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# Supporting Elementary Preservice Teachers' Design of Differentiated Instruction with a Transparent Lesson Plan Template

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## Abstract

Planning and differentiation are key components of elementary teachers' work in classrooms. Therefore, teacher education programs must prepare their preservice teachers for this future responsibility. This study examines how the integration of a more targeted lesson plan template and increased explicit in-class instruction impacts preservice teachers' knowledge and implementation of differentiated instruction in an Elementary Education teacher certification program. Findings indicate that the new, more targeted lesson plan template and increased time dedicated to explicit differentiated instruction across the Elementary Education program led candidates to feel more knowledgeable about differentiated instruction and how to design and implement instruction for diverse learners. There were also areas in which our preservice teachers felt the program could improve, both within course instruction and regarding the lesson plan template.

Transferring theoretical understandings from preservice coursework into field-based application and teaching is a primary goal of all teacher education programs (Kidd & Murray, 2020). Complications have persisted across all educational settings from the COVID-19 pandemic over the last few years; therefore, it is more critical than ever that faculty, supervisors, and cooperating teachers develop strong relationships with preservice teachers grounded in communication and feedback (Wells, 2021) and support in developing their own relationships with their students in the classroom (Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020).

However, Cahapay (2020) noted that successful teacher certification programs

should go beyond transferring knowledge into teaching practice by “holistically [involving] qualities that may be hard to measure but are essential such as critical thinking, resourcefulness, and creativity” (p. 747). The unique challenge faced by elementary teacher education programs is preparing pre-service teachers to effectively design and implement instruction across all of the core content areas taught in K-5 classrooms (i.e., English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies). This challenge is compounded by the fact that today's students are increasingly diverse in terms of their academic abilities and needs. To reach all students, teachers must differentiate instruction, using a variety of teaching methods.

Differentiated instruction is an approach teachers use to strategically develop lessons to meet the needs of individual students (Brown & Wentworth, 2021). Teachers typically differentiate based on the following four elements: content (what students need to learn), process (activities students engage in), product (what students create or produce during the lesson that is assessed) and learning environment (how the classroom works and feels) (Tomlinson, 2000). Differentiated tasks may include supplemental activities for proficient learners and high interest/low readability texts for emergent learners. According to König et al. (2020), choosing and developing learning tasks is the focus of lesson planning. When writing lesson plans, teachers must consider the characteristics of their learning groups. Expert teachers recognize and analyze students' dispositions while making decisions about their lessons and tailor learning tasks to match students' needs.

Teacher education programs must make pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and specific approaches to instructional design explicit to teaching pre-service teachers during coursework experiences, so they are easily applied in field-based settings (Boche et al., 2021). Framing desired teaching competencies within a framework of core requirements or criteria for pre-service teachers' lesson planning efforts, coupled with exemplary work samples and helpful resources, may simplify the application of teaching approaches with which they have less experience (Chalmers et al., 2017; Shand & Farrelly, 2017).

The above is particularly important in elementary education programs as pre-service teachers develop differentiation approaches. Pre-service teachers can benefit from coursework activities that involve examining and designing examples of

differentiation that can be enacted in practicum teaching experiences (Dack et al., 2019) within and across content areas. They must develop self-efficacy and believe they can achieve positive outcomes in student learning (Coates et al., 2020), differentiating instruction to effectively meet each learner's needs.

We drew upon Finkelstein et al.'s (2021) emphasis on support and operationalized the term "differentiation" as *the design of support of individual students, small groups, and entire classes in the areas of content, process, product, and learning environment*. These four differentiation emphases are color coded in the lesson plan template (Appendix A) we created and will discuss in more depth later in this article. Throughout the template students are asked to identify when they are differentiating and the type of differentiation they are implementing.

