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## Differentiating Instruction for Disabled Students in Inclusive Classrooms

*Differentiating instruction, a comprehensive approach to teaching, enables the successful inclusion of all students, including the disabled, in general-education classrooms. As inclusive educators, we argue that disability is an enacted, interactional process and not an empirical, stable fact or condition. We recommend planning responsive lessons that differentiate instruction for all students from the outset, instead of modifying one for disabled students. General-education*

*teachers, who with appropriate supports learn to attend to every student's individual needs, can replace the specially designed, and often uninteresting one-to-one skills and drills, typically suggested for disabled students, with responsive class activities contingent on individual performance. This shift in instructional focus supports the provision of access to the general education curriculum required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. We also address practical, disability-related issues for effectively differentiating instructional in inclusive classrooms.*

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**H**ISTORICALLY, THE UNITED STATES has met legal mandates for educational inclusion by bringing first Black, then disabled, then non-English-speaking students into the public schools, but keeping them separate—what Cope and Kalantzis (2000) refer to as “inclusion through exclusion” (p. 5). Most educators and the general public have come to expect disabled students<sup>1</sup> to be taught in

separate spaces by separate professionals, typically identified as special educators. In contrast, we identify ourselves as *inclusive educators*. In the U.S. literature, the term *inclusive education* has most commonly been used to refer somewhat narrowly to the integration of disabled students, previously segregated, into general education classrooms (Ware, 2001). Consequently, many educators, particularly in the United States, perceive inclusive education as having evolved from special education, and therefore as being fundamentally about issues related to disability. Although this article specifically focuses on differentiating instruction for disabled learners in inclusive classrooms, in identifying ourselves as inclusive educators we do not focus our concern solely on the integration of disabled students in classrooms alongside nondisabled peers. We propose, rather, an understanding of inclusive education as education that seeks to resist the many ways students experience marginalization and exclusion in schools. To that end, we posit that inclusive education is fundamentally about all students, and argue that the full spectrum of challenges of public schooling—around issues of poverty, second language acquisition, racial and ethnic discrimination, disability, etc.—must be attended to for education to be inclusive.

As inclusive educators, we both critique some of the assumptions underlying traditional special education practice, and align ourselves with the broader, international political project of enacting educational practices that identify and resist any exclusion in schools, whatever its basis (Ware, 2004). Indeed, the ongoing legacy of separate classrooms, teachers, and even curricula for disabled (and other) learners makes it difficult to provide real opportunities at school. Furthermore, such separation contributes in important ways to creating, sustaining, and exacerbating disability, even in integrated settings. Because most nondisabled people learn what it means to be disabled through their understanding of various negatively charged disability labels (e.g., mentally *retarded*, learning *disabled*, emotionally *disturbed*), the fact that they experience little or no interaction with disabled persons allows those negative associations to prevail.

### The Enactment of Disability

Analyzing real classroom transcripts, Reid and Valle (2005) identify a cycle of behaviors in which “knowing” that a student has a label (any disability label) predisposes a teacher to look for particular deficits associated with that label and respond to the student in day-to-day classroom interactions as though the student truly possessed the expected characteristics. The teacher’s and also other students’ behaviors then set up a situation in which the student reacts as disabled. We provide an example from an ethnographic study by Collins (2003, paraphrased from pp. 80–81).

The scenario: Students are working in small groups to determine whether there is a relationship between an object’s shape and whether or not it floats. Kim asks Cynthia to make a list of the objects the class has previously tested, but the magic marker doesn’t work. Jay, a student labeled with a learning disability (LD), offers to try writing. Carl, a classmate not in the group, says, “If she can’t do it, you can’t either.” Jay replies to Carl, “Shut up!”—but follows it with a quick grin. The teacher, who overhears the conversation but does not see him smile, reprimands Jay, telling him, “We don’t talk like that in here.” Carl returns to his seat. Cynthia gets a new marker and lists the objects tested earlier with their size, shape, and material. Jay tries to tell the girls that they are not doing the assignment: “Mrs. Bozek said for us to organize it by shape.” “You’re supposed to do shapes.” “Do it by shape.” No one responds to him. The teacher approaches, watches to see what the students are doing, and then reminds them that they were to have tested the objects by shape, “So, do all cylinders float or sink? What does the data say?” Jay comments to Kim, “See, I toldja.” The teacher again says “We don’t talk like that in here,” and points to the door.

