

The Effect Differentiated Instruction in  
Social Studies has on Student  
Performance

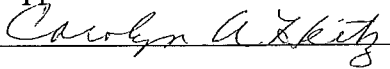
by

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A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree  
in

Education

Approved: 2 Semester Credits



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May, 2009

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**Title:** *The Effect Differentiated Instruction in Social Studies has on Student Performance*

**Graduate Degree/Major:** MS Education

**Research Adviser:** Dr. Carolyn Heitz

**Month/Year:** May, 2009

**Number of Pages:** 45

**Style Manual Used:** American Psychological Association, 5th edition

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not differentiated instruction has an effect on student performance. Differentiated instruction is giving students multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn so each student can learn effectively (Tomlinson, 2001). In this study the researcher looked at two different groups of third grade students over a period of two years. The first group of students all learned the social studies content using the textbook and taking a test at the end of each unit. With the second group, instruction was differentiated extensively, and students had the option of taking a test or doing a final project for their assessments. Final report card grades were compared between the two groups of students to see if grades improved when instruction was differentiated. It was determined that student grades did improve when instruction was differentiated, and students liked having choices for their assessment.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Students enter classrooms today with different abilities, learning styles, and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. They learn at different rates and in different ways. Therefore, teachers need to adjust their teaching style to meet the various needs of all students. They can do this in many ways such as flexible grouping, academic choice, learning centers, and giving different types of assessments. When differentiation occurs, student performance and motivation will increase.

Over the past three decades, more students with special needs are being placed in the general education classroom because of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) which was passed in 2004. This law requires students with disabilities to be educated alongside children in the regular education classroom (Haager & Klingner, 2005). Along with IDEA, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was also put into effect. “Together, these acts underscore the importance attached to greater accountability and improved educational outcomes for all learners” (Rock, Gregg, Edwin, & Gable, 2008, p. 32). Before the NCLB Act was passed, schools would lower their standards, which would enable students with disabilities to meet the expected standards. This approach did not help these students, but instead hindered their academic performance. According to Rock et al. (2008), “Students with disabilities need more than to be physically present in the classroom. They need group-individualized instruction, supplementary aids and services, accommodations, and modifications” (p. 32). One way this can be achieved is through differentiated instruction. Anderson (2007) states, “Teachers who differentiate know they are incorporating best practices in moving all of their students toward proficiency in the knowledge and skills established in state and local standards” (p. 50).

Differentiating instruction is also important for gifted students in the regular classroom. If differentiation does not occur, gifted learners may find school restrictive, frustrating, and uninspiring. They may also start to think that school is a place they are required to go, and real learning takes place somewhere else (George, 2005). Gifted students need to be challenged and experience both struggle and success. When students are not challenged, they become bored and may act out or cause behavioral problems. To prevent this from happening, teachers must create an environment that encourages these students to question, exercise independence, and use their creativity.

Another reason for differentiating instruction relates to teacher professionalism. Expert teachers are aware of students' various learning needs and are willing to go the extra mile so that all students are successfully and meaningfully challenged. A teacher who takes the time to differentiate his or her instruction, then, becomes "a more competent, creative, and professional educator" (Tomlinson, 2000).

At the beginning of each school year, it is critical that teachers take the time to get to know and assess their students to find out where they are academically. Teachers will then be able to support students at the appropriate level, as well as build on their prior knowledge so that meaningful learning takes place (Levy, 2008). Teachers who continue to use traditional instruction tend to "teach to the middle" which means a large number of students' needs will go unmet. Not only does this lead to poor performance on standardized tests, but dropout rates increase, graduation rates decrease, and there are high percentages of unemployment (Rock et al., 2008). A solution to this dilemma is for teachers to differentiate their instruction in order to reach students of all ability levels.

One way teachers can differentiate their instruction is by using Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. The theory states that all seven intelligences (logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal) are needed to productively function in society. Therefore, teachers need to present material in a way that engages most or all of the intelligences (Brualdi, 1998). In an interview, Howard Gardner once said:

So long as materials are taught and assessed in only one way, we will only reach a certain kind of child. But everything can be taught in several ways. The more we can match youngsters to congenial approaches of teaching, learning, and assessing, the more likely it is that those youngsters will achieve educational success. (Hopper & Hurry, 2000, p. 28)

### *Statement of the Problem*

As classrooms become more culturally diverse and educators are required to meet state and national standards, it is critical that differentiated instruction occur in all elementary classrooms. It would be ideal if all classroom teachers had the skills necessary to differentiate their instruction in order to improve students' academic performance. Currently there are teachers who believe that differentiation is the key to student success, but there are also teachers who are very traditional and teach all students the same way. Unfortunately, this is hindering academic performance for many students who are either above or below grade level. If teachers do not see the importance of differentiating their instruction and take the time to do it, they will prevent students from reaching their full potential and succeeding in the classroom.

To better understand the relationship between differentiated instruction and academic performance, this study will compare student grades in social studies from the 2007-08 school

year when instruction was not differentiated to students' grades in social studies the following year when differentiated instruction was present. By making other educators aware of how crucial it is to differentiate instruction and the benefits that go along with it, hopefully more teachers will take the time to differentiate their instruction.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to provide evidence that differentiating instruction has a great impact on student performance and academic achievement. The study will look at third grade student grades from the 2007-2008 school year when instruction was not differentiated and compare them with current third grade student grades after instruction was differentiated.

### *Research Questions*

The following questions will be answered as a result of this study:

1. Does differentiated instruction have a direct impact on student performance?
2. How can teachers differentiate their instruction in order for student performance to improve each school year?

### *Definition of Terms*

*Academic choice:* To give students a choice in what they learn (content) and/or how they learn (process).

*Anchor activities:* Tasks or activities that students work on when their assigned work is completed. Since students finish their work at different rates, these tasks keep all students engaged and learning at all times. Examples: independent reading, journal writing, math story problem solving.

