Room to improve

BY HOLLY L. HERTBERG AND CATHERINE M. BRIGHTON

Home improvement concept helps staff developers lead a variety of personalities to differentiated instruction in their classrooms

Kendra Martin, district staff developer, has been charged with helping the teachers at Happy Valley Middle School implement differentiated instruction in their academically diverse classrooms. Martin has been working with the faculty for a year, providing direct instruction, visiting classrooms, co-planning, co-teaching, providing feedback, and sharing resources. As she begins the end-of-the-year meeting with the faculty, Martin looks around the room. There's Betty Patterson, sitting with her arms folded and purposely avoiding eye contact. Angela Rogers sits at the front table with Lisa Crawford, a notebook of cubing and RAFT examples open in front of them, ready to share with the rest of the group. Rick Jones sits at the back of the room, silent but engaged. (His intensity often unnerves Martin — his questions are always pointed and difficult, but right on target). Sally McIntire sits in the middle of the room, looking a little tired from the school year, but she is, as always, ready to listen and absorb as much as she can. Martin takes a deep breath before starting, wondering for the hundredth time, "How do I help them all move along toward differentiating instruction when their needs are so different?"

HOLLY L. HERTBERG is assistant professor of education and psychology of the gifted. You can contact her at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400277, Charlottesville, VA 22902, (434) 924-0942, fax (434) 924-1384, e-mail: hertberg@virginia.edu.

CATHERINE M. BRIGHTON is an assistant professor of education and psychology of the gifted. You can contact her at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400277, Charlottesville, VA 22902, (434) 924-1022, fax (434) 924-1384, e-mail: brighton@virginia.edu.

PROFILE	CHARACTERISTICS	COACHING APPROACHES
sters	• Overt resister: dramatic refusals, verbal acknowledgement of disagreement. • Covert resister: creative avoidance, lack of engagement. • Communicates a conflict between the teacher and the project goals, methods.	• On-site coaching. • Assume the role of contextual analyst. • Play multiple roles in response to information collected.
Accessorizers	• Initial implementers. • Potential for shallow interpretations and serious misunderstandings about instructional innovations. • Limited ability for personal reflection. • High perception of personal competence, often reinforced by parents, administrators, and students.	• Play role of critical analyst. • Deliver a balanced message – affirm efforts and give constructive feedback. • Develop reflective practices. • Play multiple roles in response to information collected.
Redecorators	• Targeted implementers, focusing efforts on those practices that align with deeply held beliefs. • Technically accurate interpretations of select components of innovations. • Strong command of content. • Traditional approach to teaching. • Less showy than accessorizers.	• Assess belief systems. • Play the role of the calculated shepherd. • Appeal to the logical, intellectual. • Provide strategic pathways in incremental steps.
Renovators	• Motivated by feeling of responsibility to students and personal need to grow. • Belief system aligned with philosophy of differentiation. • Possess understanding that risk-taking, discomfort, and failure are a part of the growth process. • Strong command of content, pedagogy, and classroom management.	• Anticipate potential problems and provide solutions. • Provide a road map for anticipated challenges – shaken confidence, ambiguity.

The teachers described here represent four categories of teacher response that staff developers often confront when working with teachers on differentiating instruction. Some teachers respond with enthusiasm; others respond with frustration and sometimes even anger. The mixed responses from teachers are understandable; for many teachers, differentiating instruction requires a considerable shift in classroom practices and, often, in deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning.

If we envision teachers' practices metaphorically as houses that they have designed and constructed, then what we ask teachers to do when we ask them to transform their classrooms through differentiation is to tear down walls, rip up floors, and rebuild their visions of themselves as architects of learning. Using this metaphor of house renovation to understand and classify common teacher responses to differentiation, four categories of teacher response can be identified: resisters, accessorizers, redecorators, and renovators. Staff developers can address the needs of teachers in each of the four categories in different ways.

Some teachers respond with enthusiasm; others respond with frustration and sometimes even anger.

COACHING RESISTERS FOR DIFFERENTIATION

In the scenario on p.42, Patterson represents the kind of teacher who makes all professional developers and coaches uneasy: the resister. Through their words and actions, resisters communicate to anyone listening that the educational philosophy and associated classroom practices that the coach is suggesting are not workable options for them. In the language of the metaphor, resisters are the teachers who respond to the invitation to change their practices by shutting the door in the faces of the staff develop-

ers. While resistance takes diverse forms, resisters tend to demonstrate strong avoidance behaviors or uncooperativeness. Resistance can be overt or covert. Overt resistance is unmistakable: anger, resentment, and general uncooperativeness. Overt resisters make it very clear, both in staff development sessions and outside of them, that they do not believe differentiation is possible or desirable in their classrooms.


