International Journal of Education and Applied Sciences
Volume 1, Number 4, 167-174, September 2014
http://www.injoeas.com
ISSN: 2345-6728

Differentiated Assessment: A New Paradigm in Assessment Practices for Diverse Learners

Mohammad Noman, [a]* Amrita Kaur [b]

[a] *Senior Lecturer, University Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia*
[b] *Senior Lecturer, University Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia*

Article history:
Received 5 July 2014
Received in revised form 11 August 2014
Accepted 25 August 2014

Keywords:
Differentiated assessment
Learner diversity
Assessment as learning
Assessment for learning
Differentiated instruction.

Abstract

A typical classroom is full of diverse students and not all students are identical in their academic abilities. Students need a variety of options to assimilate information and beget meaning. Differentiated instruction is being widely used in such diverse classrooms as a method which advocates adaptation of instructional practices commensurate with the diverse needs of students. However, when it comes to assessment, teachers are still contingent upon uniform assessment methods for all students in the classroom irrespective of their diverse learning abilities. The assessment practices that overlook the background knowledge of diverse student population are unfair. Varying learning abilities of student's call for a differentiated method of assessment in the classrooms that ensures that correct assessment of learning is actualized and the report accurately informs teachers what accommodations are to be made in their instructional practices to meet individual need of students. This article attempts to establish that differentiated assessment can be carried out by either lowering the expectations for students with lower ability or by being flexible with assessment methods according to students wants to accurately measure learning. Only when differentiated instructional practices are informed by differentiated assessment practices can a teacher ensure that learning needs of every student in a classroom is met.

Please cite this article as:
Noman, M., & Kaur, A. (2014). Differentiated Assessment: A New Paradigm in Assessment Practices for Diverse Learners. *International journal of education and applied sciences, 1(4)*, 167- 174.

***Corresponding author:** Email: mdnoman@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Rapid globalization has made our already diverse classrooms even more diverse. This diversity has brought in fresh challenges for teachers to reach out to students with different learning needs, different socio-economic backgrounds, abilities and cultures (Stefanakis & Meier, 2010; Fogarty & Pete, 2010). Despite being aware of the diverse nature of students, especially in terms of their academic ability, not many teachers consider these in their instructional and assessment practices (Gable, Hendrickson, Tonelson & Van Acker, 2000; Guild, 2001). Modern classrooms are driven by uniformity rather than addressing differential ability of students (Gable et al., 2000; Guild, 2001; Sizer, 1999). Tatum (2011) states that differentiated instruction are the way to go to ensure equitable instruction to the diverse student population in a modern classroom. Differentiated instruction is briskly acquiring currency and adapting instructional practices to accommodate different levels of student ability is empirically well-documented (Burns, Codding, Boice, & Lukito, 2010; Johnsen, 2003). Although still not much literature is available on this subject (Anderson, 2007; Hall, 2002), the studies that exist show positive improvement in student learning in a classroom with different academic levels when instruction is diversified according to student's needs (Rock, Gregg, Ellis & Gable, 2008). Almost 70 percent of learners benefit from differentiation (Tomlinson, 2002).While instruction gets all the attention in literature on differentiation, the equally important aspect of teaching and learning – assessment, is largely ignored.

While teacher's instructional practices follow differentiation in the classroom, the assessment is still based on 'one size fits all' criteria (Harris Stefanakis, 2010; McBride, 2004) same standardized assessment for all students. Teacher's assessment of student achievement is majorly instrumental in several crucial decisions like instructional planning and placement of student (Gittman & Koster, 1999; Hoge, 1984; Sharpley & Edgar, 1986). Teachers are generally ill prepared to address the needs of diverse students in their classrooms (Naqvi, 2009; Shepard, et al., 2005). As a result, unintended bias in assessment data may happen if the diversity within the classroom is not taken into account (Popham, 2001). In schools around the world, the classroom work that is accumulated over the course of the academic year is ignored while the final grade reflects only the test scores (Harris Stefanakis, 1998). Traditional uniform assessment practices has been criticized by scholars since the resultant grades are highly suspect due to the lack of proper understanding of assessment practices and overlooking the different ability of the students (Marzano, 2000).