*Brain-based learning:* To look at the way the brain functions in order to effectively plan and design lessons. What makes sense to one brain may not make sense to another, which

is why it is important for teachers to create learning environments that immerse students in experiences that are real.

*Cooperative learning:* Students work together in a small group to complete an academic task. All students are individually accountable for their work and learning.

*Differentiated instruction:* The teacher uses a variety of instructional strategies to reach all learners. Students are given a variety of choices in what they want to study, ways they want to work, and how they want to show what they have learned. Students are also assessed in multiple ways.

*Learning centers:* Various stations set up around the room, which are designed to teach, reinforce, or extend students' knowledge, understanding, and skills (Cox, 2008). The students rotate through the various centers which can be anything from spelling, listening, and math to writing, poetry, and reading.

*Learning contract:* Used to keep students on task. This may include what will be learned, how it will be accomplished, amount of time given for the task, and how the student will be assessed.

*Learning style:* A student's preferred mode of learning or how they learn best. Some students learn best when they see pictures or visuals, and others are very hands-on and prefer to use their body and sense of touch. There are also students who learn best when they hear information, and others who prefer to hear and see it.

*Multiple intelligences:* A theory that suggests using multiple teaching strategies with students in order to meet their individual differences. We all possess each of the seven intelligences (verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal); some are just more developed than others.

*Rubric:* A scoring tool that describes the levels of quality for the criteria of a piece of work (See Appendix C).

*Student performance:* How well a student does (based on percentages) on assigned projects and tests.

*Tiered instruction:* When a teacher plans different kinds of lessons (about the same topic) at different levels of ability to allow students to begin learning where they are and build on their prior knowledge.

#### *Assumptions and Limitations of the Study*

It is assumed that all students will complete the few daily assignments that will be given. Percentages will be based on daily assignments and projects or test results. The unit tests and assignments will be based on a point value and then converted into a percentage to determine the report card letter grade. It is also assumed that the exact same test will be given during the 2008-09 school year that was given during the 2007-08 school year. Projects were not an option in the 2007-08 school year. All students were required to take the unit tests.

Not all of the students in the classroom will receive social studies instruction from the researcher. One student will be leaving the classroom during this time to receive special services. Therefore, this child will be excluded from the study. Also, Arcadia School District has a social studies curriculum in place, as well as a textbook, which teachers are required to use. The curriculum and textbook may limit the opportunities for differentiation.

#### *Methodology*

This study will be conducted using social studies grades from the 2007-08 school year and comparing them with grades from the 2008-09 school year. During the 2007-08 school year the students were required to take a test at the end of each unit. However, in the 2008-09 school

year the students will have the option of taking the unit test or doing a project that meets certain criteria. The researcher will be looking at whether or not differentiating instruction affects student performance in social studies.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Schools today must accommodate students from different cultures, ethnic groups, family situations, needs, and styles of learning. Therefore, differentiated instruction is a key component in education. Teachers who differentiate their instruction realize that all children are unique, with different learning styles, interests, and needs. According to the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (2000), differentiated instruction gives students the opportunity to reach a common curricular goal or learning standard in different ways and to different degrees of mastery. Differentiation is not always easy for teachers and several obstacles can prevent them from ever trying it, but it is critical if students are to succeed. The benefits will far outweigh the time and effort that is put into planning.

Teachers can differentiate their instruction in the classroom by varying the content, the processes/activities, the product, or the learning environment (Tomlinson, 2001). However, before teachers can begin to differentiate their instruction they need to determine a student's readiness and interest, as well as identify a student's learning style and environmental preference. Once this is done, teachers can then incorporate different instructional strategies and educational approaches based on the assessed needs of their students (Cox, 2008). When the needs of all students are met, motivation and student performance will increase.

### *Learning Profiles*

Differentiation should begin with student assessment and the creation of learning profiles (Anderson, 2007). A learning profile contains "information specific to learning preferences, family structure, favorite hobbies and interests, and other aspects of interest" (Anderson, 2007, p. 51). Learning profiles can also include assessment scores and reading levels. Teachers can then

use student learning profiles to plan and build tiered lessons, to engage students, and for student grouping (Tomlinson, 2001).

To determine students' interests, teachers can use interest inventories (Tomlinson, 2001). They can either create their own interest inventory or there are published inventories that teachers can use such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI measures how people relate to others and the world around them, how they gather information and make decisions, and the types of situations where they are most comfortable (Wethayanugoon, 1994). In addition to interest inventories, teachers could also interview or conference with students or ask open-ended questions about their learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2001).

According to Levy (2008), to assess students' readiness levels teachers should pre-assess students at the beginning of the year, as well as throughout the year to find out what they already know about various subject areas. This will not only allow teachers to provide students with the support they need, but to build on their prior knowledge in order to advance their learning. "Pre-assessments can be anything from a KWL (What I Know, What I Want to know, What I Learned) chart to a teacher-prepared test" (Levy, 2008, p. 162). Pre-assessments do not have to consume a lot of time and are very beneficial to both teachers and students. Teachers can plan according to the results, and students will be challenged at the appropriate level (Levy, 2008).

#### *Classroom Elements to Differentiate*

Only after teachers are familiar with their students' learning profiles can they begin to differentiate their instruction effectively (Levy, 2008). Tomlinson indicates that teachers can differentiate the content, process, product, and learning environment according to student readiness, interest, or learning profile (2004).

Content is what the students learn and the materials or ways in which it is accomplished. Content can be differentiated in a variety of ways such as allowing students to listen to books on tape, having an assortment of books on the same topic at different reading levels, using reading buddies, using multiple supplementary materials, and giving students spelling and vocabulary words based on their readiness level (Tomlinson, 2004). Teachers need to be sure the content they are teaching students is at an appropriate level. They do not want to limit students to only grade level curriculum if they can go further, yet they do not want to move on to something more difficult if a student has not yet mastered the previous content (Levy, 2008).

