

The Balancing Act: Effectively Meeting the Needs of ALL Students and Teachers

**By Anokhi Saraiya,
TNLI MetLife Fellow, New York City
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9:15am, Jenira Calderon's 4th Grade Classroom, January 6

Jenny watched Miguel's scrunched up face as he stared with deep concentration at his test paper. She watched as he mouthed each word silently, struggling to read the unfamiliar phrases. As she watched, her stomach filled with a mix of anxiety and hope, quietly willing him to choose the right answer. *He can do this*, she thought. *I did my job. I did as much as I could to prepare him for this, as much as possible under the circumstances*, she rationalized. Slowly, he picked up his pencil.

Jenira Calderon had been teaching at Briar Elementary School for 4 years, beginning teaching at this school right after college. Now, at the age of 26, she was one of the most popular teachers in her building. To her students, she was the graceful brunette who rushed into the classroom that often was filled with a mix of lively discussions, music, and movement, in order to keep all the students engaged and learning. Her expectations for her students were known to be extraordinarily high, and she pushed each student to achieve and exceed her expectations on a daily basis. Her serious, unyielding, no-nonsense attitude often was balanced with a playful nature.. Relationships, respect, and community were important elements of her class culture. As a result, even though she was dwarfed by some of her taller 4th grade students, none would ever dare disrespect or undermine her.

Jenira had received tenure the previous year, and was considered a "veteran" teacher at Briar Elementary. Despite this, she still felt as though she had a lot more to learn before she would be a "great" teacher. Because of her relative "newness" to the profession, she constantly craved new information, yearned to learn innovative teaching techniques, and was always willing to give any idea a try, as long as it was intended to impact and improve student learning.

Briar Elementary was full of new ideas. The school's dynamic principal, Alexis Johnson, went from meeting to meeting at the district level, bringing back new teaching techniques, ideas, or methods each time she returned to the school. Her methods at times seemed haphazard, jumping on every new trend, to push the school to be the "best." Because of her bubbly, enthusiastic nature, her petite frame, and her perfectly set blonde hair, the staff often jokingly likened her to a cheerleader. Herself a young principal, only 33 years old, she had limited teaching experience and was still trying to prove herself to her staff and colleagues. Despite this, her intentions were always to improve the teaching and learning in the building and to positively impact student achievement, as evidenced by a commitment to teacher development.

This year at Briar, the school's priority goal was Differentiated Instruction. Alexis had introduced the goal at the school's first faculty conference of the year, and subsequently provided teachers with opportunities to learn and attend professional development centered on the topic. However, even with the support, teachers were feeling overwhelmed and overworked because of the new demands.

2:00 pm, Briar Elementary School Auditorium, September 5

"As I hope you have come to see, using this approach of teaching...differentiated instruction...by really focusing on students' individual needs, and as a result planning lessons based on those individual needs, will truly enhance our teaching, as well as help our students to make important progress in all academic areas. In the end, our students will improve on State exams, which is of course important for our school. Are there any questions?" Ms. Johnson concluded her presentation about the new school year and the school's main focus for improving instruction: differentiating instruction.

Alexis quietly let out a deep breath, releasing all the pent up nervousness that she had been holding in, as she searched the crowd of teachers, concerned about what their reaction to the aggressive changes would be. She intended to exude confidence and conviction in her presentation, in order to promote teacher buy-in. However, she was concerned that teachers might reject the idea outright, rather than consider its benefits to student achievement.

In the audience, Jenny's mind was swimming. *How am I going to do this in my class of 30 students? How can I possibly plan lessons in every subject area that truly target individual learning needs?* She looked around the room, her eye's connecting with other teachers' worried, stressed eyes. She nodded reassuringly at one of the new teachers, Carolyn Moore, whose face was white with dread.

She looks shell-shocked, Jenny thought. I wish I could reassure her, tell her that she'll be fine, but really, I don't know if I'll be fine.

A hand popped up behind Jenny, and Henry Simmons, a second grade teacher and also the union chapter leader, rose to address Ms. Johnson. Mr. Simmons, a tall, imposing African-American man, who, before becoming a teacher, had played college football, always commanded attention when he spoke. The entire auditorium shifted in their seats and silenced as he spoke.