Collins (2003) noted that, because the teacher and students are paying more attention to the interpersonal aspects of the task than its requirements, Jay is “set up” by his classmates, who interfere with or ignore him. But he, too, contributes by responding with “Shut up” and “I toldja.” So, the question is, “Where is the LD?”

It is all over the classroom as an interactional possibility. Everyone stands in some relation to it. Everyone is part of the choreography that produces moments for its public appearance. LD is distributed across persons, across the moment, as part of the contextual work members do in the different scenes. Neither [Jay], nor his disability, can be separated from the contexts in which they emerge. (McDermott, 1993, cited in Collins, 2003, p. 81)

As inclusive educators, we use this example to point out that disability results not from an individual's bodily, sensory, or cognitive difference per se, but from social interpretations of that difference: difference read as impairment and responded to in negative and hierarchical ways (Oliver, 1986). Disability is contextualized. It is not a universal fact or condition; it is enacted. As an enactment, its nature and meaning shift through time (Stiker, 2002), across cultures (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999), and, in terms of our interests here, even minute-to-minute within classrooms as dialogue and activity contexts change (Rueda, Gallego, & Moll, 2000).

Furthermore, disability does not play out for all students in the same way, even when they carry the same label. Disabled students may be Black, White, or Asian; poor, middle-class, or affluent; male or female; straight or gay; English-speaking or not; young or old; and each of these factors influence their life experiences, aptitudes, attitudes, interests, and so forth. The intersectionality of all personal and social characteristics determines how disability will be experienced.

Thinking about disabilities as absolute categories of difference also causes trouble because it emphasizes students' common deficits (Tomlinson, Callahan, Tomchin, & Eiss, 1997), rather than their uniqueness and competence. If teachers are to provide access to the general education curriculum, as the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) mandate, they must identify and build on all students' strengths, talents, and prior knowledge. Only through building on their strengths and acknowledging their experiences can teachers engage students in appropriately challenging classroom activities.

### **The Value of Replacing Problematic Special Education Practices With DI**

Differentiated instruction (DI; Tomlinson, 1999, 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2002) is essential in providing real opportunities for learning to the heterogeneous groups of students who populate inclusive classrooms—and, clearly, disabled students constitute only one facet of the heterogeneity. Offering the same lesson to all makes no sense when every indication is that U.S. classrooms are inherently diverse. Teachers who use DI expect students to bring a variety of experiences, abilities, interests, and styles to their learning; they acknowledge that these affect students' performance in the classroom; and they address this natural diversity when planning and delivering rigorous and relevant, yet flexible and responsive, instruction. Nevertheless, some experienced and novice teachers continue to resist both DI and inclusion (Tomlinson et al., 1997), clinging instead to traditional, homogenizing methods.

Because people usually frame differences as problems inherent in students rather than, as we now suggest, arising from classroom practices or interactions between the two (Adelman, Reyna, Collins, Onghai, & Taylor, 1999), people often consider modification of the typical content and pace—or other aspects of the instructional process—an unfair burden on the classroom teacher. As a result, many argue that “experts” (e.g., the special education professional, the language specialist, etc.), not the classroom teacher, must accommodate differences—a process thought to be what is “special” about special education. Such accommodations typically occur (a) through modification of curriculum and instruction, which may result in the watering down of curricular content, and (b) outside of the general education classroom, which may result in the isolation and stigmatization of disabled students (not to mention a more homogenized and impoverished learning experience for the nondisabled students remaining in the general education classroom).

