



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Tier 1 Differentiation

Carol McDonald Connor, Ph.D. • September 2009

Topic: Response to Intervention in Primary Grade Reading
Practice: Progress Monitoring and Differentiation

Highlights

- Research suggests that using differentiated instruction in Tier 1 can improve learning for all students and reduce referrals for Tier 2 interventions.
- Dr. Carol McDonald Connor talks about differentiated instruction methods at Tier 1 and describes the growing research evidence supporting this practice.
- There are many ways for teachers to differentiate instruction in Tier 1. Dr. Connor explains how teachers can group students according to learning needs during regular instruction.
- Dr. Connor gives examples of how teachers can differentiate instruction during station or center time, literacy block, and partner or independent work times.
- At the beginning of the year, teachers will need to help students learn how to do centers and transition between activities.
- Classroom management is difficult, and teachers may need help from school administrators. Dr. Connor recommends a number of ways that administrators can provide help to teachers, including scheduling options, training, and the support necessary to effectively differentiate instruction in the classroom setting.

About the Interviewee

Dr. Carol McDonald Connor is an associate professor in psychology at Florida State University and the Florida Center for Reading Research. Her research examines the links between children’s language and literacy development, with the goal of illuminating reasons for the perplexing difficulties children who are atypical and diverse learners have developing basic and advanced reading skills. Most recently, her research interests have focused on children’s learning in the classroom, from preschool through third grade. These studies indicate that the effectiveness of specific instructional activities depends on the language and reading skills children bring with them to school; child characteristics-by-instruction interactions. Recently awarded the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (2008), the Society for Research in Child Development Early Career Award (2009), and the Richard Snow Award (2008), she is the principal investigator on studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Institute for Education Sciences, and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

Full Transcript

I am Carol McDonald Connor, and I am an associate professor at Florida State University in the Department of Developmental Psychology.

I was on the expert panel for the RtI [Response to Intervention] Practice Guide on Reading. When we go into schools, we see teachers doing a great job of providing Tier 2 intervention in small groups, but they frequently have more difficulty when they start thinking about differentiating Tier 1 instruction. There is classroom instruction provided to all the students in the classroom. And yet, our research shows that when we differentiate Tier 1 instruction, all the children do much better, and in fact, it can reduce the need for Tier 2.

The evidence on differentiating Tier 1 is growing stronger. Just to summarize it briefly, we now have randomized trials that show that differentiated Tier 1 in kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade is more effective than even high-quality Tier 1 instruction that isn’t differentiated. And the other interesting finding that’s just beginning to emerge is that the effects of differentiating Tier 1 appear to be accumulating over time. So when we followed children from first grade into second grade, the children that had differentiated Tier 1 in both first and second grade did better than children who had differentiated Tier 1 only in first grade or only in second grade. And these children did better than children who were in the control group for both first and second grade. And so these results suggest that we really need to look at RtI as a system that starts when children enter school in kindergarten and that follows them and that provides the differentiated instruction in Tier 1, the opportunities for more intensive Tier 2 and Tier 3. And that even if you finish first grade and you don’t seem to be getting much and the effects are small, there is a good chance that these effects are going to accumulate over time.

Grouping Students Based on Learning Needs

So we see teachers differentiating Tier 1 instruction in many ways. Probably the favorite way is to use stations or center time. So what happens is, teachers have divided their classroom into small groups where children are grouped according to their learning needs. So for example, the group where the children are really struggling with decoding well during their center, their independent time—they might be working on phonics or phonological awareness activities with the other members of their group. When they come to the teacher table, she might, again, really work on fluent decoding with that group. For the group of children that are really good comprehenders, she may not spend as much time at the teacher table with them because they're doing very well and she might have them doing, say, a writing project where they're reading books and they're writing their own stories and then they're reviewing their stories and helping each other edit them. In that way, during literacy block, even though they are all working on comprehension, they're working on the kinds of comprehension strategies that are really going to help them become better readers.

Managing Tier 1 Instruction

One of the most challenging things about differentiating Tier 1 instruction is classroom management, right? So you envision the teachers working with a small group of children at the table; the other children are working independently or in a small group with their peers, and there is a recipe for chaos. There are a number of things school administrators can do to help teachers with this classroom management issue. First and foremost, enough time at the beginning of the school year, so that teachers can actually teach children how to do centers, how to do stations, how to transition from one table to the next or one activity to the next.

Next, school administrators can watch who is in what classroom. Classrooms that have a lot of children who have behavior problems make it difficult for the teacher to provide effective instruction to all the children in the classroom, and we have research that shows this. So school administrators need to think about who is in the classroom as they're assigning classrooms at the beginning of the school year.

Next, school administrators can make more staff available to teachers. There is a number of ways to do this. One is to actually stagger the literacy blocks so that classroom A has their literacy block from 9 to 10; the paraprofessionals, speech pathologists, reading specialists converge on that classroom and make sure all the children get the teacher time they need. Another is to provide literacy coaches that can rotate among classrooms. Teachers and administrators should work together to figure out the system that's going to work best for their school.