Teachers can also differentiate the process, which is how we teach and how students learn (Levy, 2008). “When students encounter new ideas, information, or skills, they need time to run the input through their own filters of meaning...they have to make sense of it before it becomes theirs.” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 79). Some ways in which the process can be differentiated include: allowing students to use manipulatives, varying the length of time given for an activity or assignment, and setting up interest centers for students to explore (Tomlinson, 2004).

According to Levy (2008), “the product is the way our students demonstrate what they have learned” (p. 162). Teachers can differentiate products by allowing students to work by themselves or with a partner, giving students a choice on how they would like to show their knowledge of a particular topic, varying expectations and requirements, and by using rubrics. Students who are working below grade level may have fewer performance expectations, whereas students above grade level may be asked to do something that requires more advanced thinking (Levy, 2008). Tomlinson (2001) states that a lot of students are able to better show what they know in the form of a product rather than on a written test. Therefore, she suggests that teachers

replace some tests with different product assignments or combine tests and product options so students can best demonstrate what they have learned.

Finally, teachers can differentiate the learning environment. They can do this by making sure there are places in the room where students can work quietly, as well as in groups, allowing students to move around the room when necessary, adjusting lighting and/or eliminating visual distractions, and providing a home-like atmosphere (Tomlinson, 2004). Students should know they can take risks and feel comfortable doing so. They must also be encouraged to be open-minded, accept others without judging, and know that we learn from our mistakes. Teachers can help students achieve this by providing them with a safe and flexible learning environment (Tomlinson, 2001).

### *Learning Styles*

According to Fischman (2008), there are several educational approaches that demonstrate effective differentiation of instruction. Some of these approaches include Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences and Eric Jensen's Brain-Based Learning. The more information a teacher can gather about each student's learning style, the better able they are to plan instruction that engages all students and gets their attention.

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences suggests that if teachers instruct and assess in only one way, they will only reach a certain kind of child. However, since everything can be taught in several ways, the more teachers can "match youngsters to congenial approaches of teaching, learning, and assessing, the more likely it is that those students will achieve educational success" (Hopper & Hurry, 2000, p. 28). According to Gardner, everyone possesses seven distinct intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Armstrong, 1994). Each of us has all of these intelligences; we

just have a different combination. Therefore, teachers need to create lessons that give students the chance to engage all of these intelligences, which in turn will enable them to experience curriculum that is meaningful, personalized, and relevant (Brualdi, 1998).

Jensen (2000) defines brain-based learning as a comprehensive approach to instruction using the latest research about the human brain. Issues such as stress, nutrition, exercise, and social conditions are all brain-based issues that affect attention, cognition, and memory. When teachers make this connection, they are better able to plan lessons and implement techniques that will improve student performance and success (Jensen, 2000). Leslie Hart (1983) goes on to say that “teaching without an awareness of how the brain learns is like designing a glove with no sense of what a hand looks like—its shape, how it moves.” The more we understand how the brain learns, the more options we have for instruction and for designing effective learning environments while engaging all students. According to McBrien & Brandt (1997), there are many teaching strategies that will enhance brain-based learning. Some of these strategies include using manipulatives, employing active learning, attending field trips, listening to guest speakers, and participating in real-life projects. All of these strategies help meet the needs of all learning styles and incorporate multiple intelligences. When students are able to make connections with what is being taught, they are better able to retain the information later on.

### *Instructional Strategies*

Some of the many instructional strategies that can be used to support differentiated instruction are tiering, learning contracts, learning centers, cooperative learning, and anchor activities (Tomlinson, 2001). Tomlinson & McTighe (2006) state that tiering is a “readiness-based instructional approach in which all students work with the same essential knowledge, understanding, and skill, but at different levels of difficulty based on their current proficiency

with the ideas and skills” (p. 107). To develop tiered activities, teachers should create an activity that is at-level and then adjust it accordingly for the learners who are above or below grade level. Teachers can adjust the activity by the level of complexity, amount of time given, materials used, or by the number of steps (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Learning contracts allow students to work at a pace in which they are able to master the concepts being taught. They are individualized based on a student’s needs. When learning contracts are first implemented, the teacher comes up with the learning objectives, sets a time frame, and provides resources for students to use. Learning contracts allow students choice, but also require students to be accountable for their time and self-management. While students work, teachers can use the time to conference with individuals and see how they are progressing (Tomlinson, 2001).

According to Tomlinson (2001), learning centers are stations where students explore topics or practice skills. Teachers can adjust the activities at each learning center based on the readiness of the students and their various learning styles. Learning centers give students the chance to work at their own pace, complete tasks at their level, and develop independence. Teachers can also use this time to work with small groups or individual students.

Kagan (1992) states that cooperative learning is based on four principles referred to as PIES, which stands for: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction. All four of these principles need to be present if teachers want cooperative learning groups to be effective. Using cooperative learning in the classroom gives students the opportunity to develop positive interpersonal relationships such as listening, taking turns, and self-expression. It also allows them to work on cooperation, critical thinking, and consensus-building. Research has shown that cooperative learning promotes student self-esteem,

lowers levels of prejudice, increases student retention, and develops students' social skills, compared to classrooms where students worked independently (Kagan, 1992).

Anchor activities are beneficial because they allow students who finish work early to use their time wisely. Since all students work at different paces and finish tasks at different times, it is important to have something else for them to do to maintain a productive work environment (Tomlinson, 2001). Martha Kaufeldt (2007) describes anchor activities as activities that “are self-directed [and] relate to the concepts and content being taught.” She says they must also be “engaging meaningful tasks – not busywork or packets of worksheets.” Examples of anchor activities include: reading, journaling, practicing spelling words or math facts, centers, and computer work. All of these are options for students after their assigned work is completed (Tomlinson, 2001).

### *Strategies for Managing a Differentiated Classroom*

Many teachers are unsure of how to manage a differentiated classroom which prevents them from trying to provide students with instruction based on their interests and needs. However, when teachers take the time to differentiate their instruction, it tends to make school a better fit for more students and makes teaching more satisfying (Tomlinson, 2001). There are many strategies teachers can use to help design and manage differentiating instruction for students.