Resisters shut the door.

A second form of resistance, covert resistance, is more subtle. Some covert resisters demonstrate strong avoidance behavior (e.g., constant scheduling conflicts preventing observations, interviews, or attendance at meetings). Others fabricate lengthy reasons and rationalizations about why deadlines can't be met, lessons executed, or assessments completed.

Overt resistance is unmistakable: anger, resentment, and general uncooperativeness.

Whether they are overt or covert resisters, resisters present the coach with the daunting challenge of taking this largely unwilling group of educators to the next step in their responsiveness to students' diverse needs.

The first step in this important task is to assume the role of the contextual analyst. Contextual analysis involves playing the role of the detective, uncovering the reasons behind the teacher's resistance to differentiation. Martin finds she is most effective approaching each resister individually. Resistance is more difficult to deconstruct in groups. Martin's first tactic is to initiate a general, nonthreatening conversation unrelated to differentiation with the goal of opening up lines of communication. Martin has found that these nonthreatening conversations often provide powerful hints about teachers' concerns, fears, frustrations, and anger — important information Martin can use to guide her next steps. For example, Martin may discover that Patterson feels that she does not have the skills or tools necessary to make differentiation work, but to admit that lack publicly would threaten her status as a teacher in the school. Or Martin may discover that Patterson is struggling with an illness that drains her physically and emotionally to the point where she cannot conceive of taking on new approaches that feel unfamiliar and difficult to implement. Martin also may discover that Patterson fully invested herself in the last educational initiative that came through Happy Valley and still feels resentment and cynicism about the faddish nature of educational reform efforts.

Once Martin has more clarity about what is contributing to a teacher's resistance to differentiation, she can respond appropriately. If Martin finds that Patterson is intimidated by differentiation and does not feel that she has the skills to make it work, Martin can leave user-friendly differentiation materials and lesson plans in Patterson's mailbox or talk to Patterson about what is working in her classroom and how certain differentiation strategies would mesh easily with what she already is doing. This way, Martin is affirming Patterson's teaching skills while providing attractive, unintimidating next steps toward using differentiation in the classroom. If Martin finds that Patterson is struggling with an illness, Martin might model a lesson using "low-prep" differentiation strategies (differentiation strategies that require less teacher preparation time than others), following up with a discussion of how Patterson might build on what she is already doing in her classroom using the modeled strategies. If Martin finds that Patterson is weary of what she considers "flash-in-the-pan" initiatives, Martin might focus on making concrete how differentiation is grounded in best curricular and instructional practices of a number of enduring educational movements. Martin can help Patterson see that she does not have to "throw away" what she has been doing in her classroom. Rather, she can build strategically on the best elements of her practice.

When coaches like Martin assume the role of contextual analyst, uncovering the reasons behind the resistance, they commit to understanding their teachers as learners and as people, the important first step in beginning a differentiated learning experience. The successful coach will then use that information to assume multiple roles as coach to differentiate for the teachers' diverse needs — in much the same way that she will ask the teachers in her project to do for the students in their classrooms.

COACHING ACCESSORIZERS FOR DIFFERENTIATION

In the scenario on p. 42, Rogers and Crawford represent accessorizers. These are teachers who initially are very involved with and excited about differentiation, but who never develop beyond a surface and somewhat inaccurate understanding of what differentiation is. In the language of the metaphor, accessorizers are willing to add a plant or put down a throw rug, but they are not interested in making changes to their houses beyond those that are small and superficial. Accessorizers do not sense a real need to alter their houses. They are happy with their classrooms as they are.


Accessorizers add small touches.

While coaching resisters may initially seem like the most difficult task, one might argue that effectively

coaching accessorizers is actually a more formidable challenge. Rogers and Crawford jumped out early onto ...tin's coaching radar — these teachers eagerly took initial ideas from professional development and study group sessions into their classrooms. They began a positive campaign for differentiation within the school and used the terms and vocabulary often in public discussions. Where they fell short, however, was in implementing strategies without considering and then attending to the more important goal of responsive teaching. They failed to recognize the important principle that merely using a RAFT (an acronym that stands for Role, Audience, Format, and Topic: a writing planning template that teachers can use to create differentiated writing assignments) writing strategy is not, in itself, differentiating instruction; rather, using the RAFT strategy to address a range of students' abilities to make complex connections in history is ... more substantive leap.

