined the following questions:

- How does one secondary history teacher negotiate differentiated instruction in a high-stakes testing context?
- In what ways, if any, does Lucy's conceptualization and implementation of differentiated instruction match the extant literature?
- What contextual factors facilitate or inhibit Lucy's understandings of differentiated instruction?

Our focus is not the high-stakes testing system, itself, but rather, how one teacher makes sense of differentiated instruction within this particular context.

We chose to focus on Lucy, a White female in her fourth year of teaching, for several reasons. First, Lucy taught in a district pushing teachers to differentiate instruction. The district provided multiple professional development opportunities that focused on differentiated instruction, including one presentation by national expert Carole Tomlinson. Lucy had attended this presentation, and had also learned about differentiation in her teacher education coursework.

Second, school administrators and district personnel identified Lucy as a teacher who employed differentiated instructional practices. Third, Lucy taught a diverse group of students in a class with a high-stakes, fact-recall, end-of-course test that impacted students' ability to graduate and school accreditation. Fourth, Lucy was already participating in a longitudinal study examining beginning teachers' experiences with teaching in high-stakes testing environments.

Lucy graduated from a public university in Virginia with a Bachelor's degree in history and a Master's degree in social studies education. After graduation, she accepted a job at Churchill High School, a diverse high school located in a city district in Virginia. Lucy taught two sections of Honors World History II and three sections of General World History II at Churchill High School. At that time, the school implemented a tracking system that separated the students into four "achievement groups." Academically advanced, college-bound students comprised the Honors courses. Students performing slightly above grade level generally enrolled in Advanced classes. Struggling students took General or Applied level classes.

Data sources for this study included 54 classroom observations, four semi-structured interviews with Lucy, documents that Lucy produced as part of her unit planning, e-mail correspondence, and a reflective research journal kept by the first author. As noted earlier, these data had been collected as part of a broader, longitudinal study exploring beginning teachers' experiences in a high-stakes testing context. The first three interviews focused on Lucy's planning, instruction, and assessment in a high-stakes testing context. The fourth interview explored Lucy's understandings and approach to differentiating instruction. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The classroom observations took place in one honors class and one general class over the course of two spring semesters (11 observations of each class in year 1, 16 observations of each class in year 2) for a total of 54 observations. The first researcher took observation notes on a laptop computer, attempting to capture everything said and done by the teacher. To analyze the data, the three researchers conducted a systematic content analysis of the observation and interview transcripts, focusing on differentiation and/or any factors influencing differentiation. We coded the data by hand, line by line (Miles & Huberman, 1994), looking for similarities, differences, patterns, themes, disconfirming evidence, and general categories of responses (Stake, 1995). We then developed tables for categorization of responses and generated an outline of the major themes and issues emerging from the data. The researchers triangulated the data by searching through the observations, interviews, and documents to confirm or disconfirm these themes and patterns (Stake, 1995).

Findings

Our findings indicate that Lucy defined differentiation in a way congruent with the research literature and could describe several specific, appropriate examples (also evidenced in observations) of how she differentiated group work and/or class projects in her general level class. While she viewed her attempts at differentiated instruction as "limited," interviews and observations revealed that Lucy did employ other planning and instructional approaches (concept-based teaching, responsive assessment) that reflect hallmarks of differentiated instruction. In her discussions of differentiated instruction *within* classes, Lucy talked almost exclusively about her general level courses, not her honors level courses. She did, however, assert that she thought she differentiated *between* classes (general and honors) in terms of planning, instruction, and assessment. Relational and contextual issues, that is, the students, the world history II content, the school administration, and the SOL exams all appeared to shape (and inhibit) how Lucy conceptualized and implemented differentiation.

Differentiation, Within

Lucy seemed amused that she had been identified as someone who employed differentiated instruction; she described her *within* class attempts as “limited” and “minimal.” Lucy’s understandings of differentiation were, however, congruent with many aspects of the extant literature. She defined differentiation as,

letting [kids] approach something in different ways that match either their readiness level or their interest, that get them to the same finishing line. The same sort of end result... they are all getting the same content but [taking] different paths to get there.

