*Sometimes, it can be challenging to get learners to care about doing their homework and improving their overall academic performance. It can be easy to assume that learners must come ready to learn and they must take responsibility for their own learning. Today, however, we know that motivation is as much a response, as it is an input. In other words, student investment occurs when assessment results positively impact a learner’s ability to figure out his/her next steps. Learners will take an active role in their learning when the results of their work 1) supports their ability to make strategic decisions, 2) offers them targeted responses or next steps, and 3) can be acted upon to continue building a successful momentum.*

*Two dedicated teachers in Pawtucket, Rhode Island took this concept to heart and launched a year long action research project during the 2014-15 school year to see if they could make a difference in student investment and, ultimately, student learning. Their study follows. I am certain you will find their study to be interesting and their results to be promising.*

*Cassandra Erkens*

**Does One Size Really Fit All?**

**A Case Study on Differentiating Homework**

By Mary Bergeron and Donna Sawyer

Grade 3 Teachers

Francis J. Varieur School

Pawtucket School District

Pawtucket, RI

One size fits all. We see and hear this all the time. We also know it is not true. It’s not true in clothing, it’s not true in health care, and it’s certainly not true in educating children. Ever since the one roomed prairie schoolhouse, teachers have been differentiating their instruction to better serve their students. For example, today we have leveled text, varying intervention groups, and multi-leveled stories to address the needs of the children in our charge. We also know that homework is a necessary part of learning, whether you are using it to strengthen a weakness, practice a skill, or to prepare for upcoming learning. How can one singular assignment address the needs of all the students? We believe it can’t.

**WHY?**

As this was our first year teaching together, we wanted it to be as collaborative as possible. This translated into many discussions about our styles, beliefs and approaches to all disciplines. What we quickly discovered is that we both had a singular thread going through all of our planning, instruction, and assessment; it was student centered. The one deviation we had from being completely student centered was homework. We were using a one size fits all approach - the complete opposite of our classroom instruction. This led us to question our practice and ask ourselves why we didn’t have student-centered homework.

**WHAT?**

To address this concern, we engaged in an action research study during the 2014-2015 school year. Our study took place at Francis J. Varieur Elementary School, which is a commended school in the urban district of Pawtucket, RI. Our study consisted of 49 third grade students representing the full range of learning needs gifted/talented, special education, and ELL learners, with a range of socio economic status. Our purpose was to explore whether differentiating homework improved student learning.

**GETTING STARTED**

When we began we knew this would be a substantial undertaking. To differentiate reading and math needs for 49 students, to get parents to “see” homework differently, and to get the students themselves to self-track would take time. We knew we needed to adhere to school and district policy while addressing our current students’ needs and not give unnecessary work.

To begin, we delved into our data. We looked at STAR Reading and STAR Math, DIBELS, Accelerated Reader and IXL. STAR Reading, Math, and DIBELS are benchmark assessments used to gauge students’ progress. Accelerated Reader is an online program where students take comprehension quizzes for their self-selected reading and IXL is an online math program that allows children to have targeted practice with specific Common Core Standards. We were able to get a comprehensive picture of how our students both assessed against benchmarks AND performed on an individual basis. STAR Reading data revealed that our students had an average stanine score of 323 in September. STAR Math revealed that our students had an average stanine score of 535 in September. In September the average Accelerated Reader points earned was 266 and the average IXL time engaged was 65 hours. Our DIBELS screening revealed 81 % of the third grade was assessing in the core category for accuracy.

