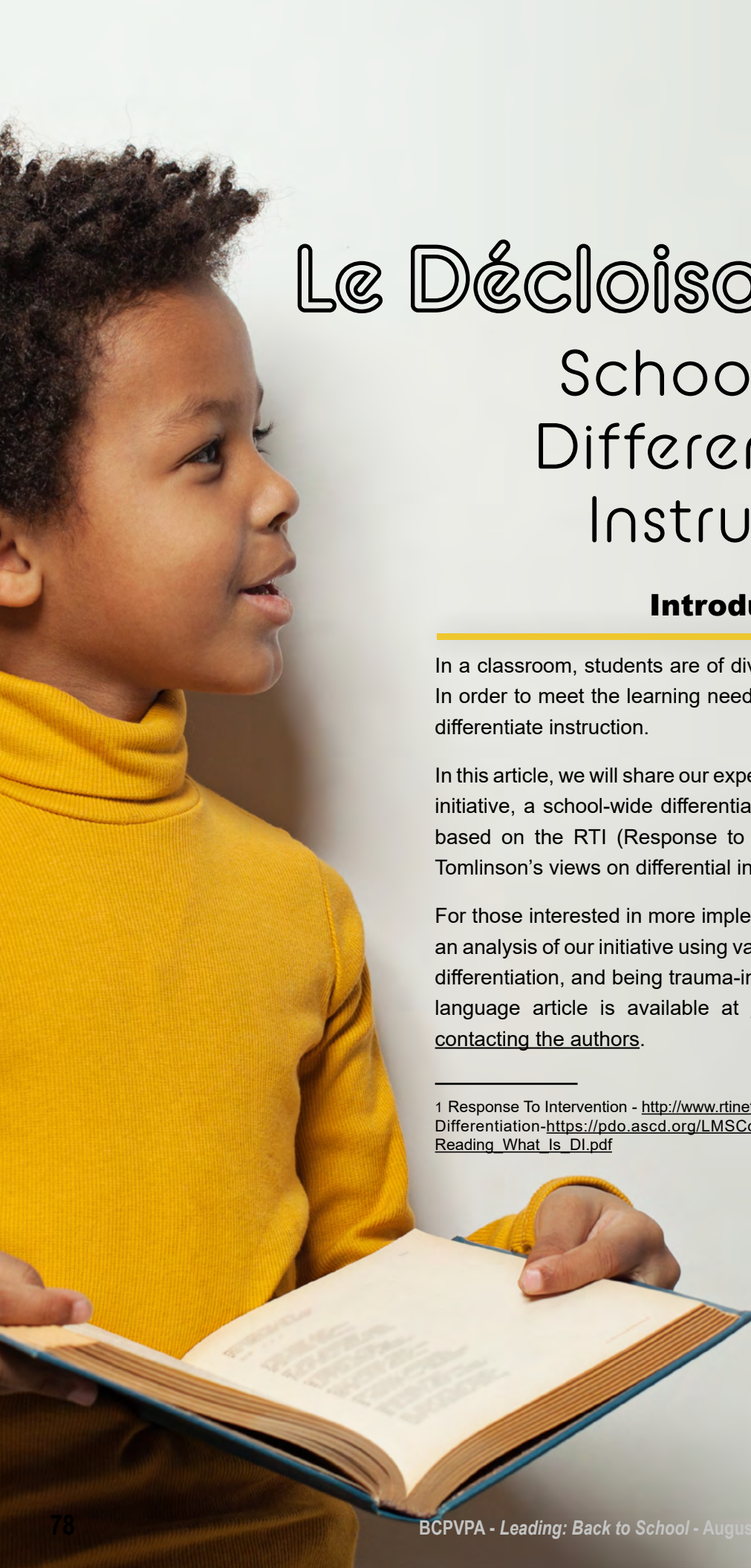




Le Décloisonnement

School-wide Differentiated Instruction

Introduction

In a classroom, students are of diverse academic levels and needs. In order to meet the learning needs of all children, teachers need to differentiate instruction.

In this article, we will share our experience with our 'Décloisonnement' initiative, a school-wide differentiated instruction initiative in literacy based on the RTI (Response to Intervention) pyramid as well as Tomlinson's views on differential instruction¹.

For those interested in more implementation and planning details, or an analysis of our initiative using various paradigms (RTI, Tomlinson's differentiation, and being trauma-informed), a more in-depth French-language article is available at bit.ly/Decloisonnement_FR or by contacting the authors.