In truth, homogeneity exists neither in mainstream settings, nor among students in segregated special-education classrooms. Not only is homogeneity a myth, but, as Tomlinson (1999) noted,

attempts to create homogenous classrooms and learning experiences often fail to result in educational achievement for the students in them:

Too often in these settings, teachers' expectations for the struggling learners decline, materials are simplified, the level of discourse is less than sterling, and the pace slackens. Too few students escape these arrangements to join more "typical" or advanced classes. In other words, remedial classes keep remedial learners remedial. (p. 21)

The assumption that there is a "norm" or "standard" of curricular content or instructional approach that will be effective with most learners that girds the push for homogeneity is a large part of the problem. As inclusive educators, we suggest that all good teachers are responsive to all learners' needs—not in the sense that they modify a standard curriculum, but in the sense that they prepare from the outset for a wide variety of aptitudes, needs, and interests.

There is, however, a role for experts or specialists. Collaboration inside the general education classroom can become an important resource for differentiation. Part- or full-time paraprofessional assistants or specialists who push in to the classroom can provide instruction to any student who needs it in small, flexible groups, and collaborate with the classroom teacher in both the planning and implementation of instruction. These specialists can assist students to work as part of a larger group and adapt, but not water down, the material for a small group or an entire class. Many instructional routines and strategies that a special education teacher may implement will benefit most students, not just those who are labeled. Such strategies might include coaching students in effective group work, teaching them study skills, or developing the capacity to work independently. Teachers, along with those who support them in the classroom, need to collaborate with the spectrum of stakeholders—students, parents, community members, administrators, and so forth—to ensure that all students are truly integrated, valued, and effective members of the classroom community.

So how does one do that? DI is a big part of the answer. It is not a method, but rather a way of doing business in classrooms, based on the belief that all students can learn and succeed. In the remainder of this article, we address general considerations for using DI with students who carry disability labels, although for the most part, our concerns and recommendations could prove applicable and useful for most students. We address general planning considerations relative to issues of disability, and specific considerations relative to effectively differentiating instructional content, process, and products.

### **Planning for Differentiated Classrooms That Include Disabled Learners**

The first step in planning is to examine current practices (i.e., instructional interactions, peer interactions, and the physical environment of the classroom) for their disabling potential. Consider the following common scenario: An elementary classroom teacher expects students to take turns reading aloud. Many disabled students, regardless of the particular label, may not read at grade level. When the teacher calls on a disabled student to read aloud, the student throws a temper tantrum, as students often prefer to arouse sanction rather than display their difficulty reading (Moll, Diaz, Estrada, & Lopes, 1992). The teacher counters the disruptive behavior by asking that the student withdraw from participation in the learning activity. The teacher who differentiates instruction will recognize that the context is provoking the situation and will problem-solve to modify the instructions. Some possible solutions include asking students to volunteer to read aloud, allowing them to have a reading buddy, assigning "parts" the hour before and asking students to prepare ahead, or allowing them to decide how and when they will read. Dyck and Pemberton (2002) also suggested bypassing reading altogether (if the objective does not require decoding skills), using alternative text with similar content, placing aids within texts to promote comprehension, supporting reading with graphic organizers, or guiding the reading by previewing important concepts and ideas.

Teachers may also learn a lot by carefully probing the classroom's physical and social-emotional environments for their disabling potential. Flexible grouping demands environments where all students are able to move freely (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). To accommodate disabled students, aisles should be clear and wide enough to be wheelchair accessible and students should be able to choose the specific environment in which they prefer to work (e.g., near the board, in a quiet corner, on a rug). Materials should be accessible, charts and bulletin boards at eye-level, and books in cubbies rather than on high shelves.

Students tend to take cues from the teacher and so the teacher's attitudes toward disability will greatly influence how students treat difference. Thus, teaching about diversity—race, class, ethnicity, ability, etc.—should be an integral part of the curriculum in inclusive classrooms. Disability awareness is an important curricular goal in creating a warm and supportive classroom community.

Flexible grouping, too, encourages students to build personal connections by working with different members of the community. It also prohibits the differentiated classroom from becoming nothing more than within-class homogeneous grouping. Teachers must be certain, however, that these groupings allow disabled students to act as helper as often as they act as helpee. To do otherwise creates a power dynamic in which disabled students are pitied, objectified, or marginalized (Shapiro, 2000; Van der Klift & Kunc, 1994). Social skills and self-advocacy can be taught and acquired in community meetings, through collaborative problem solving in small groups and one-on-one exchanges, or through role play (Salend, 2004). Students who experience failure will not be willing participants in the classroom community.

