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The Differentiated

School

Making Revolutionary Changes in Teaching and Learning



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# Introduction

Education, like all other professions, has a literature of best practice—a collective wisdom born of research and experience—that points the way to success. It’s not a formula, of course. There is no recipe that guarantees infallibility. Humans are varied, messy in their wants and needs. Young humans are certainly no less so. There is no error-proof way to teach them.

Nonetheless, we know a great deal about teaching and learning. Research and practice have clarified, and continue to clarify, pedagogical principles and procedures that merit careful attention and application. In short, we generally know what more effective classrooms look like in comparison to less effective ones. We also recognize that it is devilishly difficult to move from the latter to the former.

The metaphor of adopting a healthy lifestyle works as a proxy for adopting a best-practice classroom. Most of us know intellectually that good health is fundamental to a robust life. Most of us also know principles and practices that enhance health. Certainly some grey areas and unanswered questions remain, but some habits we know we should cultivate: sleep enough, eat more fruits and vegetables, exercise, stay out of direct sun, eliminate smoking, and so on. We have plenty of research and experiential evidence to commend those practices—and most of us mean to incorporate them into our lives. Evidence and intentions

notwithstanding, however, it's perversely difficult for most of us to live healthy.

Junk food tastes good. It requires more thought to cook for health. It's tough to add 30 minutes of exercise to a schedule that's already on overload. A tan is nice—and, in fact, makes us look fit. Besides, we've lived with our foibles to this point, and we're still in pretty good shape. There are other folks who are a lot less fit than we are. Maybe when summer comes and there are fewer pressures, we'll be more attentive to a healthy regimen.

Many of us never get much further than worthy intentions to adopt practices that stand a high likelihood of improving our health. Even if the intentions are vivid in our thinking, it is a considerable journey from *meaning* to do better to *doing* better.

Sure, most of us make forays into a healthier life. We buy a health club membership—and go for a while. We go on a diet—until we are overcome by the desire for a hamburger and a shake. We use sunscreen—until it feels sticky or until we run out.

Few of us convert from comfortable and familiar habits to practices that seem as though they will forever define someone else but not us. The point is that change is aversive when it calls on us to reinvent ourselves—to shed the cocoon of the customary—even when we really know we would benefit significantly.

So what's the solution? Should health-related practitioners quit championing the cause of a healthy lifestyle? Should they simply give up on research and exhortations?

To do so would, we think, be unethical. The practitioners have information we need to know. They also have evidence that when folks follow their advice, the outcomes are worth the effort. So they have no option but to continue learning; to make their advice clearer, more palatable, or more compelling; and to provide better support for the change they commend.

So it is with educational leaders—whether those leaders are teachers, principals, researchers, curriculum coordinators, staff developers, or specialists. By assignment or conviction, they have information about what constitutes “healthier” educational practice. They too have little choice but to continue learning; make their advice clearer, more palatable, or more compelling; and provide better support for the change they commend.

The goal of this book is to help educational leaders more effectively support changes regarding effective classrooms for academically diverse

student populations—in other words, for differentiated instruction. Most of us are keenly aware of the range of learning needs represented in our students. Most of us know we miss the mark with too many students in our classrooms. (If we miss the mark with even one student, that’s too many.) Yet most of us persist with one-size-fits-all teaching.

It’s so hard to change the familiar classroom patterns. Anyhow, mostly we’re good teachers. There are lots of classrooms less effective than ours. And the pressures are so great—standardized tests, too little time, too many students, parental expectations. It might make intellectual sense to pay attention to varied learning needs in the midst of all that, but in reality, that kind of teaching belongs to someone else. It’s just not for me. Or at least not now . . . Maybe when things let up a little . . .

How does a leader promote change when the prevailing winds all seem to blow against it? Again, there is no formula, but there is a body of knowledge about school and classroom change. We know things that are more likely to work in favor of change and things that are more likely to impede change. A leader armed with that body of best-practice knowledge is in a better position than an equally well-intentioned leader who repeats the familiar, comfortable—and often ineffective—patterns viewed as leadership.

To support leaders who, in turn, want to support development of more classrooms that work better for more students, this book will take a three-pronged approach. It will clarify the goals and attributes of best-practice differentiation. It will highlight important principles of best-practice approaches to change. It will provide illustrations from schools and leaders who understand both differentiation and school change—and who have been effective in moving from comfortable and familiar ways of teaching to ways of teaching that support the academic health of a far wider sphere of learners.