This definition reflects Tomlinson’s (1999) assertion that with differentiated instruction, the “core of what students learn remains relatively steady” but that how the student learns, including the “degree of difficulty, working arrangements, modes of expression, and sorts of scaffolding” may vary considerably (p. 16). Lucy’s statement also reflects a recognition that her students differed in their readiness to learn, their interests, and their styles of learning (Tomlinson, 2000).

When asked to describe how she differentiated instruction, Lucy stated that she mostly focused on flexible grouping and on providing intensive scaffolding for class activities and class projects in her general level classes. Lucy said, “when I set up groups for class projects, I have different roles [or] I group kids in certain ways.” To teach about World War I, for example, Lucy assigned a newspaper project:

I had my...photojournalist [groups], and those are students with very low reading levels. I gave them a set of photographs, and they sat down and wrote down what they saw in each photograph and typed it up and [responded to a] pretend you’re a camera man and you’re at this battle, what do you see [prompt]. They had to write about trench warfare and nurses. And technology, they saw that tanks were first used in World War I. These are for kids who could barely read. Then I had an editors group, these were the top 2-3 kids in each class. I gave them primary sources about the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and the sinking of the Lusitania. Those are the two events that, for some reason, are the only two events they really have to know for the SOLs... They had to read those primary sources and write an opinion essay. So those are my kids with really good reading and writing skills. So my next group was interviewers, the intermediate kids. They read first-hand accounts from soldiers, like letters home, and have to... write [interview] questions and use quotations [from the sources] for answers. The last group was illustrators, kids who like to draw. And they got four different events they had to illustrate and [either] draw a political cartoon or draw...what happened. So that [project] was differentiated by readiness level.

For this particular project, Lucy carefully grouped students according to reading level and interests (art, photography, writing, etc.) and assigned them a different part of the newspaper to construct (photographs, political cartoons, news articles, opinion essays). All of the groups focused on the essential and testable SOL content but used different materials and different assignments to engage with the content. In the language of differentiation, Lucy differentiated the process and the product, but kept the content the same. As Lucy noted, “every kid in my room [had] access to SOL content about World War I. So they are all getting access to the same content... they are all getting the same content but [taking] different paths to get there.”

Lucy contended that she differentiated “almost exclusively for [class] projects,” but not with other aspects of her instruction. Observations and classroom documents showed that, as with the World War I newspaper example, Lucy did differentiate the processes and products of most projects, whether it was creating resumes for leaders in world history, researching

explorers, constructing museum exhibits for the Industrial Revolution and more. Observations, however, revealed that, in a more limited way, Lucy employed other planning and instructional approaches—namely concept-based teaching, responsive assessment, and metacognitive strategies—that reflected the tenets of differentiated instruction. When she talked about these approaches in interviews, however, Lucy never explicitly connected them to her attempts to differentiate. For example, the literature on differentiation calls for a focus on enduring understandings and central concepts (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Lucy, a history major who knew a great deal about her content, organized her SOL-based curriculum around several central concepts and enduring understandings. She stated:

In world history II, the concepts that I think are most interesting to kids are revolution and change... The history of the modern world, 1500 to the present, is a period of very rapid change, relative to any other period of history. So the concept of change, and then, in my opinion, human beings haven't evolved as much as they've had revolutions... How does [revolution] happen and why do people revolt? Why do countries change? Why are intellectual ideas important? A lot of the kids that we teach, at any level, don't really think, for example, that political philosophy is important. They get that war is important and they get that famine and natural disasters... are important things that change everything. But, John Locke, to them, is not important. He's someone they have to memorize. So teaching revolutions and new ideas, teaching revolutions as a concept instead of a series of events. That's one of the bigger concepts I like to teach. Human rights is [another] one of my favorites, so at the end of the year, I teach the concept of human rights and how international organizations, specifically the United Nations, how does that work, how do things happening in Africa affect other parts of the world, why do we care. [All year] I talk about change and at the end of the year I try to do current events, human rights, what the world is like now, and what that means.

