



# Traveling the road to differentiation in staff development

**Teacher leaders can help educators hurdle four key barriers to implementation**

BY CAROL ANN TOMLINSON

**T**he concept of differentiated instruction is at least as old as Confucius. He reflected its core meaning when

he advised that people differ in their abilities. To teach them, he counseled, you have to start where they are.

In the United States, differentiation was a way of life in the one-room schoolhouse. There, the teacher knew students would vary greatly in age, experience, motivation to learn, and proficiency. To effectively instruct the range of students, teachers had to be flexible in their use of time, space, materials, student groupings, and instructional contact with learners. Teachers could not assume students were essentially alike in their learning

needs, and could not suppose that teaching one topic in one way according to one timetable was a viable practice.

Over time, schools were consolidated and students were assigned to classrooms according to their chronological age. Conventional wisdom was that the teacher's job would be easier if age variance was factored out of the teaching/learning equation. We

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came to believe the teacher could concentrate on developing and delivering one lesson for students whose learning needs would be relatively homogeneous based on their assignment to the class by age. Today, high stakes tests appear to move beyond merely reinforcing that one-size-fits-all teaching is

acceptable to seeming to mandate uniform instruction to produce uniform outcomes for students of a given age and grade.

Yet despite these habits of practice and testing mandates, conversations about differentiation are burgeoning.

Teachers understand the need to pay attention to student variance, and evidence abounds that teaching with student variance in mind yields positive results (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Developing classrooms that are more responsive to learner needs is challenging but presents a significant opportunity for staff developers to make a difference for teachers and their students.

### THE NEED FOR DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Many signs point to the need to develop teachers' capacity to address differences in students' readiness, interests, and learning preferences so more students can achieve at higher levels in school. Combined, the indicators are a convincing case for differentiation — or making sure individual students get the support they need to learn as much as they can, as efficiently as they can.

**1.** The United States is becoming a nation of racial and ethnic minorities, rather than a nation with a majority race and multiple minorities. Classrooms mirror that ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity (Marx, 2000). To be effective, teachers must take into account the student's language, economic status, background experience, and views of the world, all of which affect the child's learning.

**2.** Most districts now include students with identified special education needs in general education classrooms. About 96% of teachers have students in their classroom who have been identified with a learning disability, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2001), and on average, have three to four students with Individualized Education Plans. In addition, most students identified as gifted spend the

majority of their academic time in general education settings. Students in each of these populations (as well as students with multiple exceptionalities whose needs encompass both populations) require responsive instruction to develop to their full potential.

**3.** Tracking students by ability levels to address learner needs has not helped students achieve and has, in fact, resulted in lowered expectations for many students who could perform at a higher level if given appropriate opportunities to do so (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Educational Research Service, 1992). An exception is advanced learners, who likely would suffer from being placed in more heterogeneous classrooms unless advanced learning opportunities were consistently available (Kulik & Kulik, 1987).

**4.** The achievement gap between Caucasian students and many minority groups — including African-American, Hispanic, and Native American learners — is likely aggravated by tracking, which separates students perceived as lower performing from those perceived as higher performing (Denbo, 2002; Landsman, 2001).

**5.** Some experts also question the efficacy of special programs — such as those for students with learning disabilities and students with reading problems — in raising the achievement levels of students assigned to those programs (Tomlinson, 2004).

These indicators point to a clear need for teachers who can teach diverse student populations, grouped

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heterogeneously, at a high level. Achieving that goal seems likely only when teachers proactively respond to the varied needs of their learners.

**THE PROMISE OF DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION**

Common sense and research suggest that responsive or differentiated instruction benefits learners.

It's easy to get so mired in educational jargon and debates about particular approaches to teaching that we forget to draw on the common sense of the classroom. In regard to what we now call "differentiation," for example, we might do well to ask a few straightforward questions. Is it likely that a student will learn fractions in a one-size-fits-all classroom if that student has never mastered subtraction or division? Is it likely that a student will master a 7th-grade spelling list if her spelling skills hover around a 3rd-grade level? Is a student who reads

like a high school student likely to have a productive year in a reading program that assumes everyone

should move lock-step through a 4th-grade reader?

