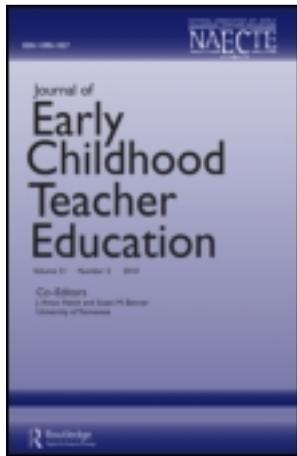


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Practice What We Preach: Differentiating Instruction and Assessment in a Higher Education Classroom as a Model of Effective Pedagogy for Early Childhood Teacher Education Candidates

Carolyn J. Griess^a & Jane B. Keat^a

^a Department of Behavioral Sciences and Education, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, Middletown, Pennsylvania, USA

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Practice What We Preach: Differentiating Instruction and Assessment in a Higher Education Classroom as a Model of Effective Pedagogy for Early Childhood Teacher Education Candidates

CAROLYN J. GRIESS AND JANE B. KEAT

Department of Behavioral Sciences and Education, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, Middletown, Pennsylvania, USA

Teacher education faculty are experiencing increasingly diverse higher education classrooms. In many ways, the diversities present in collegiate classrooms mirror the differences in classrooms of young children. The diversity may be a result of a range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic differences. Or it may be differences resulting from previous experiences, background knowledge, learning style, needs, or interests. In this article, two university colleagues present challenges related to meeting a plethora of learner needs in a course with participants from three different programs of study. The authors describe the challenges faced, steps taken to use the challenges as opportunities for growth, and the outcomes of their efforts. The authors candidly describe how they used the principles of Differentiated Instruction to model effective pedagogy for their early childhood teacher educator candidates.

Introduction

Early childhood classrooms in the United States are more diverse than ever. Young children come to classrooms with a variety of past experiences, a range of personal interests, and a collection of learning styles. Today's classrooms are full of children that represent a wide array of abilities, needs, and opportunities as a result of an increase in immigrant families with children who are linguistically diverse (Fortuny, 2010), a commitment to provide the least restrictive environment to individuals with special needs, and the implementation of classroom-based intervention programs (such as response to intervention). These, and a range of other factors, contribute to the cornucopia of differences that can enhance a learning community.

Many teacher preparation programs that prepare individuals to work in these diverse classrooms are homogeneous in race and gender. However, teacher education candidates are highly diverse in other ways. Much like the children and families they serve, candidates range in type of intelligence (linguistic, interpersonal, musical, etc.), previous experiences, personal interests, cognitive abilities, goals, and an array of other criteria. So, in ways that are similar to how early childhood teachers experience diversity in their classrooms, university faculty also experience diversity in their higher education classrooms.

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Address correspondence to Carolyn J. Griess, Department of Behavioral Sciences and Education, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, W331 Olmsted, Middletown, PA 17057, USA. E-mail: cjg130@psu.edu

In this article, we, as university faculty, reflect on our practice of meeting the diverse needs of our early childhood education teacher education candidates. Although we represent one campus, our unique experience is increasing in teacher education programs across the country (Blank, 2010; Huss-Keller & Brown, 2007). Our context is a confluence of learners participating in differing degree and credential programs within a series of courses. Side-by-side in our university classrooms are preservice and in-service teachers completing one of three different programs of study. So, in addition to the diversities that are typically present in any classroom there are an additional set of needs and opportunities emerging from bachelor's, master's and nondegree candidates learning together. Although such differing candidate needs might seem problematic, we have embraced the diversity for a variety of philosophical and pedagogical reasons. In this article we focus on the questions and answers we asked of ourselves, as faculty members, and as researchers when we intentionally differentiated instruction and assessment to meet diverse needs and model effective pedagogy.

A Unique Context

We teach undergraduate and graduate courses at a South Central Pennsylvania suburban university in the department of teacher education. Jane has taught at this land-grant university since 1990 and is the Coordinator of Early and Middle Level Programs among other responsibilities. Carolyn has taught alongside Jane in the early childhood courses at the university since 2008. The course at the center of this article is titled Early Childhood Curriculum. The class is offered one night per week over a 15-week semester. Course goals taken from the most recent syllabus are as follows:

The purpose of this course is to prepare early childhood educators with knowledge of the theory, research and recommended strategies that foster the development and learning of all young children. This course is designed to provide learners with opportunity to enhance their ability to design the relationships, environments, curriculum and instruction, recommended by research, to assure the learning progress of children from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds and with all physical, emotional, social and cognitive abilities. To accomplish the purpose, the course is taught with a combination of direct, constructivist and differentiated instruction.

