

LEADING *for* DIFFERENTIATION

*Growing Teachers
Who Grow Kids*



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So You (Might) Want to Lead for Differentiation?

There is no shortage of voices advocating for change in schools. Some of the causes and approaches are substantial, promising, and reflective of our best understanding of quality classroom practice. Some of the options are shallow, gimmicky, or ill-informed. Deciding on an initiative that merits the time and attention of faculty members as well as school leaders is a consequential decision. For the initiative to yield significant benefits for educators and students, the journey to success will involve mind-stretching, risk, awkwardness, and inconvenience for all involved. This is how it is with meaningful change. A wise leader carefully considers potential options for growth, and a wiser one recognizes the importance of choosing an option that is personally compelling. When you believe in the change you're proposing, it's easier to convince the people you lead that success is worth the hard work and occasional discomfort it will require.

Why Differentiation?

The model of differentiation we advocate is multifaceted—both rich and complex. It proposes that students achieve best in classrooms where teachers follow five key principles:

1. Offer each student a positive, secure, challenging, and supportive learning environment.

2. Provide a meaning-rich curriculum that is designed to engage learners and built around clearly articulated learning goals known to both teacher and students.

3. Use persistent formative assessment to ensure that teacher and students alike are aware of student status relative to the specified learning goals, and that teacher and students alike know what next steps are most likely to propel a given learner forward.

4. Plan instruction based on formative assessment information to attend to whole-class, small-group, and individual differences in readiness, interest, and approach to learning.

5. Work with students to create and implement classroom management routines that allow both predictability and flexibility.

This model of differentiation also emphasizes the interdependence of each of its five elements, reminding those who use it that, as is the case with all systems, the health of every element in the model predicts the health of every other element in the model.

We believe that developing a whole faculty's competence and confidence in differentiation is a worthy objective because it has the potential to improve the achievement of a full range of students in a school and the power to improve all aspects of classroom practice. Differentiation lifts the professional level of teachers by giving them both the opportunity and tools to chart pathways to success for all of the young people they serve. The scope and scale of a schoolwide differentiation change initiative is certainly ambitious, but it's exactly that comprehensiveness that opens the door to the greatest benefits (Fullan, 2001a).

Context has, or should have, much to do with undertaking a particular change initiative. A judicious leader should be able to say both privately and publicly, "This direction is important—in this place, at this time, for these teachers and students, and for these reasons." It seems a misappropriation of leadership to do less. The rationale for embarking on a particular change in a particular context also reflects the personality and educational perspectives of a particular leader.

For example, the elementary principal whose work was a focus in *The Differentiated School* (Tomlinson, et al., 2008) believed strongly that developing faculty expertise in differentiation would benefit all students in her school and would further professionalize an already dynamic faculty. This rationale guided her work and provided the basis for her appeal to the faculty to join her in that work. On the other hand, the high school principal spotlighted in *The Differentiated School* was propelled

by her conviction that differentiation is a civil right. She saw two separate realities—two separate schools—in her building. In one, economically privileged students took advantage of high-quality course offerings, further improving their odds for a bright future. In the other, students with fewer economic means were consigned to low-track classes that made school dreary and their prospects for the future drearier. She felt deeply that differentiation was the key to creating a unified school in which the best curriculum and instruction would be accessible to virtually all students, and where advanced learners could find the enhanced challenge they needed. These two rationales for leading a schoolwide embrace of differentiation are certainly powerful, and each was appropriate for the leader and for the particular context.

We encourage you to examine *your* reasons for electing to invest in differentiation. They should be potent enough to fuel your work and the work of those you lead. At this point, we'd like to offer a few more rationales for leadership toward pervasive, high-quality differentiation—three rationales that were *not* the focus of either of the two principals in *The Differentiated School*. We present these not as a multiple-choice option—pick *a*, *b*, or *c*—but rather as a means of illustrating what we mean by “leading change from a sturdy platform.”