Observations revealed that Lucy emphasized the concepts and big ideas listed above throughout her curriculum in addition to others (e.g., nationalism, imperialism). In a lesson on the French Revolution, for example, Lucy asked her students to fill in a graphic organizer comparing the characteristics of the French Revolution to their discussion of the characteristics of the concept "revolution." As another example, in a lesson on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Lucy asked students to define the larger concept of human rights and engaged them in a discussion of how this notion has changed over time. Lucy could describe her thinking about concept-based teaching in great detail and viewed it as a way to help connect world history content to all of her students, but did not list this as an example of differentiated instruction. Rather, she believed that it was important for "history teachers to be good historians" and to understand the concepts that held the facts together. And, Lucy felt that teaching concepts made history more interesting to all students. Her rationale for emphasizing concepts related more to her understandings of history and less to her understandings of differentiated instruction.

Lucy, in her choice of assessment, also employed approaches consistent with the literature on differentiation. Although she administered multiple-choice, SOL-like examinations as end-of-unit assessments, Lucy also used a wide variety of projects, exit slips, writing assignments, and other ways of assessing student learning. Observations revealed that, in many instances, she gave students a choice of assessment (or, in the language of differentiation, product) to measure a particular learning objective. In a class on the Glorious Revolution and the English Civil War, for example, she provided students with a hand-out outlining the key content. Students were asked to read the content, answer several questions, and then to either (a)

create a comic strip, (b) write a short children's book, or (c) write a song. All three approaches (or products) were designed to measure students' understandings of the Glorious Revolution and the English Civil War, but allowed students to choose an activity based on readiness and interest. Appropriate assessment choices represent a key component of differentiation. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) describe this as responsive assessment, "when students are given appropriate options for demonstrating knowledge, skill, and understanding" (p. 73). In interviews, Lucy described this approach (choice of activities) when asked to talk about her assessment practices; she did not mention or explicitly tie this to her understandings of differentiation.

Lucy also included attention to metacognitive skills in her instruction. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) assert that metacognitive students are "mindful of how they learn, set personal learning goals, regularly self-assess and adjust their performance, and use productive strategies to assist their learning" (p. 79). At the beginning of each year, Lucy required each student to develop goals for learning. She had students assess those goals at the end of the year. Also, Lucy asked her students to collectively brainstorm class norms; behaviors that should be followed when working in groups and working on class projects. Each student filled in a questionnaire reflecting on his/her behavior; the class then collaboratively developed norms. Lucy would refer to the norms whenever students worked in groups or on in-class projects. And, with any group work, Lucy regularly asked students to assess their contributions to the group assignment. Again, Lucy's attention to metacognition emerged from observations; in interviews, Lucy did not identify this as a way she thought about differentiation.

Although she did not consider herself an exemplary example of differentiation, when discussing *within* class differentiation, Lucy defined differentiation in ways congruent with the literature and could describe (and was observed implementing) specific examples of differentiating the processes and products of projects assigned in class. Additionally, Lucy emphasized enduring understandings and essential concepts of world history in her instruction, used responsive assessments, and included some attention to metacognition.

When talking about her attempts to differentiate, however, Lucy often described activities and projects in her general-level classes; she only occasionally mentioned her honors courses. When asked to talk about both classes, however, Lucy often used the term differentiation to describe how she thought about planning for the different sections. It seemed as though Lucy viewed differentiation not just as a *within* class exercise, but as a *between* class approach. She co-opted the term "differentiation" to talk about how she planned for her different sections. While this interpretation of differentiation is not congruent with definitions offered by the literature (see Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008), Lucy's reflections raised interesting issues about how teachers make sense of and implement different policies.

Differentiation, Between?