¹ Response To Intervention - <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>
Differentiation-https://pdo.ascd.org/LMSCourses/PD11OC115M/media/DI-Intro_M1_Reading_What_Is_DI.pdf

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Context

In a large school, one that has several divisions at the same grade level, several teachers are facing similar pedagogical challenges with students in the same age group.

Our initiative, called Décloisonnement², aims to leverage the overall ratio of more than one adult per classroom in the school, to provide opportunities to all students for homogeneous small group instruction. This instruction targets key literacy goals that are most needed by students, and which can be achieved by frequent homogeneous small group instruction.

Le Décloisonnement: Description and Organization

Décloisonnement combines every student of the same grade or cycle in a cohort in order to work on common learning objectives. With this approach, we first conducted reading and comprehension assessments with all the students so that we could identify and create more homogenous and smaller learning groups of students.

Each learning group cohort meets with their educator three times a week for 30 to 40 minutes, depending upon the grade level. We felt that this was the minimum duration needed for students to achieve retention and make progress. These sessions have the following features:

- they are short and fun, so that cognitive saturation is minimized while students are in this optimized learning environment
- they are frequent enough to maximize learning retention

During the 2021-2022 school year, one of the main intentions of École Anne-Hébert was to utilize Décloisonnement to provide targeted literacy support.

² “Décloisonnement” is a French word literally meaning ‘breaking down the walls’. We kept this word as we were unable to find an adequate English translation.

During the first trimester, our focus was reading; we stopped during the second trimester due to COVID-related restrictions, and reconvened during the third trimester with a focus on writing.

The scheduling for Décloisonnement was built during the summer, and was already included in all of the teachers’ schedules at the beginning of the school year.

The month of September was used to evaluate students, to form the groups, and to create the Educational Assistant schedules. Special education teachers met individually with every child in the school from grade 1 to grade 6 in order to assess their reading and comprehension level. With the results, they created the learning group cohort taking into account:

- the results of the reading assessment
- the students who were to receive service from the special education teachers
- the students who were to receive service from ‘francisation’ (French equivalent of ESL)

The francisation and special education services would also take place during the Décloisonnement sessions.

At the end of the September assessment and planning phase, each Décloisonnement period had groups that ranged from one to 12 students. Each group was either with a special education teacher, a francisation teacher, a classroom teacher, or an educational assistant. The groups with a francisation teacher or a special education teacher followed a lesson plan built by those teachers themselves. The classroom teachers and the educational assistants followed a common lesson plan built and provided in advance by one special education teacher.

At the end of the trimester, the goal was to again evaluate all of the students. However, the new wave of COVID prevented this review.