Who’s Coming to School? **A Demographic Case for Differentiation**

When we, the authors of this book, were making our way through K–12 classrooms, most of our classmates were from backgrounds relatively similar to our own in terms of ethnicity, language, family structure, and economics. Homogeneity was a myth that was more easily entertained than it is now. Students in today’s classrooms are undeniably diverse, and look like a cross-section of life in all its aspects. Consider these realities:

- Slightly over 9 percent of students in the United States speak English as a second language (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), although percentages vary by location and are as high as 23 percent of the population in many of the great city schools (Uro & Barrio, 2013).
- If we include students with limited English proficiency (LEP) in this tally, 13 percent of primary-grade students in U.S. public schools are less than proficient in English (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

- U.S. classrooms are more ethnically and culturally diverse today than at any time in the nation's past. In 2014, white students accounted for about 49.7 percent of the student population and no longer constituted the majority. Projections are that the percentage of white students will continue to decline, falling to about 45 percent by 2022 (Krogstad & Fry, 2014).

- About 5 percent of the U.S. school-age population has a diagnosed learning disability, with another 15 percent or more said to have learning or attention problems that remain undiagnosed. These students are at greater risk than the general population for failing a course in high school, not graduating from high school, and being suspended or expelled from school. Boys are about twice as likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability as girls (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014).

- In the United States, an estimated 13–20 percent of school-age young people have an emotional or mental health issue in a given year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013).

- As many as 1 in 50 students has some form of autism spectrum disorder (about 2 percent of school-age children), with boys about 4 times more likely than girls to receive a diagnosis. This figure represents an increase of 72 percent in diagnosis since 2007—likely indicating better recognition of milder cases (Steenhuysen, 2013).

- Approximately 35–45 percent of students in U.S. public and charter schools in 2011–12 received Title I services provided for students who live in areas with high concentrations of low-income families (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

- Twenty-two percent of children in the United States live in poverty; 45 percent live in low-income families. Research suggests that poverty is associated with academic, social, emotional, and behavioral problems in children (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014).

- Although national statistics are scarce on percentages of advanced learners in U.S. schools, it's likely that a sizeable segment of the school-age population is significantly underchallenged by current grade-level and standards-based curricula.

Although the idea of “a typical 5th grader” or a “standard issue 9th grader” has probably always been a construction of myth and convenience, today it seems delusional to operate from the premise that a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching will effectively address the range of learner needs in 21st century classrooms. Outside of school, these young people live in a world that enables them to customize a radio

station, download single songs at any time, select from 52 flavors of ice cream, choose from among dozens of phone options and even more service plans, watch television and movies on demand, order burgers or bowls just as they'd like them, and select from hundreds of sports shoe designs. These same young people come to the classroom with a vast spectrum of educational entry points, bringing widely variable backgrounds, calling on disparate out-of-school support systems, fueled by different interests and dreams, and approaching learning in distinctly different ways. Both demographic evidence and sound logic make the case that learner differences should be in the forefront of teacher thinking and planning if our goal is maximum success for every student. All of our students depend on us to help them construct a solid academic foundation for life, and differentiated instruction is an approach that equips us for this responsibility.

What's the Evidence?

A Research-Based Case for Differentiation

Our model of differentiation, built on a positive learning environment, strong curriculum, formative assessment, instruction that responds to learner needs, and classroom leadership and management that balances predictability and flexibility in teaching and learning, reflects our best current understanding of the elements of quality classroom practice. There are, of course, many valid and reliable sources that distill current scholarship on teaching and learning. Some of these present findings from individual research studies that pinpoint the impact of particular aspects of teaching and learning. Others are meta-analyses that distill the work of many individual researchers to provide a "big picture" look at quality practice. When these latter sources are robust, they are incredibly helpful for practitioners, providing a level of guidance that would be almost impossible to construct on a teacher-by-teacher or school-by-school basis. Three that provide a particularly helpful scholarly and sound distillation of best practices are *How People Learn* (National Research Council, 2000) and two books by John Hattie: *Visible Learning* (2009) and *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2012).

How People Learn draws on research to make a case that effective classrooms are

- **Student-centered**, because to help each learner grow, it is imperative to know where that learner is in a progression from novice to competent to expert.