Tomlinson's (2000) conceptualization of differentiation focuses exclusively on *within* class differentiation; however, in interviews, it became evident that Lucy's sense-making about this educational policy went beyond *within*, she extended to *between*. In interviews, Lucy talked about ways she sought to differentiate *between* classes, different sections of the same subject. Within the context of her work, philosophically, Lucy's thinking about teaching two very different sections (honors and general) of the same subject (World History II) reflected some of the central ideas of differentiation. She sought to find ways in her instructional practice to allow the diverse students in her classes to grow in different ways. In thinking about differentiation between classes, Lucy considered the students' readiness to learn and their interests; she thought

about the pace at which students learned material; she proactively modified the curricula; she considered the degree of difficulty of each task; and she used different resources/materials (Tomlinson).

Lucy had, over the course of her 4 years of teaching, grappled with how best to reach the diverse needs of her students. She described her honors students as very bright students who read at an advanced level and entered her class with extensive background knowledge in history. And, as Lucy observed, if these students are “not interested in history, they are interested in doing well... and in pleasing the teacher.” Over 60% of these students passed the SOL pre-test in the first week of school. One hundred percent of the honors students passed the end-of-year SOL examinations, 75% passed “advanced.”

Lucy described her general classes as diverse; that each class contained a wide spectrum of students, many of whom had not been met with much academic success in their school careers. She called this “level” a “catch-all” for “kids who are well-behaved but don’t have strong academic skills or have strong academic skills but don’t behave and don’t turn in their work.” So far as the SOL tests, Lucy reported that her department head and administrators viewed general level students as a group that “could go either way”, in terms of passing or failing the end-of-year SOL test. They represented a crucial group in so far as Churchill’s overall test scores. According to Lucy, the students cared about their test scores, but not necessarily their grades. She said, “[my general level students] really do care about their SOL score, but they don’t care about the grade they get in my class as long as it’s passing.” Most of the students failed the SOL pre-test administered early in the school year, but about 70% passed the end-of-year SOL examination.

Given this context, Lucy sought to (in her words) differentiate *between* her classes in terms of content, process and product. As Lucy recognized in her interviews, she often (but not always) emphasized depth of content in her honors classes, and breadth of content with a total focus on SOL testable content in her general classes. According to Lucy, she differentiated in this way due to the readiness of her students and the pressures from “above” for her general students to perform well on the end-of-course test. Lucy believed that in her general class, she had to build background knowledge for her students so they could learn (and remember) content and be successful on the SOL examinations. She stated that, “[In the general class] it’s pretty much however much space [a topic] gets in the curriculum framework is how much space it gets in my room.” In her honors class, students often came in with extensive background knowledge, and Lucy described her challenge as covering testable material while going beyond and challenging her students.

Lucy used World War I as an example of differentiating content between her two classes. In her general level class, Lucy introduced World War I through a brief *PowerPoint* lecture accompanied by map work. Then, students spent three class periods working on the newspaper project described earlier. In her honors class, where students had a great deal more background knowledge—as Lucy quipped, “they sit at home watching the History Channel”—she spent one day going over a *PowerPoint* presentation and assigning a reading on World War I; then the class spent two days on the Russian Revolution (a topic typically not tested on the SOLs). Both groups of students were exposed to, and learned, the essential testable SOL content; however, the honors level class went into depth on a topic (the Russian Revolution) barely mentioned in the general level class.

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In some cases, Lucy expected the honors students to read the book to gain the SOL knowledge, allowing her to spend more time in class on non-SOL material. When describing certain topics that she covered in a unit on Latin America, Lucy said:

When we studied Latin American Imperialism, we did not talk about the Panama Canal, we didn't talk about the Mexican Revolution [the SOL content]. They read that in their textbook. So we talked about the United Fruit Company and the CIA overthrowing people in Latin America and why the Europeans want to boycott American fruit. So that has nothing to do with the SOLs...but those topics are related to the topic, they are engaging, they learn things, and we make connections.

