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Understanding Complexities: Teacher Voices on Differentiating Literacy Practices

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The fact that populations attending U.S. schools are diverse, in terms of cultural representation, SES, languages spoken, etc., means that it is imperative for teachers and teacher candidates to have knowledge of various ways students gain and use literacy. This qualitative study describes reported influences on decisions made and differentiated literacy practices present in classrooms deemed effective with diverse learners. Using a multidimensional framework (Cohen, 2006), analysis highlights social, emotional, ethical, and academic education. Findings reveal the importance of how teachers define literacy and how schools support teachers when designing literacy instruction for different learners. Differences in teacher beliefs and systemic educational differences provide examples of areas that might be supported by further research.

Keywords: differentiation, literacy practices

Introduction

Over the last several decades, there has been a growing awareness that students with significant social, emotional, ethical, academic, and/or behavioral needs pose a great challenge for pre-K–12 educators (Cohen, 2006; Giroux, 1991). A synthesis of the research indicates that effective educational practices include differentiated instruction (DI) to meet the needs of all learners (Jinkens, 2009; Kaushanskaya, Gross, & Buac, 2014; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011). Advocates for differentiated instruction state the various ways children learn information necessitates incorporation of a variety of instructional methods and dimensions (i.e., social, emotional, ethical, academic) of learning (Cohen, 2006; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Gee, 2001; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Paliokas, McWalters, & Diez, 2010; Roy, Guay, & Valois, 2013; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). However, teachers often use district provided curriculum exclusively or have not been trained in DI practices sufficiently,

limiting their ability to meet all student needs in the classroom (Allington, 2012; Heath 1986). More importantly, with the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and standardized tests in the U.S., instructional focus targets academic content needs, excluding the other dimensions of learning in many cases. Arguably, differences in learning are most evident during literacy instruction. Becoming literate is a complex venture requiring the acquisition and application of knowledge from various resources for use in a multiplicity of ways. The complexities of literacy learning and application are best addressed with quality education including social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions of learning (Cohen, 2006; Guo, Justice, Sawyer, & Tompkins, 2011; Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Therefore, this study aims to highlight current practices in literacy instruction that address the various learning needs of the diverse populations that attend schools in the U.S., specifically focused on how teachers incorporate social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions of learning.

Differentiation

The demand for equal opportunities in the classroom has led to a move toward full inclusion, meaning that more students are taught in general classrooms (Ferguson, 2008; Kozol, 2012). As a result, teachers are challenged to find ways to support all learning needs. Differentiated instruction (DI) acknowledges student strengths and accommodates student limits (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Sousa and Tomlinson (2011) recommend differentiating instruction in three main areas: content, process, and product to effectively address the different supports students may need. Instruction in each of these areas is strengthened by attention to social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions.

Despite the perceived challenges DI poses for the teacher, DI implementation has been shown to increase performance on academic tasks, engagement with information, and student self-confidence (Beloshitskii & Dushkin, 2005; McQuarrie & McRae, 2010; Tulbure, 2011). Specifically, DI research has shown student growth in areas of fluency and comprehension as well as overall literacy with different populations (Fairbain, & Jones-Vo, 2010; Reis, McCoach, Little, Muller & Kaniskan, 2011). Theroux (2004) found that often these increases were linked to the emotional safety students found in the environment.

Literacy

In the U.S. education system, literacy is often taught as a prescriptive practice. In addition, teachers are often unaware or unprepared to change instructional practices provided by a curriculum to address the complexities of literacy learning. For instance, literacy acquisition requires not only foundational knowledge and skills such as alphabetic knowledge and word recognition

skills, but also comprehension and application of a wide variety of information. Students come to school with vast experiences and skills and their ability to use personal “funds of knowledge” in literacy learning is important to access content and learn new information (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). When school-based practices and curricula are based on mainstream, middle class norms, it is important to draw on student’s *funds* – personal contexts, skills, and experiences – to scaffold their understanding of academic content. Many teaching practices such as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy address ways to use student knowledge and experiences to engage more deeply with literacy. Researchers posit that culturally responsive teaching practices prove to be an effective way to differentiate for and engage learners from many different backgrounds for many different purposes (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Kubota & Lin, 2009). Further, culturally responsive practices are effective because they can account for multiple dimensions of learning.

