


# Differentiation

in the \_\_\_\_\_

## Elementary Grades



Foreword: Learning from Literature—and Children .....	vii
Acknowledgments .....	xi
Introduction: Differentiation Gets an Upgrade .....	1
1. Building a Healthy Classroom Community .....	7
2. Articulating Learning Goals .....	39
3. Constructing Useful Pre-Assessments .....	71
4. Providing Interactive Learning Experiences .....	103
5. Checking for Understanding Using Formative Assessment .....	169
6. Differentiating According to Student Readiness .....	199
7. Differentiating According to Student Interest and Learning Preference .....	251
8. Considering the Nuts and Bolts of Implementing Differentiation .....	309
Conclusion: How Can I Continue to Upgrade? .....	334
Appendix: Strategy Index .....	338
References .....	340
Index .....	344
About the Authors .....	349



# Introduction: Differentiation Gets an Upgrade

## The Challenge

Elementary school classrooms in the United States today are blessed with students from a rich range of racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This vibrant diversity expands students' understanding of what makes us *us*, and helps equip them to become productive, empathetic, and ethical citizens who can thrive in an ever-changing global society.

At the same time, the country's commitment to educating all children well has driven the push for more rigorous standards. These standards are meant to ensure that today's children are ready for tomorrow's world. A high-quality education is no longer the province of the few or the affluent, but the right of every child in every community.

These two factors—greater student diversity and increased academic rigor—mean that today's teachers have greater accountability for a more heterogeneous population of students than ever before. In many schools, appraisal of teachers' performance is based at least in part on their ability to ensure the progress of every student, regardless of background, native language, motivation, or school experience.

These realities present every teacher with a fundamental, persistent question: "How do I divide time, resources, and myself so that I am an effective catalyst for maximizing talent in all my students?" (Tomlinson, 2014a, p. 2). Herein lies the challenge.

## Differentiation: Meeting the Challenge

Good teachers have always recognized and responded to the inherent diversity in their classrooms. At minimum, they understand that they have content and skills to teach, students who need to learn those things, and differences among the students that make one-size-fits-all approaches ineffective. This, in essence, is *differentiation*. A teacher who differentiates instruction (Tomlinson, 2014)

- Creates an atmosphere in which students' unique qualities and needs are as important as the traits they share.
- Uncovers students' learning needs through pre-assessment and formative assessment and tailors tasks accordingly.
- Plans experiences and tasks that are bound together by common and important learning goals.
- Presents varied approaches and avenues for students to take in, process, and produce knowledge.
- Varies grouping configurations frequently and strategically as a way of granting access to learning goals, providing support and challenge, and building community.
- Orchestrates fluid routines and management systems.

For many elementary teachers, cultivating a differentiated classroom is a natural and intuitive response. Most kindergarten teachers, for example, understand and *delight in* the fact that the 30 faces they see belong to individuals as unique as their fingerprints. Embracing and planning for the variance is what skilled teachers just *do*.

Yet not everyone "does" differentiation the same way. In reality, there are significant misconceptions about what actually constitutes defensible differentiated instruction. Figure I.1 addresses some of those misconceptions and their respective "truths" (Tomlinson, 2003, 2014a).

**Figure I.1 | What Differentiation Is and Is Not**

<b>Differentiation <i>Is</i></b>	<b>Differentiation <i>Is Not</i></b>
... A philosophy rooted in effective teaching and learning.	... A bag of tricks or set of strategies that can be plunked into low-quality curriculum.
... Regularly examining evidence of student learning and making thoughtful instructional decisions accordingly.	... Either an every-moment necessity or a once-in-a-blue-moon "event."
... Tailoring instruction in response to patterns in student needs.	... Writing individualized lesson plans for every student.
... Designing respectful tasks and using flexible grouping.	... Sorting or pigeonholing students into static groups or levels.
... A way <i>up</i> to standards and learning goals.	... A way <i>out</i> of standards and learning goals.
... Critical to improving instruction for <i>all</i> students.	... More important for certain groups of students (e.g., students with IEPs or English language learners).

Source: From *Differentiation in Middle and High School: Strategies to Engage All Learners* (p. 3), by K. J. Dockett and J. A. Hockett, 2015, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2015 by ASCD.

## Upgrading Differentiation: Ensuring Continued Growth and Progress

Don't good elementary teachers *already* differentiate? Because differentiation is a journey rather than a destination, it's something a teacher can never truly be finished with. A teacher's efforts to plan for students' needs improve with time, practice, and feedback in the same way that new technologies are constantly "upgrading" to improve the user experience.

For many elementary-grades teachers, upgrading involves shifts in beliefs about what differentiation is, as well as changes to methods and approaches that, in some cases, have become automatic or widely accepted or otherwise gone unquestioned. In the following sections, we discuss five commonly adopted practices that impede true differentiation and explain how to upgrade them to more sophisticated applications of differentiation.

### 1. Designing differentiated tasks vs. tasks that are just "different"

Variety is a hallmark of a differentiated classroom, but that variety should come in *how* students learn, not in *what* they learn. Differentiated tasks, therefore, are not just "different"; they are designed to address a given set of learning goals with different levels of scaffolding, within different areas of interest, or via different methods for taking in, processing, or demonstrating understanding, knowledge, and skills. An "upgraded" approach would ensure that students arrive at the same learning destination even if they get there through a variety of learning paths.

