



Although Some Voice Doubts, Advocates Say Differentiated Instruction Can Raise the Bar for All Learners

By Mary Anne Hess*

A seventh grade boy spends his time in English class struggling to read at a beginner's level. A girl at a nearby desk with her nose in the book could probably tackle a Harvard literature class. Seated in between is a youngster who's a whiz at math but takes a whole period to write three English sentences because he's much more comfortable in his native Spanish.

That's diversity, as any educator knows, and — in one form or another — it's always been a part of American education.

"In the United States our goal is to educate all comers," says Dr. Carol A. Tomlinson, a 20-year veteran of the classroom who's now an associate professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education — and a proponent of mixed-ability classrooms.

Many other countries cull the academic haves from the have-nots at various rungs on the education ladder. Not so in the U.S., where the question of how teachers can successfully work with students of widely differing abilities, preparation, and home lives in the same classroom is here to stay.

Teachers have faced this dilemma since the days of the one-room schoolhouse, which mixed 6- to 16-year-olds in the same space. A solution then and now, say Tomlinson and many educators, is differentiation. It's a buzzword that's seen a thousand iterations, from SRA reading kits to placing kids in the bluebird or buzzard reading group. It's also a philosophy that sends shudders down the spines of some parents and others who doubt children can reach their highest potential in heterogeneous classrooms.

Understanding the roots of the skepticism, Tomlinson says our schools go through cycles, sometimes dealing with differences inside the classroom and other times shuttling youngsters — often the troublemakers, learning disabled and the gifted — "down the hall." The pull-outs then get labeled "discriminatory" or "elitist," depending on the group served, and the cycle begins again.

"But our choice isn't between sending them down the hall or doing nothing," Tomlinson argues. "We can differentiate in the regular classroom."

What true differentiation first requires, she says, is the realization that all learners vary in their readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Jumping off from this point, teachers can set up classrooms where everybody works toward essential understandings and skills, but uses different content, processes, and products to get there. Differentiation is all about options, she adds, and not about being punitive by just piling on additional work for the more able.

"Differentiation calls on us to make big leaps in the way we think about the classroom and the curriculum," says Tomlinson, who's seen this kind of instruction work from kindergarten through high school. "It takes a willingness to be a teacher who partners with kids in teaching and learning — who's more of a facilitator than a dictator. It challenges the sense that the curriculum is just coverage of facts."

Teachers Can Benefit

NEA member Denise DeFiore, interdisciplinary resource teacher at a new middle school in Silver Spring, Md., that's set to open this fall using differentiation, says kids aren't the only ones who reap benefits from this kind of instruction.

"It's more engaging for the teacher, too. It takes a different kind of energy than direct instruction.," she said.

The bulk of the work is in upfront planning, DeFiore says, which often involves designing a tiered lesson plan. "You have to think about the outcome — and how you will get them all there on different paths." That might involve enlisting the help of the media specialist and computer teacher, or perhaps bringing in community resources.

An elementary and middle school teacher for 12 years, DeFiore says most of her training in differentiation has been "on-the job." Preservice exposure is hit or miss, agrees Tomlinson, offering one possible explanation: "Young teachers are developing the gross motor skills of teaching. Differentiation is a fine motor skill. The way to get there is to teach them to look at kids as individuals and to let kids show you what they can do. We want young teachers to develop the right set of habits that will lead to differentiation. In truth, differentiation probably calls for an expert teacher."

With those years in the classroom behind her, DeFiore now finds that she can write most lessons as open-ended, letting students "go as far as they want." Experience has taught her that children need varying degrees of structure. "Some will take off; others need the lesson broken down into small steps."

How Differentiation Works

What is WEAC?

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WEAC represents 98,000

K-12 public school teachers and education support professionals, faculty and support staff in the Wisconsin Technical College System, education and information professionals employed by the state, retired members, and university students studying to become educators.

The weac.org Web site provides services to members and non-members, including a database of research materials, online access to classroom resources, education news and feature articles, background on education materials, and social networking opportunities.

Visit our Home Page at www.weac.org to see the latest news, services and educational resources.

Sound too chaotic, time-consuming or just plain pie-in-the-sky? "Anything that's worth doing is complicated," answers Tomlinson, who says we're way past the point when a patchwork quilt of "flavor-of-the-month" fads was expected to address classroom diversity. "Differentiation can work — at all age levels."