The Learning Process

Recent studies in the fields of neuroscience and cognitive psychology emphasize different cognitive processes of learning (Anderson, 2015), which provides many areas of consideration for addressing learning differences through instructional design. Current research explains that individuals process information differently during the learning process (Anderson, 2015; Carlock, 2011; Clark & Harrelson, 2002). The learning process includes encoding external stimuli, storing information, retrieving information, and re-encoding information. During this process, individuals experience input and make connections differently (Baars & Gage, 2010). In addition, perception and mental representations of knowledge (individual understandings of concepts) vary based on personal experiences and existing knowledge. Recent studies also explain the importance of emotional self-regulation (Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007) and executive function (Carlock, 2011) in the learning process. In sum, learning requires activation and application of knowledge and skills from many sources: social, emotional, ethical, cultural knowledge, and experiences (Mashburn, et al., 2008; Maurer & Brackett, 2004).

Methods of Instruction

Educational leaders have long advocated the use of a variety of materials when instructing diverse learners (Guthrie, 1981; Worthy & McKool, 1996). Heath (1986) recommended the exclusion of methodologies and curricula based on the assumption that the path of development is the same for all children. However, teachers often do not get the choice of materials they use in classrooms. Additionally, much of the instructional material used in classroom teaching – such as teacher guides, student texts, workbooks, and so on – is highly influenced by

the ideological underpinnings of monolingual standard language use and *one-size-fits-all* methods (Jenkins, 2009). For example, when materials are mandated, teachers may wonder how to account for the different cultural patterns of socialization (Ovando, 1997) or how to adjust scripted programs to meet the needs of learners.

Further, for decades, scholars have recognized the importance of incorporating all dimensions of a child's development into instruction to address these varying needs (Dewey, 1938; Gee, 2001; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Paliokas, McWalters, & Diez, 2010). The idea of holistic education seeks to open minds, nurture the spirit, and awaken the heart in a synergistic relationship between social, emotional, ethical, and academic development that helps students achieve self-actualization. Decades of work by theorists such as Dewey, Thoreau, Emerson, Montessori, Maslow, and Freire advocated for a holistic education that responds to and values the many pathways to learning.

Much of the current literature focuses on differentiation in academic areas, but does not investigate the implementation of varying instructional practices using a whole-child approach. ASCD (2018) argues that within the whole-child approach, ensuring each child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged means that all stakeholders – educators, parents, policy makers, and community members—engage in establishing positive environments by considering school culture, curriculum, instructional strategies, family engagement, and social-emotional wellness.

Additionally, research especially in the area of early childhood, addresses social and emotional education and argues for its importance in determining the quality of education (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Mashburn et al, 2008), yet social and emotional education is seldom a focus of teacher preparation or professional development (Guo, Justice, Sawyer, & Tompkins, 2011). Ethical education has even less presence in currently reported teacher training. Moreover, practices that researchers find to be most effective are often not implemented in classrooms. Simply put, a holistic education prepares students to live well as informed citizens by attending to all student characteristics such as culture, interests, emotions as well as academic strengths (Dewey, 1938).

Conceptual Framework

The study's primary frame utilizes Cohen's (2006) concept of multifaceted learning. Cohen (2006) suggested the four areas of social, emotional, ethical, and academic (SEEA) learning that are important for teachers to address. Though these areas have long been seen as important, it is not always understood by teachers how these areas relate to learning or which strategies are most effective (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Further, students "need to understand their own skills and abilities, manage their emotions and behavior, communicate

effectively, negotiate conflict, care about others, and make responsible decisions” (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p. 1). Integrating the four areas are foundational for student success in individual development, academic achievement, and responsible citizenry.

Social Considerations

Education that focuses on social dimensions of learning address learning through interactions and experiences that build social capital (Smidt, 2009). These interactions are socially mediated through cultural tools and traditions. Instructional examples stem from building relationships, responsibility, social problem solving, and decision-making. Education that includes social competencies provides opportunities to practice a variety of ways of learning through social interaction, which can lead to understanding multiple perspectives and to self- and social empowerment. Differentiating for social differences could mean including various student grouping strategies beyond small or whole group activities such as considering levels of group belonging (i.e., total engagement with social community, newcomer) and social patterns of thinking (i.e., influences from language or values of a culture). For example, based on the culture in which one lives and the language one speaks, learning socially involves navigating different ways of thinking such as people living in Western cultures think about things differently than people living in collectivist societies (Kitayama & Park, 2010).

