

Meeting the Needs of All Students through Differentiated Instruction: Helping Every Child Reach and Exceed Standards

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Abstract: Students enter classrooms with different abilities, learning styles, and personalities. Educators are mandated to see that all students meet the standards of our district and state. Through the use of differentiated instruction strategies, educators can meet the needs of all students and help them to meet and exceed the established standards. In this article, the author gives practical examples of how to differentiate content, process, and product for your students. Grouping techniques, assessment strategies, and tiered lessons are also addressed.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, learning styles, standards

Mrs. Johnson walks into her fifth-grade classroom on the first day of school to meet the twenty-five children she will teach for the next ten months. She has read their files, examined their standardized test scores, and met with their fourth-grade teachers. However, it is only when she has spent time with her class that she gets to know each of them as a child and learner. One student loves hamsters; another is an avid fisherman. One student is a writer beyond her years; another has trouble stringing two sentences together but can solve complex math problems. One student would like to be invisible and another wants to be noticed every minute of the day. Several students race through their work to be the first one finished, but one child wears out erasers in an effort to make every letter perfect and needs extra time to complete an assignment. Four students receive support for their learning disabilities, three are English-language learners, one child has Asperger's syndrome, and one has attention deficit disorder.

Mrs. Johnson's class is not unusual, and the mountain she has to climb is not insurmountable. Mrs. Johnson's mission is to teach this varied group so each student successfully meets the standards set forth by the state in which she teaches. More important, the greater challenge is to meet each child where he or she is and move each forward in his or her learning as far as possible.

A Focus on Standards: Why Now?

The standards movement evolved in an effort to ensure that all children received an equivalent level of education. The teaching model prior to standards-based reform left a great deal of choice to the individual teachers regarding what was taught, how long it was taught, and how to assess what was learned. Students in different classrooms in the same school would get a different education. One could see an even greater variance in underprivileged schools. This was not because of intellectual differences among the students but rather differences in teacher expectations because of divergent student needs and life experiences. There are other populations of students for whom expectations have been lower. Students with physical, emotional, mental, or learning disabilities have been required to do less in school because less was expected of them. In a standards-based educational system, local school districts, states, and the federal government have each set standards that all students must achieve regardless of the teacher, socioeconomic status, disabilities, or other differences in either the educational institution or the student.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is a term that has been bandied about in the field of education for quite awhile. If

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we take another look at Mrs. Johnson's class, it is clear that she has an enormous task in front of her. Each of the students in her class must meet a set standard of education. Students will be evaluated through a standardized test, the results of which will be scrutinized by the school district, the state government, and the federal government. What can Mrs. Johnson do for the child who is so far below his or her goal on the first day of school that this task seems impossible? What can she do for the child who comes into class already possessing the skills necessary to achieve his or her goal on the standardized test?

Every teacher who has entered a classroom has differentiated instruction in one way or another. Teachers differentiate when they give a student more time to finish an assignment, allow children choice in what they read, give different types of assessments, and myriad other ways. Although these are all good strategies, as educators, we can make our classrooms more responsive to student needs by being more systematic in our approach to differentiation. Differentiated instruction is a set of strategies that will help teachers meet each child where they are when they enter class and move them forward as far as possible on their educational path.

Content, Process, and Product

The district and state and federal governments have established our standards and handed our curriculum down to us. These standards make up the goals established for all of our students. How we reach these goals may require different paths. The core of differentiated instruction is flexibility in content, process, and product based on student strengths, needs, and learning styles.

Content

Content is what we teach. Each child is taught the same curriculum but the content may be quantitatively or qualitatively different. There are children who read and write well above grade level. Why would we want to limit them to the confines of the curriculum and standards when they can go much further? Students who are well below grade level will be more successful with a smaller amount of content or content at an appropriate level for the learner. The student who has not yet mastered multiplication and division is not ready for equivalent fractions. We must be sure the building blocks are in place for students before we ask them to move on to the next task. Differentiated instruction allows for variation in content without losing sight of the curriculum to which all children are entitled.

Process

Process includes how we teach and how students learn. The activities we provide for student learning must address differing student abilities, learning

styles, and interests. Mrs. Johnson might begin a unit on problem-solving strategies in mathematics with a minilesson outlining the analysis of a problem. From there, she might break students into smaller ability-level groups, giving each group a problem that is at an appropriate level for their readiness. As the class progresses through this unit Mrs. Johnson might show different ways students solve the same problem by grouping students based on learning styles. Student learning style can be determined through learning styles questionnaire or inventories given early in the year. By grouping students who are kinesthetic, linguistic, and artistic into separate groups they can demonstrate three distinct ways to solve problems and show how they came to a solution.

Students do not all learn the same way, so we cannot teach them all the same way. We have to adjust our teaching style to reflect the needs of our students. To do this, we must find out where our students are when they come into the process and build on their prior knowledge to advance their learning (addressed in more detail in the following). Students will need different levels of support that can be determined through formative assessment. Of course, for learning to be meaningful and lasting students must recognize its importance. Mrs. Johnson must include the purpose and application for the learning they are doing in her lessons.

Product

The *product* is the way our students demonstrate what they have learned. I discuss this *summative assessment* in the following; it must reflect student learning styles and abilities.

