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Differentiating Instruction in a Standards-based Environment

Nancy Protheroe

There’s no single formula for making it work in your school.

On the face of it, the standards-based expectations for today’s schools seem to mandate a cookie-cutter approach to education. All students, regardless of abilities, background, and interests, are expected to learn a common set of standards. However, both research and the experiences of educators make it clear that a significant number of students will fail to learn the specified knowledge and skills unless focused attention is paid to the instructional needs of individual students.

One way in which many teachers attempt to meet such needs is by differentiating instruction. But can these two seemingly incompatible orientations—one stressing common standards and one highlighting individual needs—work together? Tomlinson (2000) suggests they can:

There is no contradiction between effective standards-based instruction and differentiation. Curriculum tells us what to teach. Differentiation tells us how. Thus, if we elect to teach a standards-based curriculum, differentiation simply suggests ways in which we can make that curriculum work best for varied learners.

Hoover and Patton (2004) view standards-based requirements as increasing the importance of differentiation since teachers must offer a standards-based curriculum in ways that provide all students with “opportunities to acquire content and skills associated with each standard.”

What Is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction means more than simply assigning some students more or less work. Howard and James (2005) characterize the approach as a philosophy, while Pettig (2000) emphasizes that what differentiated instruction looks like in any one classroom may be different than the way it looks in another:

To say that there is a single, perfect example of differentiated instruction is a contradiction in terms. Differentiated instruction has as many faces as it has practitioners and as many outcomes as there are learners. ... It is not a trendy quick fix, a new set of blackline masters, or a ready-to-go kit.

In reviewing differentiated instruction from the perspective of its impact on student learning, Hall (2002) describes the approach as a compilation of many theories and practices and states that “the ‘package’ itself is lacking in empirical validation.” However, Hall goes on to say that many of the pieces of the package (e.g., the grouping of students for instruction) have been validated in research done on effective teaching. In addition, there is a growing body of case study literature pointing to a positive impact of differentiated instruction on student learning.

The “what” of differentiation can involve content, with preassessments used to determine which students might be able to skip more basic material or move through it more quickly. Other students may be found to lack background knowledge or necessary skills and need instruction in these before moving on. The activities in which students are engaged or the ways in which instruction is presented can also be varied. This may be the most complex aspect of differentiating instruction since it requires planning for and managing a range of activities, with instruction provided through a combination of whole-class, small group, and single student approaches. Finally, students may be given the opportunity to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways (Tomlinson, 1999).

Hess (1999) talks about what teachers are doing in classrooms where differentiation “is alive and well.” They:
challenges, with teachers often required to oversee a variety of activities that are occurring simultaneously.

Schoolwide Implementation

Some schools have moved to school-wide implementation of a differentiated approach to instruction. Although this approach can provide support for teachers as well as students, schools that have made the shift caution that the process will be both complex and not something that can be implemented quickly. Pettig (2000) describes the changes that will need to be made as “not add-ons; they are systemic.”

The success of efforts to differentiate instruction will lie with teachers. However, some teachers will lack either the necessary knowledge or skills. Just as each student has a level of readiness, each teacher has a personal knowledge base and comfort level that will either help or retard a move toward differentiated instruction (Gregory, 2003).

To help teachers prepare to make the change, schools should provide resources on differentiated instruction and time for teachers to discuss them. Teachers may need training in strategies—such as curriculum compacting and learning centers—that can be used to support differentiation. Typically, they are especially interested in concrete details about how to differentiate instruction because their concerns often focus on the time and amount of organization needed to implement the approach.

Nancy Waldron and James McLeskey, university faculty members who have worked with more than 30 schools as they engaged in the process of implementing a differentiated approach to instruction, stress there is not a set formula for schools to follow. However, they provide some “what works” suggestions:

- Use of a “structure,” such as the planning pyramid graphic developed by Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm, helps school teams “prioritize their instructional aims and facilitates decision-making about various aspects of the

- 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 guides. They help students set goals based on readiness, interests, and learning profiles—and assess based on growth and goal attainment.