Emotional Considerations

Education that includes emotional intelligence or emotional processing “is an educative, continuous and permanent process, focused on the enhancing the emotional competences as essential elements for the holistic development of the person in order to enable him for life” (Aurora-Adina, Clipa Otilia, & Rusu, 2011, p. 51). Competencies that comprise emotional intelligence include: 1) the ability to recognize, understand, and express emotion; 2) the ability to associate feelings and thoughts; 3) the ability to gain and use emotional knowledge; and 4) the ability to regulate emotion to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Salovey, Brackett, & Mayer, 2007). Further, Cohen (2006) described emotional needs as various abilities to regulate emotional responses, to show empathy for others, to cooperate with others, and to exhibit self-control. Because emotions are an important part of learning, designing instruction that considers variations in student emotional regulation and expression could strengthen connections and the embedding of information (Anderson, 2015; Maurer & Brackett, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

Education that addresses ethical dispositions includes learning and internalizing forms of moral reasoning, engaging with different assumptions, societal responsibilities, service to the community, moral responsibility, sensitivity to culture, and awareness of the value of collaboration (Cohen, 2006). Though there are different opinions about ethical pedagogy, studies reveal that to be productive global citizens, people must be ethical (Giroux, 1991). Literature shows that teachers consider ethics (ethical decisions, trustworthiness, responsibility) to be very important in school environments, but that administrator's express preference for prioritizing academic content, especially in light of standardized test accountability. Examples for consideration in instructional design include honoring different value systems, attending to various levels of integrity, and acknowledging different approaches to social responsibility.

Academic Considerations

Often education focused on academics involves content knowledge, cognitive abilities, and intelligence. Abilities and skills in these areas are often identified using the Common Core State Standards and/or Next Generation Science Standards and include competencies in language arts, mathematics, and science. Differentiated instruction within academic learning might include allowing more time for tasks, providing alternative language during instruction, and offering multiple access points to content.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to highlight differentiation practices during literacy instruction with a focus on Cohen's four dimensions (social, emotional, ethical, and academic) of learning. Using a qualitative design, this study used open-ended questions in surveys and interviews allowing participants to describe differentiation approaches in ways appropriate to their contexts.

Participants

Participants were invited into this study while they were attending a two-week professional development session in literacy instruction. Thirty - three teachers with a mixture of experience in public and private, rural and urban schools participated in this study. These teachers were at different stages of their career and all identified as either male or female. Participants worked in six states with different state requirements. Participants were predominantly white (87%), but information obtained revealed classroom environments reflected diversity in age, sex, academic levels, classroom population size, native language use, and parental involvement.

Data Collection and Analysis

Completed surveys revealed demographic information about the participants as well as their students and also descriptions of how the teachers differentiate literacy practices in their contexts. Follow-up interviews were requested after surveys were analyzed revealing detailed descriptions of instructional practices. Questions on the survey and interviews were open-ended. Member checking followed transcription of interviews.

The initial analysis focused on themes that emerged in relation to Cohen's (2006) four areas of education, including references to creating safe, caring, participatory, and responsive environments. Data related to social education expressed an importance in reciprocally trusting relationships. Emotional education data captured references to supporting the mental health of each student. Ethical education data involved references to character development and dispositional teaching and learning. Academic education data referenced content or strategies to access content. A second analysis of surveys suggested emerging themes across the four areas as analyzed using NVIVO software. A third analysis involved coding interview transcripts. The iterative process of analysis of surveys and transcripts through NVIVO and open coding identified common themes and practices (Maxwell, 2005) within and across data.

Findings

Final data analysis revealed themes across data categories focused on influences on instructional design and pedagogical considerations. Themes in each dimension were expectations in the classroom, and recognizing, honoring, and developing student strengths. Additionally, three specific methods incorporating the four dimensions are explained.

Instruction Influences

The data set indicates two distinct influences on instructional design. The first theme explained how teacher definitions of literacy played an important role in conceptualization of DI, and the second theme explained how administrative support was strongly aligned with implementation of DI practices.

Defining literacy. Participants stated a wide variety of definitions of literacy. Though not inconsistent with the literature (UNESCO, 2005), the variation of definitions among teachers influenced what is taught, valued, and assessed in the different contexts. In turn, this directly affects practices across contexts, revealing the complexity of DI and variety of effective practices.

Analysis of data in this study demonstrates alignment between the way teachers define literacy and the approach to DI. For example, the teachers that defined literacy as having to do exclusively with print were limited in the

differentiation strategies they used. These teachers stated that meeting different learning needs meant assigning *leveled books*, citing only student's ability to decode as a factor in instruction. Teachers with broader definitions such as "the ability to read, write, speak, and think" or "literacy is a means of communication that incorporates many modes of intake and output" offered a much broader conception of differentiation as well as more varied examples. These teachers also offered more opportunities for student-led work.