How? In classrooms where it's alive and well, teachers like DeFiore:

- Keep the focus on concepts, emphasizing understanding and sense-making, not retention and regurgitation of fragmented facts.
- Use ongoing assessments of readiness and interests, and preassess to find students needing more support and those who can leap forward. They don't assume all students need a certain task.
- Make grouping flexible. They let students work alone sometimes and also in groups based on readiness, interests, or learning styles. They use whole-group instruction for introducing ideas, planning, or sharing results.
- See themselves as a guides. They help students set goals based on readiness, interests, and learning profiles — and assess based on growth and goal attainment.

Although many argue the pros and cons of differentiation, there's no dispute that successful implementation requires significant staff development. NEA member Judy Hart, acceleration and enrichment coordinator for the school district in Geneva, Ill., is on the front lines every day, helping teachers put differentiation into practice.

It's not a lack of desire on the part of teachers, she says, but a time issue. "Differentiation is a wonderful concept if you supply staff development. But to leave teachers high and dry — they're dying out there with so many things on their plate."

Hart, who also works as a private consultant doing summer staff development workshops around the country, says she sees a movement away from tracking and toward mixed-ability classrooms. Yet, she adds, if the training isn't there or is only a "one-shot deal," teachers tend to aim instruction toward the middle range. "Then two-thirds of the kids aren't getting anything."

Hart urges teachers overwhelmed by the logistics of differentiating to take small steps. "Pick one strategy for one class or even for one youngster, and dive in. With continued support, your confidence and skill will grow."

While conducting staff training nationwide, Tomlinson also finds that it's an evolutionary process: "Teachers are at different points in their professional journey, and we need to accommodate them."

She calms the apprehensive by suggesting they initiate differentiated instruction in a cumulative way, noticing a change over a school year. Teachers have told her, "Thanks for giving me permission to do this at a pace I can handle." Tomlinson takes pride in converting skeptics who try it once, see it catch on, and say they'll try it again.

Her message during training is clear: There's no point in differentiating instruction unless you're beginning with instruction that ranks as best practice. "The starting point is what you need to do to challenge the highly able student. What you're then doing is insuring that all kids get the best-practice instruction. Whenever you have teachers doing that, it reshapes how they teach all kids."

Escalators, Not Stairwells

Tomlinson says teachers need to envision their classroom as an "escalator" going higher and higher, not as a "stairwell" that takes students to a certain grade-level landing where they stop. Tasks have to be "respectful of kids, hands-on, engaging and thought-provoking."

Such differentiated activities, which might take two to three weeks to complete, benefit from block scheduling, says DeFiore. "That allows a workshop environment where teachers can get to each group. A differentiated room may look chaotic, but it's a workshop."

Small classes are also ideal settings, says Tomlinson, but adds that during her two decades in the classroom she even managed to differentiate with 40 students "tripping over each other."

Although she's passionate about differentiation, Tomlinson knows clearly that "there's no magic wand in education." She estimates that differentiation can take as long as seven to 10 years to really institutionalize. But, she thinks, it's worth it.

"We know huge amounts about how individuals learn. Most of us have memories of being in places where we thought we were going to scream if someone repeated one more time something we'd understood seemingly forever — and places where we were about to explode with frustration because we simply could not grasp the ideas at the pace they were presented. We also all know what a difference it makes if we can work alone when we need space to think things through by ourselves, or work in a group when we need sounding boards."

If we know and respect these things about ourselves, she asks, don't we owe the same to our students?

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- Sidebar: From Theory to Practice: The Challenges of Heterogeneous Classrooms

Resources for more information

- Carol A. Tomlinson, cat3y@virginia.edu. Her professional inquiry kit, "Differentiating Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms" (\$191 retail, \$159 members) is available from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development at 1-800-933-ASCD or www.ascd.org. Several other publications and a video-based staff development series on differentiation are also available from ASCD.
- Susan Winebrenner, ecsfirst@aol.com or call 1-888-327-3477 for information on staff development workshops she gives nationwide. Winebrenner has written several books on teaching in mixed-ability classrooms, all published by Free Spirit Publishing, 612-338-2068 or on the web at www.freespirit.com.
- National Association for Gifted Children, 202-785-4268, www.nagc.org.
- The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, based at the University of Connecticut, 1-860-486-4676, www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt.html. This site is rich with articles and research on differentiation and links to other sites.