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**Meeting the Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
and Special-Needs Students in Rural Communities**

A Report on McREL's Diversity Roundtable IV

Regional Educational Laboratory
Contract #ED-01-CO-0006
Deliverable #2002-05

Institute of Education Sciences
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20208

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December 2002



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This work was produced in whole or in part with funds from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education, under contract number ED-01-CO-0006. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of IES or the Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the federal government.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Diversity Roundtable Planning Team (Zoe Barley, Lou Cicchinelli, Brian McNulty, Greg Rawls, John Ristvey, Nilda Simms) and Glenn Taylor and Jackson Hundley of McREL's technology team. Doug Fleming offered helpful suggestions that aided planning and assisted with establishing and conducting online discussions following the Roundtable. Members of McREL's Rural Steering Committee provided guidance for planning the Roundtable and helped disseminate information about it to colleagues in their respective states. The success of the Roundtable was due in large part to Delia Pompa and Carol Tomlinson, who served as presenters for the two sessions. The authors appreciate Delia's and Carol's willingness to lend their expertise and to take a risk with us as we tried a technological approach to hosting a Roundtable. Thanks to Mike Arnold for moderating both sessions in a way that made all feel welcome and comfortable with the format. Thanks also to Barb Gaddy for editorial assistance and to those who reviewed this report and made suggestions to improve its quality and utility.

INTRODUCTION

*That students differ may be inconvenient but it is inescapable.
Adapting to that diversity is the price you have to pay if you want
students to be productive. (TheodoreSizer)*

The face of America is changing. In 1945, the United States was 86 percent White, 3 percent Hispanic, 10 percent African American, and 1 percent Asian. The projection for 2050 is that the Hispanic population will increase to 25 percent; African American population, to 14 percent; and Asian population, to 8 percent. Although 2050 is nearly one-half century away, the African American and Asian populations already have stabilized at the projected levels. Hispanics now make up 15 percent of the population, and the rate of growth of this population remains high. In fact, the number of English Language Learners in public schools has grown over 30 percent since 1997.

These demographic changes extend from urban neighborhoods to rural America. In the Central Region and elsewhere across the nation, the presence of increasing numbers of English Language Learners and other special-needs students (e.g., students with disabilities, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds) poses new challenges for teachers and administrators. As educators strive to help all students achieve high standards, they seek information that addresses the specific instructional needs of children whose circumstances can make learning more a struggle than a joy.

To help educators realize the vision of standards-based reform — high levels of performance for all students — McREL has sponsored four diversity roundtables in recent years. This document is a compilation of two electronic Web conferences, which served as the venue for discussion at the fourth Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) Diversity Roundtable, held October 1 and 3, 2002. In addition to the introduction, this document includes two question-and-answer sections. The questions in these sections are based on the research, insight, strategies, and recommendations presented by two national experts during the Roundtable Web/teleconference presentations.

The objective of the McREL 2002 Diversity Roundtable was to bring rural administrators, service providers, and teachers together electronically and offer them an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with recognized national experts on two significant needs in today's rural classrooms: teaching English Language Learners, and differentiating instruction to enhance learning for special-needs students. The following outcomes were identified for participants of the Roundtable:

- Increased understanding of research-based/effective practices for educating English Language Learners in rural areas
- Increased understanding of what differentiated instruction is and how it can be applied in rural areas to improve the performance of special-needs students

Recognizing that holding the roundtable in Denver would prevent many interested educators from attending, McREL determined that an online Web conference would be a viable means of reaching the rural target audience. Research showed that the lowest common denominator of Web conference technology for a rural audience was a telephone and an Internet connection. Participants registered online, provided feedback on areas of interest around each of the topics, and were given a toll-free (800) number to call at the appointed time, along with a URL that offered access to presentation materials both before and during the conference. Conference participants included educators from 14 states.

McREL's fourth Diversity Roundtable was organized around presentations prepared specifically for the event by two national experts: Delia Pompa, executive director of the National Association for Bilingual Education, and Carol Tomlinson, professor of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. Each 90-minute Web conference included a 30-minute presentation by an expert and a 60-minute question-and-answer session. Participants had opportunities to submit questions prior to and during each session.

Following each session, participants were asked to complete an online evaluation form rating the utility of the electronic format and the quality of the content for each session. Participants also were notified when transcripts of the sessions were posted online and were invited to visit the discussion forum page to continue the dialogue.