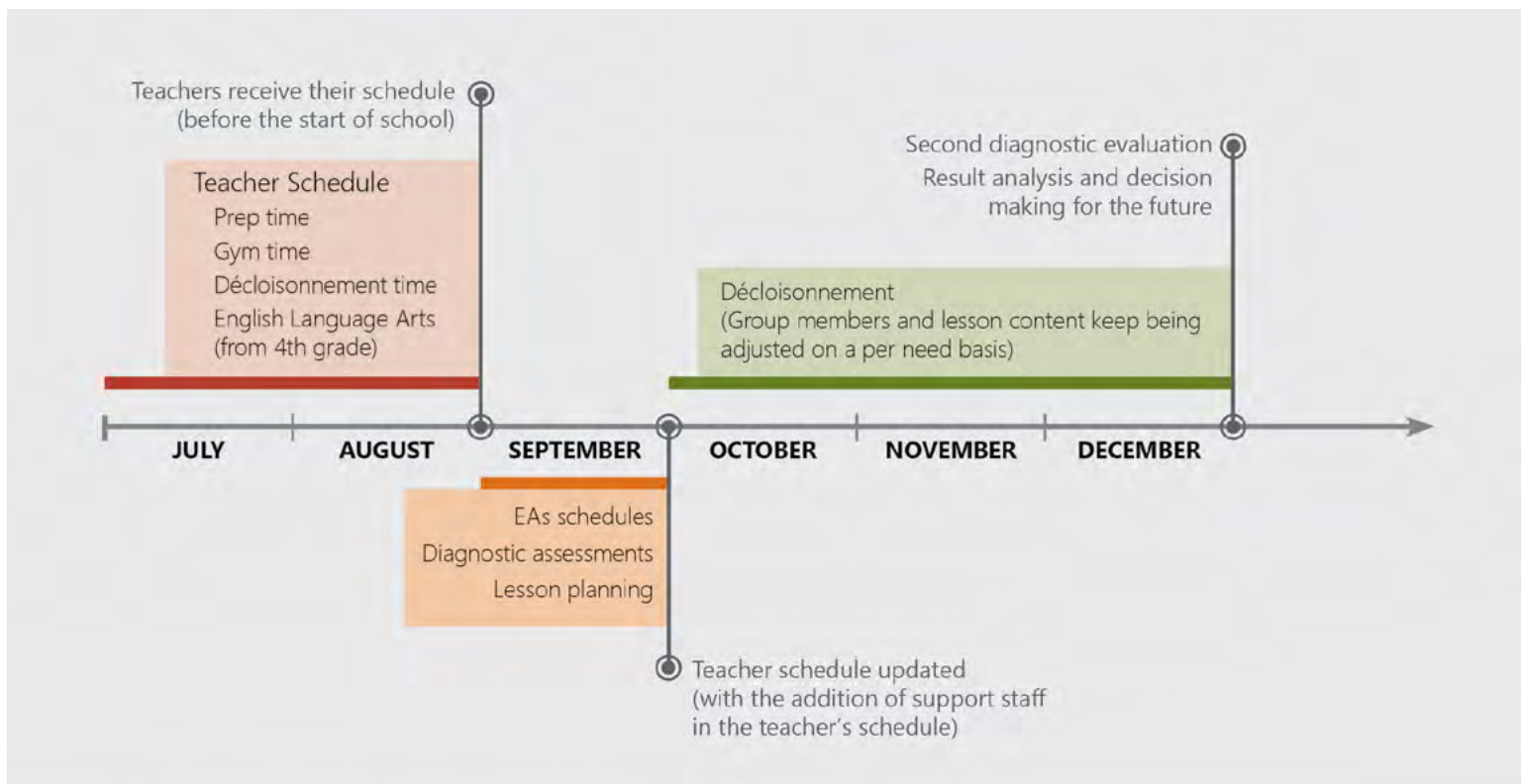


Figure 1: Timeline for planning and delivery



- ✓ Lessons are short to limit cognitive load
- ✓ Lessons are frequent enough to build automaticity and reach mastery

Figure 2: Criteria for scheduling

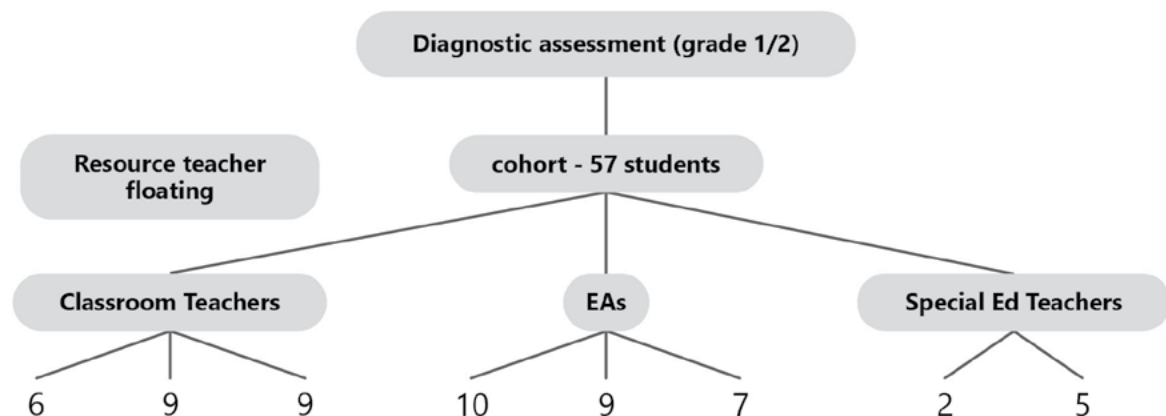


Figure 3: From whole classes to flexible grouping — an example.