Reliable and effective assessment practices must be based upon the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) developed by Vygotsky (cited in Feuerstein, Rand, & Hoffman, 1979). Instead of assessing all students with the same standardized testing, students should be assessed with what they know and what they are able to learn with assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). This practice makes assessment process meaningful as it informs instruction which, in turn helps learning. There is meager amount of empirical studies being conducted on the subject; hence not much is available in literature on differentiation in assessment. Thus, there is an urgent need for streamlining differentiated practices in such a way that differentiated instructional practices culminate in differentiated assessment practices, the results of which, in turn, informs the instruction to be aligned based upon individual needs.

What is Assessment?

Assessment is defined as "any method used to better understand the current knowledge that a student possesses" (Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991). Race, Brown and Smith (2005) explain the importance of assessment as follows: "Nothing we do to, or for our students is more important than our assessment of their work and the feedback we give them on it. The results of our assessment influence students for the rest of their lives". Assessment connects teaching practices with learning; as Patricia and Steadman (1996) claim, "Assessment is the zipper between teaching and learning." Assessment of learning has been around since time immemorial and has become central to

any school effectiveness measure. There is multifariousness of assessment methods used by teachers to document, measure and evaluate classroom learning (Wilson, 1996), however standardized tests forms a major part of any assessment process with a variety of other assessments methods to measure learning (Clarke, Madaus, Horn, & Ramos, 2000). This type of assessment is commonly termed as 'assessment of learning' and its primary purpose is to find evidence of what a student has learnt against a set of standards and goals. ZPD opposes the concept of standardized testing by suggesting that instead of assessing what a student knows to determine intelligence, students' ability should be compared through what they know already and what they are able to learn with the help of someone who already knows (Vygotsky, 1978).

Another phrase that has gained currency among educators and researchers is 'assessment for learning'. Assessment for learning can be defined as any form of assessment that is primarily designed to enhance student learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2004). Formative assessment has been found to be producing greater improvement in student achievement in a Metaresearch that summarized 250 assessment articles (Black & William, 2003). Through such assessment practices, teachers provide important feedback to the students and receive feedback on their own practices to improve upon them (Stiggins, 2002).However, improvement in learning is still not a priority when it comes to assessment practices of teachers as they tend to use assessment for grading purposes only (McNair, Bhargava, Adams, Edgerton & Kypos, 2003; Uchiyama, 2004). Thus, despite all the empirically available benefits, assessment for learning is still not serving the purpose of diverse learners in the classrooms.

Assessment as learning is the latest assessment model supporting the modern view that learners must take charge of their own learning while teachers act as a facilitator. The biggest benefit of assessment as learning is its ability to build Metacognition as students reflect on their learning, understand what they know and what they do not, set goals for themselves and strategize how they are going to achieve their goals (Black & William, 2001).If students have a clear goal in mind, their self-reflection is often accurate (p. 6-7). Teacher and student both have important roles in assessment as learning as understanding the goals and strategizing to achieve it becomes paramount. Assessment as learning can be both formal and informal in nature.

To summarize the three methods of assessment, assessment of learning is judging performance, assessment for learning is informing teaching, and finally assessment as learning is informing learning (Earl, 2003). All three methods are important and have an important role to play.

Introducing Differentiated Assessment

Although assessments as learning gives the students opportunity for self-reflection and strategize for their learning goals, still no differentiation occurs in terms of goals for individual student. Every student in the class is expected to achieve the same learning outcomes although their background knowledge is not the same. Expecting the same outcomes from every student at the same point of time has adverse effect on student's psychology. Several studies have showed that most students who are diverse in terms of learning ability agree to same assessment standards for all students (Bursuck, Munk, & Olson, 1999; Vaughn Schumm, Niarhos & Gordon, 1993). These students lose self-confidence, are at risk of dropping out of school and terminate their educational pursuits (Zigmond & Thornton, 1985).