First, teachers should begin differentiating at a pace that is comfortable for them (Tomlinson, 2001). They can start by using different texts, multilevel supplementary materials, different computer games, or peer tutors. If teachers are not comfortable differentiating learning resources right away, they could start by using the same text with the whole class, but allowing some students to read it quicker than others or providing differentiated activities that go along

with the reading. Some teachers may find it easier to start differentiating with groups or differentiating a subject area that they are most comfortable teaching. The key to differentiating is for teachers to start slowly so they do not feel overwhelmed right from the start. As the years progress, they can then add more activities that differentiate instruction without feeling so flustered along the way (Tomlinson, 2001). Tomlinson (1999) suggests that teachers set goals that are reasonable and then stick with them. Some of these goals could be assessing students before teaching a skill or topic and then designing instruction accordingly, differentiating one product per semester, creating one differentiated lesson per unit, or giving students more choices on how to work or which homework assignments to do.

Another strategy for teachers is to have a plan for students who always finish quickly (Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers do not want students to be disruptive or distracting to others nor do they want some of the brighter students to act busy so that it does not appear that the work is too easy for them. Teachers should let students know that the work they turn in should be quality, and that any work that appears to be lacking effort will not be accepted. Teachers can also use anchor activities to promote on-task behavior.

Tomlinson (2001) also suggests that teachers make sure students have a plan for getting help when the teacher is busy with other students. If teachers want to successfully manage a differentiated classroom, then the students must know that it is never okay to sit and wait for help or to disrupt other students. They should know all of their options when they become stuck and need help. Some of these options could be having the students think aloud in a journal or learning log or assigning a student who is an “expert” at the subject to be the “expert of the day”. Students could then go to this person for assistance. Teachers may also have an alternative activity in mind in case a student becomes stuck and is not able to get the help he or she needs to

complete the original activity. This can help prevent students from wasting valuable class time (Tomlinson, 1999).

According to Tomlinson (1999), teachers should also stay organized in order to successfully manage a differentiated classroom. They can do this by using student work folders that contain student work, as well as record-keeping sheets that students fill out to keep track of the work they have completed. Teachers may also want to have places in mind for students to turn in their completed work. This keeps work organized and prevents students from always bringing their work to the teacher. Instead, teachers can have students turn in their work in a folder, stack tray, or box. Another way for teachers to stay organized is for them to not grade everything. When teachers feel like they have to grade everything it can become very overwhelming and teachers may feel as though they are not able to stay up on their work. Teachers should encourage students to check each other's work and only use certain activities for formal assessment.

Finally, Tomlinson (2001) suggests that teachers "create and deliver instructions carefully" to students (p. 35). When teachers give too many directions all at once, it confuses students and can either lose them altogether or cause them to focus too much on who is doing what. Instead, teachers should create task cards or assignments sheets for students to refer to. Another option is to tape record directions so that students can replay them if necessary or post directions on an overhead or flip chart (Tomlinson, 1999). It is important that teachers think through directions carefully and think about problems that might arise for students. Teachers need to be clear with their directions and also remember to specify a time limit for each assignment so that students are not spending too much time on a single activity and not accomplishing everything they should be.

### *Types of Assessment*

According to Wormeli (2006), there are three important types of assessment that can be used in a differentiated classroom: portfolios, rubrics, and self-assessments. Portfolios are “collections of student work...[that] provide evidence of application and understanding of the targeted concepts or skills” (Gregory & Chapman, 2002, p. 50). Wormeli goes on to say that portfolios allow teachers to grade more accurately because they collect and observe work over a period of time, rather than just a single sampling such as a quiz or test. This allows teachers to not have to make as many inferences about whether or not a student has mastered a particular area of study. Instead, teachers can refer to the artifacts placed in the portfolios, which provide supportive evidence of the grade that has been given. Portfolios also allow for students to take ownership in their learning and set their own goals (Gregory & Chapman, 2002).

Rubrics are another way to assess student achievement (Wormeli, 2006). According to Jackson & Larkin (2002), a rubric is “a grading guideline to follow in assessment” (p. 40). Points are given based on predetermined criteria noted on the rubric. “Descriptions of performance for each level are contained within the rubric and indicate gradations of quality from high to low” (Jackson & Larkin, 2002, p. 40). Grades are then given based on the total score from the rubric (See Appendix C). Rubrics are very beneficial because they let students know before starting a project or assignment what the expectations will be. Students are able to monitor their own progress and use the rubric as a final checkpoint before submitting their work. Rubrics can also be altered based on specific learning styles or needs of the students (Jackson & Larkin, 2002). According to Jackson & Larkin (2002), rubrics “provide a guide for clear communication among teachers, parents, and students as expectations for academic success are clarified and refined toward the final product” (p. 40).

Wormeli (2006) believes it is important to have students complete self-assessments because it gives valuable feedback and helps them set individual goals. McDonald & Boud (2003) define self-assessment as “the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgments about the extent to which they met these criteria and standards” (p. 211). Learning logs, journals, and interactive notebooks are all great ways to have students self-assess. Students can complete various prompts such as *I learned that....*, *The part that frustrated me the most was....*, or *This is similar to...* (Wormeli, 2006). Teachers can also use self-checking rubrics, checklists, or a Likert scale to have students assess their own learning.

#### *Approaches to Avoid When Assessing and Grading*

According to Wormeli (2006), if teachers want to differentiate instruction and assessment, they need to make sure that the letter grades they give students are an accurate measurement of mastery. There are many commonly accepted, but often inappropriate grading practices that teachers use, but should avoid. Some of these practices include: incorporating nonacademic factors into the final grade, grading homework, giving group grades, and grading on a curve.

Wormeli (2006) states:

A grade represents a clear and accurate indicator of what a student knows and is able to do – mastery. With grades, we document the progress of students and our teaching, we provide feedback to students and their parents, and we make instructional decisions regarding the students. (p. 103)

If teachers take participation, behavior, and effort into consideration when giving academic grades, then the grade itself will no longer be accurate in terms of mastery (Wormeli, 2006).

