Using Observation to Improve Instruction

By making the rounds of classrooms, administrators in this Malaysian school raise teachers' awareness of differentiated instruction.

William Powell and Susan Napoliello

Many teachers and administrators in East Asia and Africa are wrestling with fundamental questions regarding differentiated instruction: Does differentiated instruction mean preparing 23 different lesson plans? Where do teachers find the time? How can teachers assess students fairly? What does differentiation actually look like in the classroom? (Kusuma-Powell, 2003).

To address such questions, the International School of Kuala Lumpur (ISKL) in Malaysia, which serves international students in preschool through middle school, has focused a great deal of professional attention on differentiation. Like many schools around the world, ISKL has witnessed a significant demographic shift in student population during the last two decades. Because of economic patterns in Southeast Asia, more students from non-English-speaking countries—particularly Japan and Korea—are attending our school. And the many students who still come from school experiences in the United States arrive expecting individualized supports for any learning disabilities they may have, comparable to those mandated by legislation enacted in their home country.

As a result, we believed our school needed to do more to support differentiation than send teachers to conferences and bring in helpful resources. As two of the school's key administrators, we developed a classroom visitation strategy we call a "protocol for the rounds." This strategy encourages and supports differentiated instruction by giving teachers constructive feedback focused on differentiating teaching and by establishing a process for teacher collaboration. The initial results and teacher responses have been extremely promising.

The protocol confirms an instructional norm that classroom teachers at ISKL will take into account the needs of students who learn differently as they plan units of study. Although teachers and learning specialists share in planning and arranging instruction for students with learning disabilities, the responsibility for seeing that these students learn belongs to their teachers.

The protocol also reinforces the use of effective pedagogical strategies and actively connects practice to learning theory. Often, what master teachers do effectively in the classroom is based on intuitive knowledge. The protocol shines a light on what may be happening unconsciously and connects these strategies to recent research, helping teachers to validate their practices.

Another benefit of the protocol is that it stimulates intellectually challenging professional dialogue among teaching colleagues—one of the most important barometers of school improvement (Barth, 1990). Our thinking and planning for the walk-through protocol were influenced by

the work of the administrators at the International School of Bangkok and guidelines from Curriculum Management Service (2001).

Four Keys to Differentiated Instruction

We first set out to identify from the research literature the foundations underlying differentiated instruction (Kusuma-Powell & Powell, 2004; Tomlinson, 2001). Our investigation suggested four keys to differentiated instruction, which became simultaneously the benchmarks and the goals of the protocol (Kusuma-Powell & Powell, 2004). These four keys are

Photos courtesy of William Powell and Susan Napoliello

William Powell and Susan Napoliello observe a class at the International School of Kuala Lumpur, watching for differentiated instruction.

Our purpose was to gain a snapshot perspective of the state of differentiated instruction in the school.

- Deep knowledge of the student as a learner;
- Deep knowledge of the content of the curriculum;
- A broad repertoire of effective instructional strategies; and
- A willingness to engage in collaborative planning, assessment, and reflection.

The Observation Protocol

To move from theory to practice, we compiled various indicators of differentiated instruction that we might expect to see and hear when visiting classrooms, such as flexible grouping, student choice, the use of wait time, and other attributes of a classroom environment that promotes equal access to the curriculum. These teacher and student behaviors served as an initial dipstick of effective differentiation within the school. We then scheduled ourselves to conduct brief walk-through observations (about five minutes long) of every elementary class in the school on a grade-by-grade basis. We hoped to observe each elementary class twice a semester. Our purpose in these walk-throughs was to engage in focused observations and gain a snapshot perspective of the state of differentiated instruction in the school.

We announced the initial walk-throughs in advance, specifying when we would be visiting the grade-level teams, and explained the purpose of the observations at an elementary faculty meeting. Although we tried to make clear that walk-through observations were *not* evaluations of specific teachers, some teachers still feared that the walk-throughs might include an element of appraisal.

To avoid causing teachers anxiety, we decided against showing them the list we had compiled of indicators of differentiation. We did not want teachers assuming that every strategy had to be present in every lesson or, worse still, coming to believe that differentiation was a simplistic pedagogical recipe—that if the "right" collection of activities is present, differentiation is happening (Kusuma-Powell & Powell, in press).

Providing Feedback

After each walk-through, we sat together for about 10 minutes and analyzed what we had just seen in terms of the indicators of differentiated instruction. One strength of the protocol was the power of joint observation of classroom instruction. Not only did the two of us pay attention to different features of the classroom, but we also actually saw different things. Our individual interpretations of what we witnessed led to intellectually stimulating conversations, probing questions, and, on occasion, powerful insights.

