**Differentiated Instruction**

*One size does not fit all*

What is differentiated instruction and why do we need it? Carol Ann Tomlinson describes differentiated instruction as factoring students’ individual learning styles and levels of readiness first before designing a lesson plan. According to research, the effectiveness of differentiation shows that this method benefits a wide range of students, from those with learning disabilities to those who are considered high quality. Not all students learn a subject in the same way or are at the same level of ability.

Differentiated instruction is a “thoughtful” process. Just as everyone has a unique fingerprint, each child has an individual learning style. Differentiated instruction may mean teaching the same material to all students using a variety of instructional strategies. Or it may require the teacher to deliver lessons at varying levels of difficulty based on the ability of each student. This is not always done easily but it is critical for success. When teachers reach out to individuals or small groups and vary their teaching, they can create the best learning experience possible. That’s what differentiating instruction is all about. Meeting the children where they are can build on their knowledge. It is a powerful and effective way to help all students be successful.

**Laying the Foundation for Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction involves planning, commitment, and acknowledgement of varying abilities, experiences, and interests. All of which, have an impact on student learning. There are three steps that provide a place to start when considering using differentiated instruction in the classroom.

1. Get to know your students – talk with the kids, ask them their opinions on things, sit down with them for a minute or two to see how things are going, listen to them, and find out what they are interested in. Teacher student connections help teachers to plan what to do with kids. They will be much more invested in helping them learn and grow if they have an understanding of the individual.

2. Identify areas of the curriculum that could be adapted to differentiate instruction - identify concepts, principles, and skills students should learn, identify those that can be taught at different degrees, and brainstorm ideas for activities, tasks and assessments that address that skill. These ideas should cover a range of learning preferences, abilities, and interests. Teachers need to ask themselves about the quality of what they are teaching. When you really think your students are capable of learning, then you want to give them the most robust materials, not the moderated version.

3. Examine your role as the teacher in the differentiated classroom - think of ways to vary your instructional delivery methods, develop a plan for facilitating time, space, and materials in your classroom as not all children will be working on the same tasks. Identify alternative methods of assessing students performance and understanding. Use various techniques to gauge how your students learn, whether it be in creative, practical or even analytical ways. Continually check in on who’s where with their knowledge and understanding of skills or tasks.

*SOURCE: Education Week; Sept 10, 2008.*
According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, there are four ways through which a teacher can differentiate instruction: 1) content, 2) process, 3) product, and 4) learning environment.

1. **Content**
   - Utilize pre-tests to assess where individual students need to begin study of a given topic or unit
   - Encourage thinking at various levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating)
   - Break assignments or lessons into smaller, more manageable parts that include structured directions for each part
   - Choose broad instructional concepts and skills that lend themselves to understanding at various levels of complexity

2. **Process**
   - Provide access to a variety of materials which target different learning preferences and reading abilities
   - Develop activities that target auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners
   - Establish stations for inquiry-based, independent learning activities
   - Create activities that vary in level of complexity and degree of abstract thinking required
   - Use flexible grouping to group and regroup students based on factors including content, ability, and assessment results

3. **Product**
   - Use a variety of assessment strategies, including performance-based and open-ended assessment
   - Balance teacher-assigned and student-selected projects
   - Offer students a choice of projects that reflect a variety of learning styles and interests
   - Make assessment an ongoing, interactive process

4. **Learning environment**
   - Optimal learning includes both physical and psychological elements
   - Flexible classroom layout, incorporating various types of furniture and arrangements to support both individual and group work
   - Classroom management techniques support a safe and supportive learning environment

Specific ways to differentiate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tiered instruction/Lessons</th>
<th>Provides teachers with a means of assigning different tasks within the same lesson or unit</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexible Grouping</td>
<td>Students work with a variety of students, through whole group or in many different forms of small groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anchor Activities</td>
<td>Ongoing assignments/tasks that students can work on independently throughout a unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compacting</td>
<td>Adjusting instruction based on prior students’ mastery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centers/Interests Groups</td>
<td>Learning experiences directed towards specific interests that children can choose on their own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice Boards</td>
<td>Organizers with a variety of activities that students can choose</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“What we call differentiation is not a recipe for teaching. It is not an instructional strategy. It is not what a teacher does when he or she has time. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is a philosophy.”

Carol Ann Tomlinson

SOURCES
Teacher Professional Development Sourcebook: Making a Difference. An Interview with Carol Ann Tomlinson.—Education Week; Sept 10, 2008.
Differentiating Instruction: Meeting Students Where They Are.—by Jennipher Willoughby, contributing freelance writer, Teaching Today; 2000.
What is Differentiated Instruction? Examples of how to Differentiate Instruction in the Classroom.—by Cathy Weselby, Teaching Strategies; October 1, 2014.
http://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/teaching-strategies/examples-of-differentiated-instruction/
The Differentiated Classroom, 2nd Edition.—by Carol Ann Tomlinson; May 2014.
Who We Are

The Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) is a regional technical assistance center for the State Education Department providing information, referral and support to families, professionals, and community agencies concerned with young children birth to five. We are located at Syracuse University’s Center on Human Policy.

ECDC services to families are free and confidential.

ECDC Staff

Maria Gill, Project Director
Laura Glover, Behavior Specialist
Kate Smith, Education Coordinator
Cyndy Colavita, Office Coordinator
Rachael Zubal-Ruggieri, Coordinator of Computer and Technical Applications

Workshops & Resources

The ECDC can provide information and workshops on a variety of topics tailored to the interests and needs of parents and early childhood professionals. Resources are available on such topics as child development, special education transitions, sensory integration, and parent involvement.

Workshops include:

- Including All Kids
- Parent Partnerships
- Developmentally Appropriate Practices
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- Supporting Social Emotional Development
- The Importance of Play
- Moving On: Transitioning Families (EI-CPSE) & (CPSE-CSE)
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education?
- What is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
- Writing IEP Goals
- Getting Ready for Kindergarten
- Challenging Behavior Series

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