Course objectives: Successful learners in this course demonstrate achievement of the following course objectives:

1. Differentiate between typical and atypical development of children birth through age eight in this time of inclusive education.
2. Describe and demonstrate positive relationships and supportive interactions as the foundation for work with all young children with an emphasis on sensitivity to those from diverse cultural and linguistic families and communities.
3. Summarize theory and research foundational to NAEYC and Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards for all young children.
4. Explain and apply effective approaches and strategies and technologies for early education to assure development and learning for all young children.
5. Explain the importance, central concepts, inquiry tools, and structure of content areas or academic disciplines to assure the development and learning of all young children.

6. Design a meaningful, challenging curriculum to promote positive outcomes using the Pennsylvania Standards Aligned System (SAS). Implement and evaluate elements of this curriculum with children to the extent possible.
7. Create and implement a systematic research study to learn more about an issue of importance that is related to course content.
8. Articulate and advocate for sound professional practices and public policies for the positive development and learning of all young children.

Early Childhood Curriculum is part of three distinct programs of study: (a) preservice teacher preparation resulting in a bachelor's degree and preK–4th-grade teacher certification; (b) in-service teacher development resulting in a master's degree; and (c) in-service child care administrator and teacher development resulting in a state-approved director's credential. Consequently, within this course are diverse candidates in the areas of age (20–72 years old), university status (pre- and in-service), program type (nondegree, bachelor's, and master's degrees); employment setting (public preK–secondary schools, center-based child care, and family/home based child care); and employment title (teacher, assistant teacher, center director, center assistant director, curriculum specialist, and center owner).

In this article two sections of Early Childhood Curriculum are presented. One section Jane taught and met during the spring 2005 semester and consisted of 17 candidates. This section was fairly evenly distributed between programs with five candidates in the bachelor's degree program, five candidates in the master's degree program, and seven enrolled in the nondegree director's credential program. Having candidates that represented each program somewhat evenly allowed for interactions within each group, as well as across groups. The second section highlighted in this study Carolyn taught and met during the spring 2011 semester. Of the 20 enrolled candidates, 15 were earning a bachelor's degree, two were working towards a master's degree and a director's credential, and three were in the director's credential program. This uneven distribution presented a challenge when attempting to create heterogeneous groups. It also necessitated maintaining an active awareness of the needs of the five nonundergraduate candidates so that they were not overlooked in the landscape of so many preservice teachers.

Merging three distinct learner types into one course is a matter of efficiency. Since two subgroups (master's degree candidates and director's credential candidates) are typically few in number, holding separate courses is not effective use of university resources. Further, we as course instructors believe there are benefits to combining the candidate types even though it can be challenging. Both the benefits and challenges will be addressed in subsequent sections.

The Early Childhood Curriculum course is required to meet multiple regulations and accreditation standards. As part of a large university system, there are university policies which must be followed regarding course implementation, requirements, and expectations. For example, university policy requires the same key assessment for all candidates regardless of program. The course is part of the state's teacher credentialing program and must meet competencies identified by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Since the teacher education program is nationally accredited, the course is required to meet standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). And finally, as this three credit course is approved as part of a nine-credit state director's credential, the course must meet objectives defined by the state Office of Child Development and Learning (OCDEL).

Although there is some overlap between expectations of these organizations, there are specific competencies and outcomes that have been assigned to the course for each agency (university, PDE, NCATE, OCDEL). As faculty, we are acutely aware of our obligation to meet the expectations of each agency and also to be responsive to candidate needs. In many ways, we mirror the struggle our candidates experience in the field when attempting to meet the required curriculum while also desiring to customize learning. This tension between standardization and curricular freedom is an authentic struggle for many educators. We embrace systems that are designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Yet, we sometimes experience frustration at not being able to cover topics candidates want to learn because of what we are required to teach.

Another challenge we experienced related to the diversity of past experiences that prepared candidates for this course content. In the Early Childhood Curriculum course, candidates' preparedness to meet rigorous course expectations differs widely on a continuum. For example, some candidates have never heard the terminology "scope and sequence" whereas others have served on curriculum committees and are experienced in curriculum development. Attempting to provide the right amount of challenge and support when candidates' entry knowledge varied added to the complexity for us as instructors.