...hile, because of their enthusiasm, accessorizers may seem like the easiest teachers to work with, they are, in fact, difficult to move forward because their understanding of the philosophy of differentiation and differentiation practices is shallow and, in some instances, misdirected. Taking teachers like Rogers and Crawford to their next level of professional development will require the coach to forge a delicate balance between affirming their early efforts to implement differentiated instruction into their classroom practice and at the same time providing them honest feedback about their misunderstandings and shallow first attempts. To make this happen, the coach must play the role of critical analyst. Through this lens, the coach will analyze what the teachers say they are doing and how that translates into ...ce, encouraging the accessorizing teachers to reflect on their beliefs and practices related to differentiation. The coach should observe the accessorizing teacher's classroom and ask the accessorizer to reflect, either aloud, in a reflective journal, or in e-mail discussions, on how class went for individual students. The coach should ask the accessorizer teacher to explain the learning goals around which the lesson was planned; the purpose behind the differentiated activity; the information she used to determine student groupings, pacing, support structures, and materials for the different activities; and to consider how it might be more effectively implemented in the future. With accessorizing teachers, emphasizing that differentiation must be purposeful rather than simply "cute" or "showy" is critical. It is not an easy task for coaches to deliver a balanced message — complimenting the energy and enthusiasm evident in the accessorizer's willingness to jump into a difficult and often daunting task, while simultaneously providing constructive feedback about where there may be misunderstandings — but to do so will help the teacher move forward in her efforts to differentiate.

COACHING REDECORATORS FOR DIFFERENTIATION

Jones represents the kind of teacher who seems like a paradox. At first glance, his quiet intensity and pointed, even argumentative, questions might be misinterpreted as the hallmarks of a resister, but in his own quiet way, Jones can also be a powerful ally for the coach. Martin knows that Jones' incisive questions indicate that he is not categorically dismissing differentiation like a resister, and not adopting it without thought like accessorizers, but that he is wrestling to make differentiation work within the confines of his existing beliefs and skills.

Redecorator teachers lack the obvious enthusiasm and outward signs of support that are characteristic of accessorizers, but instead bring a strong command of their content, an intellectual view of the teaching profession, and a desire to provide as powerful a learning experience for their students as possible. While most redecorators do not have a rich pedagogical background, this in many ways is an asset as it reduces the need to unlearn bad habits and correct misunderstandings. Redecorator teachers tend to be targeted implementers of differentiation, focusing their efforts only on those practices that align with their deeply held (and often traditional, teacher-centered) beliefs about teaching and learning. Generally, unlike their accessorizer peers, redecorators tend to become committed to effectively implementing differentiation strategies and approaches with a high degree of accuracy and appropriateness. However, while redecorators are metaphorically willing to redo the kitchen or refinish floors, they are not willing to change the overall structure of their homes. That is, while redecorators will make accurate and substantial changes to a specific part of their teaching methods, they hold firm to their traditional, teacher-centered beliefs about teaching in general.


Redecorators will redo the kitchen.

Challenging redecorators to move to the next level in their professional development requires that Martin first assess the teachers' belief systems, such as their perceptions about the roles of the teacher and learner in a responsive classroom. By listening carefully to the nature of Jones' questions in staff development sessions, Martin gains insight into his feelings and concerns about differentiation. She can then follow up with a conversation with Jones about how he sees

differentiation fitting into his classroom. Unlike resisters, redecorators are more open to conversations and discussions about the realistic possibilities of using differentiation in their classrooms. Martin knows she can talk candidly with Jones about the issues because she knows he is open to trying to understand the initiative better and is interested in making it work within the existing structures of his classroom. However, Martin also knows to expect pointed questions about the logistics (such as parental concerns, grading, resource allocation, and planning time) of differentiation, and she knows she needs to have concrete, workable responses to his questions. Without workable solutions to their concerns, redecorator teachers can become resisters who believe that differentiation is a nice idea in theory, but not feasible in reality.