### **Differentiating Content**

DI encourages teachers to tailor instructional content, process, and product to the students' needs. Content refers to the concepts and skills to be learned. Presently, state and district standards provide teachers with guidelines for teaching, but these standards stipulate only the content-to-be-in-

cluded, and not a coherent overview of what or how content might be taught (Tomlinson, 2001). Disabled students, often perceived as less competent, are frequently taught with teacher-controlled, technique-driven methods that induce the very inattentiveness, memory difficulties, low motivation, and behavioral disruptions that we assign as characteristics of the students' disabilities (Gallagher, 2004). Such methods also teach them to be passive learners. Educators often express the mistaken belief that a student who has not mastered basic skills cannot engage in higher-order thinking. However, all students should be supported and encouraged to engage in critical thinking and problem solving. Instruction simply needs to meet struggling learners at the point of their current achievement and systematically escalate their learning (Tomlinson, 1999).

Jacobson, Mulick, and Schwartz (1995) have written that "a cornerstone of psychological assessment methodology, statistics, and psychometry" is "that there is a strong presumptive relationship, in general, between overt production and actual ability" (p. 755). For example, if a person is unable to produce reliable speech or independently motorically access an expressive communication device, one may interpret these circumstances as reflecting an overall inability to communicate and possibly even to comprehend, rather than as a specific inability to execute the complex motor acts of speech production or independent device access. Borthwick and Crossley (1999) pointed out, however, that the "putative relationship between overt production and actual ability" noted by Jacobson et al. has frequently been falsified in relation to specific populations—for example, in cases of deafness and physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy (pp. 3–5).

In the absence of reliable means of assessing understanding (and many students with significant disabilities experience particular disabling conditions that render them "untestable" by conventional means), one is left in the position of having to make decisions about a student's curriculum and instruction based on assumptions, rather than certainty. One is thus faced with a choice: (a) assume that the student is probably not able to comprehend and elect to provide that student with

more limited learning opportunities, focusing on intensive remedial coverage of very basic concepts; or (b) assume that the student is able to comprehend beyond his or her ability to demonstrate that comprehension, and elect to provide that student with more rich and varied learning opportunities, while continuing to seek a more reliable means for that student to demonstrate comprehension through differentiated process and products. The former has been a common assumption within special education, and the result for students with significant disabilities has been that many have experienced severely impoverished curricula, some with little to no exposure to science and social studies content, and with only the most basic and rudimentary literacy and math instruction.

Acknowledging that educators have to make a choice between these two assumptions, Donnellan (1984) offered the “least dangerous assumption” as the criterion (p. 141). That is, if whichever assumption one acts on is later demonstrated to have been incorrect, which assumption will have had the least dangerous impact on a student’s education? Biklen and others (Biklen, 1999, 2000; Biklen & Cardinal, 1997; Rubin et al., 2001) have offered another choice as a guiding maxim: the presumption of competence. Educators must presume, first and foremost, that their students are competent individuals who are ready for and capable of benefitting from academic curricular content, and then must create the necessary instructional package to ensure students’ access to that content. Offering the opportunity for learning allows disabled students to experience an education that is rich, rigorous, challenging, relevant, interesting, and equitable to that of their nondisabled peers.

### **Differentiating Process and Products**

Tomlinson and Edison (2003) explained that the line between content and process is blurred. Process begins when students make personal sense of information, ideas, and skills, when they are able to grapple with problems using learned information. Teachers can assist students by sup-

porting the development of relevant, personal connections with problems and texts, and linking them with still other known problems and texts. Some effective strategies for disabled students include collaborative discussion teams (Salend, 2004), classwide peer tutoring (Fulk & King, 2001), book discussions (Berry & Englert, 1998; Martin, 1998), and jigsaws—a type of cooperative learning (Aronson, 1978).

