Reaching the Needs of All Learners

Why Differentiate?

Teachers and schools are faced with the challenge of reaching the needs of all students, regardless of their academic, social, and developmental levels, and moving them forward. Any given classroom will contain a heterogeneous mix of students with different ability levels and educational needs. For this reason, teachers must be masters of differentiating the curriculum to meet the needs of all students, to remediate or accelerate instruction, and to provide all students with the opportunity to learn and grow.

Reaching the needs of all learners does not mean providing the same instruction, for the same amounts of time, in exactly the same way, to all students. For these reasons, all whole group instruction, or only grouping students homogeneously will not provide students with the appropriate instructional opportunities to best reach their needs. Students come to the educational table with varying abilities, talents, and needs. Educators must utilize strategies to reach ALL students, and provide them with opportunities to develop and demonstrate their individual strengths, talents, and abilities while strengthening areas where they are weak (NCDPI, 2004).

A Balanced Curriculum for All Learners

One of the ways to help reach all learners is through the delivery of a balanced curriculum which provides students with instruction in all areas of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. A balanced curriculum is for ALL children – not just those who are performing at a higher level than others, are more advantaged, or are only in regular classrooms. All children, including those with disabilities or those whose primary language is non-English, are entitled to a full and well-rounded education provided through a balanced curriculum. The results will be students who

- develop a love of learning and become lifelong learners,
- find relevance in and connections with what they are learning,
- understand themselves and those around them,
- demonstrate talents they bring with them to school and
- develop new and necessary skills and abilities to be successful in school and in life (NCDPI, 2004).

Differentiating instruction will provide these opportunities for all students.
Differentiation is guided by...

- Respectful Tasks
- Flexible Grouping
- Ongoing Assessment

Teachers can differentiate

- Content
- Product
- Process
- Environment

According to students’

- Readiness
- Interest
- Learning Profile

What Does this Chart Mean?

Differentiation is not a strategy, a program, nor a “thing”. It is a way of thinking; a philosophy of how to respond to student differences. This chart illustrates the thinking and planning that takes place when educators design classroom lessons. Through the entire process, teachers must bear in mind the value of the task being expected of the student. Flexible grouping provides children opportunities to move fluidly depending on information gained from on-going assessment. Carol Ann Tomlinson sums up the critical element of assessment as "the feeder system for differentiation." This piece must be in place and being used well in order for differentiation to make the difference in student achievement.

In a responsive classroom, a teacher differentiates by modifying the content, process, product and environment. The *North Carolina Standard Course of Study* lays the foundation for what we teach: the content, skills and knowledge students are expected to gain at each grade level. Processes that require students to use and apply the learned content can be differentiated through the extensive assortment of research-based strategies. The “proof” that students have internalized and can demonstrate their learning
is considered the product. Teachers plan a variety of assignments to give learners the opportunity to show their understanding. The environment in which teaching takes place is sometimes unavoidable. But educators can modify physical factors such as lighting, color, choice, and sound to make students feel comfortable and valued. Creating a non-threatening, caring work space is supported by brain research - if a child is intimidated and insecure, learning cannot take place. Teachers must plan for teambuilding and classbuilding so that respect and self-esteem are nurtured.

The second layer of differentiation involves particular student characteristics. The student’s entry level to the curriculum is usually an educator’s initial target for individualized instruction. This is a good starting point for students will show no growth if it is not part of the equation. However, tapping into students’ interests will motivate learners, as well as build confidence in themselves as learners. Differentiating through learning profiles involves getting to know how your students learn best with consideration given to both learning intelligences and modalities.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differentiation is…</th>
<th>Differentiation is not…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Connecting and building relationships with students.</td>
<td>- Teaching “to” the students and having the teacher dominate classroom experiences.</td>
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<td>- Setting learning goals as a result of student-teacher collaboration.</td>
<td>- Arranging desks in rows with year-long class instruction.</td>
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<td>- Creating meaningful, rigorous curriculum for all students.</td>
<td>- Using a fixed set of instructional resources.</td>
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<td>- Using on-going assessment to drive instruction.</td>
<td>- Giving students easier or harder assignments based on their perceived ability level.</td>
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<td>- Using student differences as a basis for planning.</td>
<td>- Planning for quantity over quality.</td>
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<td>- Being proactive.</td>
<td>- Focusing on mastery of facts.</td>
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<td>- Providing access to curriculum for all students.</td>
<td>- Assessing at the end of a unit with traditional selected response form only.</td>
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<td>- Working in flexible groups.</td>
<td>- Using a single definition of excellence from which student success is measured.</td>
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<td>- Building a community within your classroom.</td>
<td>- Providing single-option assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Responding to student needs.</td>
<td>- Reacting to student needs only when problems arise.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Using time, space, instructional strategies and materials flexibly.</td>
<td>- Teaching “one” way for all students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Including students in evaluation and assessment process.</td>
<td>- Planning exclusive of student input.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Providing multi-option assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Allowing for multiple perspectives of ideas and events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Respecting the “whole” child.</td>
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**Strategies**

- Tiered centers, assignments, lessons, or products
- Curriculum compacting
- Learning contracts
- Individual projects, independent study
- Acceleration
- Use of off-grade level materials
- Learning stations, interest groups
- Partnering
- Varied texts and supplementary materials
- Problem-based learning
- Group investigations
- Use of technology
- Varied journal prompts
- Literature circles
- Varied homework and products
- Varied questioning strategies

**Tips**

- Know your students inside and out!
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss class and group procedures.
- Work within a time frame.
- Use activities effectively to allow the teacher to focus on student needs.
- Think through and deliver instructions clearly.
- Have a back-up plan for students to receive assistance while the teacher is working with groups.
- Acknowledge and develop multiple intelligences.
- Teach students to take responsibility for their learning.
- “Baby step” into differentiation at a pace that is comfortable and reasonable for the teacher(s).

“**When a teacher tries to teach all students the same thing at the same time:**

1/3 will already know it; 1/3 will get it; 1/3 won’t get it;

So 2/3 of the kids are wasting their time!”

(Scott Willis, ASCD)

**Resources**


The IRIS Center - Resources for Differentiation: http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/browsebytopic04.html

Layered Curriculum, Dr. Kathy Nunley: http://www.help4teachers.com/

Variety of Resources on Differentiation available from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: http://www.ascd.org

This is a publication of the NC Department of Public Instruction http://www.ncpublicschools.org
You may contact the Elementary Division at 919-807-3915.