Obviously, planning for differentiated instruction is more complicated than that needed for an instructional approach that includes primarily teacher presentation with uniform learning and evaluation activities for all students. It also represents implementation chal
curriculum that *all* students really need to learn versus information that only *some* students need* (Walther-Thomas & Brownell, 2001).

- Teachers need skills and strategies and the time to think about and discuss how both can be used to help all students meet standards.
- Site visits to schools a “step or two beyond them” can make implementation of new approaches “more believable” when other teachers are seen using them. Sharing and observing within the home school are also important since “it helps people buy into new ideas sooner and learn new approaches more quickly.”

Gregory and Chapman (2007) stress the importance of teacher use of preassessments as a planning tool for differentiated instruction. Some teachers may need support in how to develop on-target assessments in a time-efficient manner and also in use of the information generated to determine what will be taught—and how—to individual students.

It is clear that teachers may feel overwhelmed as they begin or increase their efforts to differentiate instruction. Thus, their education about the process should include this message: “Not every part of every lesson—or even every unit—needs to be differentiated. ... In other words, teachers do not need to meet the needs of every student at every moment” (Kise, 2007).

Lawrence-Brown (2004) suggests that teachers be encouraged to first build on their own strengths and talents. Schoolwide implementation should also make use of such strengths. For example, one teacher might already make effective use of learning centers, while another might be especially good at developing and using results from mini-assessments. These teachers could share their strategies with other teachers in the school. Teachers have also reported that it is helpful to discuss their initial efforts at implementation (Gregory, 2003). For example, which learners responded to which types of strategies? Are there combinations of student activities that seem to work well together? Are there other combinations that were especially difficult to manage?

**How Principals Can Support the Process**

As principal, the framework of support you provide for teachers as they begin to differentiate instruction is critical. In Benjamin’s (2006) view, “It is not enough to declare that differentiated instruction is going to be the order of the day.” Howard and James (2003) view principals as “responsible for the overall school environment that can support or work against” differentiated instruction. As your school’s instructional leader, you have a critical role to play in arming your teaching staff with both the will and knowledge needed for
effective implementation.

Waldron also reminds us that moving toward a differentiated approach, as with any significant change in practice, “requires teachers to work harder and take risks” (Walther-Thomas & Brownell, 2001). Thus, your support and encouragement will be especially important during this process.

However, teachers will need more than moral support from you. For example, Wormelli (2003) discusses four areas of teacher competence important to successful implementation of a differentiated approach. These include:

- An understanding of what approaches and activities are developmentally appropriate for the students they teach;
- Subject area expertise;
- An understanding of cognitive theory (i.e., how students’ minds work) along with instructional strategies that align with these; and
- Knowledge of the processes involved in differentiating instruction.

Since any of these areas affect a teacher’s readiness to effectively implement a differentiated approach to instruction, it is important that you assess the competence of your staff both as a whole and as individual teachers regarding each of the areas. For example, a third-grade teacher whose weakest area of subject expertise is in math would likely be more successful if differentiation efforts started with another content area.

By intentionally planning for and using a variety of instructional strategies and models—by differentiating instruction—teachers can increase student opportunity for success. However, this more complex approach to instruction requires commitment and careful preparation by teachers, and by the school leaders supporting them.

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References

Howard, L., & James, A. (2003). What principals need to know about teaching

“Play needs to be cherished and encouraged, for in their free play children reveal their future minds.”
~ Friedrich Froebel (1887)


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WEB RESOURCES

In this article, Carol Tomlinson, the author most often identified with differentiated instruction, briefly describes three classrooms and discusses how they do—or do not—demonstrate elements of effective practice.

http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd_online/diffinstr/el199909_tomlinson.html

The Spring 2006 issue of Leadership Compass includes brief articles as well as questions for reflection on differentiated instruction.

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1958

In this brief article, “A Culture of Acceptance: Paving the Way for Differentiated Instruction,” a first-grade teacher describes some strategies used in her classroom.

www.nea.org/teachexperience/diffk021217.html

This Web site, which includes dozens of links relevant to the topic of differentiated instruction, is noteworthy for the periodic checks conducted by the site’s hosts to ensure the links are still active.

www.internet4classrooms.com/di.htm
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