Overall, what presented the greatest challenge related to the candidate's role: preschool teacher, K–12 teacher, child care curriculum specialist, center director, or center owner. Based on the candidate's current or desired position, the perceived usefulness of content and assignments was questioned. For example, preservice PreK–4 public school teachers often bemoaned that creating *scope and sequence* was outside the sphere of their job responsibilities and that the assignment lacked relevance. Child care teachers, center directors and owners often felt frustrated at being required to write highly detailed lesson plans that met the requirements of the university, but did not reflect the type of lesson planning that was required in their centers. Curriculum specialists were sometimes challenged to complete a teacher inquiry project when they did not have their own classrooms or do not teach on a regular basis.

As a result of this complicated context we often found ourselves in one another's office discussing the challenges and possible solutions. Our conversations swirled around ethical obligations to stakeholders and moral obligations to candidates. We asked, "How could we do the right thing for both our university and our candidates?" We openly debated adjustments to assignments that would still meet course objectives, yet might be more authentic for candidates. From semester to semester, we incorporated different textbooks and required readings. However, despite what was changed or revised we consistently came back to our beliefs about teaching and learning: that it should be candidate-centered, authentic, and individualized. And in the forefront, our goal was (and is) always to develop competent teachers and leaders of young children and their families.

Our Pedagogical Context

As early childhood faculty, we are committed to the importance of developmentally appropriate and challenging learning experiences, culturally responsive and respectful classrooms, constructivist learning, and differentiated instruction and assessment. We hold this philosophical stance related to the teaching of and learning by both children and adults. As we teach courses related to childhood development, pedagogy, assessment, and families and communities we espouse the tenets of Bronfenbrenner, Dewey, Erickson, Maslow, Piaget, and Vygotsky.

Beyond espousal, at different times and in different ways we intentionally teach in such a way as to model the theories candidates are learning about in our classrooms. Built into each course is community building, direct instruction, Socratic and cooperative learning, and engaging in teacher inquiry. We embed issues of diversity, conduct formative and summative assessments, interweave candidate interests as often as possible, and utilize technology to enhance learning when appropriate. As we design our own instruction, we are intentional about *practicing what we preach* and have seen that the modeling of such practices has benefited our candidates.

Against this backdrop of intentional teaching practices, Early Childhood Curriculum proved to be especially challenging. It was difficult to meet both course requirements and candidate expectations. We were acutely aware that candidates had glaringly different needs when it came to how to best learn the content and use that learning after the course finished. Each semester the course went through another adjustment or revision to the syllabus to attempt to make the workload more meaningful and more manageable. These revisions were primarily related to textbook choices and assessments. We believed the course benefited candidates' learning and practice, but achieving the goals was proving more and more difficult each semester.

Differentiation

What became apparent was that only individualizing course materials and assignments minimally was insufficient. We needed to address the challenges with even greater intentionality. It was clear that a solution was to model an instructional approach that we taught throughout our programs of study: differentiation. With such diverse backgrounds, abilities, and needs we were presented with a prime opportunity to openly differentiate our instruction and assessment. We saw this method as a tool for teaching about differentiation and to solve the challenges of the course. Due to university and accrediting limitations, we were restricted in the degree to which we could differentiate assessment, however differentiating instruction and learning became the heart of our work.

Differentiation is a widely adopted approach to teaching in classrooms for children and adolescents. Differentiation focuses on how *content* is presented, the *process* of how material is learned, how the *product* of that learning is expressed, and an *environment* that respects difference in cultures and interaction styles (Tomlinson, 2000a). It is compatible with inclusive practices of children with [dis]abilities (Lawrence-Brown, 2004) and a standards-based accountability system (McTighe & Brown, 2005; Tomlinson, 2000b).

Differentiated instruction is a platform for implementing sound pedagogical practice. Differentiated instruction encourages an emotionally safe environment for learning by addressing individual needs rather than assuming all needs are the same. We also know that learners benefit when there is an appropriate degree of challenge and a sufficient experience with mastery. Differentiated instruction allows for content and experiences to be manipulated to provide learners with adequate rigor.