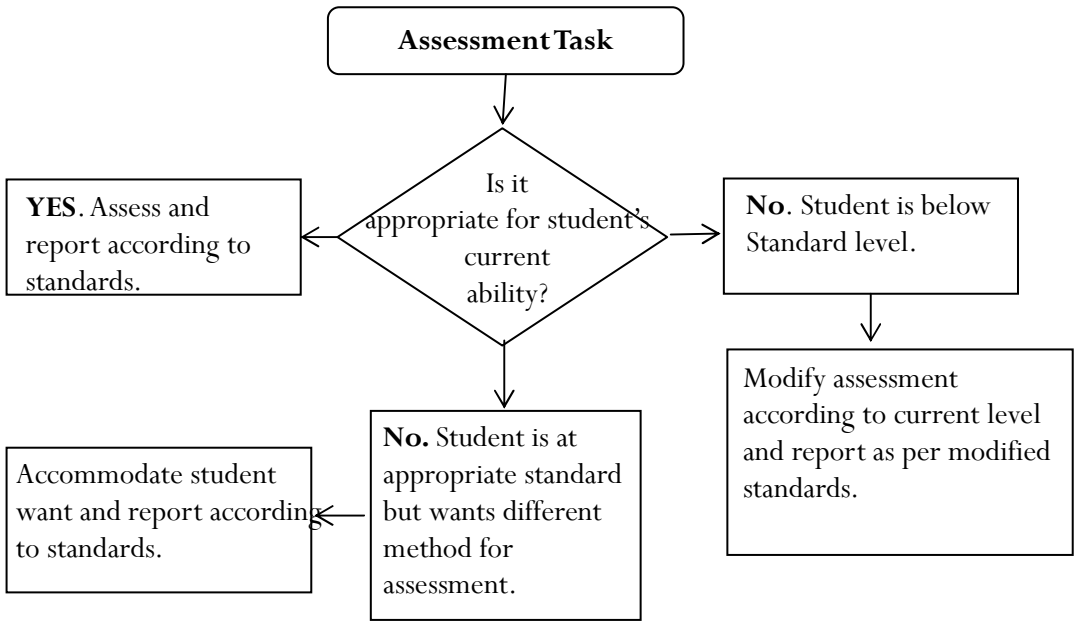
The benefit of differentiated instruction is lost when the assessment is carried out through standardized test for all students based upon 'one size fits all' thought process. This happens because teachers are acclimatized to assessing students at regular intervals through standardized testing and then assigning a grade as a measure of their learning level. However, there is more to assessment than this. Differentiated assessment practices must be utilized in every classroom for the same reason as for using differentiated instruction. Tomlinson (2004, p. 188) describes differentiating instruction as a process of "ensuring that what a student learns,

how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she has learned is a match for that student's readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning". In a similar fashion, differentiated assessment is a practice of teachers to adjust their assessments in the classroom according to the individual wants and needs of their diverse students (Jung & Guskey, 2010). There are two major drawbacks in assessing all students with the same assessment method. Standard assessment generates low grades, or worse, for students who are disadvantaged due to one of the several reasons like difficulty with the language of instruction, limited prior knowledge or learning disability even though they might be the one with the best attendance record or putting-in effort in doing their assignment, while easier assessment may help them in getting better grades although the grades might not be the true picture of their ability (Jung & Guskey, 2010).

A significant number of teachers try to educate diverse learners in their classroom by assigning bonus points, being lenient in marking or lowering down the weight of certain assignments in order to be 'fair' with the students (Gottlieb, 2006; Silva, Munk, & Bursuck, 2005).This practice is not only unfair to the students but also doesn't help much to serve the purpose of learning. To assess learning in a more transparent manner and use it as a learning tool, Jung and Guskey (2010) suggest an assessment system that involves specific areas of assessment instead of one overall grade of achievement and three basic reporting criteria: Product, Process and Progress. Assessment informs teachers and parents about the child's knowledge and skills at the time of reporting, how much effort is involved in the achievement so far and how much the child have progresses since the last report.

How to Differentiate Assessment?

Standardized approach to teaching, learning and assessment considers students of the same age to be academically at the same level. However, this assumption is far from truth (Stefanakis & Meier, 2010; Fogarty & Pete, 2010). Differentiation is carried out in a classroom on the premise that students are different from each other in terms of ability and background knowledge (Kingore, 2004). Since it is believed that differentiation in instruction is the right approach in reaching out to diverse learners, differentiation in assessment is equally important to ensure that correct report of progress is generated to inform learning.