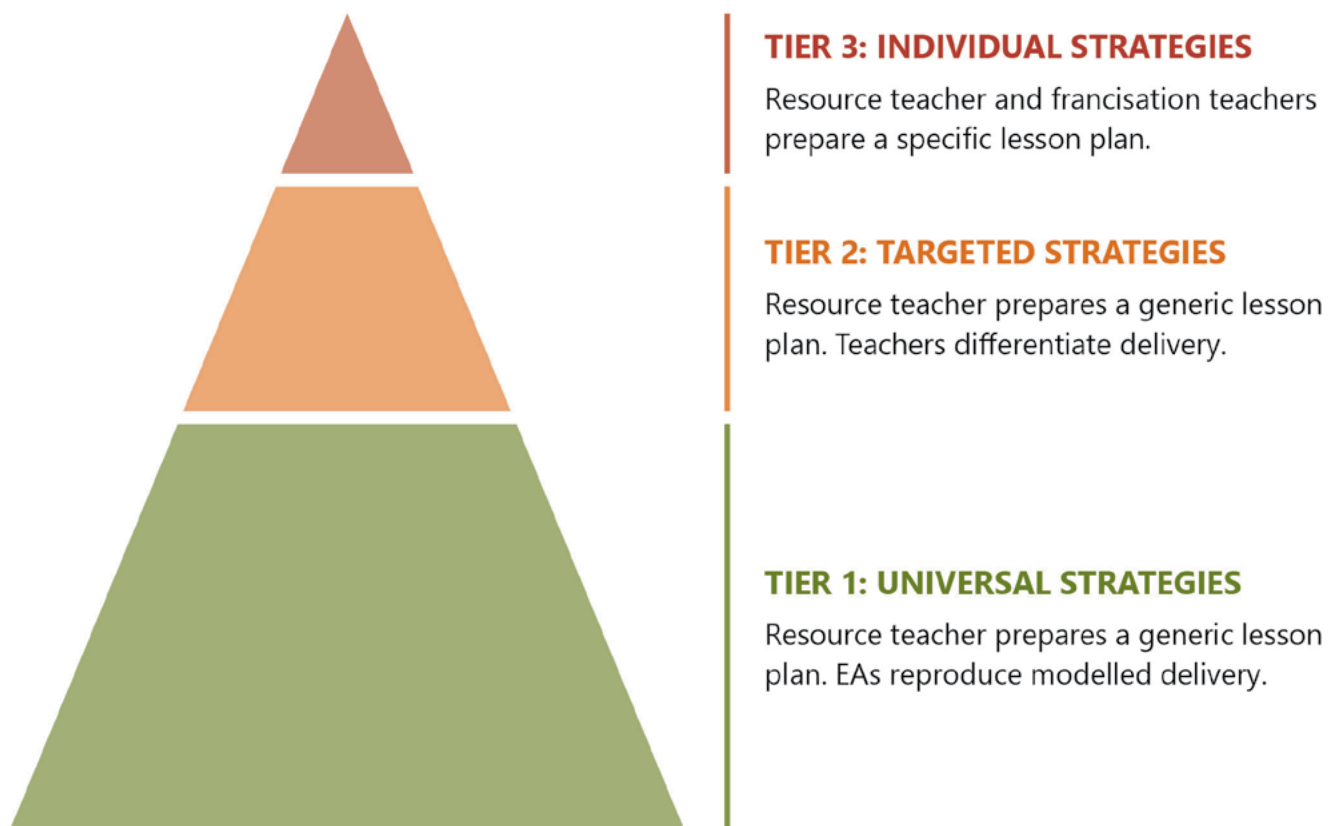


Figure 4: Response to intervention and lesson planning

Lessons Learned

Communication

Having the schedule made and communicated to each teacher before the September school start is important, as it allows everyone to schedule their teaching week around the Décloisonnement right from the beginning. Should scheduling have happened after the beginning of the school year, buy-in from teachers – and therefore the success of the initiative – would have been seriously jeopardized.

Dedicated Teacher

Having one special education teacher dedicated to planning and organizing the Décloisonnement was key to the success. This teacher did not place herself in the groups' schedule. This allowed for group visits, mentoring, and leading a group should one substitute be missing. The need for such a role was inspired by her own experience of a Décloisonnement initiative in a previous year, when such a role did not exist. Cancellations during that initiative were far too frequent to achieve the regularity needed for learning retention.

Support of the Administration

The administration of the school needs to provide support for the initiative. This support needs to address both logistical and priority considerations. On the logistical side, this involves creating and maintaining teachers and EAs' schedules that explicitly mention Décloisonnement periods. On the priority side, this means making Décloisonnement a priority for the school. If Décloisonnement was just one more initiative competing with everything else in the school, it would be regularly cancelled in favour of assemblies, FSAs³, external guests, emergency practices, and other one-off activities. Similarly, even when the 'regular' francisation periods stop (during evaluation time for instance), the francisation teacher still continues to receive her students during the Décloisonnement periods. In order to protect this

³ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/program-management/assessment/foundation-skills-assessment>

learning time for students, all other school activities had to be made of secondary priority, and the administration of the school is the guardian of this prioritization.