Assessment Is a Tool More than a Test

Preassessment

If we do not know where we are, how can we get where we are going? Students come to us with greatly varying abilities and experiences. The place to begin is with preassessment. Preassessments can be anything from a KWL (what I Know, what I Want to know, what I Learned) chart to a teacher-prepared test. The idea is to find a tool that gives you a snapshot of where your student is with respect to what you plan to teach. The use of preassessment tools allows Mrs. Johnson to look at her students more objectively. She has to teach long division, but what about the student who has all these skills already? What about the student who should have come into class knowing the basic facts of multiplication and division but is still counting on his fingers and making tally marks on his paper? You cannot build the top floor of a building without the support of the floors below it. To be effective teachers, we must begin at each student's individual level.

Formative Assessment

As we teach, we must periodically check in with our students. Mrs. Johnson ends her direct instruction by asking, "Are there any questions?" She is always amazed when the children assure her they know exactly what she is talking about and then, as she walks around the room, she finds that many students do have questions; they just did not realize it until they started doing the independent work. Formative assessment can be done in many ways and the results will give a teacher direction for further instruction.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is used to determine whether the student has successfully learned what was taught. These assessments can look as different from one another as our students do. Summative assessments include standardized tests, as well as teacher-made tests, quizzes, projects, performance assessments, and anything else one can imagine that can be objectively graded and is based on the curriculum. It is not necessary to make the assessment the same for every student. Because students vary in their ability levels, learning styles, and areas of interest, the ways in which they demonstrate what they know should vary as well.

Ability Levels, Learning Styles, and Interest

The days of grouping children randomly as bluebirds, robins, and buzzards are gone. Using the differentiated instruction model, grouping should be based on different criteria regarding the needs of the students and the short-term goals of the teacher in an effort to meet the desired standard.

Grouping for Student Needs

There are times when grouping by ability is the most appropriate action. The teacher has taught the lesson and a small group of students need further instruction. The teacher pulls these students together for additional support. This grouping is based on ongoing, formative assessment. There was also a group who came into class knowing what was taught. The teacher can pull these students together and take the lesson to the next level through more challenging activities. Ability groups are not stagnant; they change each time we assess the children.

Grouping for Learning Styles

How a student learns is as varied as the personalities in class. We can view learning styles through the lens of Gardner's multiple intelligences, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Dunn and Dunn learning styles model, or many other theorists' work. Common to all these theories is the idea that different children learn in different ways. Some students only pay attention to what the teacher

says (auditory learners) and some pay no attention to what is said but watch the teacher and read everything he or she writes on the board (visual learners). Some students have not learned anything until they can do something with it (kinesthetic learners) and some have to discuss it to truly understand what has been taught (verbal learners). You know the children in your room who need to show you, those who need to tell you, and those who need to write it out. There are times when one of each in a group should work together so they can learn from each other. There are also times the builders should be in one group and the writers in another so they can work together for a common goal. How we choose our groups can be confusing, but when we begin with a focus on the standard to which we are teaching these groups become more obvious.

Grouping for Student Interests

When teaching a unit on nonfiction reading, grouping for student interest is a natural choice. Students of all levels who have an interest in animals can work together and support each other, whereas those who have no interest in the study of animals can choose a topic that is of interest to them.

Heterogeneous Grouping

Sometimes whole-class lessons are appropriate. In this heterogeneous grouping we are teaching on a level that meets the needs of all the children in the classroom with the knowledge that the needs of individual students will be addressed elsewhere. Teaching to a large heterogeneous group can be compared with painting with a broad paintbrush. After whole group lessons are complete and students begin their independent work the teacher can pull smaller groups based on need or learning style. Students with an individualized education program may need the additional support of a special education teacher. This is where the smaller paintbrush fills in the details. As stated earlier, formative and summative assessments are the key to establishing the needs of the students.

Differentiating for All Students: Tiered Lessons

How can Mrs. Johnson possibly differentiate for all the learning styles and abilities in her classroom? Tiered lesson planning is one way to stay focused on the standards and curriculum while maintaining flexibility in content, process, and product. With the standard and curriculum in mind, Mrs. Johnson can tier for readiness (above, at, and below grade level), interest, or learning style. She can tier her lesson for content, process, or product.

Returning to the example of a unit on reading nonfiction, the curriculum focus might determine important information (main idea) of the text. Here, starting

with a heterogeneous, whole-group lesson would be appropriate. Smaller groups would then be established based on interest. The unit could be tiered through assignments, homework, readings, materials, or assessments that reflect the student's ability level, learning style, or interest. Teachers can explore many models for tiered lessons.

Differentiating for Student Achievement: Focus on and beyond Standards

The standards movement has many good qualities. It is a way to close the achievement gap by clarifying for teachers what must be taught to each student. The danger

is that teachers stop there. If teachers and students are judged on how well children perform on the standardized test, many fear teachers will stop there. Educators have to look at where the bar is set and where the students are when they enter classrooms. Some students will work all year with tutelage and barely make the bar; some can leap over the bar gracefully; and some were already over the bar before they entered class. If we use the standards as our guide, we can teach all students equitably. The risk is our focus will shift to the standards and away from the child. With the tools of differentiated instruction, we can keep the focus where it belongs and take each student as far as he or she can go.

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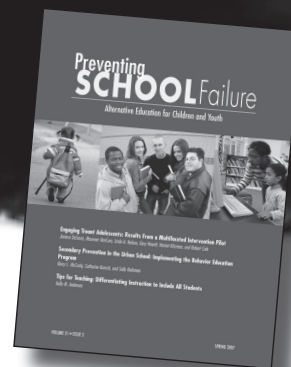
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