Source: Adapted from Jung and Guskey (2007)

There are two powerful methods that can be utilized to differentiate assessment in a diverse

classroom based upon the 'need' and 'want' of the students in a diverse classroom:

Modification according to need: It is futile to assess a grade nine Math student who is at grade seven levels with grade nine standards. The purpose of assessment is not to mete out failing grade to students but to assess the students based upon their 'needs', inform them of their current attainment level, set accountability, certification and help them improve through remedial instructional interventions to reach their goals (Black, 1998; Bloom, Hastings & Madauch, 1971; Pellegrino, Chudowsky & Glaser, 2001; Sadler, 1989). Modifications should be made in the standards to lower the expected outcomes for the students who need help and assess them on the basis of their current level (Product). To ensure parents support in their children's learning, it is important to keep them abreast of the progress being made so far in terms of set objectives (Epstein, 1987; 1996).The student and the parents should be informed what the grade actually means in terms of achievement since the last report (Progress) and important instructional decision-making is carried out to reach the next goal. This method will convey the current attainment level of the student without compromising the standards and without dishing out misleading grades. Students feel recognized for their current level of achievement and are motivated for the next level.

Accommodation according to want: The second method to differentiate assessment for diverse learners would be allowing for demonstration of learning using a method that the student 'wants' but within the constraints of the expected outcomes and without modifying the standards (Ysseldyke et al., 2004).There is not enough empirical studies done on finding a right formula for providing accommodations (Chiu & Pearson, 1999;Johnstone, Altman, Thurlow, & Thompson, 2006;Koenig & Bachman, 2004;Tindal & Fuchs, 1999). Although accommodations can be made for every student's benefit, it is primarily made for students who are below the appropriate level. Accommodations do not modify standards in instructional level or learning content but accommodations are made in assessment method (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). For example, a student who is unable to express himself in front of the class in individual presentation might be able to express himself through a poster or through an essay. Such students should be graded on their understanding of the concepts and meeting the standards; not on how they are able to express themselves. Standards tell us what the students learn while differentiated assessment will inform us how students will demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Choosing appropriate accommodation is not an easy task. Teachers need to be trained in order to understand what accommodations are appropriate for which students (Helwig & Tindal, 2003; McKevitt & Elliott, 2001; Tindal & Fuchs, 2000).

2. Discussion

Assessment is an inseparable part of learning process and should never be considered as detached from instruction. It is an important tool to determine students' learning. While there has been significant progress made in implementing differentiated instruction in the classrooms, differentiated assessment has been generally neglected. With appropriate need-based modifications and want-based accommodations every student in the classroom will be able to demonstrate what he has achieved successfully in the classroom in terms of learning. This success of students is itself a good reason for practicing differentiation in assessment. The two methods of differentiating assessment – Modification according to need and Accommodation according to want will not only inform accurately about the progress being made by the child so far but will also guide teachers to adjust the instructional practices according to diverse needs of students. Differentiated instruction is incomplete with its equally important counterpart – differentiated assessment. Enabling students to succeed in their classroom will ensure their inclusiveness in the normal teaching and learning practices in the classroom and will equip them for bigger challenges in their lives.

References

Anderson, K. M., (2007). Differentiating instruction to include all students. *Preventing School Failure, 51(3),* 49–54.

Black, P., & William, D. (2003). In praise of educational research: Formative assessment. *British Educational Research Journal, 29(5)*, 623-637.

Black, P. J. (1998). *Testing: friend or foe? The theory and practice of assessment and testing.* London: Flamer Press.

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2001). *Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment.* [Online] Retrieved from Website: http://weaeducation.typepad.co.uk/files/blackbox-1.pdf

Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B. & William, D. (2004). *Assessment for Learning: Putting it into practice.* Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Bloom, B. S., Hastings, J. T. &Madaus, G. F. (1971). *Handbook on formative and summative evaluation of student learning.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Burns, M. K., Codding, R. S., Boice, C. H., &Lukito, G. (2010). Meta-Analysis of acquisition and fluency math interventions with instructional and frustration level skills: Evidence for a skill-by-treatment interaction. *School Psychology Review, 39*, 69– 83.