In several of the kindergarten classes, we observed the skillful use of student choice (Glasser, 1988), with students allowed some degree of discretion in planning their own learning activities for the day. Students' possible choices—such as focusing on math work, art, games, writing, or the class library—were color-coded, and teachers ensured that the students didn't end up with a steady monochromatic diet. Most important, teachers held the students accountable for following their individual work center plans. When a

youngster strayed from his or her choices, we heard teachers asking, "Are you changing your plan?" This strategy kept the locus of responsibility internal to the student (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Following our walk-through observation for each grade level and our analysis of the data, we drafted a brief e-mail to the grade-level team of teachers giving feedback on what we had observed. The e-mails went out on the same day we did our walk-throughs because research shows that timeliness is essential for feedback to be effective (McCauley, Moxley, & Van Velsor, 1998). Feedback simply described effective differentiation strategies we observed, without giving criticism, advice, or recommendations. Although we discussed teacher and student behaviors that we witnessed in a specific class, we kept the feedback collectively focused without referencing individual teachers. We saw this feedback as a significant strategy toward reaching our goal of making differentiated instruction a norm at the school. Feedback had three important purposes: to recognize the skillful work of most of the teachers, to reinforce the use of effective instructional strategies, and to establish schoolwide pedagogical norms for differentiated instruction.

As we had hoped, our feedback helped teachers connect strategies that they used intuitively to research and theory that might broaden their use of those strategies. For example, in one grade level, we observed teachers skillfully paraphrasing student responses to teacher questions. In our feedback, we discussed three different types of paraphrase and the mediative effect they have on student thinking (Lipton & Wellman, 1998). Teachers had in fact been using the paraphrasing strategy intuitively, and they were excited to learn there was a solid research base to support it.

Posing Reflective Questions

In addition to providing positive feedback, we posed to each grade-level team of teachers a specific reflective question related to situations we had observed. We requested that the teachers discuss the question at their next team meeting. Both of us actively participated in the team discussion at that meeting.

Drawing on the work of Costa and Garmston (2002) and Ben Hur (2002) on mediative questioning, we created questions that

- *Started with positive assumptions.* For example, the question "What strategies do you employ to include student choice in your lessons?" assumes that the teachers do employ such strategies and that their lessons include an element of student choice.
- *Used plural forms.* In the previous example, the teachers are asked to identify multiple strategies, not just one.
- *Were open-ended rather than yes/no.*
- *Called for intellectual effort.* In many cases, we were also challenged by the questions.

Reflective questions posed to the various grade-level teams included the following.

- *Preschool/Kindergarten team:* What are some things you look for as evidence that a student is in his or her zone of proximal development while that student is engaged in student-directed play?
- *Grade One team:* What strategies do you use to sustain the cognitive engagement of all students while providing wait time for a specific student?
- *Grade Two team:* When developing higher-order questions for your students, how do you consider the needs of diverse learners?
- *Grade Four team:* What strategies help students grasp the objective of a lesson, and how is knowing that objective linked to constructing enduring understandings?

The teaching teams' initial reaction to reflective questions varied from enthusiastic engagement to suspicious detachment. At first, a few teachers misunderstood and thought that they were facing

some sort of oral examination or were expected to research the question before the meeting and make a presentation. One teacher actually appeared at a team meeting with a stack of reference books. As the teams became more accustomed to engaging in professional dialogue, however, teachers came to realize that this was not a test and that there was no prescribed outcome other than a stimulating discussion of teaching and learning.

We hoped teachers would realize that differentiation is a joint venture; no one needs to go it alone (Kusuma-Powell & Powell, 2004; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Fortunately, these professional discussions fostered learning partnerships and a climate of shared accountability, which led to reduced individual stress.

Discussing the reflective questions led the teaching teams and the administrators in many curious, unpredictable, but professionally rewarding directions. One team asked for a demonstration lesson showing how different levels of paraphrasing could be used to mediate student thinking. Teachers decided they would film this demonstration lesson and critique the video. A particularly rich discussion of instructional strategies emerged from this venture. In other teams, teachers have begun to collaborate in providing differentiated instruction, sharing professional articles and books and planning follow-up activities to improve classroom instruction individually and in teams. Some teachers are collaboratively using the strategies of cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2002) to plan and reflect on differentiated instruction.

A Store of Familiar Strategies

The International School of Kuala Lumpur is now in year two of the protocol for the rounds, and plans are afoot to extend it to our middle school. Teachers have positively embraced the process. Several teachers have expressed a desire to join us in the walk-through observations and subsequent data analysis. When we surveyed teachers for their perceptions of the walk-through observations and follow-up reflective questions, their feedback was more positive than either one of us would have predicted. One teacher wrote, "Having the administration team visit our classrooms validates the work that is going on there."

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The administrators and teaching teams are currently developing what we refer to as threshold teaching strategies for differentiation, a collection of research-based classroom instruction techniques that have emerged from the walk-through observations and subsequent discussions and that are linked explicitly to learning theory. These teaching strategies are particularly powerful because they have emerged in large part from the practice of the teachers themselves, so teachers feel ownership of them. The strategies and the research behind them are becoming a common knowledge base for our teachers.

The protocol for the rounds is still a work in progress at the International School of Kuala Lumpur, but it has initially shown itself to be a powerful tool for school improvement. EL

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