In the general level class, however, Lucy spent time building students' background knowledge—map work to identify the location of Latin America—and kept instruction focused on key SOL events/name/dates.

Observations revealed that, in both classes, Lucy utilized a wide variety of creative and engaging instructional approaches. On many days she taught in similar (and sometimes identical) ways in both classes. However, in small (and large) ways, how she asked students to *process* the information was different, particularly in terms of the nature and extent of reading and writing assignments. As Lucy noted,

Between the two classes, honors and general, there are a lot of times I use the exact same materials or the exact same activity and use different reading materials or different scaffolding for each class. I have a lot of PowerPoints that I use for both classes. But with the general students I eliminate some of the text on the slides and put it on the notes... The honors kids will get stuff that's harder to read, more dense, more specific, and sometimes stuff that's a little more off topic.

With her general-level courses, Lucy made sure the students worked with, or processed, the content in at least three different ways; through some sort of reading, some sort of lecture/discussion with a graphic organizer, and some sort of activity for them to do together. Lucy observed that, with her general students, repetition and scaffolding were important. Again, using World War I as an example, Lucy pointed out that in her general level class, during the brief *PowerPoint* lecture, she provided her students with a timeline, a list of leaders, and a graphic organizer for the main causes. For her honors courses, Lucy noted, "They never saw a timeline, they never saw a list of leaders." She lectured from the same *PowerPoint* lecture used in the general class, expected the students to take notes independently, and talked about people, events, and ideas not mentioned in the SOLs or in the textbook. Lucy used much less scaffolding in her honors course, often mentioned content once, and moved rapidly through topics.

In terms of assessment, or products, Lucy used similar class projects in both classes, but varied the style/content of tests as well as her day-to-day assessments. Both classes had multiple class projects. In many cases these projects were identical. For example, to study Exploration, both classes worked on the same project. Lucy divided students into groups by country (England, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France) and had students research the explorers, leaders, geography, colonization, and main events of the time period. Students completed a worksheet packet that led to products including a map, a "historical head" art project, and more. Other assessments differed between the two classes. The honors students, for example, had current event quizzes on a regular basis. Lucy expected them to read newspapers and to watch television to aid with the memorization of facts and events related to world history. The general level students often discussed current events, but Lucy did not quiz them. On tests, the honors

students had to respond to a number of short answer and essay questions in addition to modified true-false and SOL-like multiple-choice questions. The general level tests only contained SOL-like multiple-choice questions. Lucy assessed knowledge daily in both classes through exit slips, in-class activities, and other approaches. She admitted to struggling with ways to meaningfully differentiate assessment and that she felt she hadn't "figured out" the best way to assess her general students' learning.

In summary, there were observable differences *between* Lucy's two classes. These differences manifested themselves in the level of attention to SOL content, the depth/breadth of content covered in class, the nature of/extent of reading/writing assignments and the types of assessments used. While the literature on differentiation does not pay explicit attention to differentiating *between* classes, Lucy's sense-making of differentiation applied to both the *within* and *between* contexts. And, interestingly, she included attention to many tenets of differentiation when thinking about her instruction and assessment in two sections of the same content.

Differentiation, Shaped and Inhibited

Lucy made no claims to being an expert on differentiation; yet, observations and interviews revealed that she possessed an understanding of differentiation congruent with the literature and, whether she recognized it or not, used many strategies suggested by Tomlinson and other experts on differentiation. Lucy said that her knowledge about differentiation came from a few class sessions in her teacher education program, a workshop she attended as part of a beginning teacher induction program, and a more recent mandatory workshop presented by Carol Tomlinson to the entire faculty of Churchill High School. She stated that she thought about differentiation, but in minimal ways, and did not feel as though she had embraced the philosophy. Her thinking about differentiation also appeared to be shaped by relational and contextual issues. Stated differently, the SOL exams and the pressure from administration for high pass rates appeared to shape how Lucy thought about her students, her content, her instruction and, ultimately, her approach to differentiation.

