Recently, at our Summer Reading Clinic open house, a parent asked if we “ever had success with a student who doesn’t like to read?” As we were thinking of a response, her son, who is just going into 1st grade in the fall, was telling us how much he likes “bones and skulls.” He took out an object from his pocket and showed us a small dinosaur skeleton that he had put together. Collectively, we responded with positive thoughts about how all of these interests would be an important factor for the first day of the clinic and moving forward with him as a reader. On opening day, we had an abundance of books awaiting him about skeletons, bones, dinosaurs, and skulls. We were eager to see how he would respond. Indeed, within minutes of surrounding him with these books, he was totally engaged, curious, and captivated by the informational texts with which he was encircled. The photo in Figure 1 captures the essence of what happens when you match books to students’ interests. In this instance, the student going into 1st grade had access to books that had pictures, diagrams, and illustrations for him to comprehend. One pop-out book displayed dinosaur skeletons. Since that first day, we noticed how his interest in these topics is both dense and deep—a knowledge base of information far greater than most of his peers.

We reflected on this experience as we realized one more time how critical and essential it is for teachers to get to know their students from many different perspectives. Perhaps this type of “knowing” and information about our students can bridge the missing needed information gap, support struggling students, and scaffold learners into literacy well-being. We bring this example up because more and more we see an emphasis on the assessment of academic skills of the learner and not so much on getting to know who the students are. We see that the start of the school year is often heavy on all sorts of assessments and diagnostic tools to determine their academic profile and get ready for guided reading groupings. As Springer, Harris, and Dole (2017) state, “In light of our current test focused educational climate, some teachers think that their focus must shift away from motivation to read in favor of core-focused instruction. . . . [E]ither we focus on readers’ motivation and interest or we can focus on test-prep and learning” (p. 43). We believe academic assessments are important, but we also believe in the critical information needed to be collected about the lives of our students. It is this rich information that allows us to determine what texts students need to have access to, what read-alouds will capture their attention, how to plan for guided reading materials, and what to include in our classroom libraries and centers that will engage students and immerse them in their quest to literacy. Further, there needs to be a way to balance the data collected on students to reflect both an academic profile and also important information about the life of the student. We believe that getting to know our students is at the heart of differentiation in the balanced literacy classroom. Therefore the purpose of this article is threefold:
1. To offer an overview and definition on the ideas inherent in differentiated instruction.

2. To give a rationale for why we need to get to know our students from multiple perspectives, including both academic profiles along with important information about the life of the learner.

3. To provide examples of strategies and activities for gathering and collecting data on getting to know our students within the balanced literacy classroom routine.

**Overview of Differentiation**

While differentiation has been a trendy topic the last few decades, the origin of the practice most certainly indicates this concept is more “vintage” than “novel.” Teachers in one-room schoolhouses had to differentiate to effectively teach to a variety of ages and grade levels (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017). Despite the substantial developments from the classrooms of our grandparents to the modern classrooms of the 21st century, differentiation remains an effective teaching practice to this day. How can such a practice hold such staying power? Differentiation is an acceptance that teaching a topic one way is not an effective approach for maximizing the learning for most students. Tomlinson (2004) defines differentiation as “ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for that student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning” (p. 188). For many teachers, a differentiated approach starts with a thoughtful examination of what they are teaching, which includes the purpose, how they are teaching it, and how they are going to assess the student’s understanding.

Today, differentiation can often be seen in multiple areas of instruction. Teachers may offer students three different difficulty levels of an assignment that they can choose among. Students could be sorted into various groups throughout the day based upon their needs. At a broader level, a school-wide approach to differentiation comes through the use of Response to Intervention (RTI). Within the RTI system,
students are assessed, placed into one of three tiers, and provided with interventions based upon the tier into which they fall. Students falling into Tier I receive just the general education curriculum, while students in Tiers II and III receive more intensive support (Jefferson, Grant, & Sander, 2017). In each of those examples, teachers are adjusting something within the instructional setting to better meet the needs of the students.