This report, along with complete transcripts, audio files, and presentation materials of both sessions, are posted on McREL's Diversity Roundtable Web page: www.mcrel.org/diversityroundtable/. In addition, questions from participants for which the allotted time precluded discussion are posted on the McREL Teacher Quality Discussion Board: www.mcrel.org/products/webforum/forums.asp. It is our hope that this document, and all the materials on the Web site will serve as vehicles for further thought and discussion on these rural issues with colleagues, near and far. If we could have our fondest wish, these materials would stimulate changes in practice and policy that translate into improved learning experiences for rural students who are English Language Learners or who have other special needs.

SERVING CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, districts are required to account for the performance of every subgroup of students. More and more of those subgroups in rural areas reflect the changing face of the United States. Historically, funds and other resources to assist culturally and linguistically diverse students have been directed primarily to urban areas where there are large concentrations of these students. But today, rural communities need similar assistance to help the increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms.

This section provides a picture of the challenges that rural communities face in serving culturally and linguistically diverse students and offers suggestions for meeting some of these challenges. The questions and answers in this section are drawn from the presentation made by Delia Pompa

and the answers she provided to participants' questions during a Web conference sponsored by McREL on October 1, 2002.

CHALLENGES TO MEETING STUDENT NEEDS

Two main challenges to meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural areas were discussed during the Roundtable event: (1) limited concentrations of English Language Learners and (2) limited resources. This section includes questions related to each of these challenges.

Limited Concentrations of English Language Learners

Question: Why do varying concentrations of English Language Learners pose such a challenge to rural schools, even though the number of students involved is often small?

The basic problem is marshaling limited resources to serve a critical mass of students in one setting. Some districts respond to this situation by creating newcomer centers, designating one school as the school to serve English Language Learners. This tends to work in terms of the kinds of services students receive, but, from the child's perspective, the "quality of life" may not be good. Having to travel to another school — perhaps a considerable distance away — to get an appropriate education limits many other aspects of the child's life, including participation in extracurricular activities, the creation of a sense of neighborhood, and the feeling of being part of the school. When students must travel long distances — 40 miles or more — the newcomer center solution is not the best and the challenge of serving a critical mass of students remains. Some districts attempt to address the problem using distance learning and other technology solutions. Again, limited resources, both financial and human, often thwart these efforts. Still others provide training for teachers to help them use different instructional strategies with English Language Learners in their classrooms. For the most part, however, the problem of what to do in rural settings with varying concentrations of English Language Learners remains a difficult challenge.

Question: How does acculturation in rural areas differ from that in urban areas for culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Factors that influence acculturation include the concentration of other people like oneself and the kind of access to one's home country. For some immigrants in rural communities, acculturation is likely to occur more quickly because the number of individuals like them is probably small. Factors that influence acculturation vary not just by setting but by the kinds of resources families have. For example, immigrants who have access to telecommunications are more easily able to maintain ties to their home country — and thus acculturation is likely to occur more slowly. One caveat is that it isn't clear yet how the use of technology will change the pattern of acculturation in urban and rural areas. What is known is that many families are bicultural — they have acculturated to the "American way of life" *and* kept many aspects of their home culture. Educators need to understand that the acculturation process is not a one-way street. Today, changes in demographics mean the creation of new and mixed cultures in a different way than in the past.

Question: Why should rural areas pay particular attention to immigrant students who have been in the United States for several years?

Research has shown that risk behaviors for immigrant children tend to be higher the longer they are in this country and the more acculturated they become. The reasons for this are not clear. It is clear, however, that immigrant status alone does not necessarily mean children will exhibit risk behaviors. In rural communities where there may be no history of serving immigrant students or insufficient services for them, it is more likely that immigrant students will engage in risk behaviors. This means that educators need to pay attention to the varying needs of immigrant communities as these communities evolve over time and provide the specialized services students need at various stages of acculturation. Educators should keep in mind that it is not language needs alone that will determine the kinds of services that are appropriate for many culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Question: How do Native American students fit into the discussion of culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural areas?

Native American students share many of the characteristics of newcomer groups and groups that have been in this country for some time and live in poverty. Unfortunately, discussions of culturally and linguistically diverse students often have not addressed the needs of Native American students. Their needs have been taken for granted. Fortunately, Native American students have not been forgotten under the No Child Left Behind Act. Under Title III of the Act, districts can continue to serve Native American children through programs that help them recover and maintain their native language. They could be helped further if those who have been serving Native American populations a long time are included in national-level discussions about culturally and linguistically diverse students. Based on their experiences, these people could represent the interests of Native American students and contribute many ideas about what should be done to assist newcomers or specific ethnic and linguistic groups.

Limited Resources

Question: What are the teacher quality issues with regard to culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural areas?

