Differentiating Instruction for Individual Students

When the general education classroom teacher is aware of the needs of students with dyslexia and/or related disorders and provides structured, sequential, systematic instruction for these students while meeting the needs of other students in the class, fewer students are likely to be referred for special education. To meet the needs of all students, teachers need to couple carefully planned lessons with daily and weekly monitoring of students’ responses to instruction. The observant teacher seeks a balance between challenging and overloading students. When tasks do not demand much intellectual energy, students may become bored; however, when tasks are too difficult, students may become discouraged and frustrated and may misbehave. For example, when teachers observe a student misbehaving, they should ask how the instructional and learning environment might be structured differently so that the student is successful rather than discouraged and frustrated, rather than jump to the conclusion that the student has an emotional or be-
havioral problem or that the parents are not providing support in the home. Mis-
behavior may be a signal that learning is not occurring rather than a re-
eflection of moral character or what is happening at home.

After initial instruction in any new concept, a skilled teacher individualizes in-
struction by adjusting the difficulty of the task for each student so that each stu-
dent finds success while continuing to move forward. For example, the teacher
might form a small instructional group for those students who need reteaching of
a concept and form another group for the students who mastered the concept very
quickly and need enrichment learning opportunities to extend and elaborate the
initial learning (see Delisle, 1984). When students have sufficient time to practice
and review concepts, they often become firmly fixed in long-term memory. All stu-
dents can learn but some need more instruction and practice, even further enrich-
ment, than others. A few simple adjustments to the daily plan, such as selection of
words with a range of difficulty for the daily reading and spelling lessons, are typ-
ically all that is necessary to allow the teacher to keep the stronger students chal-
lenged while providing appropriate input, modeling, and practice for those with
weaker skills. Teachers can also adjust classroom and homework assignments to
reflect individual needs, whether or not a student has a 504 Accommodation Plan.

**Classroom Grouping**  Providing small-group or one-to-one instruc-
tion for every student in need of individualization is not always feasible; however, it is
possible for the teacher to organize the class to provide instruction tailored to the
range of instructional levels in most general education classrooms. Several infor-
mal reading inventories are available commercially (e.g., Leslie & Caldwell, 2005)
or can be designed for the specific textbook(s) used in a school. These inven-
tories can be administered at the beginning of the school year to identify the in-
sertional levels of students and then to form three to four small instructional groups. The
teacher can meet daily with each of these groups for 20–30 minutes of teacher-
guided instruction while other students do independent work designed for their
group (e.g., practicing and applying skills learned from instructional time with the
teacher, reading new stories, rereading stories to develop fluency).

The informal inventory can be readministered in the middle of the year to as-
 sess whether any children need to be moved to a different group. This kind of as-
 sessment of response to instruction increases the probability that instruction re-
mains differentiated throughout the school year. When students are grouped by
instructional level, the teacher can pace instruction to the students’ rates of learn-
ing and adapt students’ response to instruction as needed. The most common
classroom groupings are discussed in Chapter 10, along with options for differen-
tiated instruction that involve a building-level grouping plan with other teachers
at the same grade level and possibly different grade levels.

**Individualization within Group Instruction**  Even within groups
formed on the basis of similar instructional levels, teachers may have to provide
additional individualization because instructional levels are rarely identical. Varia-
tion in levels of learning, profiles of learning skills and achievement, and strate-
gies for learning are normal. Normal variation in reading and writing acquisition
is the rule rather than the exception. Teachers must flexibly adapt to these individ-
ual differences within the larger and smaller instructional groups in the classroom.
Evidence-Based General Principles for Spelling Instruction  

Research supports the following guidelines for teaching spelling to students with spelling problems due to dyslexia or dysgraphia:

1. *Less is more.* In what might be the first scientific research on instructional practices, Rice (1897, 1913) studied spelling instruction in classrooms throughout the country. The results showed that children who received just 15 minutes of daily spelling instruction achieved higher spelling scores than those who received 1 hour a day of spelling instruction. What may matter more than absolute amount of time spent on spelling is the nature of the spelling instruction received. More time should be spent teaching spelling strategies and less time relying solely on assessing spelling once a week on dictation tests.

2. *Beginning spelling (Grades 1–3) is affected by word frequency in the language, and so is developing spelling in the upper grades, but learning word formation strategies for low-frequency, morphologically complex words also becomes important in the upper grades.* Fry (1996) incorporated the 1,000 most-frequent words in the language into his spelling lessons for Grades 1–6; these were developed and validated over the years for children who received services in his Rutgers University clinic for learning problems. Each spelling lesson begins with teaching and practicing explicit strategies for learning to spell single high-frequency words, which are called Instant Words. This strategy instruction and practice is followed by sentence dictation activities in which children practice spelling the same words in sentence context, which clarifies the meaning of each word. Sentence dictation requires that children hold multiple words in sentence syntax in conscious working memory as they spell, much as they must do when composing.