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| **Assessment Measures** | **September, 2014** |
| STAR Reading | Stanine Average Score-323 |
| STAR Math | Stanine Average Score-535 |
| Accelerated Reader | Average 266 points |
| IXL Computer Math Program | Average 65 hours  |
| DIBELS DORF Accuracy | 81% in core category |

**USING OUR DATA**

In analyzing all our data we found three clear groups emerged both in reading and math. For reading our students’ needs were group A: fluency /comprehension below level, group B: fluency/comprehension at level, and group C: comprehension above level. This proved true for math as well. Our students had varying needs; group 1: skills development, group 2: concept development, and group 3: concept application. It would have been tempting to simply make 3 groups: group A, group B, and group C; however, our data clearly revealed that the students who were in group A for reading were not necessarily in group 1 for math. We then created a method for organizing students based on need. Each student was placed in a group for reading; A, B, or C and the same for Math; 1, 2 or 3. Each student was then given a combination to represent their reading and math need for example; A2, C3. Differentiated resources were then gathered to strengthen the needs of the students in these groupings. Students’ homework packets were collated to represent these combinations.

Knowing that nightly reading greatly impacts student progress and adhering to our school and district policy, we focused on student self-tracking their self-selected nightly reading as a significant component to their differentiated homework. As self-selected reading is innately differentiated, we realized our responsibility would be in enforcing the expectation that it be completed and students track their points. Our system for IXL offers another homework component that is inherently differentiated. It is an online math program that allows students to practice common core aligned skills and concepts. Students are able to practice at their own pace and own level. As with Accelerated Reader, our focus was on tracking student progress and making them accountable for choosing the skill they needed to strengthen.

**GETTING PARENTS AND STUDENTS ON BOARD**

To link all of the elements together into one cohesive packet, we created a cover tracking sheet that was student friendly and that could travel home for parents. The form allowed students and parents to monitor and track the progress made day to day. It covered every aspect of the students’ homework; fluency, comprehension, math practice, Accelerated Reader and IXL progress. Out of necessity, the form was revised several times throughout the year. Because our goal was to shift and make homework more student-centered, we took direction from their suggestions, along with parent input, and developed a student friendly cover sheet.



In the early stages of the homework shift, we needed to make clear the expectations and roles of all involved. This was especially true considering we had siblings, cousins, and other close family connections within the grade level and even within our individual classrooms. Parents needed to be aware that homework would look different for each child. Communication needed to be ongoing and ultimately had a significant impact on shift we were making.

**WHAT WE FOUND**

When we checked our data midyear, we were pleased with our early results:

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| **Assessment Measures** | **September 2014** | **January****2015** | **Increase** |
| STAR Reading | Stanine Average Score-323 | Stanine Average Score-430 | 107 points |
| STAR Math | Stanine Average Score-535 | Stanine Average Score-613 | 78 points |
| Accelerated Reader | Average 266 points | Average 290 points | 24 points |
| IXL Computer Math Program | Average 65 hours  | Average 100 hours | 35 hours |
|  DIBELS DORF Accuracy | 81 % in core category | 85% in core category | 4%  |

Our answer was clear: differentiating homework improved student learning. We have seen a marked increase in our students’ performance. The data indicated every area showed growth. We noticed this to be especially true in reading, where the stanine score had increased by over 107 points, by mid-year. This was more than **doubled** the progress expected all year. Math stanine scores increased 78 points at the mid-year mark. This gain surpassed yearly expected growth by almost **two fold**. We observed an increase in the time students dedicated at home to self-selected reading and at home math practice. The increase in student commitment directly and positively impacted their performance on benchmark assessments. This in turn translated to better classroom performance and academic growth. We attributed this to targeted homework practice and students’ focused efforts to strengthen their weak areas.

**WHAT’S NEXT?**

Because we have seen such a positive return on our effort, we are attempting to take it even further. We are making homework even more student-centered. A recent survey of our students’ views on homework revealed interesting ideas. Some felt they need to spend more time with specific math skills, and others needed to strengthen citing evidence from text, while others expressed a desire to dedicate time to strengthening writing skills. Our next steps are to allow students to guide the direction their homework must go. With carefully chosen resources, parameters put in place by us, and an intentional development of student self-efficacy with our efforts, students will choose their weekly tasks. Although the thought of this is new and a bit overwhelming at times, we feel the reward of student growth is worth the effort.