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# INTRODUCTION

Principals, as former teachers themselves, know that classrooms are made up of students who learn at different rates, have different levels of prior knowledge, possess varying abilities and readiness levels, and bring different experiences and backgrounds into the learning environment. Principals have become more conscious of the range of student abilities and experiences in most classrooms and are striving to help teachers provide learning experiences that are appropriate to the readiness, interests, and preferences of these diverse learners. In the current climate of diminishing resources and accelerating demand for student achievement, it is simultaneously more important and more difficult to meet the needs of all learners. As Grant (2003) describes it, the pressure to meet high standards forces principals to focus on students who are most at risk of school failure. He states:

Principals have no choice but to find innovative ways to help their students succeed, especially those students whose learning differences make meeting the standards an enormous challenge. (p. 48)

However, the principal must recognize and support the notion that quality teaching and learning for *all students* is the foundation upon which school success is built. The differentiated instruction model makes this focus on supporting all students possible; it allows teachers to fulfill all their students' needs.

This book is designed as a guide to help educational leaders understand the concept of differentiated instruction and implement the model schoolwide by doing the following:

- Obtaining an understanding of the concept of differentiated instruction and the theory that supports it
- Discovering why schools need differentiated instruction to serve all learners and ensure their success
- Learning how differentiated instruction serves all students—including students with special needs, gifted students, students with attention difficulties, and English learners
- Understanding how teachers can identify their students' individual learning profiles and using tools to support teachers in that process
- Knowing how differentiation fits into a solid curriculum that includes assessment and tiered instruction

- Identifying specific learning strategies that teachers can use in the classroom for differentiated instruction
- Leading differentiation by supporting and encouraging teachers, providing access to professional development opportunities, and establishing partnerships

Like many principals, you may be wondering, “Will differentiated instruction help my school in its efforts to meet the core standards and achieve adequate yearly progress?” This question inevitably arises whenever school leaders implement a new instructional orientation, philosophy, or strategy. Of course, there is never a definitive answer, as with any education model, concept, or approach; however, *differentiated instruction*—responding to the readiness, preferences, and interests of students by designing activities and assignments to meet diverse student needs—certainly has the capacity to do so. By providing students with opportunities to learn material in ways that accommodate their individual needs and preferences, teachers increase the likelihood of student success.

## The Principal’s Role

Differentiated instruction is a powerful philosophical orientation that helps teachers focus their instruction on content, process, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson, 1999a). While teachers are the ones who implement differentiated instruction at the classroom level, principals play a critical role in the model’s success. The principal is responsible for creating the overall school environment that can support or work against this approach, as well as for maintaining focus on the educational goals of the school. It can be difficult for principals to reconcile the complexities of that environment—teacher personalities and skills, standards, parent concerns, and so on—within the model of differentiated instruction. The first step is for principals to educate themselves about this instructional orientation and commit time to communicating with teachers, parents, and community leaders about its advantages. In other words, principals must be the lead learners.

As principals lead their teachers to implement best practices, they must consider how best to develop their classroom teaching staff: the heart and soul of differentiated instruction. Teachers have different levels of readiness for change just as individual students have different levels of readiness for learning (Gregory, 2008).

### Leading Change

Everett Rogers (1995) suggests that people fit into several categories in relation to their readiness and acceptance of change: innovators, leaders, the early majority, the late majority, and resisters.

- *Innovators*: These staff members are eager to try new ideas and dive in. They are not always supported by others.

- *Leaders*: These staff members are open to change, are critical thinkers, and are respected by other faculty members.
- *Early majority*: These staff members are cautious; they will follow others if others support the innovation.
- *Late majority*: These staff members are hesitant to get involved.
- *Resistors*: These people are often opposed to new ideas. They are usually outside the “inner circle,” and others often view them as negative.

These categories illustrate what principals and other school leaders have long known: some people are adaptable and amenable to trying new strategies and techniques while others are not. Their reasons for acceptance or rejection of change can come from personality differences or past experiences in the change process.

Table I.1 lists these five categories, the approximate percentage of each type of person among staff (as identified by Rogers, 1995), the characteristics, and the ways principals can support each type of personality.

**Table I.1:** Five Categories Related to Change

Personality Types	Characteristics	Support
Innovators (8 percent)	Eager to try new ideas and dive in; not always supported by others	Encourage innovators to blaze the trail. Provide opportunities, time, and resources to let them experiment.
Leaders (17 percent)	Critical thinkers who are open to change and are respected by faculty	Provide leaders with articles and research about differentiation. Allow for visits to other schools or classrooms, and encourage book or video studies.
Early majority (29 percent)	Cautious; will follow others if they support the innovation	Provide the early majority with collaborative time with others who are implementing the model.
Late majority (29 percent)	Reluctant to get involved with the innovation	Provide time for encouragement and support from the early majority (without pressure). Provide easy strategies for the group to begin to implement and transfer.
Resistors (17 percent)	Often opposed to new ideas, outside the inner circle, and seen as negative	Provide information. Keep these staff members in the loop. Share easy strategies and materials that will provide success with students.

Source: Rogers, 1995.

By assessing teachers in relation to the five categories, principals can better understand the level of support required during implementation of differentiated instruction. However, it is important for principals not to label staff members. The categories are meant to give principals a sense of how best to support staff members as they implement differentiated instruction

and how to appropriately respond to teachers' needs to keep them moving forward in the implementation process.

Staff members also might go through stages of concern as they implement any new process or adapt to a change. Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall (1987) created the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) to illustrate the stages of concern. These stages relate to awareness of the initiative, how the initiative impacts an individual, what tasks are involved, and the overall impact. In these various stages, staff members will want information to know how the change affects them, how they will make time for the change, whether it will make a difference for students, and what other people are doing; finally, they will accept the task and refocus on it. These stages are useful in assessing the progression of implementation of a schoolwide change and determining what support and interventions might be helpful to move people along the continuum to complete implementation. Table I.2 shows the focus, stage, concern, and necessary support in this model.