Bursuck, W. D., Munk, D. D., & Olson, M. M. (1999). The fairness of report card grading adaptations: What do students with and without disabilities think? *Remedial and Special Education, 20*, 84–92.

Chiu, D. W. T., & Pearson, P. D. (1999). *Synthesizing the effects of test accommodations for special education and limited English proficient students.* Paper presented at the National Conference on Large-Scale Assessment, Snowbird, UT. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED433362)

Clarke, M., Madaus, G. F., Horn, C. J., & Ramos, M. A. (2000). Retrospective on educational testing and assessment in the 20th century. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 32(2),* 159–181.

Dietel, R. J., Herman, J. L., & Knuth, R. A. (1991). *What does research say about assessment?* [Online]. Retrieved from http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/stw_esys/4assess.htm

Earl, L (2003). *Assessment as learning: Using classroom assessment to maximize student learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Epstein, J. L. (1987). Toward a theory of family-school connections: Teacher practices and parent involvement across the school years. In K. Hurrelmann, F. Kaufmann, and F. Losel (Eds.). *Social Intervention: Potential and constraints*. New York: deGruyter.

Epstein, J. L. (1996). Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes? In A. Booth and J. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-School Links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ.

Feuerstein, R., Rand, Y., & Hoffman, M. B. (1979). *The dynamic assessment of retarded performers: The learning potential assessment device: Theory, instruments, and techniques*. Baltimore, MD: University Park Press.

Fogarty, R., & Pete, B. M. (2010). *Supporting differentiated instruction: A professional learning communities approach*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Gable, R. A., Hendrickson, J. M., Tonelson, S. W., & Van Acker, R. (2000). Changing disciplinary and instructional practices in the middle school to address IDEA. *The Clearing House, 73(4),* 205-208.

Gittman, E., & Koster, E. (1999). *Analysis of ability and achievement scores for students recommended by classroom teachers to a gifted and talented program*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association, Ellenville, NY.

Gottlieb, M. (2006). *Assessing English language learners: Bridges from language proficiency to academic achievement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Guild, P. B. (2001). Diversity, Learning Style and Culture. *New Horizons for Learning*. Retrieved from http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/Learning%20Styles/diversity.html, [24 August 2014].

Hall, T. (2002). *Differentiated instruction* [Online]. Wakefield, MA: CAST. Retrieved from www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac_diffinstruc.html

Harris Stefanakis, E. (1998). *Whose judgment counts?: Assessing bilingual children, K-3*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harris Stefanakis, E. (2010). *Differentiated Assessment: Finding Every Learner's Potential.* San Francisco: Wiley, Jossey Bass Publishers.

Helwig, R., & Tindal, G. (2003). An experimental analysis of accommodation decisions on large-scale mathematics tests. *Exceptional Children, 69(2),* 211-225.

Hoge, R. D. (1984). Psychometric properties of teacher-judgment measures of pupil attitudes, classroom behaviors, and achievement levels. *Journal of Special Education, 17*, 401–429.

Johnsen, S. (2003). Adapting instruction with heterogeneous groups. *Gifted Child Today, 26(3),* 5-6.

Johnstone, C. J., Altman, L., Thurlow, M., & Thompson, S. (2006). *A summary of research on the effects of test accommodations: 2002 through 2004 (Technical Report 45).* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Jung, L. A., & Guskey, T. R. (2010). Grading Exceptional Learners: Meeting students where they are. *Educational Leadership, 16(5),* 31-35.

Kingore, B. (2004). *Differentiation: Simplified, Realistic, and Effective*. Austin: Professional Associates Publishing.

Koenig, J.A., & Bachman, L.F. (Eds.). (2004). *keeping score for all: The effects of inclusion and accommodation policies on large-scale educational assessments*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Marzano, R. J. (2000). *Transforming classroom grading.* Alexandria, VA: McREL

McBride, B. (2004). Data-driven instructional methods: "One-strategy-fits-all" doesn't work in real classrooms. *T.H.E Journal, 31(11),* 38-40.