"Ms. Johnson," he began in a deep, booming voice, "what support will be provided for teachers as we begin these instructional changes? Also, what are the expectations of implementation? How immediately do you expect to see changes."

All the teachers shifted their attention from Mr. Simmons back to Ms. Johnson, eagerly awaiting a response to ease their anxious minds.

"Well, Mr. Simmons, a lot of what I have discussed today is imperative for improving instruction and student performance." Ms. Johnson spoke carefully and with conviction in her voice, making every effort not to let her strong voice waiver. "We are all here to make education better for students, I truly believe that. The work that we will do this year, yes, it will be challenging, and at times stressful and overwhelming. However, it is my expectation and that of the Assistant Principal that as the year progresses, we will see a great many improvements."

Well, that really didn't answer the question, Jenny thought to herself. What professional development are we going to receive?

10:15am, Jenny's Classroom, November 20

“Ok, class, it’s time to go off on your own and read independently in your groups. Just a reminder, I’m going to be meeting with my Guided Reading group on the rug. I expect that everyone else is reading, trying out the “stop and think” reading strategy as you read, and keeping track of your thinking using post-it notes. I should not be interrupted unless it is an emergency...Miguel, Jana, Steven, Dominique, Will, and Ashley, join me at the rug with your guided reading folders.”

Jenny stopped to breathe, just for a second, before moving swiftly from the front of the room to the rug area. It had been two months since Alexis had announced the differentiated instruction school initiative. Two months, four professional development days, and six planning meetings to discuss implementation and progress. And this afternoon, there was to be another planning and professional development workshop to monitor implementation.

Jenny was learning new teaching techniques everyday, but she was becoming overwhelmed with the required individual, group, and whole class lessons and assignments she had to create for each day. *It isn't even Thanksgiving yet*, she thought wearily to herself. The work was constantly accumulating, and her normally pleasant and enthusiastic disposition was slowly being drained away because of the lack of time to rejuvenate and live a balanced life. Even her friends and family were starting to recognize the toll it was taking. Just last night, when she should had been at her niece’s 3rd birthday party, she bailed at the last minute because she hadn’t finished planning today’s guided reading lesson, and she wanted to make sure it was perfect. *If only there were more time during the school day*, she thought to herself, *to get some of the planning done, then maybe I can live my life again*. Settling with her guided reading plans, mini-dry erase boards, and pile of guided reading books, on the rug, she pushed her exhaustion aside. *Breathe in, breathe out*, she thought.

As she sat, she scanned the room to see if her students were in fact working in their reading groups.

“Jonathon. Let’s get going over there. You should be reading already...Tamara, you too. I don’t want to hear any more talking. This is your time to read independently,” she reminded.

“Ms. Calderon! Ms. Calderon! Can I go to the bathroom?” shouted Celia.

“Celia. Can you please stop shouting? Do you remember our rules for independent work time? You may sign yourself out and go to the bathroom, but do not abuse the privilege,” Jenny replied, trying to restrain her growing frustration. She took two more deep breaths. Her fatigue was masked by her smiling face, and yet it reflected in her eyes. It had been two months since Ms. Johnson had launched her differentiated instruction initiatives, and although Jenny felt that her teaching had improved, demonstrated by her students’ progress, she was always tired and stressed out from all the planning, assessing, and managing the classroom. By herself, in a class of 30, the days were extremely challenging.

As her guided reading group gathered on the rug, Jenny said, “Alright, ladies and gentleman, let’s get down to business.”

She passed out the book they had been working on, and began her small group lesson. Her eyes met each student as they received their book, and she saw each face light up with excitement as they began. “I love guided reading, Ms. Calderon,” whispered Miguel. “I always feel like I am learning something new. Do you think my reading is getting better?”

Miguel was a skinny, shy boy, who had recently arrived from the Dominican Republic. When he started fourth grade in September, he was reading at a beginning of second grade reading level. He was not English proficient, and often stumbled over his words. As a result, he rarely raised his hand to participate because he was afraid to speak in front of his class. Now, with consistent guided reading instruction, as well as English as a Second Language supplemental instruction, he was learning new vocabulary and becoming more confident each day. The specific, targeted instruction that differentiated lessons afforded had clearly supported his growth and development.