### 2. Designing engaging *and* substantive tasks vs. tasks that are just "fun"

Elementary teachers recognize how important it is for children to find joy in learning. They want their students to be excited about what they're doing in school and take pride in what they produce. Sometimes, in an effort to make sure that students are actively engaged, teachers lose sight of the goals and purpose of a task and, in the name of differentiation, substitute "fun" for substance. Teachers with an upgraded approach to differentiation ensure that student excitement and investment are poured into tasks that have meaning and purpose. In other words, differentiated tasks are both joyful *and* important.

### **3. Differentiating for all students within the classroom vs. sending students out of the classroom**

As the term is used in this book, *differentiation* is not synonymous with pulling students out for special programs, sending students to another teacher's classroom for one or more subjects, or regrouping students between classrooms for part of the day. Rather than describing *where* students learn, an upgraded conception of differentiation refers to *how* the classroom teacher makes important curricular goals accessible to all learners within the *same* classroom.

### **4. Recognizing *all* areas of strength and need vs. regarding reading level as an indicator of overall ability**

Without question, a student's ability to decode and comprehend text serves as a requisite skill to completing many other tasks. It is *not*, however, synonymous with her or his intellectual capacity. Nor does a student's reading level reflect his or her competence in math, understanding of science, or familiarity with history, for example. Although reading skills are the most overt and frequently assessed or reported indicators of student achievement, they do not paint the whole picture of a child's ability. A student may struggle with reading but excel in math; conversely, a fluent and capable reader may struggle to make sense of numbers and mathematical relationships. A teacher using an upgraded approach to differentiation recognizes that each student possesses a *collection* of strengths and areas for growth—and adjusts instruction accordingly.

### **5. Using flexible grouping vs. maintaining static groups**

Small groups and small-group instruction are the norm in many K–5 classrooms. Most teachers would agree that breaking the class into partners, trios, or quads for certain tasks can make teaching more responsive and learning more efficient. But when groups are static—that is, when students are in the same groups with the same peers for weeks or months at a time—grouping can work against the goals of increasing student learning and motivation. A teacher with an upgraded understanding of grouping uses many different configurations *flexibly* to meet a range of student needs and to grant access to rich learning opportunities. In doing so, the teacher not only builds students' capacity to engage with differentiated tasks but also strengthens camaraderie and respect among learners.



Teachers may recognize one, several, or all of these ineffective practices in their own classroom or school. Each one can serve as a launching point for a “differentiation upgrade.” In that spirit, the rest of this book provides comprehensive guidance, tools,

and examples for teachers seeking to build on how they are already successfully uncovering and addressing student differences, while propelling their journey toward expertise.

## What's Ahead

This book is organized around entry points for a differentiation upgrade that we have posed as questions for teachers to consider:

- How do I build a family of learners?
- How do I focus what I have to teach?
- How do I know what students already know?
- How do I get students engaged with the content and with one another?
- How do I know if students are getting it?
- What if students are in different places?
- How do I increase motivation and investment?
- How do I manage it all?
- How can I continue to upgrade?

The answers to these questions form the backbone of this book, which aims to be a comprehensive guide to differentiation in the elementary grades. Teachers might choose to start with Chapter 1 or to begin with the chapter that most closely reflects their area of interest. Here's a brief look at what each chapter addresses:

Chapter 1 presents techniques for building a healthy community of learners in which students see *all* of their classmates as family members with important strengths to share and areas of growth to support.

Chapter 2 shows teachers how to prioritize, focus, and “translate” curriculum, texts, or programs into manageable and meaningful learning goals that are fit to be differentiated.

Chapter 3 offers guidelines on how best to gather information about what students already know, understand, and can do prior to beginning a unit or lesson.

Chapter 4 explains strategies for actively engaging *all* students in making sense of content and practicing skills through interaction and discussion.

Chapter 5 provides strategies and prompts for gauging the progress of student learning—both during the course of a lesson and at its completion—with the goal of using that information to inform future instructional decisions.

Chapter 6 focuses on approaches to adjusting content, process, and product for student readiness, with an emphasis on closely analyzing and planning instruction directly from formative assessment results.

Chapter 7 offers strategies for maintaining students' interest, enthusiasm, and investment throughout lesson and units, as well as techniques that provide students with varied avenues for taking in, processing, and demonstrating mastery of learning goals.

Chapter 8 offers practical tools for effectively managing a classroom that supports techniques described throughout this book.

The Conclusion provides encouragement and suggestions to help teachers continuously “upgrade” their practice and make progress in their quest to create more responsive classrooms.

This book recognizes that the most powerful and efficient learning often happens by example. Accordingly, Part 2 of each chapter provides a plethora of tools and examples\* spanning a range of grade levels and content areas that were developed *by, for, or with* real teachers. These can be used to support teacher growth in myriad contexts, including professional learning communities, department or team planning meetings, and instructional coaching relationships. In addition, each chapter closes with a “before” and “after” example of a teacher experimenting with the principles and practices of differentiation. Our intent is to illustrate the kind of process and thinking that all teachers undertake in their journeys toward expertise.

Used well, this book and its tools have the potential to elevate what happens in elementary classrooms and, ultimately, to improve the learning and the lives of both teachers and their students.

#### **A Note to Primary-Grades Teachers**

The primary-grades examples in this book are written so that *teachers* understand the process or task. Primary-grades teachers can use these examples as the basis for delivery that is most appropriate for the skills of their learners, many of whom are at different stages of development in learning to read and write.

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\*For added utility, select forms and templates from this book can be downloaded at <http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/Doubet2017forms.pdf>. Use the password “Doubet2017117014” to unlock the PDF. In addition, a study guide for this book can be found at <http://www.ascd.org/books/An-ASCD-Study-Guide-for-Differentiation-in-the-Elementary-Grades> providing questions and prompts for use in professional development and PLCs.