Teachers can provide feedback on participation, but it should not be included in the final academic grade unless it is the actual skill being taught. When looking at effort, Wormeli (2006) states that it is difficult to measure effort because it is very subjective. There is not a commonly accepted objective method for determining how hard someone is working. Although it is important to teach students the importance of factors such as active participation and effort, these skills “are not demonstrations of mastery themselves; they are routes to that mastery” (p. 111). Instead of incorporating these factors into the academic grade, teachers should include them in a separate column on the report card. This way students and parents are still informed, yet the grade will not reflect other factors besides achievement (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Wormeli (2006) also suggests that teachers avoid grading homework that is practice. He goes on to say that the only time teachers should ever grade homework is when students have already mastered the concepts. Homework should be given so students can practice, reinforce, elaborate, or extend their understanding, not when they are learning something new. When homework is given and students have not yet mastered the concepts, they may end up doing it incorrectly and then have to unlearn what they thought was right.

According to Wormeli (2006), teachers should avoid giving group grades as well. When teachers give grades to an entire group, they do not show an individual student’s achievement or mastery and therefore, cannot be used to document progress or provide feedback. Wormeli (2006) goes on to say that group grades can cause tension and peer pressure among students, as well as negative feelings towards group members who are not as helpful or do not have as many ideas to contribute. Some students will do very little or no work, yet still earn the same grade as a student who has worked very hard or done all of the work. This can also cause negative feelings among students. Wormeli (2006) believes teachers should still use cooperative groups in the

classroom; however, they should be sure to grade students individually so that one student's grade does not suffer because of another student's lack of effort or achievement.

Finally, Wormeli (2006) suggests that teachers do not grade on a curve. He says that this is becoming less common among teachers, but that it is still being done. When teachers grade on a curve, they are simply comparing one student to another; they are not providing students with a grade based on mastery. A student could have performed poorly on a test, but still received a high grade because he or she did better than the majority of the class. This is very misleading and does not give students accurate feedback, nor can it be used to document progress. "Grades should be based on the student's demonstrations of knowledge and skill scored against a set of established criteria" (Wormeli, 2006, p. 128). When teachers grade on a curve, all they can determine is that some students do not do as well as others.

### *Exceptional Students*

According to Nordlund (2003), it is just as important for instruction to be differentiated for gifted and talented students as it is for students with learning needs. They need to be challenged in ways that encourage them to want to continue building on their knowledge and motivate them in future educational settings. To do this, teachers need to create activities that help gifted students develop a greater understanding of a concept, help them connect current instruction to their prior knowledge, and encourage students to explore and research one small part of instruction and really understand it thoroughly (Nordlund, 2003). Nordlund goes on to say that it is important for gifted students to receive pull-out instruction where they are able to explore topics in-depth and use their higher-level thinking skills (2003). Along with pull-out instruction, it is essential that instruction be differentiated throughout the day in order for gifted students to meet their full potential. Some ways a teacher can do this is by giving alternative

assignments, using learning centers, learning contracts, and tiered assignments, or by allowing the student to explore the learned material at a different level of understanding. When this is achieved, “students become self-motivated learners who enjoy the challenges of learning” (Nordlund, 2003, p. 65).

Nordlund (2003) states that it is also important for teachers to differentiate instruction for students who are learning English as a second language (ESL). How much a teacher differentiates would depend on the individual student’s level of understanding of English and their cognitive ability. Some general teaching strategies a teacher can use to make English language learners (ELL) feel welcome would be to assign them a class buddy, daily one on one interaction with the teacher, provide them with alternative activities, and allow them to use other methods of communicating until they are comfortable speaking in front of others. Teachers should also take the time to explain directions and assignments more thoroughly, speak slowly and in short sentences, and paraphrase and rephrase, especially in the beginning when students are first learning the language (Rief & Heimburge, 2006). During classroom instruction, Nordlund (2003) suggests that teachers use visuals and manipulatives such as posters, charts, pictures, and objects to help students acquire the English language. He also suggests teachers label objects throughout the classroom and school to help build a student’s vocabulary. When teachers invest the time, they allow ELL students to overcome obstacles, meet challenges, and achieve success (Rief & Heimburge, 2006).

### Chapter III: Methodology

All students learn differently. In order to meet the needs of all students, teachers need to differentiate their instruction. This study is designed to determine whether or not differentiating instruction in social studies has an impact on student performance. The data collected will provide evidence showing the need for teachers to differentiate their instruction if they want all students to succeed in the classroom.

#### *Selection and Description of Sample*

For this study, 23 third grade students' social studies grades from the 2007-08 school year will be compared to 20 students' social studies grades from the 2008-09 school year after instruction has been differentiated. The students range in age from eight to ten years old and are both Hispanic and Caucasian. The students range in ability levels with some students receiving English Language Learner (ELL) services, Title 1 services, Gifted and Talented services, and Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) services. All of the students attend school at Arcadia Elementary School in Arcadia, Wisconsin.

#### *Description of Setting*

The School District of Arcadia serves the communities of Arcadia, Waumandee, Dodge, and Pine Creek, all located in western Wisconsin. Within the School District of Arcadia, approximately 700 students attend at the elementary level, pre-kindergarten thru 8<sup>th</sup> grade. According to Wisconsin's Information Network for Successful Schools (WINNS), the elementary school student population is approximately 82.5% Caucasian, 16.1% Hispanic, .8% African American, and .6% Asian. Among those students, about 38.5% are eligible for subsidized lunch and about 14.1% are identified as having special needs.

### *Instrumentation*

Data will be collected using the researcher's grade book and comparing social studies grades from 2007-08 to grades this year in 2008-09. Subjects from both school years will be taking the same tests and given the same amount of time to prepare and study. The tests will be worth the same amount of points and the questions and format will also be the same. The grading scale will remain consistent throughout the study to ensure proper results.