As with most things over time, differentiation has to adapt to meet the complexity of the world around us. One such change is in the method of how instruction is being provided due to advancements in technology. The availability of electronic devices in the classroom, online curriculum, and responsive online programs that adapt to a student’s level of performance all provide a greater flexibility in providing differentiated instruction to students. Today’s students are considered *digital natives* since they have been exposed to technology since birth. These students will benefit from differentiation that effectively utilizes technology and digital resources to support the variety of learners within the classroom (Morgan, 2014).

In planning for a differentiated classroom, no amount of instructional or curricular changes would be effective if they are not meeting students at their instructional level and interests, and taking into account their background knowledge. Teachers must gather a variety of information on their students such as background and demographic information, academic data, and getting to know all about the student, including their interests and how they learn best. While data collection can feel overwhelming, there is support for including more informal data when developing a literacy curriculum like student interest inventories. When teachers incorporate student interest in their teaching, the students are more motivated to learn (Morgan, 2014). Teachers can have informal conferences with students to learn about their hobbies and interests. The responses that the teacher receives on student interest inventories can inform the teacher about what books to add to the classroom library to make sure that there are books that the student would be interested in reading (Policastro & McTague, 2015). When teachers meet the instructional needs and provide text that interests students, differentiated instruction, and student growth, can flourish.

**Rationale for the Life Story Route to Differentiation**

Inherent in the definition of differentiated instruction is the notion and idea of knowing the learner. As we get to know our students, a deeper development of differentiation begins to emerge (Policastro, Mazeski, & Wach, 2011). Hipsky (2011) discusses that every student who walks into your classroom will have a story, individual ways of viewing the world, variations in how they learn, different home lives, and varying skill sets. Thus, we can view the life story that students bring as one of the truest and purest of differentiated teaching. In Figure 2 below, you can see that, when going the life story route, the goal and purpose is to find out all that we can about our students. This includes information about their lives, along with social and emotional issues, all of which have tremendous academic implications.
Getting to know our students can have a tremendous impact on many aspects of the teaching and learning process. Powell and Powell (2011) state that “to maximize learning, we need to dig deeper than the superficial acquaintance . . . . and understand that the business of coming to know our students as learners is simply too important to leave to chance” (pp. 21 & 22). Safir (2017) describes three levels of data that are important in getting to know students deeply. Level 1 is “satellite” data which includes information such as test scores, Level 2 is “map” data which includes such things as teacher-created assessments, and Level 3 is “street” data which tells the untold stories of the student (p. 3). It is the Level 3 data that requires close observation, listening, and getting to know students deeply. It is this “getting to know” aspect of teaching that forms a trust between student and teacher; this method is all about developing important relationships with our students. McDonald (2012) stresses the importance of building relationships as “We must take time to find out how each student is doing and to talk one-on-one. We must take time to care about each student in our classroom” (p. 1). Taking into account the rich diversity of students within our classrooms, we must address this relationship building as part of getting to know our students. Hammond (2014), states that “Culturally responsive teachers take advantage of the fact that our brains are wired for connection. . . . [T]eachers build capacity to establish an authentic connection with students that builds mutual trust and respect” (p. 19).

As we begin to think of ways to promote the life story route and gather information on the life we must keep in mind that children’s life stories need to be celebrated, appreciated and most importantly documented (Policastro, 2010; Policastro et al., 2010). This documentation can come in the form of a memoir. In Figure 3, the multiple ways of representing our lives through a memoir can be seen.

As Policastro and McTague (2015) discuss, “We can tell or dictate our stories, draw, act out and write stories through logs, journals diaries and memoirs. These precious documents show pieces of our lives and eventually the complete autobiography that develops over a life time of experiences” (p. 61). One way to help build a memoir is to use mentor texts. Culham (2014), states that “Learning how to be a writing thief and spot the texts that show students a particular writing skill in action is an effective instructional strategy that supports deep reading, which in turn leads to deep writing” (p. 30). See the Appendix for a list of suggested memoir books to assist in this mentoring process.

1-3 About Me!

