Differentiation in my gymnasium is something that is pretty much non-existent at this point in time. I am always struggling with the idea that some students don't understand what I am teaching; but yet don't speak up. When I explain a skill or drill, I always ask if anyone has any questions or concerns. Once I answer all of the students' questions and start our activity, I tend to see students still confused and looking around. I see that eventually, these students get engaged in the activity but I feel that it's only because they looked around and are mimicking what they are seeing. I feel that I can do a much better job of relaying new information to all students, regardless of learning style, in a way that the entire group will understand.

At first, I thought I had a grasp on differentiation and that I was doing everything possible to do so. I guess I 'thought' it was taking place. While I was student-teaching, my cooperating teacher and I spoke about differentiation and she told me that the way I presented new material was sufficient for all learners. She was right; however, I feel that it was based on the students that I was presenting the new material to. In this particular school, for whatever reason, the students were very athletic. I mean athletic across the entire gender spectrum – both in fine and gross motor skills. I had groups of really good athletes. To me, it was easy presenting new material because they just got it. They made my job easy at the time but unbeknownst to me, challenging down the road. This was not the typical classroom setting in every district.

As I read through the *"CCT Performance Profile,"* I realized that I was nowhere near where I should be as it pertained to differentiation. As I read through the *"Continuum of Effective Teaching" [Indicator 2]* I read the following, *"Differentiation is limited to providing more time and/or lowering expectations for performance or achievement."* Upon reading this excerpt, I felt so bad – as if I had let my students down. However, my mentor quickly made me aware that it will not be the first time I would feel like this. I was helping students that were struggling, but what I realized was that the help was merely there as a result of noticing something during class – nothing that was built into the lesson. I didn't have a system in place for differentiating activities and/or new skill practice, etc. Differentiation in my gymnasium was done on a sporadic basis and with no real means for shaping future learning.

This harsh realization inspired me to reflect on my individual practices and to investigate ways to implement differentiation strategies in the gymnasium. A discussion that I had with another physical education teacher in my district with thirty years of experience just confirmed the obvious. He told me that as a teacher, if you don't feel as if your students are 'getting' it, then

your instinct is probably correct. I am a believer in instinct and intuition but I did not want to depend on it to determine the shortcomings of my students. I wanted hard evidence to back it up. I expressed this to him and he told me that the hard evidence was smacking me right in the face – when I watched my students! He was right but I asked for some suggestions to document progress. He gave me a few ideas.

I was working on a basketball unit with 2nd graders and I had a peer assessment sheet that I was going to use to track progress. What this teacher told me to do was to use the peer assessment questions as individual stations in the gym so the students can work at their own pace. I made task cards with the questions on sheets of paper and had them laminated. I then taped them up on the wall, set up 5-6 stations throughout the gym, gave the students a basketball each, and off they went. I told the students that they were free to choose the station they wanted to go to as long as there were no more than 4 students per station. For example, one question was, "Can you dribble a basketball 10 times in a row?" Simple enough right? Wrong! Some students would dribble once and then dribble the ball off of their foot. As I observed the class, I was wondering what in the world I had done. This was no different than anything else I had already done. I thought to myself, where is the differentiation? Was it allowing the students to go to where they felt comfortable? Was it the stations? Was it the task sheets on the wall? I didn't feel comfortable with any of this. I couldn't see how this would help my students understand a skill more in depth and how to improve. It was back to the drawing board.

I decided to pick the brain of more experienced teachers, not necessarily physical education teachers. One 1st grade teacher told me that what I was doing was fine but I can make it better. She mentioned that what I did was a good starting point. She told me to build on it and it could be really good. She gave me the idea of using more experienced students as helpers and to maybe show pictures/videos of what I was trying to teach to supplement the lecture. My mind started racing. For this particular basketball unit however, I only found pictures depicting the most basic basketball skills that I was trying to teach. In reality, they are 'ball' skills at this level but since we were eventually going to play games, I just called it basketball. So this was totally fine.