The observable experience of teachers and their students indicates there is a daily need to examine learner status with regard to desired outcomes so that instruction can be tailored for success.

Much of differentiation draws on practices that are at the core of specialty area practices. In effectively differentiated classrooms, teachers use a variety of graphic organizers, reading materials at different levels of complexity, direct instruction in small groups, curriculum compacting, up-front teaching of vocabulary to support reading success, and so on. These approaches — and others like them — have been found effective in the specialty areas of special education,

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**EFFECTIVE DIFFERENTIATION**

Research suggests that effective differentiation:

- 1 Is proactive rather than reactive. Teachers plan multiple routes for students to succeed rather than adapting one-size-fits-all lesson plans when it becomes evident the lessons are not working.
- 2 Uses small, flexible learning groups for instruction. Teachers plan to meet with various groupings of students based on a variety of needs throughout a learning cycle.
- 3 Uses a variety of materials to address learner needs, including materials at a range of reading levels and materials that address various learning modalities.
- 4 Uses flexible pacing to address learner variance. In these classrooms, teachers do not assume that a good day is one in which every student begins and ends a task at the same time.
- 5 Is knowledge-centered. Lessons are based on the teacher's clear understanding of what is essential in the study unit, and the teacher helps each student build his or her own maps of understanding and skill encompassing the essentials.
- 6 Is learner-centered. Teachers systematically study learner traits to understand what each student brings to the task, what each student needs to succeed with the task, and what the student needs to support his or her success.

reading, gifted education, and second language instruction.

Considerable research indicates that students learn best when they work with materials and tasks at a moderate level of challenge for them as individuals, that the motivation to learn is enhanced when student interests are linked to desired outcomes, and that students learn more efficiently when learning preferences are addressed in classrooms.

While most teachers persist with single-size approaches to instructing diverse students populations, both research and everyday observation provide ample evidence that many students are ill-served in such classrooms. We are repeatedly disappointed by test scores indicating a shortfall in student achievement. More disappointing is the number of students from varied economic and cultural

backgrounds and achievement levels who become disenchanted with learning because school has failed to connect with them as individual learners.

**THE CHALLENGE OF DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION**

Most current teachers have likely neither been students in nor seen effectively differentiated classrooms. While many teachers indicate that they believe differentiated or responsive teaching would benefit students, they also indicate they do not believe it is feasible for them to differentiate instruction (Schumm & Vaughn, 1991). Research — as well as a commonsense look around schools — suggests that the "infeasibility" argument is winning in teachers' struggle of conscience.

1. Teachers seldom differentiate instruction — whether for students

who are English language learners, students with learning problems, or students identified as gifted.

2. Few teachers instruct in ways that are culturally and racially sensitive.

3. When teachers do differentiate instruction, they often do so in ways that are more tangential than substantive, and in ways that are more reactive than proactive or planned.

4. Even teachers in special class settings who differentiate for students with an exceptionality that “matches” their specialty seldom differentiate for students with exceptionalities in other areas or with multiple exceptionalities.

5. Few preservice teacher programs seem to prepare beginning teachers to plan for effective instruction of academically diverse learners (See Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Teaching is a habit-bound profession. The demands of teaching necessitate that teachers develop virtually automatic classroom routines to be able to survive the early stages of becoming a teacher. Once those habits and routines are set, it is profoundly difficult for teachers to modify them significantly. Indications are that while many teachers see an increasing need to reach out differently to students whose differences are evident, they lack the skills to do so.