At our family open house for the Summer Reading Clinic, we provided bags that were labelled “1-3 About Me!” (see Figure 4), and we asked the children to bring in one to three items about their life such as photos, artifacts, and other small objects. This activity provided an opportunity on the first day for the children to engage in rich conversations and classroom discourse about their lives. We believe that giving children an opportunity to share about their lives in a low-risk environment sets the stage for building a community of learners. On opening day, the children came with their bags filled with pieces of their life. Some items included a hair bow collection, family portraits, crystals, sports items, and much more. One boy brought
in his ukulele. Although it did not fit in his bag, he was so excited that he played for everyone. This activity also provided the teacher with a glimpse into the world of the students. Viewing interests and hobbies of the students firsthand allows for more opportunities to provide access to books and align lessons to the interests of the students. For the students, it allowed time to share about their own life and also to ask questions about the lives of the other students. Often, opening days of school can be a time of anxiety and stress. Allowing children to share their story is one way to start settling in to the classroom routines.

**Making a “Who Am I” Book**

The “1-3 About Me!” activity opens the door to information about the student. Following up with an activity in which the children create a book about themselves moves them into a fun reading and writing activity. In this activity, we suggested that the children select a book from a list provided on the makingbooks.com website (www.makingbooks.com), which provides many ways that children can create their own book and includes information about all of them. Making a “Who Am I” book can be set up as a center where models and examples are provided along with directions and materials to make the book.

In this “Who Am I” book, the student may include information such as “I have gotten hit by a fire work,” “I love Harry Potter,” and “I have a lab in my basement.” We were curious about the lab in the basement and found out it is where she does science experiments.

**Life Line as a Reader: The Literacy Autobiography**

Exploring children’s life lines as readers, which is their developing literacy autobiography, allows students to trace and map backwards their memories of themselves as readers. This is especially important as we look at how the literate lives of our students have evolved to
this point. In some sense, this is an opportunity to examine the dynamics of family literacy and more. We had the children in our clinic create their timelines as readers which involved asking them what their earliest memories about reading were. Did they listen to stories? What books do they remember? They also asked their parents what stories, books, and memories that they had from their very early life line. In Figure 6, you can see that the timeline is divided into categories of age zero to five, Kindergarten and 1st grade, and 2nd grade. The conversations that the children had about this triggered memories that they had forgotten about.

Documenting our students’ literate lives can stack up to a monument of literacy accomplishments. For children, this can begin a path documenting the books they have listened to and read over a period of time. Adding to this timeline is like a treasure chest full of a wealth of important data. Doing this activity in school in “real time” can be beneficial for students who might not have access to books in the home and whose timeline is sparse. This allows them to add to the timeline the classroom books they have read and listened to.

**Why Interests Matter**

Interest is a hook. When a child has an interest in any topic or subject, one of the easiest ways to grasp and hold on to their interest is to follow up with information, making the information easy and accessible for the students. This information can be in the form of text, digital, or non-print information and artifacts. This information is important as we want classroom libraries to be full of information that matches and is in alignment with all the students’ interests. Silva (2006) discusses “[t]heories of interests as split into two distinct fields: (1) interest as part of emotional experiences, curiosity, [and] momentary motivation and (2) interest as part of personality, individual differences, and peoples’ idiosyncratic hobbies, goals and avocations” (p. 4). Interest falls into two categories, individual and situational. Springer et al. (2017) distinguish individual interests as “intrinsic, created over time, long lasting, and personal” (p. 45). Situational interest is described as “interest occurs when teachers create a classroom climate and instructional activities in which everyone is excited to participate” (p. 45).

We believe that following students’ individual interests while expanding their situational interests is important. For example, we set up informational conversational centers where students had choices about selecting which center to explore. Centers were stocked with informational texts and artifacts surrounding topics such as rocks, bugs, animals, sports, making paper airplanes, architecture, weather, and more. We found that children were drawn to these centers with little direction. They were eager to talk to their peers about the information that they were exploring. During this center time, we tracked students’ interests by observing and documenting through an interest tracker. Figure 7 is an example of one student’s interest tracker.
How Parents Can Help

Parents are the ones who know their children the best. In fact, teachers can spend a year with a child and often not glean who the child really is. Parents have the data sources that provide important information that can be used immediately in our planning and developing of lessons for students to be successful. Over the years, we have developed a set of five questions to ask parents about their children when they register for the Summer Reading Clinic. It is always interesting to see what parents include. For example, we ask parents the following questions:

1. Describe your child’s interests and hobbies.
2. Describe your child’s reading and writing strengths.
3. What types of books does your child like?
4. List three main areas that you would like us to focus on over the five-week Reading Clinic.
5. Please tell us how your child learns best.