McKevitt, B. C., & Elliott, S. N. (2001). *The effects and consequences of using testing accommodations on a standardized reading test*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.

McNair, S., Bhargava, A., Adams, L., Edgerton, S. &Kypos, B. (2003). Teachers speak out on assessment practices. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 31(1)*, 23–31.

Naqvi, R. (2009). *Building bridges: Acknowledging children's first languages*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, April.

Nolet, V., & McLaughlin, M. J. (2000). *Accessing the general curriculum: Including students with disabilities in standards-based reform*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Patricia, C. K. & Steadman, M. H. (1996). *Classroom Research: Implementing the Scholarship of Teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pellegrino, J. W., Chudowsky, N. & Glaser, R. (Eds.) (2001). *Knowing what students know: the science and design of educational assessment*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Popham, W. J. (2001). *The Truth about testing: An educator's call to action*. Alexandria, Va. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Race, P. Brown, S. & Smith, B. (2005). *500 Tips on assessment: 2nd edition*. London: Routledge.

Rock, M., Gregg, M., Ellis, E., & Gable, R. A. (2008). REACH: A framework for differentiating classroom instruction. *Preventing School Failure, 52(2),* 31–47.

Sadler, D. R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science, 18,* 119–144.

Sharpley, C. F., & Edgar, E. (1986). Teachers' ratings vs. standardized tests: an empirical investigation of agreement between two indices of achievement. *Psychology in the Schools, 23,* 106–111.

Shepard, L., Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., Rust, F., Snowden, J. B., Gordon, E., Gutierrez, C., & Pacheco, J. (2005). Assessment. Chapter 8 in Darling-Hammond, L. & Bransford, J. (Eds) *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should know and be able to do.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass (note particularly pp. 282-284).

Silva, M., Munk, D. D., &Bursuck, W. D. (2005). Grading adaptations for students with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 41*, 87–98.

Sizer, T. R. (1999). No two are quite alike. *Educational Leadership, 57(1),* 6-11.

Stefanakis, E. H., & Meier, D. (2010). *Differentiated assessment: How to assess the learning potential of every student (grades 6–12).* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Stiggins, R. J. (2002). Assessment crisis: The absence of assessment for learning. *Phi Delta Kappan, 83(10),* 758–765.

Tatum, A.W. (2011). Diversity and literacy. In S.J. Samuels &A.E. Farstrup (Eds.), *what research has to say about reading instruction* (4th ed., pp. 424-447). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Tindal, G., & Fuchs, L. (1999). *A summary of research on testing accommodations: What we know so far.* Lexington, KY: Mid-South Regional Resource Center.

Tindal, G., & Fuchs, L. (2000). *A summary of research on test changes: An empirical basis for defining accommodations*. Lexington, KY: Mid-South Regional Resource Center.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2002). Different learner's different lessons. *Instructor, 112(2)*, 21-25.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2004). Point/counterpoint: Sharing responsibility for differentiating instruction. *Roeper Review, 26(4)*, 188-189.

Uchiyama, M. K. (2004). *Teachers' use of formative assessment in middle school reform-based mathematics classrooms*. Digital Dissertations (UMI No.AAT 3123299).

Vaughn. S., Schumm. J. S., Niarhos, F. J., & Gordon, J. (1993). Students' perceptions of two hypothetical teachers' instructional adaptations for low achievers.

The Elementary School Journal, 94(1). 87- 102.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. (pp. 79-91). In *Mind in Society*. (Trans. M. Cole). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wilson, R. J. (1996). *Assessing students in classrooms and schools*. Scarborough, ON: Allyn and Bacon.

Ysseldyke, J., Nelson, J. R., Christenson, S., Johnson, D. R., Dennison, A., Triezenberg, H., Sharpe, M., & Hawes, M. (2004). What we know and need to know about the consequences of high-stakes testing for students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 71(1),* 75-95.

Zigmond, N., & Thornton, H. (1985). Follow-up of postsecondary age learning disabled graduates and dropouts. *Learning Disabilities Research*, 1(1), 50-55.