I found a basketball book with pictures of children doing basic ball handling activities. In looking ahead to different learning styles, I thought that the pictures would work for my visual learners,

my lecture would work for my auditory learners, and actually performing the skills would work for my kinesthetic learners. I tweaked the photos by adding arrows so students can see that the ball does up/down, etc. I copied them and put them on sheets of paper and had them laminated. I was going to place the sheet with the question at the station along with the picture beside each other. Eventually, I decided to save paper and make one 11”x17” sheet with the picture of the skill and the question. I had them laminated and they looked pretty good. I showed the 1st grade teacher and she said that it looked great. Then came the most important question she could ever ask - and from a non-physical education professional! She asked me if I had a variety of sized basketballs or balls for the students to choose from. I said that the basketballs were smaller than any regulation basketball but not by very much. She mentioned to me that I need to take this into consideration and compared it to her 1st graders not all reading the same books during reading centers. They read “just right” books and they move one once they master the previous one.

A light bulb didn’t light up in my head, it exploded! How could I be so naïve? Not only was I not providing them with options, I did not for one minute think of ball size and its effect on learning, confidence, and eventual development. My thinking was that they were going to need to use a basketball or bigger ball if they played the sport recreationally; therefore, nothing seemed wrong with the concept. An article that I read “Beyond games, gadgets, and gimmicks: differentiating instruction across domains in physical education,” [Shelley Paul Smith- 2005] mentions that “a skillful teacher differentiates instruction to create a learning environment that is not ‘one size fits all.’ My differentiation philosophy was one size fits all. Once I realized this, I felt the proverbial tide turn and it was like a path was opened for a new and creative thinking process when it came to designing lessons.

Now I understood when another teacher told me that the problem was ‘smacking me in the face.’ Now I changed my basketball lesson to do the following. I kept the laminated task cards with the questions from the peer assessment. I picked out playground balls of all sizes including our regular basketballs for the more experienced students. I instructed students that as they proceeded from station to station, the questions would be a little more challenging. For example, can you dribble a basketball 10 times with your dominant hand? Non-dominant hand? Both hands? Can you dribble with one-hand behind your back while maintaining an athletic stance? [This is difficult for younger students as they tend to bend really low to the ground as they dribble]. I instructed them that as they went from station to station, they were allowed to

choose the ball size that they felt comfortable with. If they felt that they wanted to use a smaller ball for some stations and a larger for others that this was just fine. I wanted them to challenge themselves to find stations that weren't too hard or too easy. In addition to those stations with questions on the task cards, I also had a station that I called a create-your-own station. I felt that this would allow students that were more experienced maybe demonstrate a more advanced skill i.e. dribbling with eyes closed, between their legs, etc. I created a sheet with different activities that they might want to try or they could just create their own as long as it was safe.

During my first few lessons with the stations, I was really anxious to see how they would be received. I was genuinely surprised at the participation level from my students. It was great to see students switching balls when they felt they needed to and for them to challenge themselves. The more experienced students loved the 'create your own' station. One of the most inspiring moments was seeing an experienced student go with his not-so-experienced friend to a station that the experienced student had mastered. The experienced student switched his ball for a size like the one his friend had and he began working with him. One of the most precious moments I have ever experienced as a teacher. Seeing that student, voluntarily help his classmate with such eagerness and patience was awe inspiring and why I love teaching. This experience did two things at the time. First I felt horrible for previous students who might have been in this situation. Conversely though, I knew that moving forward, this was not going to be a shortcoming of my teaching and thus never happen again.

One concern that I had was giving students enough time to cover the different skills I wanted to cover. In a conversation with another gym teacher, he told me that I will never feel that the students had enough time no matter what but that I need to find a happy medium. He told me to focus on skills that would be applicable throughout the curriculum that will help students be successful in other areas. All students should know how to dribble a ball or bounce and catch, etc. He told me to use these dribbling stations for a warm-up activity throughout the year and not just during a basketball unit.