Personal Experiences Differentiating

In the sections to follow, we will separately share our experiences implementing the course in a highly differentiated manner. Depending on course load and other university responsibilities, the course is assigned to one of us, typically in the spring semester. Jane's story took place in the spring 2005 semester with 17 candidates. Carolyn's story tells what happened in the spring 2011 semester with one section comprised of 20 candidates.

Jane's Story

Although I had taught graduate candidates in higher education for more than 15 years, after moving from one campus to another and taking on a new course schedule, I often heard myself complaining and worrying. "How can I possibly meet the unique needs of this exceptionally diverse group of candidates? Is it impossible to teach to a group of persons with so many different goals, skills, worries, and past experiences?" On one particular day, I heard myself complaining, and I also heard the echo of the complaints and concerns of many graduate candidates over the previous years. Teachers today all must become skillful at differentiating for learners with different pasts, goals, abilities, etc. Suddenly, I knew that this course was an opportunity rather than a problem. Suddenly, I recognized the opportunity to differentiate instruction transparently and ostentatiously. Suddenly, I realized that the candidates in my class could learn both experientially and cognitively what it is to be a learner in a differentiated learning classroom and how a teacher arranges instruction in differentiated ways. Needless to say, I stopped complaining and began to reread differentiated research and redesign the course syllabus.

On the first evening of class, I used my most enthusiastic voice to point out that this course would be taught in a manner the might feel different from others. I asked each person to pay particular attention to class introductions to identify the different goals of the learners in the class. Of course, we all recognized that some were undergraduate candidates, some were graduate candidates and some were nondegree candidates, and members of each group were working toward the goal of a different state certificate or credential. In this discussion, we also identified other differences among us. Our ages ranged from 20 to 62, and our previous schooling had been acquired during differing decades with different emphases. In subsequent discussion, we heard that our prior knowledge included varying degrees of experiences with young children, family constellations, learning theories, state standards, academic reading, and assigned writings.

Next on the agenda for the first evening of class was the introduction of the syllabus. Before distributing the syllabus, I explained my intention to enact as many recommended practices as I could within the course. I listed several principles of early childhood education that would be modeled, such as founding all instructional interactions upon a basis of a strong relationship of trust, and planning instructional activities in which knowledge could be constructed by learners. Further, I explained my decision to design ways to differentiate instruction in ways that invited each person to use his or her unique forms of intelligence to construct and represent knowledge. Also, I explained that I had taught for many years without differentiating to this degree and would need the assistance of my candidates to help me understand what was working and what was unclear or difficult to enact.

Differentiation of resources was the first form experienced by the candidates. Four textbooks were identified, and a list of questions was provided to guide the choice of book. During the first class session, candidates engaged in three center activities. In one center, candidates met with me to discuss the match between the learner and the textbook. The reading for the subsequent week was comprised of articles found within the university library system. Each person had acquired their textbook by the third week of class. In a second center, candidates met in small groups to complete a multiple intelligence instrument and discuss the implications of such knowledge for engaging in differentiated instruction. In the third center, candidates described their goals and hopes for the course. Over the semester, I returned to these notes frequently to be sure that each individual was progressing to her identified goals as well as to the achievement of course objectives.

Differentiation of instruction was the second form experienced by candidates. Our 15 weeks of class time were an opportunity for me to design combinations of interactive direct instruction and learning centers with differing grouping characteristics. To provide candidates with the comfort of a reliable routine, the general format of each class session was the same. Each session included morning meeting (approximately 45 minutes), interactive direct instruction (approximately 45 minutes), break (10 minutes), center time (50–60 minutes), and summarizing time (10–20 minutes). During morning meeting, candidates engaged in a focused greeting, shared responses to unique reading, and received announcements regarding the grouping structure for interactive direct instruction time. During the first three sessions, candidates selected where they sat while they were provided direct instruction with PowerPoint slides and frequent pauses for candidate interaction. Therefore, the pair-share discussions were primarily with persons of similar ages who were pursuing the same academic goal. Eventually, I modeled ways a teacher can gradually increase the uses of teacher authority to assign candidates to groups to expand the quantity and quality of pair-share interactions. At the conclusion of the fourth session of morning meeting, I asked candidates to sit with someone they did not know well. The next week, I distributed color-coded cards with candidate names and paired numbers, so candidates found their assigned partners. Sometimes, the assigned groups would be based a person's preferred way of representing knowledge; other times, the grouping assignment would be based on questions asked in weekly reflections or on content area strengths. Eventually, I simply posted a PowerPoint slide with assigned groupings for the direct instruction portion of the class session. In each case, I explained to the class my teacher-reasons for assigning groups. By the time the semester concluded, undergraduates, graduate candidates and non-degree candidates not only knew each other's names, but they knew each other's priorities, experiences, preferences, reasons, and more.