Templates are commonly used in teacher education programs to support pre-service teachers in designing and implementing effective, comprehensible instruction aligned to specific course- and program-level goals (Şeker & Erdem, 2017). Teacher education programs must be cautious about how lesson planning templates are integrated in coursework and practicum experiences, emphasizing critical teaching practices (e.g., differentiation) and dispositions rather than matters of compliance and decontextualized busywork (Lowrey et al., 2019). Likewise, how and with which instruments preservice teachers are evaluated matters, as they explicitly and implicitly communicate the practices and dispositions that are valued and will lead them to academic and professional success (Ottander & Grelsson, 2006). Also, evaluation tools should be paired with clear feedback that students can apply to their teaching practices (Olpak & Ates, 2018).

Ultimately, teacher educators must make clear the purpose, required instructions and tasks, and criteria for succeeding. Equally important is that teacher educators support pre-service teachers in engaging in metacognitive reflection through the process of completing an assignment, increasing understanding of “rationale behind any evidence-based teaching strategy” and “monitoring their own learning process” (Winkelmes, 2019, p. 41).

As planning and differentiating are a central part of the work of classroom teachers, teacher education programs must prepare pre-service teachers for this task. To better prepare our pre-service teachers, elementary education faculty at our institution have focused content-area courses on differentiation and modified the templates used by our preservice teachers when writing lesson plans to support this change. This project seeks to examine how increased instruction in differentiation and a more targeted lesson plan template with more explicit in-class instruction may impact pre-service teachers’ knowledge and implementation of differentiation.

### Methods

Approximately 8,300 students are enrolled at our mid-sized state university in the Southeastern U.S. About 80 students are majoring in Elementary Education. The Elementary Education students typically apply to the teacher education program during their junior year and are placed in cohorts in which they complete four semesters (i.e., “Blocks”) of coursework and field experiences; student teaching is completed in the fourth and final block. Blocks 1-3 contain a mix of methods/theory courses with complementary field experiences embedded within each methods course. During the first three semesters, field experiences range from 60-120 hours. Table

1 depicts the organization of each block in the Elementary Education program.

**Table 1**

*Organization of Elementary Education Program*

Block	Required Time in Field	Methods Course Topics
Block 1 Activities	60 hours	Teaching Children to Read, Creative Experiences
Block 2 Activities	120 hours	Language Arts, Curriculum, Content Area Reading and Social Studies
Block 3 Activities	90 hours	Math, Science, Diagnostic Reading
Block 4 Activities	600 hours	Student Teaching

In Summer 2021, faculty members in the Elementary Education program revised the lesson plan template to focus on differentiation and meeting the needs of diverse learners. In the following academic year, pre-service teachers enrolled in Blocks 1, 2, and 3 utilized the revised lesson plan to design and implement instruction in reading, language arts, social studies, math, and science. As a first step, the preservice teachers were required to write a summary of their students' backgrounds and needs (e.g., socio-cultural, racial, and religious

background; individual needs; IEP, 504, gifted, etc.). Next, they used the color-coding scheme to demonstrate how they differentiated the lesson (i.e., content, process, product, and environment) to meet the needs of the students in their assigned classrooms. For example, preservice teachers would highlight in blue written text within their lesson plan to indicate they were intentionally differentiating ‘product.’ Our goal in adding this scaffolding to the lesson plan template was that expectations of intentional differentiation would be more explicit to the teaching preservice teachers throughout their work in the Elementary Education program (Moles & Wishart, 2016). Finally, pre-service teachers self-evaluated their strengths and weaknesses and analyzed the effectiveness of their instructional design and implementation within written lesson plan reflections.

### **Data Collection**

Preservice teachers in Blocks 1-3 were asked to participate in this study as all were exposed to the program’s new lesson plan design with an increased emphasis on differentiation. Block 4 students were excluded as they were in student teaching and did not have the level of exposure to the new lesson plan format compared to Blocks 1-3. A total of 30 students consented to participate in this study.

