

Educators are changing the learning environment so they can see students' readiness levels, learning profiles, needs, and interests more clearly.

Differentiated Instruction in the Elementary Classroom

Susan G. Cox

AS classrooms become more culturally diverse, it becomes more imperative that differentiated instruction occur in elementary classrooms. Today's classrooms usually contain students with a wide range of abilities and varied experiential backgrounds. These students learn at different rates and in different ways. Differentiation is important in the elementary years because students' early experiences have a profound

impact on their views of school, their understanding of the learning process, and their views of themselves as learners.

According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, associate professor at the University of Virginia and author of the book *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of all Learners*, "modifying instruction to draw on student interests is likely to result in greater student engagement, higher levels of intrinsic motiva-

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tion, higher student productivity, greater student autonomy, increased achievement, and an improved sense of self-competence.”

What Is It?

“Differentiated Instruction is teaching with student variance in mind. It means starting where the students are, rather than adopting a standardized approach to teaching that seems to presume that all learners of a given age or grade are essentially alike. Thus differentiated instruction is ‘responsive’ teaching rather than ‘one-size-fits-all’ teaching,” says Tomlinson.

How Does It Work?

Teachers must utilize all available resources to support learning activities. This requires individualizing learning for each student by arranging the classroom and the entire school for small group, large group, and individual learning. The goal is to maximize the capacity of each learner by teaching in ways that help all learners bridge gaps in understanding and skill and help each learner grow as much and as quickly as he or she can.

Says Tomlinson, “Using *Blooms Taxonomy of Cognitive Educational Outcomes* allows the teachers to design projects around the Content, Process, and Product that meet the needs of all levels of students in the class.” *Content* refers to what a student learns, *process* refers to the activities a student

engages in while learning, and *product* refers to activities the student completes that show learning has occurred.

Teaching Strategies

Teachers can vary instruction through flexible grouping. They can use whole class instruction, small group instruction, and individual instruction, and students can be grouped based on readiness, interests, or learning profile.

Readiness has to do with a student’s current preparedness to work with a prescribed set of knowledge, understanding, and skill. If a student finds the work too easy, he or she will not learn. If the work is too difficult, the result is the same. Everyone learns best when the work is a little above our current level and there is a system in place to help us bridge the gap.

Student interest is another way to group students. If you can relate the knowledge to be learned to a student’s interests, you have an advantage to gaining the student’s attention. A learning profile refers to a student’s preferred mode of learning. Some students learn best in groups and some learn best alone. A student’s gender, culture, learning style, and intelligence preference can shape their learning profile.

Cube Activities

Another helpful strategy is using “tiered activities,” where the

teacher keeps the concepts and skills the same for each student but provides "routes of access" that vary in terms of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. Tiered assignments can include "cube" activities where different assignments are written on the faces of a cube. Cubing is a versatile strategy that allows teachers to plan different activities for different students or groups of students based on student readiness, learning styles, and/or interests.

All cube activities reflect the same content, but each activity is different. For example, one student might roll the cube and the assignment will be to label the planets on a map of the solar system. Another student rolling the same cube might be assigned to choose one planet and write a report about it. A third student might be assigned the task of comparing two planets and listing ways they are alike or different. One cube would have six different assignments based on a single topic.

Versatile Instruction


Cubes can also be color coded to ensure assignments are on the appropriate level for a particular group of students. While this activity requires a lot of time on the teacher's part to set up, it can be reused many times. Cubing provides a way for all students to explore one important topic or idea, but to accomplish tasks at their

readiness levels, in their preferred learning styles, and/or in areas of personal interest.

Anchor activities, such as journal writing, reading, math games, or vocabulary skills, are activities that extend the curriculum. Students may participate in these activities if they have spare time while waiting for the teacher's help or after they have completed a task.

Anchor Activities

Teachers can use interest centers, learning centers, and learning stations as anchor activities. An interest center can focus on topics taken from a unit of study or they can address topics outside the curriculum. Learning centers are a collection of materials and activities designed to teach, reinforce, or extend students' knowledge, understanding, and skills. Learning stations are areas in the classroom students visit on a specified timetable to complete specified tasks.

In a differentiated classroom, the learning goals are clear, there is a strong link between assessment and instruction, the students are grouped flexibly, individual growth is emphasized, the sights are set high for both teacher and students, and the teacher makes sure differentiation is always a way up, never a way out. This type of instruction cannot help but result in greater student learning. 

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