Learning centers offered the candidates and me many opportunities to explore and examine multiple ways that learners can construct new knowledge and many ways that learners can report what was learned. Each week during the break, I created centers by distributing bags of materials to be used at each center (groups of four or six chairs.) Each bag contained a sheet of assignment directions and a variety of materials to use to complete the assignment. At first, I organized the class sessions so that candidates would stay at one center during the entire center time. For example, when candidates were representing knowledge with their preferred form of intelligence, they remained at the center with the materials needed to complete the assignment. Later in the semester, center time was organized so that candidates would spend a portion of time at several centers, and complete each center in an allotted period of time. As an example, when candidates examined the general principles and structures of Project Approach, Highscope Curriculum, and Creative Curriculum, candidates were provided with the needed materials at each center and were given a 15–20 minutes time period at each center. As another example, during the mathematics session, each center related to a mathematics curriculum focal point, such as number and operations, measurement, geometry, data representation and algebra, and contained manipulative materials, children's books, and suggestions from the website of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Candidates were alerted to the 15-minute time allotment before moving to a different center.

When learning centers were formed on the basis of preferred form of intelligence, one group searched articles and reported in graphic organizer form, while another group searched stories and reported in detailed drawing or drama form. When learning centers were formed on the basis of preferred grade group, undergraduate candidates in a field experience second-grade classroom worked with public school teachers of second grade and

directors of school-age programs with second-grade children. In my journal one evening, I noted that undergraduates contributed language of learning theorists such as Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner, while public school teachers contributed concepts of standards alignment, and child care directors contributed information about school-age research and family needs.

Differentiation of requirements was the third form experienced by the candidates. In the syllabus, candidates saw that achievement of each course objective could be represented in one of three different ways. At first, as I designed the course, I struggled with how to invite multiple forms of representation of objective achievement while retaining a manageable rubric. I still remember the day when I realized that the rubric could be designed to identify qualitative differences of objective achievement without mentioning the form of representation. In other words, I would not be evaluating the quality of the representation, only the quality of the achievement of the objective. For example, to show that the learner could explain differences between typical and atypical development of children birth through age 8, candidates could construct a board game or design a graphic organizer or write a story or prepare a research report. To make sure that the instructor understood the candidate's message, the candidate was required to include a one-page explanation of how the representation provided evidence of objective achievement. The rubric could relate to details of developmental characteristics at different ages and stages. As the instructor, I received several versions of each form of representation of achieving this objective.

As a second example, to show that the candidates could "demonstrate positive relationships and supportive interactions as the foundation for work with all young children with an emphasis on sensitivity to those from diverse cultural and linguistic families and communities" (objective two), candidates could choose to represent their knowledge with a detailed drawing, a role-play, or a synthesized research report of three sources along with a one-page explanation of how the representation provided evidence of objective achievement. The rubric could focus on details related to supportive and unsupportive relationships. Again, I received several representations of each type. I began to see that the discomfort level of some learners had decreased when one pair asked if they could change the role play option into a video tape of their minidrama. Over the course of the semester, candidates gradually moved from using the alternate forms of representation to simply writing a report of course achievement. I wondered aloud if confidence in their writing skills had increased, and heard many comments of agreement from the candidates.

Two requirements were *not differentiated*. For many reasons, I thought it important that candidates conclude the semester with two assignments that were not differentiated. The first was a teacher research inquiry that each candidate designed, implemented, and reported individually in the form of a paper. The second was a key assessment design of a curriculum, unit, and collection of lesson plans in a content area. This key assessment could be designed by pairs or by individuals. Undergraduate candidates worked together on this project, while most practicing teachers and directors worked individually to design for their work place.