Martin knows that Jones, like many redecorator teachers, tends to be traditional in his views of classroom instruction and that while he might acknowledge that students differ in their readiness to learn a particular concept, he may be unwilling to deviate from his deeply held beliefs about the importance of direct instruction and individual student practice. Given this information, Martin assumes the role of the calculated shepherd and makes strategic recommendations for instructional approaches that align with Jones' more traditional belief system, while at the same time beginning to address his students' differing needs. From this view, Martin appeals to Jones' intellectual tendencies and makes a logical argument about how a strategy such as a tiered assignment could address students' different readiness levels within his classroom but could be managed using direct instruction and individual practice. Gradually, Martin will encourage Jones to try strategies that move further and further away from his teacher-centered philosophy, but she knows she needs to take on this task incrementally and carefully.

COACHING RENOVATORS FOR DIFFERENTIATION

Renovators, like McIntire in the opening scenario, are those teachers who, in the language of the metaphor, entirely rebuild their teaching practices and belief systems from the ground up when they are confronted with differentiation of instruction. Coaches charged with moving teacher groups toward more responsive, differentiated practices hope that there are large groups of renovator teachers in their midst. In many ways, renovators are ideal change agents. They are intrinsically motivated to find better, more effective ways to reach and teach their students, are knowledgeable about the discipline they teach, and are willing to consider alternative teaching practices. They are reflective about their beliefs and view the change process as a complex and multifaceted journey — not a destination in itself.


Renovators rip up floors.

Martin knows that she won't immediately be able to spot a renovator. Renovators emerge over time from all of the previously discussed categories in response to thinking about and wrestling with the idea of responsive teaching. However, in both listening to teachers and watching them work, Martin can see the characteristics of a renovator emerge. Martin knows she is working with a renovator when she hears a teacher talk about differentiation as an overarching philosophy of recognizing and responding to student diversity, not as a group of strategies to supplement her already established teaching practices. Martin knows she is working with a renovator when she observes a teacher implementing differentiated lessons appropriately and purposefully to address identified student needs, when she sees a teacher focused on the needs of students over the challenges that differentiation presents to herself, when she sees a teacher look creatively at the possibilities offered by differentiation instead of cynically at the liabilities, and when she observes a teacher using the skills she needs to differentiate instruction or working doggedly to acquire them.

Once Martin has identified a teacher as a renovator, she knows the teacher will require different supports than the other categories of teachers. Renovators are already motivated,

RESEARCH METHODS

This article summarizes the findings from a five-year study funded by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut (Brighton, Hertberg, Moon, Tomlinson, & Callahan, in press). This mixed-methods study sought to investigate factors that inhibit and support middle school teachers' implementation of differentiated instruction and assessment practices in mixed-ability classrooms. Approximately 75 teachers from nine middle schools across the United States participated in the research project, agreeing to attend monthly coaching sessions, follow-up classroom observations, formal interviews, and sharing their journeys in journals, myriad planning documents, and student work samples.

Research for these materials was supported under the Javits Act Program (Grant No. R206R000001-01) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Grantees undertaking such projects are encouraged to express freely their professional judgment. These materials, therefore, do not necessarily represent positions or policies of the government, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

their belief systems are consistent with the philosophy of differentiation, and they are open to new ideas. Martin knows that what renovator teachers need from her, however, is a road map for their change process that anticipates and suggests ways to handle potential problems, such as resistance from other teachers, questions from parents, and lack of resources. Additionally, as renovator teachers change to become more systematically responsive to students' diverse needs, they make great leaps of insight, but also at times suffer from shaken confidence and feelings of anxiety. Martin feels that her greatest contributions to renovator teachers often are creating a safe environment for taking the necessary risks, providing access to resources, and giving them regular support and feedback through coaching sessions or e-mail exchanges during the change process.

CONCLUSION

While it may be tempting to consider professional development for differentiated instruction as a "one-size-fits-all" proposition, doing so contradicts the message staff developers hope to convey to and instill in teacher-learners. Teachers who come to staff development are as diverse as the students they teach. Professional developers need to respond to this diversity by differentiating their approach to staff development. As in the classroom with student learners, there are times in professional development when whole group, direct instruction is the most appropriate instructional vehicle. At other times, individual or small group coaching tailored to address teachers' specific learner needs is necessary. To make this coaching time as effective and productive as possible, coaches must recognize where teacher-learners are in regard to differentiation when they come in. Using the house reconstruction metaphor to understand teachers' common responses to differentiation, we can identify which categories teachers fall into and provide them with the support and feedback they need to grow as responsive teachers.

REFERENCE

Brighton, C., Hertberg, H., Moon, T., Tomlinson, C., & Callahan, C. (In press). *Feasibility of high-end learning in the academically diverse middle school.* Storrs, CT: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.