Data collection consisted of a survey reflection that students were asked to complete during their final class of the Spring 2022 semester. The reflection consisted of three open-ended questions: a) Has your knowledge of differentiation increased this semester? If so, how? b) In what ways has the format of the current lesson plan template impacted your ability to design differentiation approaches and make them more explicit during your evaluations, and c) What would you like us to keep doing and/or

change in terms of differentiated instruction? All students enrolled in the program were asked to complete the reflection for program improvement purposes. Only responses from students in Blocks 1-3 who granted written consent to participate in the study (N=30) were included in our data analysis.

Findings were triangulated by collecting participants’ lesson plans and post-teaching reflections (Paparinni et al., 2021). Lesson plans typically ranged in length from five to seven pages and included the placement students’ background, state standard(s), learning objective(s), assessments, behavior management processes, differentiation, and lesson procedure.

Written lesson reflections were required at the end of each lesson plan. The preservice teachers were asked to address the following prompts in their reflections: a) Provide a detailed description of what occurred throughout the lesson; b) What did students do well with and what are they still struggling with related to the learning targets; c) Describe the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and planned supports; d) Based on the analysis of students’ learning and teaching effectiveness, what are your next steps to strengthen your teaching practice and support students’ learning?

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using constant-comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This type of analysis helps the researcher compare people, incidents, and categories within data (Charmaz, 2000). Three levels of coding were used to analyze the data: a) open coding, b) axial coding, and c) selective coding.

We began with open coding in which we went through all the data and looked for

different themes that emerged. The following open codes are examples of some of the common themes during this stage of the analysis: knowledge increased due to field experiences, professors' instruction, cooperating teachers, application/strategies for differentiation. Next, we engaged in active coding where we looked for the connection among the categories and subcategories of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Within this step we went back through the data and open codes and noticed the relationships and connections among the codes. The following are examples of axial codes that emerged: formatting increased organization, highlighting was beneficial to differentiation, and the need for similar expectations among the courses/blocks. In the final stage of coding (selective coding), core categories emerge, systematically connecting them to the other codes/categories and confirming the similarities among them. The core categories that emerged in this study were a) the increased knowledge of differentiation, b) knowledge of lesson plan design and instruction implementation, and c) areas for improvement.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, we looked for findings that did not confirm our initial analysis. While there were some standalone codes that only occurred in one participant's data (e.g., that the template's format was repetitive at times) we did not find codes that negated our analyses. Additionally, the data were triangulated by looking for consistencies and inconsistencies among multiple participants and data sources (i.e., lesson plans and reflections) as previously stated above.

### **Findings**

Preservice teachers will write approximately 50 formal (submitted for evaluation by course instructor) lesson plans during their time in this Elementary

Education program. From our data we found that the new lesson plan template and increased time spent on differentiated instruction across the Blocks led preservice teachers to feel more knowledgeable about differentiated instruction and how to design and implement instruction for all students. We also found that there were areas of improvement, both within course instruction and the lesson plan template.

### **Knowledge of Differentiated Instruction**

Within the survey responses, most preservice teachers described their increased knowledge regarding differentiation. More than learning how to correctly design it in a lesson plan, which is important, they described their increased knowledge of actual differentiation and the impact it has on their elementary students' ability to learn and thrive in the classroom. For example, a Block 2 student stated "My knowledge increased a lot this semester. We were shown different examples of how to realistically use differentiation and our professors went in depth on how differentiation can look different for each classroom and how to correctly use it." Increasing preservice teachers' knowledge of differentiation within the college classroom prior to being in the field gives them the opportunity to ask questions and try new approaches in a lower-stakes environment, hopefully applying that knowledge into their field placements (where they now realize that what works for one class or student may not work for another).

Direct instruction by course instructors on how to differentiate product, process, content, and environment in elementary classrooms was well received. Preservice teachers expressed appreciation about differentiation being broken down into those identifiable areas; however, misconceptions and mistakes still occurred and were seen as learning opportunities by

both the course instructor and preservice teachers. A Block 3 candidate noted, “I sometimes mess up the differentiation and professors did a great job at redirecting me in the correct direction.” Likewise, a Block 1 student stated, “I feel my misconceptions of differentiation were corrected and I learned how to differentiate better.” In general, focusing instruction on differentiation throughout the semester led to preservice teachers reporting an increase in knowledge, which impacted their ability to design and implement differentiated instruction.