Candidate thoughts on their differentiation experience were collected toward the end of the semester. I asked the candidates to anonymously complete a survey about their experiences and preferences. As I read the survey responses, I learned that most of the candidates had not previously encountered a differentiated instruction course before, and more than half of the candidates described feeling uncomfortable or nervous at first. Many candidates expected precise directions and examples of each assignment. Without specific information of what the instructor wanted, candidates were concerned about how their grade would be computed. In spite of aligned objectives, assessments, and rubrics, discomfort was

expressed at first. By the end of the course, many candidates explained that once they relaxed and trusted the instructor, they actually enjoyed this new process. All candidates indicated surprise that the rubrics did provide them with specific guidance, and the trick was to find a way to provide evidence of meeting the objective. Many candidates explained that they had tried new things, taken in new perspectives, enjoyed surprising new insights, and eventually used the rubric to guide their work. As the instructor of the course, I valued the explanation of the candidate who wrote, "I thought I might have worked more quickly if I was just told what I needed to do. But I am not convinced it would have been better work or better learning." Candidates also made suggestions for me to consider. More than half the class requested a few early due dates within the first few weeks of the semester to provide instructor reassurance about grading. At the conclusion of the course, candidates' evaluations for the quality of the instructor were 6.24 on a 7.00 point scale. On the last evening of class, the candidates and I summarized our experiences in this course that had indeed felt different. I acknowledged some anxiety at first, because so many of the expectations and experiences felt different. In addition, I reported that I had relaxed as I saw increased risk-taking on the part of myself and my candidates. Further, I applauded each candidate for a specific accomplishment that had seemed especially difficult at the beginning. To my surprise, this class of differentiated individuals with differentiated goals, strengths, and stories had provided me with a professional experience of enhanced creativity and satisfaction.

Carolyn's Story

Teaching any course for the first time can be challenging enough. But I became acutely aware my first time teaching Early Childhood Curriculum that there were distinct differences between this course and my other assigned courses. I quickly saw the need to differentiate my instruction, but was limited in ability to do so until I had a stronger grasp of the course itself. By my third assignment to teach the course I was rapt and ready to make significant changes to how course material was presented and engaged in by the candidates.

One significant change to my pedagogical approach was to create an environment that would support and capitalize on the differences present in the room, rather than attempt to minimize them. In reflection, I became aware that because of my discomfort with the vast differences in candidates' abilities and needs I attempted to deal with them by focusing on how candidates were more alike than different. In my syllabus, presentation materials, and words in the classroom I was consistently trying to show candidates their similarities, common needs, and common abilities. I would articulate where candidates strengths were similar across groups as well as where their challenges were similar across groups. In retrospect, I was attempting to promote a homogenous classroom.

In the spring of 2011, I made a deliberate effort to make my pedagogical practices transparent. First, I made a conscious effort to articulate for candidates my choices. I provided background as to why I made choices about what information was presented, how it was presented, and whom it was directed toward. I described my thought process when forming groups or why I chose to allow candidates to make their own groups. As I worked my way through each evening class, I would pause and articulate my rationale for use of an instructional strategy or why I chose the example used. Candidates seemed to respond to being able to peek inside my thought process and it seemed to assist them in making connections between theory and practice. I was invigorated by the new challenge to design instruction in such a way that it would be meaningful when made transparent.

In addition to *pulling back the curtain of my mind*, I sought to differentiate through intentional grouping strategies. At times I created groups that possessed heterogeneous

knowledge. Activities were designed to facilitate peer learning and individuals were assigned roles to support the group learning. For example, preservice teachers who were well practiced in writing formal lesson plans were grouped with child care directors who had never been exposed to the university lesson plan format. The group was instructed to discuss the types of lesson plans each candidate was familiar with and the strengths and challenges of each. Through the discussion, preservice candidates came to realize that although the university format was lengthy, the detail required helped them plan for their lesson and execute it effectively. Child care center directors recognized that weekly lesson plans that fit onto one piece of paper lacked enough detail to feel assured that learning was occurring.

Another grouping strategy that proved to be especially beneficial was the use of *horizontal* and *vertical* teams that remained consistent throughout the entire semester. In an attempt to replicate what happens in many elementary school settings, candidates were first placed in horizontal teams based on the age or grade level they had self-selected to focus their work on that semester. Just as the third-grade teachers in a building meet regularly to discuss grade-level issues, so would candidates during coursework. For example, as we studied developmentally appropriate practices candidates would be instructed to move into their horizontal teams for discussion and group activities. The intent was to have candidates engage deeply with the material.