Rural areas traditionally have been very stable. Many teachers in rural areas have lived there for some time. They are familiar with the needs of students in these areas and are quite comfortable teaching in rural schools. However, given the changes in the populations that rural areas serve, a mismatch has developed between the kinds of skills teachers have and the kinds of skills they need. Because rural areas have had limited access to universities and technical assistance centers, teachers have not had opportunities to learn how to work with students who do not speak English. Many teachers in rural areas do not understand how being an English Language Learner affects students' access to the curriculum — for example, how reading is affected by the dynamics of learning a second language — or how to make the curriculum more accessible.

Question: In addition to under-prepared teachers, what other personnel challenges do rural areas face in serving culturally and linguistically diverse students well?

Culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural areas face issues that range from a lack of role models to a lack of someone who understands how to meet their particular learning needs in the school setting. Bilingual counselors and bilingual special education teachers can help with these issues, as can role models in the school and district administration as well as community services.

Question: What other factors limit the ability of rural communities to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students?

One factor is the lack of outside supports to help the school when a new group of immigrants arrives in a rural community. When there is an established community in a setting, whether it is rural or urban, there are many resources to draw on in addition to those provided by the school. For example, adults who represent the specific culturally or linguistically diverse group can come in to the school to work with children. There are likely to be social service providers who speak the language of the families. In addition, there are leaders in the community who can be role models for students.

Another factor limiting the ability of rural communities to serve these students is the small size of rural schools. In general, small schools do not have the infrastructure or skilled personnel to provide the range of programs necessary to meet the learning needs of diverse populations with different languages and different cultural and economic backgrounds.

Question: What are some of the possible consequences of the limited resources of rural areas to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Having limited resources may lead to some deliberate misclassification and some not-so-deliberate misclassification. Many times schools are driven to classify students as needing special education, bilingual education, or supplemental services because they need the resources that come with these classifications in order to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students. Sometimes misclassification is not deliberate. For example, the limited understanding that some teachers have about the specific needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students often leads to misclassification. For example, an English language learner may be misclassified as needing special education services because difficulties the student is having with the language lead the teacher to think that the student has a learning disability.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

This section provides suggestions for addressing the challenges that rural areas face in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The suggestions highlight ways in which districts can address the challenges, as well as actions that the federal government, state departments of education, higher education, and service providers can take to help districts address these issues.

Question: How can the U.S. Department of Education assist districts in their efforts to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students?

One important way in which the U.S. Department of Education can assist districts is to provide funds to support professional development for preservice and inservice teachers. Such funds currently are provided for under Title II and Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act. Also, when the Higher Education Act is reauthorized in the next year or so, there will be a significant focus on increasing minorities' access to higher education, including minorities entering teaching. By providing funds that support professional development, the federal government can help ensure that teachers are highly qualified to teach all students.

Question: What leadership should state departments of education provide to support rural districts in meeting the needs of English Language Learners?

State departments of education can support rural districts by convening meetings to gather information about needs in rural areas and by following up with training and other assistance to help meet those needs. This can be done in partnership with other organizations, such as regional education laboratories and comprehensive centers. States also might distribute a publication tailored to the state that provides information about how rural districts can fund and create programs for English Language Learners. The resource book could include state funding opportunities, relevant laws and possible ways to meet requirements of those laws, and other state resources that can help rural districts meet the needs of English Language Learners.

Question: What information is most important for teacher preparation programs to provide preservice teachers to prepare them to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Preservice teachers should learn the principles of second language acquisition and acquire some basic skills in second language instruction. They should understand that children who are learning a second language require specialized literacy techniques and specialized language development techniques. In addition to understanding the instructional implications of linguistic differences, teachers should know that there also are implications that result from differences in values and family circumstances such as poverty.

Question: Online courses may be one solution to the problems that many rural teachers face in accessing professional development. What should professional development providers include in an online course in the areas of diversity, risk behavior, limited English proficiency, and mobility?

First and foremost, the course should give teachers a snapshot of how our world is different by providing information about demographic changes. Next, the course should introduce learners to the unique characteristics of different non-mainstream populations of students. For example, with regard to English Language Learners, the course might address what teachers need to know about second language acquisition and literacy in second language acquisition. As another example, the course might address characteristics of students in rural poverty by exploring such questions as, "How is a poor student in Appalachia different from a poor student in New York

City?” For example, even a poor student in New York City has access to a library, though this is not always the case in Appalachia. Next, the course should review some of the research on learning and how learning is affected by different factors. Then the course could focus on instructional strategies — what “good teaching” means for all students and how it differs for different subgroups. The purpose of the first part of the course should be increase teachers’ awareness of demographic changes; the second should help teachers focus on what might be different for diverse students; and the third part should address what to do given those differences.