### **Designing and Implementing Instruction**

In our meetings concerning the redesign of the lesson plan format, Elementary Education faculty discussed the importance of being transparent when it came to the actual task of designing a lesson for a grade in a college course compared to how their cooperating teachers plan a lesson in the field. Cooperating teachers often write abbreviated plans that cover an entire week, and they may or may not be required to submit them to their principal for review. As college professors, we know that it is not realistic for practicing teachers to write a 5–7-page lesson plan for every lesson they will teach; however, our preservice teachers need the practice and experience of explicitly writing out what they will do and how and why they will do it in order to learn and grow as educators.

We found that in introducing the new template and being transparent about our reasons for the lesson plan requirement, preservice teachers’ buy-in and support was better than past semesters as they saw it as a way to be better prepared to work with their elementary students in the field. This was especially true when it came to differentiation. In the past, differentiation was relegated to one area of the plan where they simply wrote a sentence or two

describing how they would differentiate; whereas now, it was embedded in the lesson plan with a highlighting system that made preservice teachers really think about the different ways they were differentiating.

As described by a Block 2 student, “The layout of the lesson plan gives us the opportunity to explicitly highlight and point out where the differentiation is [which] is helpful because it ensures that those sections will stand out and be abided by. Intro, body and closing helps to decide where the differentiated instruction is.” The above sentiment was echoed by a Block 1 student who wrote, “By having to highlight different parts throughout the lesson plan, it helped me explicitly state how I planned on differentiating for my students. This way, when it was time to teach my lesson, I knew exactly what I was going to do.”

Preservice teachers also credited the new lesson plan template with helping them to be more reflective and organized in their planning. The new template begins with asking preservice teachers to provide a description of their students, which makes them reflect on individual learning needs right from the start, instead of just focusing on teaching a reading lesson, for example, that includes comparing and contrasting characters. We want preservice teachers to realize that students, and their needs, are at the core of effective instruction, and therefore, we are clear in our expectations that preservice teachers must know their students. One way to help ensure this consideration was to integrate it in the lesson plan template used by our preservice teachers.

Including it in the template requires students to learn about their students prior to designing a lesson. Additionally, we had multiple in-class discussions across the Blocks around the fact that it is impossible to

differentiate instruction without first knowing your students and their needs. The participants' survey responses indicated that our preservice teachers were very receptive to this intentional approach to differentiating instruction. For example, a Block 3 student stated, "I think the way the lesson plan template is laid out allows me to see better where differentiation needs to take place. I am better to reflect on what needs to happen and take place." A Block 2 student similarly noted, "The current lesson plan template [pushes] me to be more organized and it also makes it easier to differentiate."

### **Areas for Improvement**

While overall the new lesson plan template and the instruction surrounding it were well received, some survey responses highlighted some areas in which faculty could make improvements in subsequent semesters. One element that we will strive to be more transparent about in our instruction is that differentiation approaches can sometimes be specific to certain content areas. There were multiple survey responses in which participants said they would have preferred one course session (or an entire course) focused on how differentiation can be integrated into lesson plans. For example, a Block 3 student stated, "I think there needs to be more clear instructions and a course where this portion of the lesson is thoroughly explained and learned."

Unfortunately, this type of instruction needs to be integrated into all field-based courses to address the curricular needs within those courses, and we as faculty need to do a better job of making that clear to our preservice teachers. Additionally, when preservice teachers move through the Blocks they are held to higher expectations. In Block 1 they are just starting out in the program and are beginning to design differentiated instruction; while differentiation is required

in lesson plans in each Block, we expect more consistency and effectiveness with differentiated instruction in Block 3 compared to Block 1. Some participants did not necessarily see this as scaffolding across the Blocks and instead, felt as if faculty were changing the expectations on them. "For example, a Block 3 student noted, "We need a more in-depth explanation in Block 1. The expectations were not the same when coming into Block 2." It is clear from these surveys that faculty need to be more transparent in the expectations within each Block, so our preservice teachers have a better understanding of how we scaffold and what is expected.