During the 2008-09 school year, students will have the option of completing a project for their assessment. At the beginning of the school year, a note will be given to the parents at an open house informing them of the assessment choices their child will have in social studies. Parents can then ask any questions about the project sheets (See Appendix B) that will be going home with their child at the beginning of each unit. Parents will also have the opportunity to ask questions about the project sheets at parent teacher conferences or any other time throughout the year. If a child chooses to do a project instead of a test, the projects are due the day before the test is administered. The day prior to the test, the students who have chosen to do a project will present their project to the class. If the students do not show a great understanding of the topics discussed in the unit, they will be required to take the test the following day. All students, regardless of whether or not they are doing a test or project, will be required to participate in the review activity the day before the test. Everyone will receive a study guide a week or two prior to the test, which will give them an idea of what to expect on the test.

To assess any projects that are done, a rubric will be created that will be distributed to the students ahead of time so they know what criteria is expected of them (See Appendix C). According to Wormeli, a rubric is "a popular approach for focusing learning and for assessing and reporting student achievement" (2006, p. 44). Wormeli goes on to say that when teachers

create rubrics they need to design them in terms of content, clarity, practically, and technical quality/fairness (2006). The rubric that will be used in this study will be a generic rubric that includes items such as effort, mechanics, and knowledge of the content.

### *Data Collection*

To collect data for the research, student grades in social studies will be recorded for an entire school year. During the first year, the students will be required to take a test at the end of each unit. The majority of the content will also be taught directly from the book with a discussion following.

The next school year's instruction will be differentiated and students will have the option of taking the unit test or doing a project (See Appendix B) for their assessment. Students will also do a lot of cooperative learning and hands-on activities such as making an edible map, participating in a debate, and holding a classroom election. The social studies book will also be used more as a guide rather than the basis of the lessons. Learning centers will be set up around the room, along with tiered activities, to reinforce the skills being taught. Student grades will once again be recorded for the entire school year.

The unit tests will contain the same questions and format so that grades can accurately be compared from one school year to the next. The results will be based on five projects or unit tests which contain 30-35 multiple choice, fill in the blank, and/or matching questions, as well as, one or two essay questions. The researcher will also look at the percentage of students that chose to complete a project rather than take the test and how it changed throughout the year. Lastly, the researcher will look at the number of students who solely did tests or projects the entire school year in relationship to their final report card grade.

A ten question Differentiated Instruction Survey (See Appendix A) will also be individually read to the 20 third grade students in the 2008-09 school year to determine why some students may have chosen to do a project instead of a test and vice versa. The researcher will note additional comments the individual students make as they are completing the survey. This will help the researcher determine whether or not instruction in social studies will be differentiated in a similar way in the 2009-10 school year.

### *Data Analysis*

Student percentages from the 2007-08 school year will be compared with the percentages from the 2008-09 school year after instruction was differentiated. All grades for third grade students at Arcadia Elementary School are based on percentages which are then converted to letter grades.

Table 1

### *Grading Scale*

Letter Grade	Percentage
O	97-100%
S+	89-96%
S	79-88%
S-	70-80%
N	69% or lower

O=Outstanding S=Satisfactory N=Needs Improvement

The overall class averages from both school years will be compared to determine whether or not differentiating instruction has an effect on student achievement. The researcher will also

look at how many of the 20 students in the 2008-09 chose to do all projects or all tests and how it changed throughout the school year.

### *Limitations*

Due to the ages of the students, the survey given will be limited to the number of questions that can be asked in order to ensure that the subjects will take sufficient time to think about the questions and answer them honestly. The researcher will also be limited to what will be taught in social studies the following year in order to be as consistent as possible from year to year and accurately compare grades. Finally, since all projects are done outside of school time, it is suspected that some of the work may be done by members of the family. This would hinder the researcher's ability to accurately compare student report card grades from one school year to the next.

## Chapter IV: Results

Students enter the classroom with a wide variety of knowledge, skills, and needs. The purpose of this study was to show the effect on student grades when teachers take the time to differentiate their instruction and meet the needs of all students in the classroom. This study also looked at students' attitudes and opinions about having choices in their learning.

### *Data Analysis*

Table 2 shows the overall class averages in social studies for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years. During the 2007-08 school year, social studies instruction was not differentiated. In the 2008-09 school year, instruction was differentiated extensively.

Table 2

### *Class Averages in Social Studies*

Quarter	2007-08 School Year	2008-09 School Year
First Quarter	79-88% (S)	89-96% (S+)
Second Quarter	70-80% (S-)	79-88% (S)
Third Quarter	79-88% (S)	89-96% (S+)
Fourth Quarter	79-88% (S)	79-88% (S)

O=Outstanding S=Satisfactory N=Needs Improvement

Table 3 shows the survey responses of 20 third grade students. Each student was individually administered the survey by the researcher halfway through the 2008-09 school year. Any comments the individual student made during the survey process were also recorded, along with whether or not they were a high, medium, or low performing student in relationship to the rest of their peers.