Question: What is the best way for a service provider to begin working with a rural district to help them understand how to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students?

The service provider should meet with the superintendent and ask if the community demographics have been examined recently, particularly in relation to achievement, and if so, how the district has responded or will respond. Next, the service provider should ask what assistance the district might need and present ways in which his/her organization might be able to assist the district. Educators aren’t likely to accept help until they realize what they need. Often they do not realize what they need until they are asked, “Did you know this and what are you doing about it?”

Question: Many rural districts do not have the human and fiscal resources to support native language programs that include an English as a Second Language component. What should rural districts do in light of their limited resources?

Research on the effectiveness of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and programs that use native language indicates three things. One is that children learn English as quickly in English as a Second Language programs as they do in programs that use students’ native language. Second, children who have been in good dual language programs have higher achievement than either children in all-English instruction or special English language programs. And children who have been in good sustained dual language programs perform at or above the level of those students who are fully English proficient. Third, children who only participate in ESL programs show improvement in both oral English skills and in academic skills areas early on, but their level of performance tapers off as they progress through school.

These findings suggest that native language programs that include an ESL component might be the ideal. If rural districts do not have the resources to support such programs, they can choose from a number of ESL models — such as the Sheltered Instruction — that work very well. And, there are other very good ESL programs that use varying amounts of native language. In selecting a program for its English Language Learners, a district should look for a program that has a good research base, holds students to high standards, and includes an evaluation component.

Question: What is the role of the superintendent in addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural areas?

A key role for the superintendent — and other community leaders — is to promote a positive attitude about demographic changes that are occurring. When community leaders see demographic changes as a boon to the community rather than a drain on community resources, the superintendent helps create an attitude that leads to children being served appropriately and to communities coming together to recognize diversity, celebrate it, and make the most of it. A superintendent can be an attitude leader by highlighting the resources that diverse students bring to the community. For example, a diverse student body helps all students develop a broader perspective about the world.

Another important role for the superintendent is to examine the district's programs, practices, and policies — from curricula to teacher qualifications — and ask what needs to change in light of changing demographics. The superintendent should inform the community about needed changes and help educators and community members work together to develop programs that serve all students well.

Finally, the superintendent plays an important role in understanding what diversity means for his or her district from an education and accountability perspective. For example, the superintendent should talk with members of the Chamber of Commerce about how schools are changing as a result of changing demographics and what the consequences might be for them as members of the business community if schools do not succeed in educating all students. The superintendent should act as a cheerleader by saying, "Here is what our school looks like, and here is how we need you to help."

Question: What actions can rural schools take to ensure that they successfully address the needs of English Language Learners?

First, rural schools should recognize that their student population is changing. They should take steps to ensure that they make education decisions based on the needs of all students, not just some students, by bringing all stakeholders to the table. Second, they should find ways to help the community understand what is happening, why it is happening, and how the school is responding. Third, if they do not have individuals at the table who have the skills required to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, they should find experts to help them. For example, when the student population of Dalton, Georgia schools increased from a small percentage of students to 50 percent of students being Limited English Proficient, the district reached an agreement with the University of Monterey, Mexico, to provide professional development for teachers.

Question: How can rural schools use federal monies to support services for culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Rural schools should consider all of the different sources of federal funds available to them and try to apply them in new ways. Examples of available funds include Title I, Title III, safe and

drug-free schools, 21st Century Learning Communities, and funds for recruiting and retaining teachers.

Question: What are some other resources to assist rural schools in serving culturally and linguistically diverse students?

The National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) is a key resource for rural schools several reasons. It has a special interest group that works with small schools and low-incidence populations. It also has a Web site (<http://www.nabe.org>) with information on a variety of topics related to meeting the needs of English Language Learners. The Web site also lists NABE products and publications. One publication is a toolkit that includes a PowerPoint presentation explaining the Title III law and highlighting changes in the law, implications for school districts, and examples of how the law has been implemented. To obtain a copy of the toolkit, go to the NABE Web site and click on the Products/Publications section. The toolkit can be ordered online at a cost of \$99. A videotape presentation of the law also is available separately for \$35. In addition to the Web site, NABE publishes the *Bilingual Education Research Journal* and a bi-monthly news magazine. Each of these publications includes articles on low-incidence populations and Native American students in rural schools.

There are an increasing number of print resources available from a variety of sources for working with Hispanic students. Reviewing resources for Hispanic students often triggers ideas for helping students of other ethnic and racial backgrounds, because their needs are often similar to those of Hispanic students.

