The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners

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Foreword

She waited until they were all in their usual places,
and then she asked, "Did I choose you, or did you choose
me?" And the Souls answered, "Yes!"
E. L. Konigsburg
The View from Saturday

I enjoyed writing this book because it reminded me that teaching is, in part, a history. I enjoyed writing this book because it reminded me of *my* history as a teacher.

Writing this book connected me with teachers of another century in one-room schoolhouses on the Great Plains of the United States. These teachers accepted all comers and said by their actions, "I'm grateful for every one of you who came to learn. Different as you are, we can make this work!"

This book also transported me back to late nights at the home of my first real teaching partner nearly three decades ago. She and I tried to make sense of multitask classrooms, which seemed the obvious need of our very diverse students. After three decades of a remarkable friendship, Doris Standridge still works with me to make sense of teaching—and of life. In this book, she also created all the graphics.

Writing this book led me to recall the names and faces of students I taught and who unfailingly taught me. They were high schoolers, preschoolers, and middle schoolers. They were so alike, yet so different. They needed me to be many things to them, not just one person, and they taught me how to achieve that.

This book reminded me of colleagues in Fauquier County, Va. They worked hard, took professional risks, thought "outside the box," found joy in classrooms, and created joy there, too. It was a classy school district, and it was a great training ground for teaching because there was encouragement to be an innovator.

Writing this book helped me retrace my steps on the journey of my "second life" at the University of Virginia and in schools around the country. I now work with teachers in all the different kinds of places that make up the United States and with all the sorts of students who are its future. At the University of Virginia, my colleagues push my thinking and model excellence. My students often ask, "Why?" Then generally they follow with, "Why not?" Students still are my teachers.

Around the country, other teachers' questions create thick, patterned tapestries of understanding and uncertainty, which generally is the more valuable for growth. It is a risk to name any more names. People in so many places have contributed to what I know to write here. In a few places, however, I have lingered longer, and in those places, conversations have been especially powerful.

I am grateful to Mindy Passe, Lynn Howard, the Project START teachers, and many others in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Schools; to Susan Allan and the Grosse Pointe (Mich.) teachers; to Suette King and her colleagues in the Ann Arbor (Mich.) Schools; to Terry Greenlund, Sandra Page, and a large group of thoughtful teachers in the Chapel Hill-Carboro (N.C.) Schools; to Marian Gillewicz and the teachers of Yellowknife (NWT, Canada); to Pam Ungar and the principals and teachers in the Augusta County Schools (Va.); to Peg Davis and her study groups in the Madison County Schools (Va.); and to Mary Ellen Shaw, Mary Peterson, and the primary teachers at Mount Daniel Elementary School in Falls Church (Va.). I've also been enriched by interactions with principals and teachers at three research sites on differentiated instruction, where my colleagues and I have worked over the past three years: Sudbrook Middle School in the Baltimore County (Md.) Schools, Madison Middle School in the Roanoke City (Va.) Schools, and McLean Middle School in the Fort Worth (Tex.) Schools. Ideas from many folks in all these places greatly shape the pages that follow.

I have directly borrowed (I hope they don't think stolen!) lesson plans and instructional approaches from Nikki Kenney (San Antonio, Tex.); Judy Larrick (Albemarle County, Va.); Taren Basenight, Annie Joines, Jean Parrish, Nancy Brickman, and Holly Speight (Chapel Hill, N.C.); Caroline Cunningham (Peabody School, Charlottesville, Va.); Chris Stevenson (University of Vermont); and Mary Hooper and Marie deLuca (Grosse Pointe, Mich.).

I also have come to put these ideas on paper because of the partnership and support of numerous staff members at ASCD. I am particularly indebted to Leslie Kiernan, who has an unfailing heart and eye for magical classrooms and who loses sleep over any sliver of work at less than the highest quality she can produce. I also am indebted to John O'Neil, who embodies the best in teaching as an editor. He has always appreciatively accepted me where I am and asked gentle but probing questions to push me on.

Teachers often say to me, "How can I find time to differentiate instruction? I'm so busy already!" Writing this book has reinforced the only answer I know to give: "Build a career. Plan to be better tomorrow than today, but don't ever plan to be finished."

Writing this book reminded me that teaching is about learning, and that learning is about becoming, and that making a history is about making a life. This book is about writing your own history as a teacher—one day at a time, one increment of growth at a time, one collegial partnership at a time.

CAROL ANN TOMLINSON

1

What Is a Differentiated Classroom?

> A different way to learn is what the kids are calling for . . . . All of them are talking about how our one-size-fits-all delivery system—which mandates that everyone learn the same thing at the same time, no matter what their individual needs—has failed them.
>
> Seymour Sarason
>
> *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*

In the United States more than a century ago, the teacher in a one-room prairie schoolhouse faced a challenging task. She had to divide her time and energy between teaching young children who had never held a book and could not read or write and teaching older, more advanced students with little interest in what the young ones were doing. Today's teachers still contend with the essential challenge of the one-room schoolhouse: how to reach out effectively to students who span the spectrum of learning readiness, personal interests, culturally shaped ways of seeing and speaking of the world, and experiences in that world.