As those words rolled out of his mouth, I thought of the locomotor activities I teach my students; i.e. galloping, skipping, leaping, sliding, running, etc. Although these can be challenging for some students to grasp, my point is that I use them throughout the year for various things. I may use a warm-up where students go around the gym skipping or hopping. It's just another

way to use that skill/movement in other areas. Then I thought, how can I differentiate locomotor movements when doing an activity? Or do I differentiate when teaching the movements? The answer was no.

I play tag games with students and sometimes I tell them that the only way to move is by skipping. I will always see students that cannot skip and they either stop or just run. In doing some research in a physical education website, I came across a blurb about differentiation which read that teachers should "give children a variety of choices" when approaching a task. How do I apply this to locomotor movements? When doing an activity, I will give the students a choice of let's say, skipping, galloping, or running. I mentioned this to my well-seasoned physical education colleague and he agreed wholeheartedly. What I kept thinking about was how to teach these movements in a way that all of my students will understand. How do I decrease that learning curve?

While I was student-teaching, I attended a physical education conference and as I entered, there was a curriculum conference geared towards physical education. As I entered the lecture hall, I was handed a sheet with information on the products that the presenters were selling. In speaking to my cooperating teacher while completing this module, she mentioned to me that someone out there had some videos on teaching locomotor movements and with animations, etc. I perused every physical education catalog and nothing. In looking through some materials that I had on a bookcase, and by total accident, I found a handout. Not just any handout but the one I got as I entered that presentation at the physical education conference. On it was a pricelist and description of some DVD's. One of them was titled "Locomotor Animations." Unbelievable coincidence but I was hoping that this outfit was still around and that the DVD was still available. I called them and sure enough, the DVD was available - so I ordered a copy. I was really excited to introduce technology into the gymnasium. This can really be an asset to my teaching; and to my students.

When I got it, I viewed it and it was more than what I could have imagined. I received the video on a Friday and it was torture waiting for Monday. I wanted to be in school immediately to put this DVD to use. In hindsight, the two days allowed me to plan. I decided to use the DVD for a 2nd grade class that had students in it that didn't know how to skip. In this particular class, I did an entry poll and asked students to fill out an index card if they thought they mastered skipping, were progressing, or if they needed help. I had nine students that wrote down that they needed

help. I then had the class skip around the gym. I asked them to skip forward, backward, and at different speeds and pathways. I kept a close eye on those nine students and they were not as bad as they perceived themselves; but they all needed practice. In reality, I observed seven students that I thought needed lots of practice. They were confusing galloping with skipping. I then had the entire class stop. I did a short cool down activity [static stretching] in front of the TV/DVD player. I explained to them that we were going to watch a DVD and a little about what it was about.

After showing the DVD, I explained a simple obstacle course with hula hoops, ropes, and poly spots that the students can do in order to practice skipping. I had coned off about 75% of the gym for our activity and the other 25% was where the TV/DVD player was and an area for practicing. I let the 'skipping' portion of the DVD loop around over and over [it had this option] so as the students practiced, they could stop over at the television and review on an as-needed basis. I gave every student the option of practicing, playing, and/or watching the DVD if needed. It was nice to see students that were struggling going over and watching the video as they moved their bodies mimicking the animation. It was interesting to see students that were pretty good at skipping going over and watching. I asked them why they watched and one student told me that she wanted to 'make sure' she was doing it correctly while another told me that he watched because the animations were 'cool.'

Prior to the end of class, I pulled the index cards of the students that needed help. As I observed them, I can unequivocally say that they were much improved. They just got it. Sometimes their movement form might not have been as smooth but this will come with age and experience. My biggest regret was not having this video at the beginning of the school year when I get my new Kindergarten students for the first time. I didn't worry too much though because here it was in April and I was just using it with 2nd graders – and this was something that I was going to use for my entire career and it would benefit students greatly.

Differentiation is something that I will not master overnight. With every unit comes new challenges and with every class comes a diverse group of learners. I will make it a point to find ways to differentiate instruction in the gymnasium with all of my units and lessons to help my students; regardless of learning style. I am now cognizant of how differentiation can impact student learning in ways I hadn't before. In the end, if I keep working at differentiation, it will increase student learning and make me a stronger, more effective teacher.