Educators should look for resources for post-secondary education as well as K–12 education to encourage students and parents to think about opportunities beyond high school. Parents and students need information that helps them understand the process for accessing these opportunities. In this instance, being rural is an advantage. In a small school, teachers and other staff usually know students well. This makes it easier to provide information to parents and students and to instill the desire and confidence in students to seek post-secondary education.

Question: What are some forums for sharing best practices for new and emerging programs related to serving culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural communities?

One forum for sharing best practices is the annual NABE conference. Each year, there are more sessions at this conference on culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural areas because there is a growing need for information and guidance. NABE's Special Interest Group in Rural Education is one way for educators to engage in online conversations about this topic throughout the year. NABE is interested in co-sponsoring a national meeting on serving culturally and linguistically diverse students in rural areas as another forum for sharing best practices.

CONCLUSION

One Roundtable participant asked if there is resistance to addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As Delia Pompa noted, although there still are some who resist

the notion, the number of resisters is smaller than in the past. There seems to be a growing awareness of and openness to dealing with this issue. Educators ask, “What should I do about this? Tell me. I want to learn more.”

At several points during the Roundtable, Delia emphasized the importance of helping resisters understand the changing demographics in their community. She suggested asking them to think about how their district is different than it was 20 years ago, 10 years ago, or even 5 years ago. Often this will help them recognize that they need to do some things differently. There are some who want this country to be as it was in days past, but even they cannot deny that this country — and their school districts — are changing. Thus, they must change in ways that take into account the best interests of all children.

DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION TO ENHANCE THE LEARNING OF SPECIAL-NEEDS STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS

Differentiated instruction is about adapting to the differences among students. Its aim is to help each child get the most out of what makes him or her unique — his or her general and special abilities and aptitude. Differentiated instruction is more than a collection of teaching strategies, such as use of graphic organizers or compacting the curriculum. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that recognizes that each student cannot reach his or her full learning capacity if all students are treated the same. In Carol Tomlinson’s view, differentiated instruction is what happens when teachers put into practice their passion for content as well as for working with students — they do whatever it takes for each student to learn from and contribute to the power of the particular subject being taught.

Obviously, differentiated instruction is not restricted to rural areas or to special-needs students. Most of what is addressed in this section also is applicable in urban and suburban areas. The questions and answers that follow are drawn from a presentation made by Carol Tomlinson and the answers she provided to participants’ questions during a Web conference held on October 3, 2002. This section addresses the key components of differentiated instruction, implementation challenges, and how this approach might be implemented in specific situations.

KEY COMPONENTS OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

The questions that follow provide a general overview of differentiated instruction by addressing the philosophy of differentiated instruction, the steps of differentiation, and the elements of teaching that teachers can adjust when differentiating. Also included is a brief explanation of one of the principles of differentiation — flexible grouping.

Question: What is the philosophy of differentiated instruction?

There are several aspects of the philosophy of differentiated instruction to consider. One aspect is recognition and acceptance of the idea that no two learners learn in the same way since learning is affected by differences in prior experiences, culture, language, and gender. Another

aspect of the philosophy is teachers' use of the "essentials" of a content area — the fundamental concepts and skills — as building blocks to help students develop the next level of understanding. By building on these essentials, teachers give students the power to increase their learning. A third aspect of the philosophy is that the learning environment should foster in students genuine appreciation and respect for one another despite their differences.

Question: What are the steps in differentiating instruction?

There are five main steps in differentiating instruction:

- Understand precisely what students should know and be able to do at the end of a unit, and match every lesson to those goals.
- Continually assess students.
- Make small-group teaching a part of the instructional plan.
- Talk with students about what a differentiated classroom is and why you are differentiating instruction. Invite students to help develop the procedures and rules that will make differentiation work.
- Reflect on practice. Ask, "How did it go today? How did it go for specific individuals? What adjustments should be made to make it better tomorrow?"

Question: What student traits do teachers need to respond to when differentiating instruction?

Teachers need to respond to students' readiness to learn, their interests, and their preferred method of learning.

Question: What are the elements of teaching that teachers can adjust when differentiating instruction?

Teachers can adjust content (what is taught), process (how students make sense of what is taught), and products (how students show what they have learned).

Question: What is the principle of flexible grouping, and why is it important to differentiated instruction?