To that end, Carol Tomlinson has drawn heavily on the work and reflective writing of Lane Narvaez, principal of Conway Elementary School, and Kay Brimijoin, faculty member at Sweet Briar College in Virginia and staff developer at Conway for more than six years, as well as on observations at the school and conversations with many of its staff. She has also drawn generously from the work and reflective writing of Joyce Stone, principal of Colchester High School; Bill Rich and Brad Blanchette, Colchester faculty members; observations and interviews at Colchester; and research data gathered by Cindy Strickland and Kristina Doubet, University of Virginia doctoral students at the time they spent two years researching the Colchester site.

The book is not about formulas or recipes. We and our key collaborators have a combined educational experience of nearly 150 years. If we ever had the illusion that there is a single right answer to successful teaching, we've long since abandoned it. What we do believe, however, is that the research-based body of educational knowledge matters, that we can learn from the experiences of others, and that it is possible to change schools and classrooms for the better if we do so from a solid understanding of why the change matters and how change happens.

For us, and for the other educators whose experiences we'll share in this book, the change journey has been both evolutionary and revolutionary, both frustrating and exhilarating, both depleting and renewing. In the end, it has been reconstructing in highly positive ways. We are not through learning, but we believe that what we have learned to this point is worth sharing. We hope you will think so as well.

# 1

## Setting the Stage for Change Toward Differentiation

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Students in today's schools are becoming more academically diverse. There are more students identified for more exceptionalities in special education, more students for whom English is not their first language, and more students struggling to read. There is a need to ensure challenge for advanced learners when accountability pressures focus on basic competencies, and a growing economic gap exists between segments of the student population.

It seems unrealistic to think that all those students will thrive in classrooms that disregard their learning differences. In fact, a look at indicators such as grades, student discipline, attendance, college acceptance, dropout rates, and standardized test scores confirms that school is not working well for too many students.

Differentiated instruction seems promising as a response to the variety of learning needs students bring to school every day. It makes sense to encourage teachers to be mindful of and responsive to their students' diverse learning needs. But what would the school leaders be asking teachers to do by encouraging them to differentiate instruction? What does differentiation look like? And would benefits to students and teachers be worth the tension and effort such a change would require? Are there avoidable errors that leaders should keep in mind?

What does it mean to lead for schoolwide change for differentiation?

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### **Fostering Enduring, Deep Change**

We often hear fellow educators say, "We're doing differentiation in our school this year. Could you come help us?" Not surprisingly then, we also hear, "Our teachers know about differentiation, but nobody seems to do much with it in their classrooms." We also visit classrooms where



“differentiation is happening,” go to conference sessions, and even read books that revisit the truth that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

On the one hand, it’s positive that educators are having a conversation about how to teach with an eye to individual learner needs. As we’ll discuss later, there is more than ample evidence of a need for that conversation. Further, it speaks well of us as educators that we see and acknowledge the varying needs of our students. On the other hand, shallow approaches to differentiating instruction for academically diverse learners will serve neither the students nor the profession well.

Mandates for classroom change and drive-through approaches to staff development likely will do more harm than good. They may result in some modifications for some people over some period of time, but they are seldom catalysts for broad, widespread, and enduring change. In addition, surface approaches to deep issues trivialize problems and convince teachers that shortly the wind will shift and the gnats that are pestering them will go away until a new breeze blows through.

In this book, we hope to provide a more substantial way to think about substantial change on behalf of a substantial need in our schools. It is our intent to (a) clarify the tenets of “defensible differentiation,” (b) specify key principles and practices of leadership for meaningful change in classrooms and schools, and (c) illustrate how it looks when educators commit to making durable changes in teaching—in this case, to implement differentiated instruction in classrooms throughout a school.

To set the stage for the rest of the book, this chapter will first highlight some key elements of defensible differentiation. Next, it will take a look at the complexity of educational change. Finally, it will introduce two schools that made differentiated classrooms a schoolwide reality and whose change journey will provide practical and concrete illustrations through the rest of the book.

## **Defensible Differentiation: What It Is and Is Not**

There is a great deal already written about what we call “differentiated instruction.” This section of the chapter will not try to repeat or even summarize that writing. What it will do is address some misconceptions by outlining what differentiation is and is not, and it will highlight essential elements of defensible differentiation. The point is to remind educational leaders (a term we use to include teachers and administrators who

are wise and informed pace setters for their colleagues) that solutions to educational problems do not lie in names or in labels but in quality practice. Calling something “differentiation” provides no guarantee of its efficacy for students. Leaders must continually be attuned to fidelity of practice and continually ask themselves and others, “How does what’s happening here make sense for learners?”

Differentiation that’s likely to make a positive difference for students will have some attributes and—more to the point—will not have others. Figure 1.1 suggests some misconceptions about differentiation that, turned into practice, can dilute or damage student outcomes. It also points to some indicators of defensible differentiation.