Administrative support. A second and equally important influence on reported differentiation practices involved administrative support. Though findings about support varied, all participants referenced administrative support as a factor in their instructional design. Some participants described school-wide professional development opportunities or classroom experiences as the source of learning about DI practice. Conversely, participants reported limited support from administration as the primary reason for their lack of knowledge about effective differentiation practices.

Less than half of the participants reported receiving professional development specifically focused on DI. Some participants stated that a few workshops addressed meeting student needs in different ways through literacy strategies, but most stated that they learned more by "trial and error" in their own classrooms. Some participants suggested funds were available for leveled books, but not for other differentiated materials or professional development. A few participants found some training through workshops about other topics such as inclusion or brain-based learning; however, these opportunities were only offered once so learning was limited.

Some participants pointed to inquiry-based methods and constructivist approaches as a desired option, but demonstrated hesitation about implementation, citing behavior management as a key issue. The data also revealed inconsistencies, for example, where one participant advocated for traditional literacy methods of guided reading in one question and inquiry-based methods in another question. Another participant reported using Daily Five (Boushey & Moser, 2014) and Read Well (Sopris West Educational Services, 2004) as the foundation for literacy instruction in her class. These inconsistencies seemed to depend on decisions about programs supported by the districts. Interviews revealed two common reasons. The first explanation revealed that administration supported professional development in some areas while ignoring other areas leaving teachers with, as one teacher noted, "spotty ideas about DI. Like I have a foundation in DI for visual learners, but not about how to challenge my bored learners." Another explanation offered by teachers in this study involved confidence levels of teachers. One participant explained that she knew how to differentiate with Daily Five because she had training and experience; however,

she did not know how to meet the needs of all of her students without a curriculum or program giving her ideas.

Social, Emotional, Ethical, Academic

Though all four categories of instruction were not explicitly addressed by each teacher or addressed in equal depth, pedagogical considerations about expectations in the classroom and student strengths were coded in each category. For example, some teachers stated that they maintained high expectations for all students academically. Expectations for differences in social knowledge were also held at high standards though sometimes not explicitly stated or taught. Alternatively, emotional support was managed with a different approach to expectations according to many of these teachers. Children with different emotional needs were held to different standards. One participant explained that if a child struggled emotionally, expectations were changed, lowered, or eliminated. Data revealed tactics labeled by teachers as differentiation for emotional needs; however, this differentiation did not seem to support students' emotional growth. For instance, one teacher stated, "I have a student that cries a lot. I just have to let her cry it out and let her start back to work when she can. I don't make her do missed work." According to the research, lowering expectations decreases learning and possibly increases the achievement gap (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Yet, most of the teachers in this study explained that they were not trained in how utilize emotional intelligence or to support emotional needs in the classroom.

Social education. Not surprisingly, teachers in primary grade levels said that they taught social education more regularly than secondary teachers. Primary teachers mentioned more instances of approaching teaching and learning with an understanding that students come to school with different experiences and developmental levels to guide their social behavior and learning. Secondary teachers often cited Vygotsky's social learning theory and stated they allowed projects to be done in groups or Socratic discussions, which allowed natural differentiation through peer interaction. Arguably, having students all work together does not take into account all students' needs, yet most of the participants felt that social education meant allowing students to learn together. Interestingly, some teachers stated that some students did not "work well with others," yet none of these teachers expressed consideration for various cultural backgrounds or learning needs with regard to social instruction. Few examples of effective social DI were offered beyond grouping strategies, although many elementary teachers indicated they focused on social skills because students came to school with "diverse understandings of socialization." The following

participant statements demonstrate two examples that intentionally consider social implications of instruction:

“We have community meetings to discuss classroom issues and social expectations. In these meetings we also practice breathing activities and yoga. This helps us to understand where people are coming. This helps me design instruction differently for different students” (Elementary teacher).

“Exposing students to larger social situations helps use existing [competencies] and promote new social competencies. Seeing and adjusting is a great way to learn” (Secondary teacher).

Emotional education. Participants primarily referenced changing the way they taught based on the confidence level of each student. Approximately half of the teachers admitted that they do not think about emotional intelligence or emotional education unless the topic comes up—usually in student outbursts, or even in a story they are reading to the class. Teachers reported that a focus on each student’s emotional education was lacking. Alternatively, some teachers described scaffolding as a form of emotional education in which a partner was always assigned to task completion so as to reduce the stress of each individual student failing a task. The following three statements illustrate the range of attitudes toward emotional education:

“When I have students with low confidence, I give them an easy book to build their confidence” (Elementary teacher).