Discussion of the high-stakes examination and related pressure to "cover" the curriculum pervaded Lucy's discussion of teaching general-level classes. The SOL test clearly shaped Lucy's thinking about instruction and differentiation. When asked to talk about testing, Lucy commented, "I hate the outcome, that kids think their whole year rests on this test." She went on to say that "the testing system in general is just overwhelming. Kids take a couple of tests a week...It's pretty bad." When asked to talk more about this, Lucy described her experiences with benchmark testing; SOL-like examinations given several times per semester to assess students' progress (or lack thereof). She observed:

Testing is a huge disruption, it's extremely stressful, [the school and district] administrators put a lot of pressure on us, we give them way too many tests during the year to prepare for, we give them benchmark tests every few weeks, it's way too much testing... The kids, the minute they see those scantrons, totally check out. They do not pay attention and therefore the [benchmark] tests are not good indicators. I mean I have kids that, there'll be 80 bubbles on the sheet and 70 questions on the test and about half of my kids will fill in all 80 bubbles because they literally just went through and filled in all the bubbles. The tests don't mean anything...in history, our benchmarks are really meaningless. And they have never historically been a good indicator of success or failure on the SOL tests.

The benchmarks, combined with the pressure to perform on the SOLs, kept Lucy to a tight pacing schedule—a breakneck pace. This limited the amount of depth she could get into with her general level students, students who often did not have rich or deep background knowledge in world history. That constraint, Lucy noted, limited how much she could differentiate content or focus on teaching skills she felt were important. Time was the one thing Lucy said she simply didn't have enough of. In a world without SOLs, Lucy said would “change how I approach the class with at-risk kids” and focus on content in depth and emphasize more reading and writing skills. She would “eliminate some big chunks of stuff out of the curriculum and really pick up on the reading and writing skills.” Lucy joked that she would “sacrifice the unification of Italy” in favor of more interesting topics, like the development of Africa in the 19th and 20th century, or the rise of dictatorships in Europe. Currently, she felt frustrated because “teaching reading and writing is way too time-consuming. And, I can't get them to read and write competently enough about the SOL material to make it worth their while.” In summary, Lucy appeared to feel constrained by the pressures to get her at-risk students to pass the SOL tests. She admitted that, “I feel like, as much as I feel I'm pressured for time, I have a lot of freedom for lesson planning.” This was evident in observations, where Lucy used a variety of creative and engaging instructional approaches, including class projects. When looking for evidence of *within-class* differentiation, most examples came from Lucy's day-to-day instruction, not from her thinking about content or assessment.

Discussion & Implications

In the high-stakes testing context of Virginia, and elsewhere, as teachers are being called upon to do a better job of teaching *all* children, a growing number of schools and school districts are promoting differentiated instruction as a way to improve teaching and learning. At a recent Education Job Fair, 100% of our students reported being asked how they differentiated their instruction. A principal invited to guest speak at one of our student teaching seminars emphasized the importance of differentiation and how he considered this a central part of the mission of his school. Yet, very little empirical research explores how these policies are realized, that is, how teachers make sense of implementing a standards-based curriculum, prepare all students for a high-stakes test, and differentiate instruction. This case study, while clearly a small and unique sample, offers an initial exploration of how Lucy, a teacher identified by administration as a successful teacher who differentiates, thought about and makes sense of this way of thinking about teaching and learning.