The principle of flexible grouping says that students should be grouped in many ways — by similar or dissimilar learning profiles, interests, or levels of readiness. The choice for grouping can be made by the teacher or by students. The principle of flexible grouping is important because it emphasizes that teachers need to observe students in a variety of groupings in order to determine what learning experiences each student needs. Students need to experience a range of settings to understand better what they know and how they learn. This helps students become more self-directed learners.

CHALLENGES TO DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION

Although most teachers recognize the need to differentiate instruction, many do not know how to begin or how to continue when their initial efforts are not successful. Questions in this section address the challenges in differentiating instruction, including different ways that teachers might express resistance to differentiation, classroom management issues, and the teacher's beliefs and level of knowledge and skills. The section also provides possible ways to meet the challenges presented.

Question: What are some ways that teachers express resistance to differentiating instruction?

Sometimes resistance comes from the need to protect oneself. For example, a teacher might ask, "How could I possibly do one more thing? I am already working long days, and I am tired and I do not have much of a life as it is." To address this type of resistance, first remind yourself that most teachers understand the need to reach out somewhat differently to different students, but they need someone to show them how to do it in a manageable way. Help teachers understand that they can take small initial steps, and assure them that they will become more proficient with each new step. Remember that the art of initiating and sustaining change involves compelling people to do something but stopping before they feel overwhelmed.

Another kind of resistance arises when teachers think they are being given conflicting messages. In this situation, a teacher might ask, "What do you mean I am supposed to differentiate instruction when I also have this standards test? Nobody is going to differentiate the standards test, so why should I be expected to differentiate what I do leading up to the test?" This is a legitimate question for teachers to ask because the notion of standards has been translated to high-stakes testing. Teachers get the message that they should get every one of their students to the same level of understanding on a prescribed date regardless of students' readiness, experience, preferred method of learning, level of English proficiency, or anything else. This message causes teachers to feel panicked and frustrated. The "small steps" approach to implementing differentiation is also appropriate in this case.

Question: What are some of the management challenges that teachers face when they begin to practice differentiated instruction, and what are some of the strategies to address those challenges?

One approach is to talk with students about who they are and what they need. For example, a teacher can ask students to rate their strengths and weaknesses on a scale and compare their ratings. When discussing the differences among the ratings, the teacher can ask students what they think he or she should do about these differences. In my experience, students never say, "What do you mean? Do the same thing for all of us regardless." They were very clear that what I needed to do was understand their strengths and weaknesses and help them build on their strengths and find ways to circumvent their weaknesses. The next step is to ask students how the classroom would be different from other classrooms if you were to do that. My students would say things like, "We might finish things at different times. You might have to help different ones

of us at different times. We might end up needing different materials to work with. We might not always have the same homework. We might not even always need the same test at the same time.” Then I would say, “Okay, if we are to make it work, what rules and procedures will we have to follow?” And the students helped me develop the rules to make it work.

Another way to manage differentiated instruction is to introduce it in very, very small steps. For example, first teach students to do something absolutely silently at their seat — reading a novel or a story of their choice, working word problems, practicing handwriting, working on a daily work plan. Tell them that the most important thing is that when they are doing this silent activity, whatever else happens, they should not look up, talk to anybody, or ask any questions. They should just keep doing the silent activity. The point of this activity is to help students understand that it matters that they can concentrate on their work. Before trying this approach, study the class to determine how long students can sustain the activity successfully before they get restless, and then assign them the activity for slightly less time than that. The goal is to make sure they are successful. Then add a variation — give some of the students in the group one thing to do and some others another thing. After the activity, ask students if it bothered them that two things were going on at once and, if so, why. Also ask them why they thought you had them do two different things. As a next step, call one or two students over to talk with you while the other students work on something. Ask the students, “How did that feel? Did the noise bother you? Do you know why I did that?” It’s like letting the string out on a kite bit by bit so that you always feel in control and understand where things are going. Teachers should start where they feel comfortable — where they are still able to maintain responsibility for the classroom. Starting small, starting with manageable things, starting at safe times, trying to make sure students are successful — all make a big difference in managing a differentiated classroom.

Question: How can a teacher differentiate when there is wide variance in students’ ability in a classroom and pressure to cover a prescribed curriculum?

Tiering is one approach to solving this problem. In tiering, the learning goal is the same for all students, but the degree of difficulty with which you ask students to act on that knowledge differs. This means, for example, that the teacher provides fairly straightforward scaffolding — such as what occurs during whole-class teaching — for those students who are struggling and more complex activities for more advanced students. In other words, the teacher works with each student at a level of moderate challenge — referred to by Vygotsky as the zone of proximal development. This might mean asking students to use different resources or different skills.