### THE OPPORTUNITY FOR STAFF DEVELOPERS

Even for teachers with the will to teach more responsively, at least four key barriers to effective differentiation exist: a lack of reflection on students as individuals; lack of clarity about what students should know, understand, and be able to do as the result of a segment of learning; inadequate repertoires of instructional approaches that invite student-centeredness and flexibility; and lack of skills to manage and facilitate flexible instruction (Brighton, Hertberg, Moon, Tomlinson, & Callahan, in press).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND DIFFERENTIATION

Research (Tomlinson et al., 2003) on differentiation in response to readiness, interest, and learning profile indicates:

### Readiness

- Each student’s work should be at an appropriate level of challenge. Students are frustrated when work is too hard. Students are bored when work is too easy. Neither produces positive achievement. When the difficulty of the task matches the student’s readiness, both achievement and attitude about learning are likely to improve.

### Interest

- Tasks and questions that link to a student’s interest are likely to promote greater student engagement, satisfaction, creativity, and autonomy.
- Tasks that are interesting to students are likely to enhance their attitudes about learning.
- Tasks that are interesting to students are likely to increase their sense of competence and their achievement.
- When students do not have strong personal interests, it may be particularly important to use choice, novelty, and links with their prior experiences to build their interest.

### Learning profile

- Learning profiles are shaped by learning style, gender, culture, and intelligence preferences (individuals’ preferences in reasoning).
- Addressing learning style tends to result in improved achievement and attitude about learning for students in a wide range of cultural groups.
- Addressing a student’s intelligence preferences in the learning cycle is likely to improve achievement even if the final assessment is not a match for the student’s preferences.
- Understanding varied approaches to learning across cultural groups guides teachers’ awareness of how to develop learning contexts that are flexible enough to work for a range of learners.

Not surprisingly, the barriers to differentiation vary from teacher to teacher. Some teachers, for example, are clear about essential outcomes and grasp the appropriate instructional strategies for differentiation — but lack the management skills to implement what they know. Others manage a flexible classroom confidently but are ambiguous about essential learning outcomes. Many teachers lack

confidence in more than one area.

Staff development leading to more responsive classrooms is, then, staff development in quest of profound changes in standard teaching practice. Such staff development would, itself, be profoundly different from standard practice. It would necessarily move from “training via mass inoculation” to professional learning opportunities proactively planned to be catalysts for

persistent and personalized teacher growth throughout a career. Such staff development is:

**1. Reflective:** helping teachers develop the practice of reflecting on their students as individual learners.

**2. Informed:** based on current best professional understandings from the range of educational specialties of what constitutes effective teaching and learning for the spectrum of learners.

**3. Diagnostic:** ensuring that teachers develop the skill and will to study, chart, and respond to students' learning needs.

**4. Connective:** focused on clarifying the interdependence between curriculum, assessment, and responsive instruction.

**5. Application-oriented:** rooted directly in teachers' daily classroom practice and planned to ensure teachers use quality curriculum, flexible approaches to instruction, and effective classroom management routines.

**6. Problem-focused:** based on the assumption that there is not one right way to teach, and that teaching is strengthened when professionals examine classroom complexities and debate the merits of a range of approaches to teaching.

**7. Quality-concerned:** ensuring fidelity to key principles of responsive teaching and consistently aimed at understanding the impacts of particular approaches on the cognitive and affective development of individual learners.

**8. Collaborative:** ensuring that classroom teachers, specialists, and administrators engage in mutual problem solving that brings to bear the perspectives and expertise of multiple professionals in designing academically responsive classrooms.

**9. Supportive:** designed to ensure that teachers have time, mate-

rials, resources, informed leadership, and collegial support necessary to risk and succeed with change.

**10. Sustained:** recognizing that teachers continually evolve as professionals and need intelligent support to continue to evolve throughout their careers.

**11. Differentiated:** addressing the reality that teachers themselves differ in readiness, interest, and learning profile, will do so throughout their professional lives, and will maximize their individual capacities as teachers if they receive the right support at the right times. Staff development that models for teachers the beliefs, attitudes, and practices that differentiation commends for their students provides powerful images of what the practice looks like and how it benefits individual human beings.

Staff development leaders will necessarily play a profound role in any movement to ensure that contemporary classrooms are appropriately responsive to contemporary students. The need for such classrooms is evident — as is the gulf between the characteristics of much current classroom practice and academically responsive classroom practice. Staff development is the bridge between what is and what might be.

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