Graham, Harris, and Loynachan (1994) created another list of grade-appropriate, high-frequency words to use in spelling instruction at different instructional levels. This list is based on the high-frequency words children use in their own compositions at various grade levels. See Lesson Set 5 in Berninger and Abbott (2003) for examples of how these high-frequency words for writing can be used in written composition activities to encourage children to learn to spell them correctly in their own writing and not just on a dictated spelling test.

3. *Use effective strategies.* Effective strategies for teaching beginning spelling using high-frequency words include selective reminding; combining the alphabetic principle, onset rimes, and whole-word naming; developing syllable awareness for the six syllable types in English and the phonemes in the syllables; spelling the same words repeatedly in different sentence contexts from dictation; sorting function and content words by phoneme–grapheme correspondences; and word play.

   a. For selective reminding, based on Hart, Berninger, and Abbott (1997), children practice spelling a small set of high-frequency words in each lesson, but on subsequent trials only practice those missed in the prior trials (see Berninger, 1998b).

   b. To ensure that children transfer spelling knowledge beyond the taught one-syllable words to other one-syllable words and to their own composing, they need to learn multiple spelling strategies for phoneme-to-
grapheme correspondence, onset rimes, and whole words (naming all the letters and the whole word; Berninger et al., 1998; Berninger & Abbott, 2003, Lesson Set 4). Fry (1996) also includes activities for applying the alphabetic principle to spelling.

c. Games for developing syllable awareness and phoneme awareness within syllables that improved spelling of two-syllable words are included in Lesson Set 5 (Berninger & Abbott, 2003), which is based on a study by Berninger, Vaughan, et al. (2000). In that study, a minimum of 24 repeated practices in spelling a word as part of sentence dictation was required for at-risk second-grade spellers to reach mastery for spelling second-grade, high-frequency words. The programmatic spelling research of Dreger, Luke, and Melican (1995) showed that what differentiated good and poor spellers was memory for word spelling in the long run not the short run. Thus, instructional programs for spelling should consider distributing repetitions of spelling practice for particular words across time intervals that span several months and not just sequential days within the school week.

d. All or most of the phonemes in content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) tend to correspond predictably to graphemes; but function words (conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, helping verbs, articles) tend to be only partially decodable compared with content words (i.e., have fewer phonemes that correspond to conventional graphemes). However, training automatic phoneme-grapheme correspondences; sorting phonemes into categories for alternative possible graphemes on a substitution card (e.g., /z/ can be spelled with s or z), and playing spelling bingo for the high-frequency, partially decodable function words improved children’s spelling of function as well as content words (Berninger, Vaughan, et al., 2002; also see Lesson Set 7 in Berninger & Abbott, 2003). Also, see Bear, Ivernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2000) for sorting activities that facilitate spelling development.

e. Play with language through the humor in riddles, puns, and jokes can also be an effective instructional component for spelling (e.g., Berninger, Abbott, Graham, & Richards, 2002). Children at risk for spelling (and reading) problems may develop understanding of how language is used to create humor at a slower rate than typically developing readers and spellers. For example, a sixth grader who had participated in several of the treatment studies finally “got” the jokes and riddles used at the beginning of each session when younger children in that treatment study still struggled with perceiving the humor in the word play. In a before-school club that always began with about 10 minutes of children choosing their favorite riddle, pun, or joke of the day from paperbacks and other collections the researchers provided (Berninger, Rutberg et al., 2006, Study 4), one second grader asked his teacher in all seriousness if jokes always had to be funny. Until children reach a certain level of linguistic awareness, the humor in language may not be readily apparent. Word hunts for words with specific syllable or morpheme patterns were part of the effective writing instruction that improved writing on state high-stakes tests as well as individually administered standardized tests of composition (Berninger, Rutberg et al., 2006, Study 4).
4. Effective strategies for teaching spelling beyond the beginning stage include orthographic strategies such as Photographic Lepr echaun and Proofreader’s Trick, which are in the Mark T’wain spelling lessons (Unit II) in the accompanying workbook, *Helping Students with Dyslexia and Dysgraphia Make Connections: Differen* 

tiated Instruction Lesson Plans in Reading and Writing* (Berninger & Wolf, 2009), and visual search (finding correctly spelled words in the horizontal, vertical, or diagonal rows of otherwise random letters) and anagrams (unscrambling letters to find correctly spelled words) in *Spelling Through Morphographs* (Dixon & Engelmann, 2001). Examples of effective morphological strategies include adding morphological awareness activities from Dixon and Englemann (2001; building words from roots and affixes; decomposing words with affixes into their roots, prefixes, and suffixes; morphological spelling rules), and Henry (1990, 2003) and Henry and Redding (1996; phonological, orthographic, and morphological units in words of Anglo-Saxon, Latinate, and Greek origin). Fry (1996) also includes morpheme variants that develop morphological awareness as applied to spelling.