Finally, our Elementary Education faculty can improve on our own differentiated instruction. Based on our surveys, there were preservice teachers who wanted more time and instruction focused on differentiation. Some wanted us to vary our instruction to include more modalities and others felt we did not focus on differentiating instruction enough for gifted students in today's elementary classrooms. For example, a Block 1 student noted, "It would be nice to learn different types of differentiation or more examples of how to adjust our lessons, especially for more advanced students." Another Block 1 student stated, "I would like to see more differentiated ways for instruction like visual and auditory ways for instruction or displaying information." As instructors within the Blocks, we often feel that we have covered our material ad nauseum, however, it is helpful to get this type of feedback from our preservice teachers in order to improve our own instruction.

### **Conclusion**

As elementary education faculty, we realize the importance of making pedagogical content knowledge and instructional design transparent to preservice teachers during



coursework, so they understand the importance of applying those concepts when in the field (Boche et al., 2021; Shulman, 1986). Teacher education programs are in a prime position to foster specific knowledge and skills with preservice teachers early in their coursework, which is beneficial as waiting until the end of preservice teachers' programs often means that they are in the field without the same level of instructional support from faculty. (Siffinn & Lew, 2018).

Our program integrated our revised lesson plan template with increased focus on differentiation within all the Blocks so students are exposed to explicit differentiated instruction at the beginning of their education coursework and can continue to scaffold their learning throughout the program. Throughout the Blocks the preservice teachers noted that changes made within the program led them to feel more knowledgeable about differentiated instruction and how to design and implement instruction for all students. However, increased transparency in regard to differentiation among specific content areas and the differing expectations among the Blocks are areas that we need to continue to work on as a program. Additionally, preservice teachers would like increased instruction in differentiating using a variety of modalities as well as differentiating for gifted learners.

Elementary Education programs should make learning and instruction transparent to their preservice teachers. Allowing preservice teachers to understand the why to pedagogical knowledge and instructional design will aid them in becoming more confident teachers.

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**Appendix A: Lesson Plan Template**

<b>Grade Level:</b>	<b>Content Area(s):</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<b>Your Students:</b>	•	
<b>Georgia Standard(s) of Excellence (GSE):</b>	•	
<b>Learning Objective(s):</b>	•	
<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Diagnostic and/or Formative Assessment:</b> •	
	<b>Summative Assessment:</b> •	
<b>Materials:</b>	<b>Physical Materials &amp; Resources:</b> •	
	<b>Digital Materials &amp; Resources:</b> •	
<b>Classroom Management Strategies:</b>	<b>Organization and Distribution of Materials:</b> •	
	<b>Transitions Management (from one activity or context to the next):</b> •	
	<b>Behavior Management:</b> •	
<b>Supports for Students:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize the color coding scheme provided to demonstrate how you have differentiated the lesson</li> <li>• Highlight using these colors throughout your lesson plan</li> <li>• You are not required to differentiate all of the suggested areas, but some form(s) of differentiation must be present and it must be tied to your students' needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Content</b> (i.e., what students learn, curriculum and materials used)</li> <li>• <b>Process</b> (i.e., how students learn, instructional tools and strategies)</li> <li>• <b>Product</b> (i.e., how students demonstrate learning, what they create or complete)</li> <li>• <b>Environment</b> (i.e., where students learn)</li> </ul>	
<b>Introduction:</b>	<b>Introduction Procedure:</b> •	
	<b>Planned Questions &amp; Prompts for Introduction:</b> •	

