

Conditions For Learning

ENGAGING RESPONSIVE INSPIRING

Creating the conditions for differentiation



CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR DIFFERENTIATION

With thoughtful planning, opportunities to practice, and high expectations, Sandra Harris was able to incorporate flexible, small group instruction consistently and routinely into her classroom.

Sandra Harris is an enthusiastic, dedicated second year teacher who wants the best for her students. “My students are the reason I wake up every day to do this work”, she shared when we began our coaching session. Sandra, however, was becoming increasingly frustrated when trying to implement small group instruction in her classroom. She understands that working with small groups is an effective strategy to ensure all students get what they need academically. She is also **very** aware that school administrators expect that

every classroom implement small group instruction.

“My students just are not ready to take on the responsibility of working independently. They always need me at their side, or I have to constantly intervene when students have questions. They can only work for three minutes independently. How am I supposed to work with these students in small groups in three minutes?”

“Three minutes”, I said. “That is wonderful. Did you share that data with your students?”



Some quit due to slow progress, never grasping the fact that slow progress is progress.

Sandra's issue is similar to that which many teachers experience. **How do I work with a small group of students and keep the rest of the class engaged in meaningful work?**

We began our planning session by considering what Sandra had shared - ***"I have to constantly intervene when students have questions."*** I asked Sandra to imagine what her classroom would look like and sound like if students did not need her help while working with small groups. ***"Students would be respectful and helpful to each other."***

If being respectful and helpful to each other were the dispositions she wanted, then, students needed to practice.

Ask Three Before You Ask Me

Sandra needed to direct students to ask each other questions before seeking her help. Sandra introduced the *Ask Three Before You Ask Me* strategy and practiced with her students. Sandra made a habit of circulating during the independent practice portion of her lessons. When students would ask her questions about the content or directions, she would repeat, "Ask three before you ask me". Sandra would stand by the group and watch the student ask a group member his or her question. If that student did not know the answer, the student would ask another. Sandra would guide and encourage the interaction as the student continued asking. Finally, if the third student did not know the answer, Sandra would support students with an answer to the question. Sandra learned that other group members were eager to help their classmates and share what they knew with other students. This

strategy became one of the foundations for supporting small group work. Students were accountable, positively interdependent, and supportive of each other.

If You Finish

Another concern that Sandra shared with me had to do with her assumptions about the students' ability to sustain work for a significant period of time. ***"My students just aren't ready to take on the responsibility of working independently."***

After probing further, we determined that in order to continue working, students need options that interest them. Sandra put together a list of various familiar classroom activities that the students could reference upon completing the assignment at hand.

The list provided high-interest, academic activities as options for continued work. Students practiced the concept that they are never done, but have choices when it comes to the next activity.

Sandra's list included:

- * **Accelerated Reader**
- * **Seasonal Writing Activities**
- * **Poetry**
- * **Project Based Research**
- * **Math Practice Activities**

Having a choice was the "reward" and the incentive to move on to more work.

Assessment

The last part of the equation, for completing the conditions for differentiation was to determine what Sandra's students needed to know. What was she going to help the students learn in their small group? Sandra needed to determine, through

assessment, what her students needed to know. The school had recently given a writing assessment and Sandra had determined each child's strengths in writing as well as the areas that needed focus. She used this data to begin a conversation with her students to set some goals around writing.

Next, Sandra explained to her students that having a classroom environment where she could work with students in small groups was going to create a place where every child in her room was going to be successful - no matter what their academic level was.

Once Sandra analyzed the class trends around student need, she was able to create small groups of students that needed support with similar skills.

A few significant cultural practices were now in place in Sandra's classroom.

- 1) *Students knew to "Ask Three" when they had questions*
- 2) *Students knew what to do when they finished assignments*
- 3) *Sandra had actionable data that supported her creation of small, differentiated groups*

"For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." Aristotle

What I Observed

Sandra invited me back to her classroom to observe her and the students in action in early March. Prior to my visit, I recalled Sandra's frustration - ***"They can only work for 3 minutes independently."***

From the moment I walked in, I observed a significant difference in her stance with the class. She was confident, clear, and purpose-driven and students were engaged and focused.

It was as if Sandra was conducting a symphony. Students were in a variety of modes throughout the lesson. She introduced a shared writing mini-lesson and showed students how to transfer their writing from a graphic organizer to paper.

After the mini-lesson, students worked independently and collaboratively using a very respectful volume - I heard many students ask each other questions and I heard others that were eager to help. Sandra pulled a small group of students to the back table to provide additional support.

While Sandra met with students at the back table, she narrated out loud the positive behaviors she observed students exhibiting in the class. When students completed assignments, they quietly moved on to folders that

contained additional assignments.

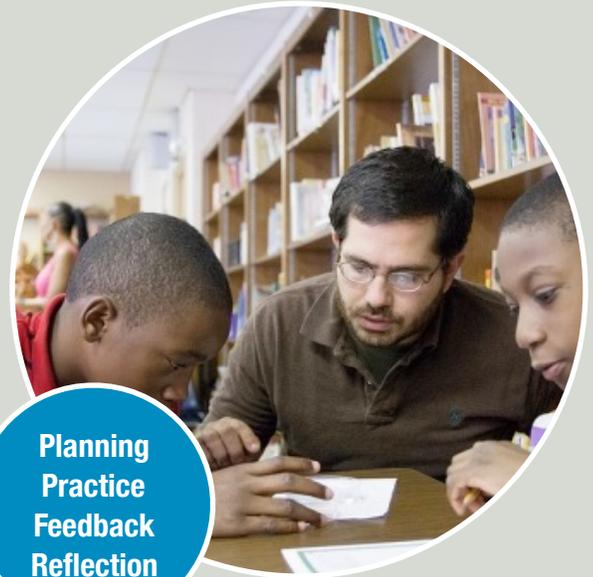
Sandra periodically circulated around the room and worked with small groups and individual students throughout the lesson. **She worked with her small groups for one hour!**

Take the time to implement well

Sandra and I first discussed her challenge in early October. We outlined the strategies to create the conditions for differentiation, discussed the rationale for each one, and discussed how to introduce them to her class. Sandra was incredibly excited about helping her students in a strategic and targeted way. She had concrete strategies to implement.

The explicit teaching of the strategies included frequently reminding students of the expectations, providing feedback to students, and asking the students the following questions - How did we do? Are you learning more as a result of this structure? How can we make this time even more effective?

Sandra and I checked in weekly about her class's progress, and



**Planning
Practice
Feedback
Reflection**

discussed the modifications she made along the way, never losing sight of her vision. "The strategies, she said, were instrumental in helping build a strong foundation for pulling small groups of students together for differentiated instruction."

Sandra was incredibly effective creating the conditions for differentiation. Give it a try and let us know how it goes for you!

J. Knighton

Conditions For Learning

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