Key elements of effective differentiation are important for leaders to understand. They are the mileposts that change efforts should be moving toward—nonnegotiables of the model. Each of the nonnegotiables is aimed at one shared goal—greater academic success for the broadest possible student population. The nonnegotiables are respecting individuals, owning student success, building community, providing high-quality curriculum, assessing to inform instruction, implementing flexible classroom routines, creating varied avenues to learning, and sharing responsibility for teaching and learning.

## **Respecting Individuals**

With genuine respect comes a desire to know a person more fully, understand him or her more deeply, and connect with that person. Respecting individuals looks, sounds, or feels like the following:

- Listening
- Asking for input
- Making time for the person
- Using positive humor
- Accentuating the positive
- Accepting the person “as is,” while helping him or her grow
- Learning and demonstrating an appreciation for each person’s culture and background
- Providing the best (respectful tasks—everyone’s work is equally important and equally engaging)
- Expecting the best—always “teaching up”—pushing the student beyond where he or she believes achievement is possible
- Holding the person to a high standard
- Ensuring a positive environment for growth

<b>Figure 1.1</b> <b>What Differentiated Instruction Is and Is Not</b>		
<b>What Differentiation Is Not</b>	<b>What Differentiation Is</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Just for students with labels	For every student	Every student has particular interests and learning preferences as well as a readiness level that varies over time and context. Each learner needs appropriate support.
Something extra in the curriculum	At the core of effective planning	Differentiation is not something you do when the real lesson is finished. It's integral to ensuring that each student has access to success with key content goals.
An approach that mollycoddles students—makes them dependent	Teaching up; supporting students in achieving at a level higher than they thought possible	Effective differentiation always enables a student to do more than would be possible without it, not less.
Incompatible with standards	A vehicle for ensuring student success with standards	A goal of differentiation is ensuring that each student succeeds with whatever is important for him or her to know, understand, and do.
Use of certain instructional strategies	Use of flexible approaches to space, time, materials, groupings, and instruction	Flexibility is a hallmark of differentiation, but no single instructional strategy is required to differentiate effectively.
Tracking in the regular classroom	The antithesis of tracking	Effective differentiation requires use of flexible grouping patterns so that students consistently work in a variety of groups based on readiness, interest, learning preference, random assignment, teacher choice, and student choice.
Assigning students to cross-class groups based on assessment data	Within a classroom	When students are removed from their classrooms and placed with students deemed similar in other classrooms, a kind of tracking is taking place. Real flexibility is lost.
All or mostly based on a particular approach to multiple intelligences	Systematic attention to readiness, interest, and learning profile	Learning profile is one-third of the domain of differentiation and consists of learning style, intelligence preference (there are two strong models addressing intelligence preference), gender-related preferences, and culture-related preferences. A single approach to intelligence preferences in the classroom is a narrow segment of the big picture of differentiation.

<b>Figure 1.1—(continued)</b> <b>What Differentiated Instruction Is and Is Not</b>		
<b>What Differentiation Is Not</b>	<b>What Differentiation Is</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
All or mostly based on learning style preferences	Systematic attention to readiness, interest, and learning profile	See note above. Attention to learning style is helpful for some students some of the time and helps teachers learn to be more flexible, but it leaves other needs unaddressed.
Synonymous with student choice	A balance of teacher choice and student choice	There are times when it's important for teachers to assign particular work to students because it will move them forward in key ways. At other times, it makes good sense for students to call the shots and learn about making wise choices.
Individualization	Focused on individuals, small groups, and the class as a whole	Although it is an aim of differentiation to focus on individuals, it is not a goal to make individual lesson plans for each student.
More problems, books, or questions for some students and fewer for others	Varied avenues to the same essential understandings	Struggling students don't often benefit by doing less of what they don't understand, and it's not helpful for advanced learners to do more of what they already know. Differentiation asks students to work with essential understandings at varied degrees of complexity and with varied support systems. Information-based tasks and skills-based tasks should be congruent with students' current needs.
Something a teacher does because it's the thing to do	Something a teacher does in response to particular needs of particular human beings	Differentiation should be responsive instruction, not mechanical instruction.
Something that happens all day every day	Something that happens when there is a need for it	At times, whole-class instruction is important and effective. Teachers need to build community as well as attend to individual needs.
Something a teacher does on the spot when it becomes evident that a lesson isn't working for some students (reactive or improvisational)	Something a teacher plans prior to a lesson based on assessment evidence of student needs (proactive)	The most powerful differentiation is based on pre-assessment and ongoing assessment of student progress toward key goals. The teacher uses the assessment information to make proactive plans to address student needs. Some improvisation is still needed, but it is not a dominant means of differentiation.