Though today's teachers generally work with single classes with students of nearly the same age, these children have an array of needs as great as those among the children of the one-room school. Thus, a teacher's question remains much the same as it was 100 years ago: "How do I divide time, resources, and myself so that I am an effective catalyst for maximizing talent in all my students?" Consider how these teachers answer that question.

- Mrs. Wiggins assigns students to spelling lists based on a pretest, not the assumption that all 3rd graders should work on List Three.
- Mr. Owen matches homework to student need whenever possible, trying to ensure that practice is meaningful for everyone.
- Ms. Jernigan only occasionally teaches math to the whole class at once. More often, she uses a series of direct instruction, practice, and application groups. She works hard to give everyone "equal time" at an appropriate entry point of instruction, matching practice work to student need. She also regroups students for real-world

math applications so they hear a variety of voices in their journey to think mathematically.

- Ms. Enrico offers students a variety of options when it's time to create the final product for a unit. She bases the options on students' interests so they have the chance to link what they've learned with something that matters to them as individuals.

All of these teachers are differentiating instruction. Perhaps they practiced differentiating instruction before it had a name, or without even knowing its name. They are teachers who strive to do whatever it takes to ensure that struggling and advanced learners, students with varied cultural heritages, and children with different background experiences all grow as much as they possibly can each day, each week, and throughout the year.

Hallmarks of Differentiated Classrooms

In differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are, not the front of a curriculum guide. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus, they also accept and act on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity. In differentiated classrooms, teachers ensure that a student competes against himself as he grows and develops more than he competes against other students.

In differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's. These teachers believe that students should be held to high standards. They work diligently to ensure that struggling, advanced, and in-between students think and work harder than they meant to; achieve more than they thought they could; and come to believe that learning involves effort, risk, and personal triumph. These teachers also work to ensure that each student consistently experiences the reality that success is likely to follow hard work.

Teachers in differentiated classes use time flexibly, call upon a range of instructional strategies, and become partners with their students to see that both what is learned and the learning environment are shaped to the learner. They do not force-fit learners into a standard mold. You might say these teachers are students of their students. They are diagnosticians, prescribing the best possible instruction for their students. These teachers also are artists who use the tools of their craft to address students' needs. They do not reach for standardized, mass-produced instruction assumed to be a good fit for all students because they recognize that students are individuals.

Teachers in differentiated classrooms begin with a clear and solid sense of what constitutes powerful curriculum and engaging instruction. Then they ask what it will take to modify that instruction so that each learner comes away with understandings and skills that offer guidance to the next phase of learning. Essentially, teachers in differentiated classrooms accept, embrace, and plan for the fact that learners bring many commonalities to school, but that learners also bring the essential differences that make them individuals. Teachers can allow for this reality in many ways to make classrooms a good fit for each individual.

Although differentiated classrooms embody common sense, they still can be difficult to

achieve. In part, it is difficult to achieve a differentiated classroom because we see few examples of them. The examples that are out there, however, offer a productive way to start exploring differentiated instruction.

Portraits from Schools

Teachers work daily to find ways to reach out to individual learners at their varied points of readiness, interest, and learning preference. There is no one "right way" to create an effectively differentiated classroom; teachers craft responsive learning places in ways that are a good match for their teaching styles, as well as for learners' needs. Following are samples from classrooms in which teachers differentiate instruction. Some are lifted directly from an observation in a classroom. Some are composites of several classrooms, or extensions of conversations with teachers. All are intended to help in forming images of what it looks like and feels like in a differentiated classroom.

Snapshots from Two Primary Classrooms

For a part of each day in Mrs. Jasper's 1st grade class, students rotate among learning centers. Mrs. Jasper has worked hard for several years to provide a variety of learning centers related to several subject areas. All students go to all learning centers because Mrs. Jasper says they feel it's unfair if they don't all do the same thing. Students enjoy the movement and the independence the learning centers provide.

Many times, Isabel breezes through the center work. Just as frequently, Jamie is confused about how to do the work. Mrs. Jasper tries to help Jamie as often as she can, but she doesn't worry so much about Isabel because her skills are well beyond those expected of a 1st grader.

Today, all students in Mrs. Jasper's class will work in a learning center on compound words. From a list of 10 compound words, they will select and illustrate 5. Later, Mrs. Jasper will ask for volunteers to show their illustrations. She will do this until the students share illustrations for all 10 words.

Down the hall, Ms. Cunningham also uses learning centers in her 1st grade classroom. She, too, has invested considerable time in developing interesting centers on a variety of subjects. Ms. Cunningham's centers, however, draw upon some of the principles of differentiated classrooms. Sometimes all students work in a particular learning center if it introduces an idea or skill new to everyone. More often, Ms. Cunningham assigns students to a specific learning center, or to a particular task at a certain learning center, based on her continually developing sense of their individual readiness.

Today, her students also will work at a learning center on compound words. Students' names are listed at the center; one of four colors is beside each name. Each student works with the folder that matches the color beside his or her name. For example, Sam has the color red next to his name. Using the materials in the red folder, Sam must decide the correct order of pairs of words to make familiar compound words. He also will make a poster that illustrates each simple word and the new compound word they form. Using materials in the blue folder, Jenna will look around the classroom and in books to find examples of compound words. She will write them out and illustrate them in a booklet. Using materials in the purple folder,