“I have a few students that get frustrated easily. One [student] cries and another exhibits behavior problems when they have trouble in writing. I lessen the amount they have to write so they don’t melt down” (Secondary teacher).

“For my students that are too dramatic emotionally, I find books to read aloud that show kids regulating their emotions and solving problems” (Secondary teacher).

Research suggests that such accommodations, while certainly thoughtful, actually decrease participation in activities and create the possibility of perpetuating the achievement gap (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Additionally, most examples from this study fall short of the previously stated differentiation of emotional intelligence and processing such as recognizing, understanding, and expressing emotion or show empathy to promote

emotional and intellectual growth (Cohen, 2006; Salovey, Brackett, & Mayer, 2007). Self-reports and existing evidence from this study confirm that teachers might benefit from specific focus on emotional education during professional development or teacher preparation (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011).

Ethical education. Consideration of ethical pedagogy was least mentioned by teachers in this study. The following quotes suggest teachers were thinking about ethics in different ways in classroom practice. While teachers had few examples, one pattern in the data revealed that ethical considerations were individual and not used in whole-group instruction.

“I usually teach ethics in language arts class. Ethical teaching happens in relation to characters in stories and connections with personal experiences” (Secondary teacher).

“We explicitly discuss specific ethical issues that third graders deal with in morning meeting time” (Elementary teacher).

“Creating a safe environment ensures ethical dispositions because when they know they are loved and cared for, they will make ethical decisions. I approach students differently based on how they need me to show that they are cared for” (Secondary teacher).

Academic education. It is not hard to believe that the most frequently mentioned DI had to do with academic content. Effective practices revealed in this study included a preponderance of multi-modal examples. Some participants referred to a “spiraled curriculum” in which they revisited information in different contexts with different application processes. From content to skills, teachers often revealed that the focus of their differentiation practices were driven by current student experience and ability as well as by academic standards. A few of the many examples given when asked how teachers differentiate included changing the speed and pace of instruction for students, breaking down tasks into smaller units for some, using multimodal instruction (visual, auditory, etc.) and explicitly teaching grammar, word parts, and connotations for some of the students.

Though participants stated they differentiated the most in the area of academic education, many examples lacked specificity. Further, participants admitted that they “had not had much formal training” and felt they could “do a better job” of meeting individual student needs. Teachers were primarily concerned with DI in academic content because assessments and curriculum focus on content knowledge and skills as measures of academic achievement (Cohen,

McCabe, Mitchell, & Pickeral, 2009) often at the expense of emotional and ethical considerations.

Effective Methods

Participants in this study revealed some common methods thought to be effective such as tasks that meet students where they are by including student individual background knowledge. Three overall ideas for effective differentiation were represented in the data: 1) incorporating perspective taking into literacy instruction; 2) using inquiry-based instruction (IBI); and 3) building trust through relationships. Multiple participants described ways these three ideas gave opportunities for equal access to learning.

Multiple perspectives. de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (de Bono, 1987) was an example reported a few times in this study. "Thinking Hats" is a group discussion and individual thinking process that provides a tool for perspective taking, analysis, and application of information while learning together. For example, students actively engage in literacy dialogue by taking on a specific perspective on a topic. Participants in this study reported this process applicable in many situations and required little preparation time because students are using their background knowledge and skills in all areas to think through an issue or topic.

Additionally, participants stated that drawing on student's feelings and motivations toward the content helped them to make lessons relevant to each student. One participant said, "When students are writing, I ask them to incorporate what their characters are smelling, seeing, hearing, tasting. It makes their writing more descriptive." A few of these participants also referred to having students express their emotions by posing questions such as "How would you step into the shoes of the character in a book?" or "What perspectives live inside this story?" These types of questions deepened comprehension not only of a story and the human condition, but of the individual student's understanding of themselves and helps to differentiate instruction for each of her students, according to several participants.

Inquiry-based instruction. Inquiry-based instruction was described by participants as a one "easy" way to include the four dimensions of education in instructional design and also to use the competencies in each dimension to build individual learning and problem-solving skills. Studies about inquiry-based classroom practices have yielded many positive connections to increased achievement in a variety of areas including reading comprehension (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) and self-regulation (Berry & Englert, 2005; McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006). This appears to be true across differing populations (Amaral,

Garrison, Klentschy, 2002; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Responses from participants in this study revealed a variety of inquiry approaches, but at the heart of their comments were a few key elements such as offering hands-on, concrete tasks, asking authentic questions in order to elicit different understandings, and incorporating student-led learning. Teachers prompted deeper learning in all four areas based on student background knowledge and curiosities.