It might be good if teachers thought about instruction the way business people think about selling video games. First, remember that everybody wants to play the game. In education this means that we should not have students just doing drill and practice in the corner by themselves. All students ought to be working with important ideas, thinking, and producing things — the real game of education. Second, if you want someone to buy your game, it has to start where the player is. If it’s too hard or too easy, the player won’t be motivated to play. Third, if someone is going to keep playing your game, it has to accommodate growth in the player’s skill. And fourth, if you will not do that, the player will not buy your game.

Question: Do you see hope for meeting a broad variety of student needs with the availability of standards-based mathematics curricula?

I do not believe there are ever going to be curriculum materials that will take away the need for teachers to know children — who they are, what they like, what makes them feel safe, what challenges them. But it is helpful when publishers save teachers some steps by offering two or three ways to approach instruction. For example, a company called Exemplars has some wonderful standards-based mathematics materials, especially in the elementary and middle school years. The materials show different levels of students' expertise in mathematical problem solving by providing rubrics that guide both teachers and students in thinking mathematically. The materials also provide examples of tiered lessons for each of the standards. More and more publishers in a wide variety of areas are trying to provide suggestions for competently differentiating instruction.

Question: In high-poverty schools, what helps teachers believe that all students are able, and should have opportunities, to manage concepts at high levels?

When teachers come to believe over a long period of time that students cannot perform at high levels, they continue to function under those assumptions. One way to change teachers' perspectives is to give them new experiences. Sometimes, one or two people who strongly believe that things can be different take action and prove that their belief in children's abilities to perform at high levels is justified. Other times, a principal or other school leader forges a team and makes things happen. It is very powerful when you find somebody who simply will not accept the prevailing notion of what students cannot do and gives a very vivid demonstration of what they can do. Henry Levin's work provides an example of this. His approach is to teach struggling students as you would gifted ones — teach them the big ideas — the important and powerful concepts and skills — and how to think.

Question: Which is a greater barrier to differentiating instruction — the teacher's level of understanding of content or pedagogy — and why?

The University of Virginia recently completed a five-year study in 12 middle schools in four states to address that question. This study of factors facilitating differentiated instruction indicated that there are at least four barriers: (1) the teacher is weak in content knowledge — does not know what is important about it or how it is organized, (2) the teacher has a limited repertoire of instructional strategies, (3) the teacher has poor classroom management skills, and (4) the teacher does not reflect, or reflects very little, about the needs of individual students and how students are responding to instruction. The study did not indicate that one of the four factors was more important than the others, but it was evident that a weakness in any one area can derail the process of successfully implementing differentiated instruction. This means that teachers need professional development in all four areas and that leaders must be able to assess where teachers are in relation to all four. For example, there is no point in providing extensive staff development on concept-based instruction if teachers are already quite proficient with their content. On the other hand, there is no point in helping the teacher increase content knowledge if classroom management issues are going to get in the way. It is important to understand the

complexity of the endeavor and that teachers need to hone all four of these areas throughout their careers. (The study will be available through the National Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Connecticut, in 2003.)

IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Roundtable participants asked several questions related to using differentiated instruction in specific situations, such as a special education resource room or with gifted and talented students in a Title I school with low achievement. Those questions are included in this section along with questions related to planning differentiated lessons and using peer tutors in differentiated classrooms.

Question: When a teacher has a heterogeneous classroom, including special education students and English Language Learners, in a Title 1 school with low achievement, how can the teacher meet the needs of the one or two talented and gifted learners in the classroom?

The hardest thing is figuring out that you do have to do something for these students. Like all students, gifted and talented students need teachers in order grow. Gifted and talented students know how to show teachers what they can do independently, but they do not know how to put themselves in the zone of proximal development. It is the teacher's job to do that — to push the student into that state of discomfort. One approach is to use small groups and to group the gifted and talented students together sometimes. Another approach is to compact the curriculum. The teacher also could form a partnership with a specialist in gifted education and ask that person to help locate computer materials, ready-made problems, or units for these students. The difficulty seems to be that teachers feel so responsible for the students who are hurting that they practice triage education and anybody who is not dying is left alone.

Question: What would you recommend in a language arts class for a child who has great conceptual knowledge and skills in their native language but very low English language skills — a *War-and-Peace* capability and interest and a *Frog-and-Toad* [a book for young children] skill level?

Make sure the student who has the conceptual brilliance gets a chance to do things that are conceptually challenging for him or her. With any child, including a child with a learning disability or a student who is learning English, I want that child to think, at least some of the time, at peak level. So I may say to the student, “Here are the important questions I want you to deal with. Write in Spanish, then we will figure out how to get your answers translated into English.” Or, if it is a student who has great visual ability, I'll ask the student to draw a response and then we will figure out how to do the narration. Whatever it takes, I want that student to learn to find satisfaction in the power of his or her mind, and I do not want to cut that back because the student has a *Frog-and-Toad* vocabulary.