In the boxed text below is a sample of one parent’s response about their child. We think that this information provides insights and important direction for planning instruction that can be differentiated to this learner’s needs and preferences.

There are many possible opportunities in which to gather and collect this critical data from parents. Before school starts, this inquiry could be sent to parents with a request for it to be returned at the start of school. When parents register their children for school, this could be part of the information collected. Back to School Nights and parent-teacher conferences could also be a venue to yield this information. This information could also be discussed during parent-teacher conferences. We think that passing this information on to the next teacher could be an opportunity for sharing and collaborating about the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Figure 7. Interest Tracker</strong></th>
<th><strong>Example:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Example:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Example:</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describe your child’s interests and hobbies.</strong></td>
<td>Today, Jenny was interested in the rock center.</td>
<td>Jenny brought rocks in from Colorado to display at the rock center.</td>
<td>Today, Jenny went back to the rock center to do research on rocks.</td>
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### Example:

Today, Jenny was interested in the rock center.

Jenny brought rocks in from Colorado to display at the rock center.

Today, Jenny went back to the rock center to do research on rocks.

---

**Describe your child’s interests and hobbies.**

Max is into sports—baseball, soccer, basketball . . . and he takes drum lessons as well as is a purple belt in tae kwon do.

**Describe your child’s reading and writing strengths.**

Max is slowly growing in his reading. He likes to see how many words he can read in a minute and then try to beat it the next time he reads. He has the basics; just afraid of new things. He does like to write—mainly notes to our family and friends, signs that he posts around the house, etc.:) He definitely spells things as they sound to him.:)"}

**What types of books does your child like?**

Max likes the “Who Would Win” series . . . and Captain Underpants. He cannot read them all himself, but he likes to read them with us.

**List three main areas that you would like us to focus over the five-week Reading Clinic.**

Max’s reading is coming along, although slowly. He is afraid to take risks in reading . . . . He prefers to know the entire sentence before saying it out loud. I struggle to get him to sound things out. (1) Raise his confidence level in reading; (2) teach him that reading can be fun, not boring; and (3) [provide] strategies to read the big words.

**Please tell us how your child learns best.**

Max is an active kid. He is not a huge fan of worksheets, etc. He needs activities to engage him (i.e., games, partner activities, etc.).
Putting It All Together in the Balanced Literacy Classroom

When we think about how to go about getting to know our students, especially during the first months within the balanced literacy classroom routines, we can plan activities that center on read-alouds, guided reading, independent reading, and writing along with centers. Interactive read-alouds can highlight both memoirs and autobiographies of famous people. These read-alouds can focus on finding evidence from the text that brings forth elements of the characters’ lives and identifies who the person is. Guided reading can be followed up with informational text that features more information about the characters’ lives. Small reading groups can focus on the life lines of the characters. Center time can be a time during which the children have an opportunity to actually make their “Who Am I” books and create their literacy autobiography/life line as a reader project. Independent reading can highlight mentor texts that students can read and then use to write their own autobiographies (see below).

Conclusion

There is much to balance in the balanced literacy classroom. The notions and ideas of getting to know our students, who they are and their life stories, must be balanced with their academic learning profile. Thus, rethinking practices to include the life of our students can greatly enhance and enrich the learning experience. Indeed, merging this information into the daily deliberate decision-making process about each child is the heart of differentiation in the balanced literacy classroom.

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References


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Resources for Writing/Collaging Memoir/Making Timelines


Appendix: Memoir and Autobiographical Selections for Students (Elementary, Middle School, and Upward)