One participant stated that posing a question and allowing students to research and answer the questions, in groups or individually, with teacher facilitation and guidance was the best way to differentiate. She said:

Social education comes into play with things like working together to find answers and everyone comes to the work with different social assets that have to be navigated when working together. Emotional education plays a role when all students bring important information and strengths to the groups and build confidence. Ethical education plays a role when everyone contributes their own original work. My students have different experiences and value systems and the ethical dispositions they have are different. And academic work involves specific content and standards. Again, students have different academic knowledge that we need to support so they all end up with the academic skills they need. The teaching of respecting perspectives and negotiating personalities and information is the essence of learning. In inquiry, it's all there.

Citing examples of essential questions from Wiggins and McTighe (2005), this participant discussed the importance of asking a relevant and intriguing question in each unit of study to begin student's individual learning.

Another participant stated, "by using inquiry-based practices, students tell you explicitly how they need you to focus your instruction for their needs. It eliminates guessing or preplanning in a generalized way." She explained that she initially thought of DI as an unstructured mess and that most of her strategies involved planning a visual, kinesthetic, and auditory lesson, but most DI approaches seemed too chaotic. However, with the inquiry approach, she felt she got to know her students and planned for them in more individualized ways within a structure. Other participants described IBI differently in different subject areas such as writing and science; however, most descriptions included an integration of social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions for problem solving activities.

Trusting relationships. Lastly, many participants described the value of building a trusting relationship in the classroom community as a source of DI. They described several instances in which participants provided evidence of better learning outcomes due to the trusting environment established. One participant stated, “When my students feel I trust them, they feel valued. Then they engage in their own learning.” Another participant explained that his students often sought out peers and other resources when they lacked knowledge in a certain area. He stated that his students knew the resources in their environment and were free to seek help from others when needed. He explained that students often offered their strengths to help others complete projects. He added that because everyone in the classroom trusted each other, they knew each other well, which built “a classroom of students that differentiated for each other.”

Discussion

This study set out to highlight current practices in differentiating literacy instruction. Results demonstrate the extent to which beliefs about literacy influence integration of social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions when differentiating instruction. Results also indicate teachers know about DI for academic content and have minimal ideas about DI within other dimensions.

Implications

The findings offer a means to examine social, emotional, ethical, and academic instruction separately and integrally. This study also underscores benefits of exploring effective differentiation practices in the context of literacy. Analysis of participant self-reports indicate the varied levels to which Cohen’s four dimensions of education are integrated into instructional design. Similarly, the hesitation from participants to offer ways they are differentiating literacy instruction for students and to report support from administrators indicates the complex issues teachers face when attempting to meet the needs of different learners. This demonstrates the importance of and need to provide continuous professional development during both teacher preparation and during inservice.

Learning is a multifaceted endeavor. Focus on DI solely for content learning often ignores other integral aspects of learning. For example, in the current political climate, acknowledging differences in ethical manifestations and negotiating these different stances may prove significantly important. Additionally, controversies about how ethics manifests in schools often relegate ethical teaching to home environments (Lampe, 2010). Existing research demonstrates that social-emotional competencies contribute to effective learning (Goleman, 1995; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Elias and Weissberg, 2000). These facts further the argument for the need to differentiate with multiple ethical

dispositions in mind; the three methods mentioned in this study provide possibilities for future integration of all dimensions.

Conclusion

As classroom populations continue to change, it is increasingly important for teachers to have an understanding of how to address diverse learning needs in schools. In this study, we were interested in capturing effective DI practices according to the teachers that were implementing them. If we look to the adoption of CCSS and standardized assessments as our marker for what is important to learn, it is clear that academic content and skill is presently important. For this study we chose to look at the four categories that we believe are integral to the process of learning. Similar to findings in the literature, this study reveals the current lack of differentiated teaching in the areas of social, emotional, and ethical education (Bohlin, Dougherty, & Farmer, 2002; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, Pickeral, 2009; Nielsen-Jones, Ryan, & Bohlin, 1999). With the wide variety of cultural beliefs, values, and emotional needs, teaching holistically is complex to say the least. To properly account for the existing population diversity, teachers need to be versed in instructional practices that meet the needs of students who learn in a wide variety of ways.

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