**Table I.2:** Concerns Based Adoption Model—Stages of Concern and Support

Focus	Stage	Concern	Support
Awareness	Awareness	Is this another bandwagon?	Help develop the concept for staff members.
Self	Information	What is differentiation?	Provide information. Discuss in team meetings. Provide articles, and encourage book studies.
	Personal	How will this affect me?	Help people start small. Allow time for staff to see how others are doing it.
Task	Management	How will I find time? Will this cause chaos?	Create opportunities to share and solve problems. Share strategies for implementation.
Impact	Consequence	Does it make a difference for students?	Visit other teachers who are further along in implementation. Discuss the impact of the model.
	Collaboration	What are my colleagues doing?	Continue to provide team time and opportunities for support, sharing, and interaction.
	Mastery/ Refocusing	I think I can make this better. I can see a need for improvements.	Adapt innovation to suit staff needs with professional dialogue and alterations.

Source: Hord et al., 1987.

### Addressing Parent Concerns

Principals must ensure that all stakeholders support the classroom changes that result from implementation of differentiated instruction—this includes parents. Parents are sensitive to change in classrooms and will need to be reassured about the advantages of using differentiation to personalize instruction. A differentiated classroom can look very different to parents—both the environment and the student work. Parents who remember sitting in rows

of desks listening to the teacher and spending homework time on textbooks may be disconcerted with changes in how their children are being taught. Parents of students with special needs may be appreciative, while parents of gifted learners may be more skeptical because they might think differentiation means the school is focusing on struggling students rather than on meeting their child's needs (Tomlinson, 1999b).

Principals should consider their current relationships with parents: Are parents in the school community generally positive? How have you worked with them to resolve concerns in the past? Arroyo, Rhoad, and Drew (1999) offer the following suggestions to encourage communication and enlist parental support:

- Include parents on planning teams.
- Clearly communicate definitions and expectations for students.
- Regularly communicate with parents at the school level (principal) and at the classroom level (teachers).
- Involve parents in the classroom so that they can become comfortable with differentiation.
- Plan incremental change in classrooms to differentiate instruction.
- Provide parents with opportunities to give feedback about their concerns, and incorporate their suggestions whenever possible.

Principals must reassure parents that their child's learning needs are being better met through the highly individualized instruction of differentiation. Ongoing and regular communication is critical to build support, as is providing literature and resources about differentiated instruction (Shellard, 2002).

### **Making a Long-Term Commitment**

Principals must recognize the importance of patience and consistency when creating changes in the school environment (Gregory, 2008). Even small changes in educational practice can take a while to become well-established routines. Implementation of a schoolwide model such as differentiated instruction requires the development of long-term goals in such areas as staffing, budgeting, developing teachers, and evaluating programs. Benchmark goals will help principals measure progress along the way. Celebrations of success provide motivation and inspiration and can incorporate opportunities for staff to share their ideas with one another. Just as schools develop plans to implement technology or a specific type of evaluation, a plan for differentiating instruction in all classes within a solid curriculum will help guide the process.



## Where to Start

This book begins by offering a discussion of differentiation—what it is, what it is not, and the elements of a differentiated classroom—so principals can help staff members develop a shared definition. Then it examines the need for differentiation given what we know about how the brain works and the concept of nature and nurture, including the impact and uniqueness of prior knowledge and experience, and outlines the brain’s memory processing system to shed light on why differentiation is key to the success of every learner.

Principals then learn about differentiation as it relates to student temperament, personality, and sensory-based differences; multiple intelligences; and gender and culture. Understanding the various ways that individuals learn is critical to designing instruction for all students. This allows principals to help teachers create individual student learning profiles using several tools to identify student strengths and needs, and then provide strategies learners can use to engage their strengths and compensate for their weaker areas.

An examination of how differentiation fits into a solid foundation of curriculum development and unit design addresses lesson planning, types of assessment, and how to use assessment data to plan in successful differentiated classrooms. These practices, while not unique to differentiated instruction, assist educators in successfully responding to a wide variety of learners.

Principals will also learn specific strategies to differentiate instruction in the classroom—from accommodating individual learners to differentiating instruction for the whole classroom, with a section on how technology can assist in differentiating instruction.

Classroom management is a crucial issue in the differentiated classroom; therefore, principals will also learn strategies for using time and materials effectively as well as for developing independent and interdependent learners. These strategies will help principals support teachers who are often worried that differentiation will lead to chaos in the classroom.

At the end of each chapter, reflection questions will help principals focus their efforts to support and encourage teachers and provide them with high-quality best practices for differentiation.

## A Process Rather Than a Destination

Differentiated instruction is a philosophy that—if effectively embraced—creates dynamic learning environments and fosters learning for every teacher and student. A commitment to this instructional orientation requires a commitment to nurturing teachers, helping them to become masterful at differentiating instruction. It involves a commitment to many stakeholders, including students. While the process of change may sometimes seem arduous, the reward of perseverance is a high level of student success schoolwide. Principals should keep in mind that differentiation is not a destination; rather, it is a continuous process of responding to students individually and collectively and supporting teachers in this important task.



## Reflections for Principals

1. How can you begin developing a plan of action to encourage differentiated instruction? What do you know about the concept, and what does the staff know?
2. What are some things you need to do immediately?
3. What would a plan for your staff look like? How will you begin?
4. What resources, materials, and people are in place already?
5. How can you help stakeholders become informed about differentiated instruction?
6. How will parents feel about the change? Staff? How do these two stakeholder groups generally respond and adapt to change?

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