
Introduction

In classrooms today, we have students with mixed academic, social/emotional and behavior needs. Our students come from different cultures, socio-economic backgrounds and home environments. We need to adapt our instruction for multiple levels of ability, recognizing that not all students are alike. They learn through different learning modalities and at different speeds. To be effective in today's mixed-ability classroom, a teacher needs to have a *sensitivity*, which leads to an *awareness*, which cultivates an *understanding* of the academic and social/emotional needs students bring to today's classroom. Students' academic readiness levels and interests vary as much as their physical appearance.

Since I began teaching twenty-five years ago, the job responsibilities for regular and special education teachers have been redefined to meet the needs of students in inclusive, or mixed-ability classrooms. At a recent workshop I lead, one of the participants shared, "I move at a reasonable pace for all my students but when I give a test to see what they've learned, there are still students who have not learned the material. Why?" Traditional teaching methods teach all students in the same way and at the same time. Redefined responsibilities require the teacher to create a learning environment that will be motivating **and** comfortable for the full range of diverse students. Students are looked at as individuals with unique strengths and interests. Learning styles are considered in curriculum development. Today's teachers are asked to plan collaboratively to meet the learning needs of all children by *differentiating instruction*. For many teachers, team and co-teaching have become ways to meet the challenge of differentiating instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. To be effective in today's mixed-ability classroom, teachers now understand that support from their colleagues, both special and regular educators, is imperative.

We need ongoing training in teaching strategies, environmental and curriculum adaptations, and classroom management that will allow *all* children to achieve. Teachers need to stay abreast of cutting-edge research that addresses the strategies and methods that make a positive impact on their students. It's

important that all teachers feel capable of providing instruction that increases successful opportunities for all individuals.

One of the many pressures today's teachers are feeling is the need to keep "test scores high" and all students achieving at high levels. Achievement has traditionally been measured in various ways. To begin with, the I.Q. test, a still popular instrument in measuring intelligence despite overwhelming evidence of its limitations and inaccuracy (Gardner, H. 1993). We also developed numerous achievement tests, the diagnostic test, the abilities test, all which produce numbers that can baffle parents, label students, and undermine teaching.

One of the inherent outcomes of all these numbers is their prophetic self-fulfillment. A poor test score for a struggling learner becomes, not an explanation of the learning problem, but a confirmation of it to the disappointment of parents, a further erosion of the student's self-esteem, a justification for a more specialized placement and a roadblock for the teacher. The classroom teacher, who is in a position to see the potential in a student far above which was measured by a test, is blocked by the imposing authority of the test results. "After all Mr. Khalsa, the test results show a severe disability in math and an I.Q. of 82. Surely you..." The student often reaches the most limiting conclusion, "The numbers say I'm slow so I must be a poor student." Then as the object of low expectation, the student performs at a low level. The prophecy has been fulfilled.

Fortunately, this cycle can be changed by empowering the teacher with new skills and insight on how to reach and teach *all* students by differentiating instruction. Differentiating instruction supports the creative and dynamic interaction between teacher and learner. The purpose of this book is two-fold. The first is to provide the *foundation principles* necessary for helping all teachers to successfully address the wide range of learning styles and interest levels among their students. It is designed to provide guidance in understanding the children they are asked to teach in mixed-ability classrooms, including how they learn. The second purpose is to offer *practical guidance* for teachers who are working toward the goal of increasing successful opportunities for all students. This book will explain differentiated instruction and show how to successfully reach and teach students at different grade levels in a mixed-ability classroom.

Chapter 1: Establishing a Foundation

What is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction assumes that “one size *doesn't* fit all.” Classrooms that do not employ differentiated instruction address only a segment of a student’s potential as a learner. Teachers who use differentiated instruction embrace the inherent strengths of diversity, which is an integral part of all mixed-ability classrooms. These strengths include acknowledging the differences among students while recognizing their similarities. This acknowledgment eventually becomes an essential part of teaching and learning.