<b>Body:</b>	<b>Body Procedure:</b> •
	<b>Planned Questions &amp; Prompts for Body:</b> •
<b>Closure:</b>	<b>Closure Procedure:</b> •
	<b>Planned Questions &amp; Prompts for Closure:</b> •
<b>Reflection, Analysis, and Next Steps</b>	<b>What changes from the original plan did you make in your implementation of the lesson? Why?</b> •
	<b>What did students learn? How do you know?</b> •
	<b>If you integrated digital technologies in this lesson, to which level of the <a href="#">SAMR Model</a> did it align? Explain.</b> •
	<b>What were your teaching strengths? What were the areas of improvement in your teaching?</b> •
	<b>What are your next steps to strengthen your teaching practice AND support students' learning? Make sure to include different teaching strategies and planned supports than what had been used in this lesson. The new, proposed teaching strategies and planned supports must be grounded in research and/or theory. Cite your sources.</b> •

**Appendix B: Lesson Plan Checklist**

<b>Candidate Name:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	
<b>Your Students:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Compose a brief summary of your students' backgrounds and needs. <input type="checkbox"/> Consider all applicable needs (e.g., sociocultural, racial, and religious background; individual needs; IEP, 504, gifted, etc.)
<b>Georgia Standard(s) of Excellence:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Selects appropriate standards aligned to learning objective(s) for the specific lesson with integrity
<b>Learning Objective(s):</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Aligned to GSE <input type="checkbox"/> Worded in student-friendly terms <input type="checkbox"/> Measurable <input type="checkbox"/> Specific; frames what students will be able to do by the end of the lesson
<b>Assessment(s):</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Includes differentiation and modifications <input type="checkbox"/> Aligns to GSE and learning objective(s) <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate types of assessment are included (i.e., diagnostic, formative, summative) <input type="checkbox"/> Explains the evidence that will be collected (i.e., what, how, when)
<b>Materials:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Materials utilized in the lesson are appropriate and enhance the lesson <input type="checkbox"/> Includes hyperlinks to digital resources, if available and accessible by the instructor
<b>Classroom Management Strategies:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Aligns to the information noted in Your Students, Intro, Body, and Closure sections of the lesson plan
<b>Supports for Students:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Utilize the color coding scheme provided to demonstrate how you have differentiated the lesson throughout your lesson plan
<b>Introduction</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Engage students and spark interest and excitement <input type="checkbox"/> Questioning and involving students in setting the stage for the lesson <input type="checkbox"/> Activate prior knowledge and/or revisit previous relevant learning <input type="checkbox"/> Review/introduce academic vocabulary <input type="checkbox"/> Formally state objective(s) of the lesson in student-friendly terms
<b>Body:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> What will happen after the introduction? <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching strategies and learning tasks align with the learning objectives and explain how you will facilitate the learning for your students <input type="checkbox"/> Students will demonstrate learning and skills that align with the learning objective(s) <input type="checkbox"/> Formative assessments are utilized. <input type="checkbox"/> Planned questions include higher-order thinking questions.
<b>Closure:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Candidate summarizes learning tasks and activities <input type="checkbox"/> Students share/summarize what they have learned and done <input type="checkbox"/> Students apply new knowledge and skills to new contexts beyond the classroom <input type="checkbox"/> Students have opportunity to ask questions, clarify misconceptions, and self-assess their own learning/performance <input type="checkbox"/> If relevant, plans for continuing the project, activities, or learning in future lessons/days are discussed.
<b>Reflection, Analysis, &amp; Next Steps:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Research and/or teaching and learning theory is cited in at least one section of the reflection. <input type="checkbox"/> Reflection includes characteristics of the lesson and specific examples aligned with the learning objectives of what went well and what can be improved and why. <input type="checkbox"/> Specific examples should be aligned with the learning objective(s) and evidence of students' learning <input type="checkbox"/> Reflection describes how you will extend the lesson for those students who met the objective(s) <input type="checkbox"/> Analysis focuses on effectiveness of instructional design and implementation, not just classroom management
<b>Comments:</b>	