On the other hand, I cannot teach that child to get to *War and Peace* in English unless I also work with some of those *Frog-and-Toad* issues. It is really important to have that student develop vocabulary and comfort with English language structures. So sometimes I may have that

student do work that is not really meaningful to him at that point, but I will find a way to do a lot of work with reading, vocabulary, and spelling. As that child's English teacher, I would think in terms of spending a considerable chunk of time with the *War and Peace* ideas and a considerable chunk of time with the *Frog-and-Toad* skills and would determine that some of the things in between we could probably live without for now.

Question: How does differentiated instruction apply to special education teachers with students in a resource room?

Special education resource rooms often serve as good examples of differentiated instruction as do kindergarten classrooms and art classes. Special education teachers are accustomed to diagnosing students' needs and to setting up a classroom in such a way that the teacher does different things with different students at different times. Students work on the content and skills that are their own particular next steps.

One important aspect of helping teachers learn how to differentiate instruction is finding others who are comfortable with the processes involved in differentiating. Many special education teachers understand well the whole notion of why teachers need to do different things, how one can think about what those things are, how one assesses to see where students start and to monitor their growth, and how to support that growth differently for different students. In many ways, there is a close match between what occurs in a special education resource room and the general philosophy and practices of differentiation.

Question: Are there specific strategies for including differentiated instruction in lesson planning? What does a differentiated lesson plan look like? Where can examples of differentiated lesson plans be found?

One of the first things to do is to be sure to specify what it is that students need to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of the lesson. Many of us teach units that are somewhat fog-enshrouded in that there are many activities addressing the topic, but we do not indicate precisely what it is that students must know about the topic — the big understandings and skills that should come out of learning about the topic. Clarity and focus about the big understandings and skills are hard to achieve, but they make for much better teaching.

As a teacher, once you know those non-negotiables, then you need to think about the different needs of your students. For those who struggle, you do not want a lot of "fluff and fuss." You need to know exactly where to focus attention. With advanced students, the question becomes how to use the essentials of what is to be learned as a springboard for learning more complex concepts. To plan the unit effectively, the teacher needs to know students' interests and their level of prior knowledge, so the lesson plan should include opportunities for pre-assessment. Next, think about how much time the unit will take — identify the large chunks — and then think about when to have students work in small groups and when to have the class work together as a whole. Next, select strategies that will help students learn the required knowledge.

Sources for examples of differentiated lesson plans include the Hottlinx Web site (<http://www.hottlinx.org>) at the University of Virginia. This Web site includes many examples of

differentiated activities, lessons, and projects. In many cases, there is also an explanation of why the lesson has been done a particular way. Later this year, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development will release two books of differentiated units. The format includes several elements: What is your topic? What are the standards you are addressing? What should students know, understand, and be able to do? What are the steps in the lesson? What strategies are being used? Each page will have two columns. The left-hand column will specify exactly what the teacher is doing with the students. The right-hand column will include the teacher's explanation of his or her decisions.

Question: In what ways can peer tutoring and peer review play a role in differentiated instruction?

The usefulness of peer tutoring and peer review depends on how the situation is set up and how students are matched. The peer tutor needs to be eager to do that kind of work, have social skills, and be patient. Peer tutoring is not good if it creates a caste system in which some students are always the tutors and others are always the tutees. It can also be problematic for advanced students if their primary role in the class is teach somebody else rather than to learn. Another caution is to think carefully about pairing the most advanced students with those who are struggling the most. Frequently, the gap is so great that these students do not communicate very well. To avoid these issues, it may be better to establish groups where each person in the group has a non-negotiable contribution to make to the group. The roles need to be defined in a way so that the group can only function well if each person contributes.

CONCLUSION

The premise underlying differentiated instruction makes clear that differentiated instruction is primarily about respect for individuals and what they bring to and need from the learning process. For special-needs students in rural areas, this respect is critical, in part because there may be few others who have the same special needs. Teachers in rural communities need to consider how students' characteristics and the rural nature of the community can be taken into account when planning and delivering instruction. This means thinking about how the rural community affects students' readiness, interests, and preferred method of learning, as well as what is taught, how it is taught, and what students are required to produce as evidence of their learning. By considering these factors, teachers can help special-needs students — and all students — achieve to their full capacity and feel as if they are part of the community.