Over the course of the semester when the breadth of material seemed highly relevant, candidates would be directed to join their vertical teams. Each vertical team had at least one candidate who had chosen to focus on each of the age/grade levels from infancy through third grade. This was especially beneficial as we focused on the state early learning standards. Candidates discussed how standards stranded through each age/grade level, paying particular attention to the nuances of how the concept was adapted to be developmentally appropriate to children's cognitive or physical abilities. Although at times certain candidates would struggle with interpersonality issues in their horizontal or vertical groups, the richness of discussion and substantive work product encouraged me that the strategy was effective.

Assessment in my course was not as highly differentiated as Jane's. I joined this university shortly after their initial NCATE accreditation. Meeting state competencies and national standards has been of high importance to the faculty unit and I felt a sense of responsibility to implement what was promised. In addition, as I was making changes to my instruction I was hesitant to make too many changes to the assignments—wanting to make sure the learning and the assessment truly aligned. As a result, I allowed for two points of differentiation within the key assessment that met NCATE requirements. Depending on candidates' strengths, needs, and preferences they were able to choose between two options for meeting the requirement to create a scope and sequence and two options for the requirement of developing a curricular unit. During whole class instruction I expressed which options I believed would be best suited for each type of learner. Over several class periods I met with candidates individually to discuss what option they were most interested in completing. In the end, it was truly their choice and most candidates chose the option that would provide them the most growth versus the option that appeared less demanding.

At times, all three candidate types expressed frustration with the rigor of assignments. Preservice teachers mostly questioned the usefulness of the scope and sequence. In-service teachers and child care center directors expressed that the university approved lesson plan format was not realistic compared to the ways "real teachers" lesson plan. I continuously attempted to identify the rationale for the assignments and the benefits for completing them in required ways. I was fortunate to have stories to tell of former candidates who

completed these assignments and their reports months after the course had ended about their usefulness. Despite the complaints verbalized in class, overall candidate rating of teacher effectiveness scores for the semester were high. The overall rating for the course average was 6.58 on a 7-point scale. Many comments were made in the open-ended portion of the survey. However, none spoke directly or indirectly to the differentiation methods used for instruction or assessment.

Implication

Teacher preparation faculty often practice the very strategies they teach their candidates. However, as higher education increasingly mirrors the complexities of the PreK–12 environment, faculty are more fully identifying with the challenge of their candidates: meeting learner needs while operating under higher levels of accountability.

Federal initiatives and state budgets targeted toward high-quality early childhood education are increasing in number and are closely monitored. As policy makers implement programs intended to raise quality, higher education faculty has a crucial role to play in teacher preparation and development. Faculty are confronted with finding ways to meet university obligations, external standards, and candidate's individual needs. Higher education classrooms that contain learners from one program type (e.g., only M.Ed. candidates) might at first-glance appear more homogeneous than the context described in this article. However, when thinking about criteria such as academic preparation, years of experience in the field, language and cultural differences, candidates' interests, and candidates' expectations it is clear that few classrooms are truly homogeneous. With this understanding, finding ways to effectively differentiate course goals becomes even more important.

As we, the higher education community, embrace differentiation in our classrooms there seems to be two clear implications. First, we are modeling for our learners the very concepts and behaviors that we encourage them to practice. Also, experiencing differentiated instruction increases their understanding of the effectiveness of this approach and is likely to increase buy-in for differentiating their own classrooms.

Second, differentiating coursework to meet varied learner needs implies that individual achievement will increase. We define achievement by not just a grade earned, but also to include mastery of content. Undergraduate, graduate, and nondegree learners participating in differentiated learning experiences have the opportunity to engage with content in ways targeted toward their individual needs and sometimes individual preferences. This is likely to result in higher levels of thinking and deeper levels of understanding.

Diverse candidate needs often felt (and sometimes still feel) overwhelming to us. Preparing for the course and individual classes is sometimes challenging. On the surface it seems a solution would be to segregate candidates by program type. However, we have consistently agreed that course discussions, group activities, and outcomes are enhanced by the diversity represented of mixed-program type candidates.

We feel privileged that at our university we do not face these challenges in isolation. We teach in a collegial program that places a high value on collaboration and open debate. Our partnership (tenured faculty and junior lecturer) has been especially rewarding. Together we navigate the important work of teacher preparation and development. We remain current in the field, sensitive to our learners, and engaged in accountability measures. Although at times it seems as though academic freedom has been reduced in the era of standardization, we have found that thoughtful, inquisitive, and imaginative professors can practice what they preach. Our hope is that our candidates echo our efforts – taking reflective practice, a stance toward inquiry, creativity, and differentiation back to their very own classrooms.

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