Disabled students often need to have modified access to content materials that are consistent with their learning preferences and needs, and it is imperative that teachers routinely utilize and ensure consistent access to adaptive technology (AT) devices and services, and augmentative and alternative communication systems (AACs), including, if necessary, the provision of a facilitator to support a student’s access to their AT and AACs (Biklen, 1993; Crossley, 1994). Other common examples of differentiated process or product supports may include the use of audiotaped texts, universally designed texts available on CD-ROM, Braille, large print, or other adapted means of print access; peer support; additional time; fewer items or questions to address; graphic organizers; multi-modal presentation, and so forth.

It is important to provide students a range of options for demonstrating what they know and can do (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). Products should have clear, challenging, and specified criteria for success, based both on grade level expectation and individual student need (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). Products can be flexible and sensitive to learners’ talents and may include making a poster, writing a report, making an oral presentation, enacting a dramatic response, creating and singing a song or poem, drawing, or working collaboratively. Teachers, however, should take care to ensure that a student with reading and writing problems does not by-pass opportunities for learning in favor of more accessible presentation formats. The decision as to what constitutes a proper response should be decided by the objectives of the instruction. Finally, it is not appropriate to have only one opportunity per unit to demonstrate one’s knowledge. Students need many and varied smaller opportunities throughout the course of study, and having multiple opportunities for re-

hearsal and practice of assessment activities typically supports students' successful performance.

If a student with a labeled disability seems to be unengaged, or otherwise appears to be having a difficult time with a particular learning task, it is just as likely that the student is bored, uninterested, or finds the modality of the learning task unengaging, as it is that the student is unable to do the task. We urge all teachers to consider and attend to various aspects of differentiation before limiting or otherwise modifying the curricular content for disabled students.

### **Conclusion**

For disabled students, and many of their peers as well, traditional educational practices create a barrier for the kinds of meaningful learning experiences that promote intellectual growth and autonomy (Gallagher, 2004). As the example of Jay and some contemporary special-education practices reveal, it takes a village to enact disability. Disability does not reside in the individual, but rather in the interactions between the individual and the environment. We encourage all educators to consider potentially disabling and restrictive aspects of their pedagogy, and to challenge common assumptions about educating disabled students. Good instruction is good instruction: the goals and procedures are clearly articulated; the instruction is relevant, accessible, and responsive; and the tasks are interesting and challenging, but reachable with effort. Disabled students benefit from good instruction, just as all students do.

When teachers effectively differentiate instruction—constantly assessing students' understandings, teaching responsively, and enabling students to demonstrate competence in varied, meaningful ways—disabled (and other) students can participate successfully as full members of heterogeneous inclusive classrooms.

In a democracy, every student has the right to be educated, and the United States has made a commitment to providing that education without cost and without the inequities of segregation. As a matter of law, the United States recognized in 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Education*) that separate

is not equal. Nonetheless, people continue to believe and behave as if students with disabilities (and poor students, some students of color, and those whose primary language is not English) cannot participate productively in classrooms with students who represent the normative standard. When we examine this assertion and the educational practices that emerge from it, we discover that they are not consistent with the democratic ideals in which the United States takes such great national pride.

Unless teachers have the will to sustain efforts to improve instruction through promising new approaches such as DI, they have no possibility of making things better. Inclusive educators challenge both the utility and the ethics of assumptions that rely on the segregationist beliefs and practices, especially because they have served, however unintended, to segregate so many students. However long the journey and however bumpy the ride, society cannot hope to create the conditions of social justice for all unless it (re)invents a unified, comprehensive, democratic, and truly inclusive system of education that can provide all learners, in part through DI, both quality instruction and a sense of belonging. Indeed, effectively differentiating instruction in heterogeneous classrooms is a powerful tool that enables teachers to create inclusive schools and classrooms within which all children can be “valued equally, treated with respect and provided with real opportunities at school” (Thomas & Loxley, 2001, p. 119).

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### **Notes**

1. We use the term *disabled students* rather than the typically preferred, person-first, *student with a disability*, because the disability resides in the context, not in the person. We explain our position in the text.

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