



# Just for the ASKing!

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on differentiation of instruction.

## Differentiation of Instruction



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Everywhere you turn, everyone is talking about it. It is the title of books, the focus of articles in professional journals, and the most requested workshop. The “it” is, of course, differentiation of instruction. The sheer volume of information is overwhelming because each author and workshop presenter offers approaches or strategies that have the potential to help teachers address the challenges they face in their efforts to meet the needs of every student. Given this barrage of information, this month I am attempting to pull together and make sense of some of the most important thinking and commentary about differentiation of instruction.

Educational writers have built a case for differentiation of instruction for several decades. Howard Gardner wrote “...the biggest mistake of past centuries in teaching has been to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual and thus to feel justified in teaching them all the same subjects in the same way.” In an article on developmental appropriateness, Lilian Katz said, “When a teacher tries to teach something to the entire class at the same time, chances are one-third of the kids already know it; one third will get it; and the remaining third won’t. So two thirds of the children are wasting their time.” And Marilyn Hughes stated, “To learn a particular concept, some children need days; some, ten minutes, but the typical lockstep school schedule ignores this fundamental fact.” Each of these perspectives provides food for thought for teachers as they make their instructional decisions.

In a recent edition of ASCD’s *Education Update* Carol Tomlinson noted that much confusion exists about what differentiation of instruction is and what it isn’t. She pointed out that many educators feel that there is a conflict between standards-based education and differentiated instruction. Carol states, “... standards guide what to teach, and differentiation guides how to teach.” In a second clarification, Carol explains that “...differentiation is about providing a variety of means and supports for mastering a standard, not changing the content of standards. A richer framework of meaning helps students more effectively learn, recall, relate to, retain, and retrieve content.”

Anne Wescott Dodd, a former middle school teacher and now a professor at Bates College, looks back on a 25-year career and concludes, “I wish someone had told me then that knowing my students was as important as knowing my subject. I didn’t realize until much later that to motivate and engage students, teachers must create a classroom environment in which every student comes to believe, ‘I count, I care, and

I can.” As Dodd points out it is critical that teachers know as much as possible about their students; if that is not the case, there is no other way to effectively differentiate instruction. A recent *USA Today* profile of an outstanding teacher includes a description of a practice that the teacher feels has a significant difference in her capacity to reach all of her students. At the start of the school year, this teacher makes phone calls to the homes of her students and interviews parents to learn more about her students. She keeps an information card on each student and uses the information on the card throughout the year to group students, to provide relevant instructional examples, and to link student interests to the standards she is teaching.

Many current articles emphasize the importance of using assessment data as a tool for promoting learning rather than using the data only to determine grades. Teachers whose practice is driven by the philosophy of assessment **for** learning rather than assessment **of** learning are very public with their students about how they will be assessed. Such teachers allow their students multiple opportunities on assessments because they have concluded that it is the learning that is important and not the one-chance opportunity to complete a test. These teachers are explicit in defining fairness for their students. To them fairness is giving each student what he or she needs to learn. By defining fairness, the teacher sets the stage for both differentiation of instruction and differentiation of assessment.

Highly successful teachers are proactive rather than reactive. They understand that planning for the differentiation of instruction cannot be an afterthought when a unit plan has been completed. As they plan their instruction, they automatically include multiple routes for students to succeed. While it is essential that teachers monitor student learning and adjust instruction on the spot, these teachers do not develop one-size-fits-all lessons and then only adjust when students struggle or when it becomes apparent that the lessons are not working. For this type of planning, teachers must first be perfectly clear about the learning outcomes and what it will look like when students have successfully mastered the targeted knowledge and skills. Second, it is crucial that teachers complete pre-assessments and use that data in planning instruction. A task analysis of what needs to be known and done and who can do what helps ensure that all students are capable of being successful. The task analysis helps the teacher determine how and when to instruct the entire class, small groups, or individuals. By analyzing the tasks that students will be expected to do, the teacher can plan ahead to include materials with a range of reading levels and that address the different ways students process information.

All of us have driven past a construction site and seen supportive structures that have been put in place outside a building to help the workers to complete their jobs. The term “scaffolding” is used to describe these visible supports. It is important to note that when the construction work is completed, the scaffolding is removed. Teachers need to apply the concept of scaffolding to the educational setting in order to meet the different learning needs of students. Paula Rutherford writes, “Just as scaffolding is used to support buildings during the construction process, educational scaffolding provides support systems for students during the learning process.” Scaffolding can take many forms. It may be an index card a student consults to determine which formula to use to solve a math problem; it may be a construction paper placemat with grammar guidelines taped to a student’s desk; it may be a packet with templates that enable a student to successfully complete a piece of writing. Scaffolding may also include coaching or modeling by a teacher, tape recorded directions, lists of page numbers a student can consult in a book, word banks on a bulletin board, mnemonic devices, or note taking formats. It is important to note that scaffolding is not permanent. As student learning increases and as students become more independent, the scaffolding is removed just as it is in a construction project.

Teachers who successfully include differentiated approaches to their planning continually analyze instructional data and look for patterns in student learning to identify which concepts and skills need to be re-taught to whom. For example, after administering a language arts assessment, a teacher may find that

some students need support in planning, composing, and revising paragraphs, stories or letters. The teacher may also conclude that another group of students requires additional instruction in editing for grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Using the data, group students appropriately for additional instruction and then gives them additional opportunities to demonstrate competency with the concepts and skills.

Differentiation is often referred to as a way of thinking to meet the needs of students who have difficulty learning. Of equal importance is consideration about meeting the needs of students who learn quickly or who have mastered the content we are teaching. By employing strategies to meet the needs of all learners, educators can reduce or eliminate boredom as well as minimize frustration and discipline problems while adding rigor and independence to student learning.

An on-going challenge for teachers who are trying out differentiated approaches to instruction or who are still in the planning stages is how to find the time to carry out differentiated instruction. Although finding time to differentiate does pose a problem for some teachers, it should not be used as an excuse to ignore the reality that many students in our classes require a different approach in order to learn. Classrooms across the nation are becoming more and more ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse. As educators, we cannot afford to teach our diverse classrooms of learners using a single approach for everyone. Every teacher must embrace the concept of differentiation of instruction. For some the embrace has begun. Still others are “doing business” in the same way they always have. Teachers who ignore the need to differentiate instruction are not only shortchanging their students, they reflect poorly on their chosen profession by not adding to their knowledge and skills.

Paula Rutherford writes that there are several differentiation non-negotiables. In order to successfully differentiate, Paula says that we must:

- be knowledgeable about and skillful with the content to be taught
- acknowledge, understand, respect, and respond to the differences in, and needs of the learners to be taught
- hold and select purposefully from a deep and broad repertoire of instructional strategies
- use multiple sources of data to inform decisions about instruction
- realize that differentiation is not a set of strategies but is instead a way of thinking about the teaching and learning process
- not differentiate who will learn what, but rather how we will teach so that all students have access to, and support and guidance in mastering, the district and/or state curriculum.

The principal plays a critical role in encouraging and supporting differentiation of instruction. Finding ways to schedule time for collaboration, framing questions about the use of multiple sources of data in instructional decision making, providing appropriate professional development opportunities, and continuously asking what is being done for those students who do not learn or who already know what is to be learned are essential variables that are controllable by the principal. To do less is to neglect the instructional leadership responsibilities that accompany the title principal.

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