Already, he had moved up two reading levels, and was devouring books at a beginning third grade reading level. In addition, working in a small group with other students at a similar level gave him opportunities to shine.

“Miguel, your reading is definitely improving,” Jenny replied with a smile. “In fact, you’ve made great progress in every subject. I am super proud of you!” Jenny continued to grin at him and then looked down at his book, and nodded to indicate that he get started.

Just then, a noise behind her shook her out of her moment of joy. Even though her students were engaged, every few minutes, she had to look up, reprimand off-task students, answer interrupting questions, and generally manage the classroom. With each interruption, she took a deep breath to calm herself. *I am doing my best*, she thought to herself. *And, this is good for them. Even if all the planning and extra work is overwhelming, I love this part of the day...when I can just teach a small group and scaffold their learning, building their confidence to succeed.*

1:00pm, Teacher Resource Center, Briar Elementary, November 20

“Alright ladies and gentleman, thank you for being here, and thank you for all your hard work each day,” Principal Johnson welcomed her 4th grade teachers to their seventh planning and professional development workshop of the year. “Let’s begin by sharing out how things are going in your classrooms. Who would like to start?”

The fourth grade teachers looked timidly at one another. No one felt comfortable expressing their true feelings of frustration to Ms. Johnson. Finally, Sarah Pauley, frowning, spoke up. “To be honest, it has been pretty hard, Ms. Johnson. The training and support you have provided, in terms of learning opportunities and workshops, have been wonderfully helpful. But I’m finding it hard to keep up. Sometimes I question how I can keep up this level of planning and assessment. I do have to say though, the kids are really responding. They love the individualized goals and tasks, and I definitely see their progress on interim assessments. And parents have expressed their appreciation for the work I’ve been doing as well.” Sarah’s frown slowly upturned, and she nodded to

herself, pleasantly surprised. What started off as an expression of frustration evolved into a modest celebration of the impact of her work.

Jenny, who initially wasn't going to speak because she thought anything she said would just sound like whining, suddenly found herself talking. "You know, yesterday, at Parent-Teacher Conferences, I had several parents tell me how much their kids were learning, and how excited their kids were about coming to school. It was nice to hear how much parents appreciate this work. One parent, Miguel's mom, was near tears because Miguel was reading everyday at home, which she had never seen before. And he's talking about college now, as something to dream about. That was nice to hear." After this, other teachers felt comfortable sharing both their positive as well as challenging experiences.

After a few minutes, Ms. Johnson redirected everyone to the agenda for the meeting, which included discussing both student data and engaging in a conversation about the group's book study, The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners, by Carol Ann Tomlinson.

6:00pm, The Heights Bar and Grill, November 20

After work, Jenny's frustrations came pouring out, as her colleagues listened, nodding in agreement with each statement. They had all gathered for a happy hour, to celebrate the end of the work week, but anyone looking at them wouldn't have described them as "happy."

"They are all so needy," Jenny started. "I know that working in a small group is valuable, but there has to be a better way. I feel like I'm ignoring the rest of the class when I pull a small group together. But at the same time, that individual and small group time is so precious. It's the only time I have to really pinpoint individual needs and address those needs explicitly. I need help. I think the quality of my overall instruction is declining, because I am trying to plan so many more elements to my lessons. And I feel restricted, stuck in a rut." Jenny was replaying the day in her head, teetering between moments of hope and despair.

9:15am, Jenira Calderon's 4th Grade Classroom, January 6

Slowly, as he picked up his pencil. Miguel's eyes scanned the words, his mind trying to make sense of the different reading passages. Gradually, he began to fill in circles on his answer document. At first, he worked cautiously, but as the time passed, his focus sharpened, his shoulders relaxed, and a smile crept onto his face. At the same moment, Jenny's face relaxed and she let out a sigh. *I did my job, my best. He will succeed. I didn't fail him.*

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do we best meet the needs of all learners?
- 2) How do teachers balance the needs of individual student learners with the demands of curriculum/standards/testing and accountability?
- 3) What can Alexis do to better support her teachers throughout the day, in order to allow them more personal time?