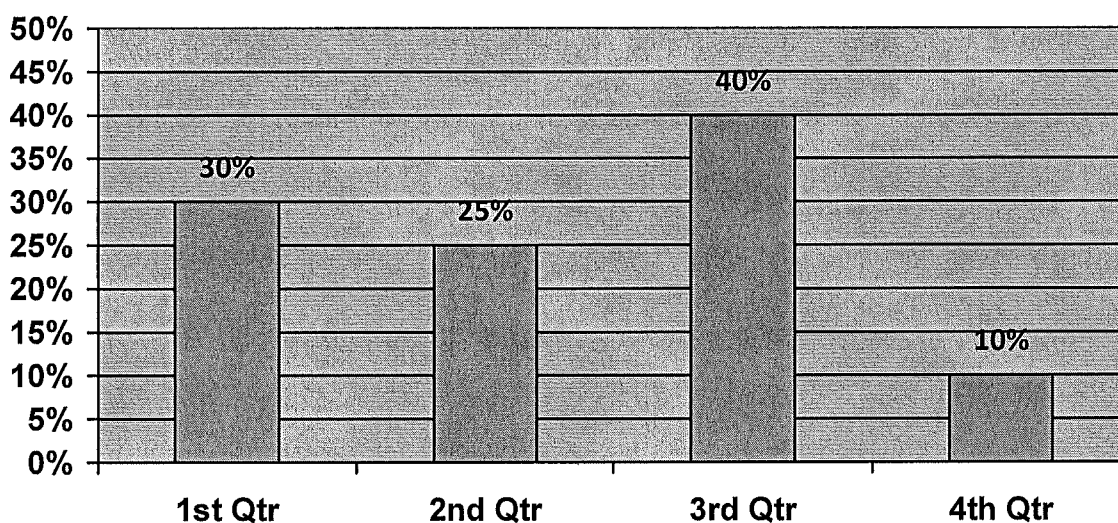
Table 3

*Student Survey Responses*

Question	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
1. Tests make me very nervous.	45%	40%	15%
2. I always study for tests.	65%	5%	30%
3. I usually do well on tests.	20%	30%	50%
4. Even though I study, I still do poorly on tests.	10%	65%	25%
5. I like that projects give me a choice in my learning.	80%	10%	10%
6. I never study, but still do well on tests.	20%	65%	15%
7. If I had the option of doing a test or a project, I would definitely do a project.	45%	30%	25%
8. Projects are too much work. I'd rather take a test.	15%	65%	20%
9. My grades are important to me.	100%	0%	0%
10. Projects are easier to do than taking a test.	45%	20%	35%

During the 2008-09 school year, the students had an option of doing a project or taking a test for each unit assessment. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students who chose to do a project each unit, and how it changed throughout the school year. During the first quarter, 30% of the students chose to do a project, in the second quarter 25% chose to do a project, in the third quarter 40% did a project, and in the fourth quarter 10% of the students completed a project.

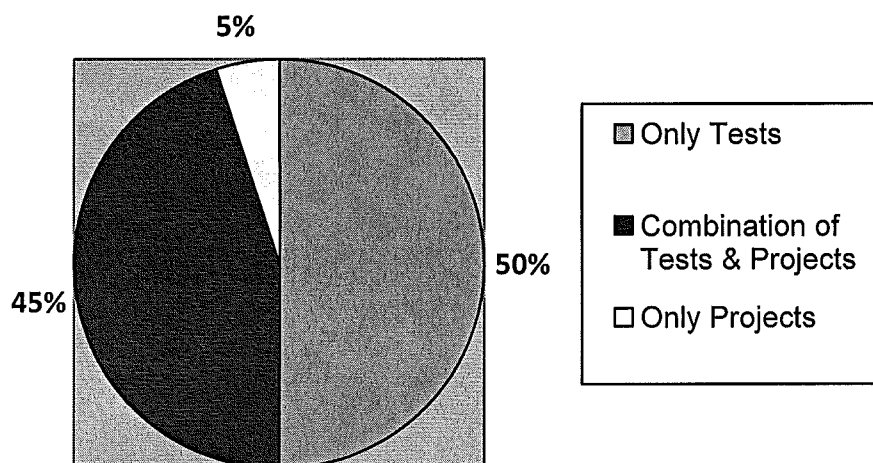
Approximately mid-year, the researcher changed the project requirements which could have resulted in the decrease in the number of students who chose to complete a project. The students now had to be prepared to explain their project, as well as, answer any questions asked by the teacher or other students. If they were not able to answer the majority of the questions, they were required to take the test the following day. If it was evident that a lot of effort went into the project but the student failed to provide enough information about the topic, the student was given another day to gather information or add to the project. If they opted not to improve upon their project, then it was necessary for them to take the unit test.



*Figure 1.* Percentage of students who completed a project each quarter.

Five unit exams were given in social studies during the 2008-09 school year. If students opted out of taking the exam, they needed to complete a project that went along with the social studies content studied in that particular unit. Figure 2 shows the percentage of students who completed all projects, all tests, or a combination of the two for their assessment throughout the 2008-09 school year. Half of the class, or 50% of the students chose to take the test each unit,

45% of the students did a combination of projects and tests, and 5% of the students completed a project for all five units.



*Figure 2.* Percentage of student assessment choices in the 2008-09 school year.

Finally, the researcher wanted to see if there was a correlation between a student's academic ability level and whether or not they chose to do a test or a project. To determine whether or not a student was high, medium, or low performing, the researcher categorized the 20 third grade students into three groups according to their overall academic performance in all subject areas.

In the first quarter only 43% of the low performing students chose to take a test. By the fourth quarter 86% chose to take a test instead of doing a project. Halfway through the school year the researcher raised the standards for the project which could have resulted in the increasing number of students who chose to take a test. The students could no longer submit a project and talk about it; in addition they needed to be able to answer any questions the teacher and other students may have had. Figure 3 shows the results.