Importance of the 'Base' Schedule of the School

Having a base schedule of the school that is comprised of periods close to the ideal duration of Décloisonnement sessions helps in building the Décloisonnement schedule and minimizes transition times, since transition between Décloisonnement periods naturally fit within the base schedule. With 110 minutes of preparation time given to teachers, some elementary schools build their day around five periods of 55 minutes, and a smaller period of 18 minutes; while other schools build their day around periods of 40 minutes and 30 minutes. The latter is better for Décloisonnement.

Student Inclusion and Stigmatization

Being pulled out of the classroom can be an issue for some students, as they may feel exposed and stigmatized. We had an experience with a student refusing to attend francisation. However, when francisation was scheduled as part of Décloisonnement, the issue disappeared. There is no stigma when everyone is actually getting out of the regular classroom! This is interesting, as one could think that Décloisonnement defeats the purpose of inclusion since it groups students according to abilities. It turns out that Décloisonnement actually benefits inclusion: children are separated only for very small parts of the week, they all go out of the classroom at the same time, they get high-quality small group instruction tailored to their needs, and there is no stigma associated with such customization.

Student Return to the Classroom

If a student for some reason could not stay in the regular classroom, and was out of it for a long time, participating in Décloisonnement session allows the student to get reacquainted with their peers, albeit within a smaller group, and offers an opportunity to build resilience in being with peers.

This was an unexpected yet very positive aspect to the Décloisonnement we experienced in our school, and another benefit of Décloisonnement towards inclusion.

Lesson Planning

We have learned that we needed to provide two different types of lesson plans, one for teachers and one for educational assistants. The groups of students working with the teachers tended to be on Tier 2 of the RTI (Response to Intervention) pyramid, and needed more targeted interventions. On the other hand, the group of students working with the EAs were on Tier 1, and very often needed more challenging activities.

Space

In order for the Décloisonnement to logistically function properly and smoothly, you need to make sure that enough classrooms are available to accommodate each learning group. We were lucky enough to have spare classrooms this year, but the library could also be a good option to accommodate a group of students.

EAs' Voice

Educational Assistants have also shared with us some lessons learned⁴:

- The smaller group setting offers space to speak to those who are more shy. And, those who speak more also have a better space to listen to others. We have a student with high anxiety that could use this opportunity to speak.
- Since students change groups, this is an opportunity for some students to make new friends.
- Because students are moving classes, the session is considered less as 'work', the atmosphere is more comfortable, and this helps students to actually be more engaged in the work.

⁴ Thank you to the EA team at Anne-Hébert for their contribution.

Conclusion

Despite a COVID wave forcing a mid-year stop, the authors are very satisfied with the initiative. It seems to fill a need that our school had, allows the whole school to focus on key literacy objectives, and offers more emotional bandwidth to explore and be creative with other aspects of the curriculum. When the basics are covered, there is a sense of freedom to embark on new projects and experiments⁵.

In addition, while the literature cited at the beginning of this article focuses on classroom-based differentiation, our analysis found that the Décloisonnement enables differentiation for the whole school. Here, we seem to have a very good example that changing the structure of the school (the schedules, the roles) has been a catalyst to providing more differentiation for every student from grade 2 to grade 6 – a concrete example for our school that “structure shapes behavior”⁶.

As for the lesson content during our Décloisonnement session, we have found that the Décloisonnement is most suitable to develop skills that are sometimes referred to as “the basics” where repetition, recall, and final mastery are important in freeing the learner from rapid cognitive overload, and enabling them to reach a higher order of thinking.

As for the 2022-23 school year, we have the following plan:

First trimester - reading

Second trimester - numeracy including chess, problem-solving and math contest preparation

Third trimester – writing

This is just the beginning!

⁵ This reflection was first made to one of the authors by Trevor Calkins - <https://www.poweroften.ca/about> - the author would like to express his gratitude for the mentorship provided in the early part of his career in education

⁶ As discussed regarding the iceberg model at the Compassionate Systems Leadership introductory workshop attended by one of the authors September 2021. See <https://systemsawareness.org/> and <https://www.compassionatesystemsleadership.net/systemsthinking/#iceberg>