In all classrooms, teachers have students who are inattentive and easily distracted, as well as those who are eager to learn and easily engaged. Ineffective teaching approaches each type of student with a broad stroke towards presentation and instruction. For example, in traditional classrooms, teachers ask a question and then call on an individual student to respond, while the rest of the class, which includes the inattentive, easily distracted students and English Language Learners (ELL), are expected to sit quietly and listen to the interchange. Effective teachers differentiate their questioning strategies for today’s classrooms. These differentiated strategies encourage high response opportunities for all students and active participation, with all students having a voice that is heard and respected. Another approach for differentiating instruction is referred to as *universal design*, which adapts the means for a student’s presentation, process and engagement.

A New Approach to Teaching. Differentiating instruction is “thinking outside of the box.” It challenges the teacher to approach the art of teaching from different perspectives while maintaining the goal of student achievement. In the differentiated classroom, the teacher comes to the understanding that learning is constant, but the time and way it is reached are changeable.

The goal of differentiated instruction is to help all students make sense of the information presented so they can use the information in a meaningful way. Differentiated instruction offers a variety of ways to acquire, process, and apply the information being taught. In a differentiated classroom students engage in activities which provide a balance between skill building and purposeful tasks.

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Today's teachers are being challenged to change old habits of "one size fits all," or undifferentiated instruction, to offer a variety of instructional experiences that are focused on *essential-to-know* concepts and skills as identified in state and district standards. Differentiation requires the teacher to be knowledgeable of the content being taught, as well as skilled in the basics of pedagogy. The focus is on the orchestration of productive learning environments for all students.

What Differentiated Instruction Isn't

It is not Ability Grouping. Putting students together according to their ability or disability (ability grouping) **is not** differentiated instruction. Homogenous grouping does not effectively offer the learning experiences necessary to promote the achievement of all students. Teacher-selected groupings can stigmatize students as "low" and "high" learners. If "tracking" students by ability were effective, we would still be advocating for its implementation.

An important principle which guides differentiation is the *flexible grouping* of students. Students work individually, in small groups and in heterogeneous, whole class settings. In a differentiated classroom, the teacher experiments with a variety of group configurations throughout the year, and students experience many different working groups and learning arrangements. Flexible grouping is based on a variety of factors, including readiness levels, interests, and behavioral needs. I discuss this strategy in further detail in Chapter 3, *Differentiated Practice*.

It is not Watering Down Content. Differentiated instruction is not watering down the content or materials given to the underachieving or struggling learner. Sources of information are given at various reading levels and in varying formats to match the needs of the learner while keeping the focus on the essential-to-know concepts. Giving every student the necessary time and instruction to answer questions that might be too complex is essential for the student's continued participation in the learning process. Promoting student engagement is vital for student achievement. It's also important to point out that differentiated instruction is not sacrificing the quality education of general and advanced needs students. When instruction is effectively differentiated, learning expectations are high, and even complex information is attainable for all learners. In a differentiated classroom, the learning environment is equally comfortable and motivating for all students, encouraging them to fully engage in the learning challenges offered during the day.

It is not the Multi-Grade Classrooms of the 1990's. Multi-age grouping has been around for as long as one-room schools have, and to some extent its current decrease in popularity in many school districts can be attributed to the standards movement. The multi-grade classroom (for example, combining 1st, 2nd and possibly 3rd graders) in the same classroom, gathered significant momentum in the 1990's but has since been shown to create more problems than solutions in many schools. Testing pressures, as well as the differences in multi-aged students' social-physical development, may make it more difficult to operate multi-aged classrooms.

The mixing of two or three primary grade levels in single classrooms may or may not promote increased learning, but it should not be confused with differentiated instruction. Differentiating instruction, however, can and, in many instances, is used in multi-grade classrooms for the purpose of successfully varying instruction to meet the different students' needs.