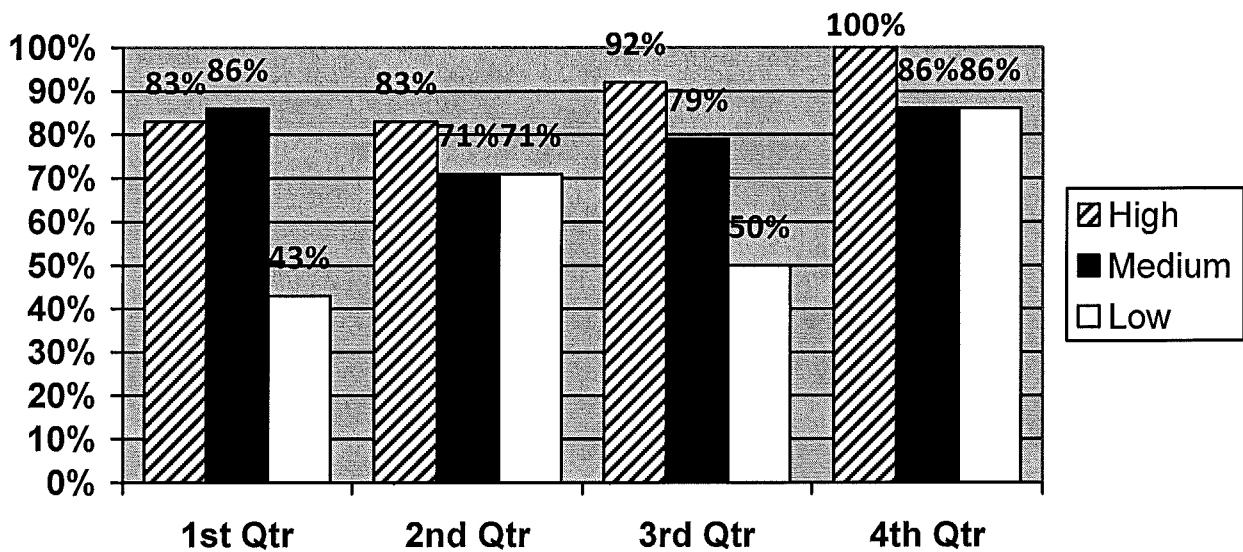


Figure 3. Percentage of students (based on ability) who opted to take the tests.

Figure 3 also shows that many of the high performing students chose to do a test each unit. When looking at these students' survey responses, it seems that many of them chose to do the tests because they were more confident in their test taking abilities, tests were easy for them, and they generally performed well.

## Chapter V: Discussion

All students learn in a different way and at a different pace. Therefore, it is necessary for all teachers to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of all students. This study compared student grades over a two year time period. The first year instruction was not differentiated and students were all expected to take the social studies tests at the end of each unit. The following year instruction was differentiated and students had the option of doing the unit tests or completing projects for their assessments.

### *Conclusions*

After the researcher differentiated instruction during the second year of the study, it was determined that when a teacher differentiates instruction, student performance improves. Student social studies grades during the 2008-09 school year were higher overall than the previous year when instruction was not differentiated. This reinforces what researchers say about the benefits of differentiating instruction. When students are active in the learning process, assessments are varied, and students feel a sense of safety and connection, the most effective learning will take place (Tomlinson, 2001).

From looking at the student survey responses (Table 3), it is evident that the students care about their grades and want to do well. Most of the students liked having choices in how they were assessed each unit, which also holds them more accountable for their learning. From the student responses it can also be concluded that even though students felt that projects were easier to do than the tests, there seemed to be more students who took the test each unit. This could be due to the fact that students felt they did not have the support at home or materials necessary to do the projects. There were also students who were unsure of whether or not projects were easier than tests because they chose to do a test each unit. Since they did well on the first couple of

tests, they were never anxious to try a project. Tests may also have been easier for the students during the 2008-09 school year because they learned the material in a way that was hands-on and more meaningful to them. They were able to make more connections and relate to the content matter, which in turn made the tests appear easier.

### *Recommendations*

It is recommended that more school districts take the time to train their staff on differentiated instruction. Research has found that all students learn differently; therefore, teachers cannot teach the same way to all students and expect to meet their individual needs. Some ways a district could get information to their staff is by sending teachers to workshops and holding in-services about the topic. School districts could also invite professional speakers to educate teachers on ways they can differentiate their classroom instruction. The results will far outweigh the time and funds it takes to educate these individuals and provide them with the resources needed to get started.

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## Appendix B: Sample Project Ideas

### Unit 1 - Learning About Communities

In this unit your child will be studying the organization and development of communities. The following ideas and topics will be covered:

- Reasons for living in communities
- How people in communities depend on one another
- Different customs and cultures in communities
- Safety in communities
- Places shown on maps and globes
- Different sizes of communities
- Histories of communities

At the end of the unit your child will have the option of taking the written test or completing a project. If your child chooses to complete one of the projects instead of taking the written test, the project will be due the day before the test.

The following are some project ideas your child may decide to do instead of taking the written test. Your child may come up with his/her own project idea, as well, I just ask that he/she runs the idea by me before getting started.



Make a poster about a person you admire in your community. Do research on him or her and write a short biography. Draw pictures or take photographs of that person to illustrate your poster. Add captions to the pictures that tell how that person is a leader.



Create a magazine about your community. Decide which events and people you want to include in your magazine. Then write short paragraphs about them. Make maps, time lines, and charts for your magazine.



Create an imaginary community. Decide on some reasons the community's citizens live there and what the citizens' jobs are. You may also want to make up festivals and community laws. Then assign the community a location in the world. Draw a map of the community, decide its size, and write its history.

## Appendix C: Project Rubric

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Project \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Awesome 4</b>	<b>Good 3</b>	<b>Okay 2</b>	<b>Not Quite There Yet 1</b>
<b>Content Knowledge</b>	Student demonstrates excellent understanding of the topic. The finished project is fully developed and well organized.	Student demonstrates a good understanding of the topic. The project is developed and organized.	Student demonstrates some understanding of the topic. Some facts may be inaccurate.	Student demonstrates little understanding of the topic. Some information may be inaccurate or unrelated.
<b>Visuals</b>	Student used many visuals to enhance project.	Some visuals were used to enhance the project.	Some visuals were used that did not go along with project.	Student used no visuals.
<b>Mechanics</b>	Project has no spelling or grammatical errors.	Project has no more than two spelling and/or grammatical errors.	Project had three spelling and/or grammatical errors.	Project had four or more spelling and/or grammatical errors.
<b>Effort</b>	The project clearly shows that much effort went into it.	Mostly complete, could use a few finishing touches.	More time and effort needed on project.	Still needs quite a bit of work, project is not complete.
<b>Presentation</b>	Spoke clearly and was easy to understand. Good eye contact. Able to answer all questions asked.	Spoke clearly, easy to understand. Good eye contact. Able to answer most questions asked.	Somewhat difficult to understand. Some eye contact. Able to answer few questions.	Very difficult to understand. Little or no eye contact. Not able to answer any questions asked.