Lucy was able to define differentiation in ways congruent with the literature. She employed many strategies similar to those recommended by differentiation experts, like Carol Tomlinson (e.g., 2000; Tomlinson, et. al., 2003). The high-stakes testing context, however, shaped her thinking about instruction and, by default, her approach to differentiation within classes. As noted earlier in our paper, Tomlinson (2000) asked a series of questions about the impact of standards on classroom instruction. In this study, it became evident that, for struggling at-risk students, the standards are the curriculum and, out of necessity, slavishly covered at a breakneck pace. As Levstik and Barton (2005) pointed out:

The need to cover a prescribed curriculum is the most common way of explaining instruction... A curriculum exists... and the teacher's primary job is to ensure that students are exposed to the curriculum—principals expect it, parents support it, and teachers themselves accept that coverage as their chief duty. (p. 252)

Yet, Lucy, an ambitious teacher, was able to take this curriculum and this breakneck pace and create a lively classroom full of creative approaches that did foster inquiry. It was clear she was negotiating a very complicated and complex environment and trying to teach two very different groups in the best way she knew how. She was, however, still working on and developing her ideas and approaches to differentiation. It seemed as though she had not fully embraced the concept of differentiation but rather, in thinking about what worked best for her students, she “poached” or “rented” strategies and ideas she felt would work.

Tomlinson, Brimijoin, and Narvaez (2008) warn that, in many schools, teachers armed with a little bit of knowledge about differentiation can, in some instances, be dangerous; that “shallow implementation to differentiating instruction for academically diverse learners will serve neither the students nor the profession well” (p. 2). They argue that calling something a popular catchphrase—differentiation—does not solve educational problems. Rather, they assert, school leaders and teachers need to pay attention to fidelity of implementation and continually reflect on and respond to the question, “How does what’s happening here make sense for learners?” (p. 3). The case of Lucy offers a snapshot of a teacher who possessed (according to her) a little bit of knowledge, yet was implementing key tenets of differentiation in ways that made sense for most of the learners in her classroom. It could be Lucy knew more than she realized; it could also be that she simply hadn’t taken the time or space to reflect deeply on what she was doing instructionally. Observations revealed a great deal more ambitious teaching and differentiation than Lucy was able to articulate in interviews; perhaps part of professional development of teachers could include offering opportunities to meaningfully reflect on practice.

The case of Lucy also raises difficult and thorny questions about the issue of tracking (ability grouping) and differentiation. Research on the educational effects of tracking, as well as related issues of equity and access to quality education, has proliferated over the last 30 years. Some research reveals that students in lower track classes typically receive a qualitatively different education from students in higher track classes. The literature defines these differences in terms of the amount of time, energy, and enthusiasm teachers bring to their teaching, the content covered, the quality of instruction, and the types of teaching approaches used (e.g., Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Oakes, 1985, 1992; Slavin, 1990; Wheelock, 1992; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 2002). Other work, however, suggests that ability grouping offers “clear and consistent academic benefits” for students in “higher ability groups, but students in the lower groups are not harmed academically by grouping and they gain academic ground in some grouping programs” (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; see also, Kulik 2003; Rogers, 2002). Yet, Tomlinson’s work focuses exclusively on *within* class differentiation and assumes a diverse and heterogeneous group of students.

Lucy’s thinking about differentiation reflected the context in which she worked; a context with specific academic groupings and accompanying pressure/expectations in terms of test performance. Lucy had to reflect carefully on what students knew upon entering her class, and where they should be when they left her class. She had to think about how to get her struggling students to pass the high-stakes test, and how to challenge her higher-achieving students beyond the test. Observations revealed high quality instruction in both classes, with thoughtful attention to students’ interests, learning preferences, and readiness. However, this raises questions as to the difficulties facing teachers when new policies like differentiation are presented in complex contexts, and highlights issues of equity and access.

This study provides insight into how one teacher makes sense of differentiation, a way of thinking about instruction. But, it raises many more questions and areas of future research. Does

it make a difference in student learning in history? What does differentiation look like when done by a history teacher purposefully? How do other history teachers make sense of this term—is it another form of educational jargon, or a valuable pedagogical approach? How do professional development sessions on differentiation shape teachers' thinking about teaching? How can teachers be encouraged to pay attention to the unique needs of all learners (at-risk and high achieving)? The field of social studies provides little guidance or attention to the notion of differentiating instruction. This study does not claim to answer or address these larger issues, but does take a small first step by exploring how one ambitious teacher made sense of differentiation in a high-stakes testing context.



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