

## **Differentiating Instruction For Advanced Learners In the Mixed-Ability Middle School Classroom**

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A particular challenge for middle school teachers is being able to differentiate or adapt instruction to respond to the diverse student needs found in inclusive, mixed-ability classrooms. This digest provides an overview of some key principles for differentiating instruction, with an emphasis on the learning needs of academically advanced learners.

### **Why Differentiate Instruction?**

A single seventh grade heterogeneous language arts class is likely to include students who can read and comprehend as well as most college learners; students who can barely decode words, comprehend meaning, or apply basic information; and students who fall somewhere between these extremes. There are students whose primary interests lie in science, sports, music, or a dozen other fields. There are students who learn best by working alone and those who are most successful working in groups. Further, the learning profiles of young adolescents often change rapidly as they develop. There simply is no single learning template for the general middle school class. If middle school students differ in readiness, interest, and learning profiles, and if a good middle school attempts to meet each student where he or she is and foster continual growth, a one-size-fits-all model of instruction makes little sense. Rather, differentiated instruction seems a better solution for meeting the academic diversity that typifies the middle school years.

### **What Differentiation Is--And Is Not**

A differentiated classroom offers a variety of learning options designed to tap into different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In a differentiated class, the teacher uses (1) a variety of ways for students to explore curriculum content, (2) a variety of sense-making activities or processes through which students can come to understand and "own" information and ideas, and (3) a variety of options through which students can demonstrate or exhibit what they have learned.

A class is not differentiated when assignments are the same for all learners and the adjustments consist of varying the level of difficulty of questions for certain students, grading some students harder than others, or letting students who finish early play games for enrichment. It is not appropriate to have more advanced learners do extra math problems, extra book reports, or after completing their "regular" work be given extension assignments. Asking students to do more of what they already know is hollow. Asking them to do "the regular work, plus" inevitably seems punitive to them (Tomlinson, 1995a).

## Characteristics of a Differentiated Class

Four characteristics shape teaching and learning in an effective differentiated classroom (Tomlinson, 1995a):

1. Instruction is concept focused and principle driven. All students have the opportunity to explore and apply the key concepts of the subject being studied. All students come to understand the key principles on which the study is based. Such instruction enables struggling learners to grasp and use powerful ideas and, at the same time, encourages advanced learners to expand their understanding and application of the key concepts and principles. Such instruction stresses understanding or sense-making rather than retention and regurgitation of fragmented bits of information. Concept-based and principle-driven instruction invites teachers to provide varied learning options. A "coverage-based" curriculum may cause a teacher to feel compelled to see that all students do the same work. In the former, all students have the opportunity to explore meaningful ideas through a variety of avenues and approaches.
2. On-going assessment of student readiness and growth are built into the curriculum. Teachers do not assume that all students need a given task or segment of study, but continuously assess student readiness and interest, providing support when students need additional instruction and guidance, and extending student exploration when indications are that a student or group of students is ready to move ahead.
3. Flexible grouping is consistently used. In a differentiated class, students work in many patterns. Sometimes they work alone, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in groups. Sometimes tasks are readiness-based, sometimes interest-based, sometimes constructed to match learning style, and sometimes a combination of readiness, interest, and learning style. In a differentiated classroom, whole-group instruction may also be used for introducing new ideas, when planning, and for sharing learning outcomes.
4. Students are active explorers. Teachers guide the exploration. Because varied activities often occur simultaneously in a differentiated classroom, the teacher works more as a guide or facilitator of learning than as a dispenser of information. As in a large family, students must learn to be responsible for their own work. Not only does such student-centeredness give students more ownership of their learning, but it also facilitates the important adolescent learning goal of growing independence in thought, planning, and evaluation. Implicit in such instruction is (1) goal-setting shared by teacher and student based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile, and (2) assessment predicated on student growth and goal attainment.

## How to Think About Differentiating Instruction

There are many ways to shake up the classroom to create a better fit for more learners—including those who are advanced. In general, interest-based adjustments allow students to have a voice in deciding whether they will apply key principles being studied to math-oriented, literature-based, hobby-related, science-oriented, or history-associated areas. For example, in studying the American Revolution, one student might opt to write a short story about the life of a teenager during the Revolutionary period. Another might elect to apply key ideas about the American Revolution to an investigation of heroes then and now. Yet another might prefer to study ways in which the Revolution affected the development of science.

Adjustments based on learning profile encourage students to understand their own learning preferences. For example, some students need a longer period to reflect on ideas before beginning to apply them, while others prefer quick action. Some students need to talk with others as they learn, while others need a quiet work space. Some students learn best as they tell stories about ideas being explored, others as they create mind maps, and still others as they construct three-dimensional representations. Some students may learn best through a practical application of ideas, others through a more analytical approach.

Readiness-based adjustments can be created by teachers offering students a range of learning tasks developed along one or more of the following continua:

1. Concrete to abstract. Learners advanced in a subject often benefit from tasks that involve more abstract materials, representations, ideas, or applications than less advanced peers.
2. Simple to complex. Learners advanced in a subject often benefit from tasks that are more complex in resources, research, issues, problems, skills, or goals than less advanced peers.
3. Basic to transformational. Learners advanced in a subject often benefit from tasks that require greater transformation or manipulation of information, ideas, materials, or applications than less advanced peers.
4. Fewer facets to multi-facets. Learners advanced in a subject often benefit from tasks that have more facets or parts in their directions, connections within or across subjects, or planning and execution than less advanced peers.
5. Smaller leaps to greater leaps. Learners advanced in a subject often benefit from tasks that require greater mental leaps in insight, application, or transfer than less advanced peers.
6. More structured to more open. Learners advanced in a subject often benefit from tasks that are more open in regard to solutions, decisions, and approaches than less advanced peers.
7. Less independence to greater independence. Learners advanced in a subject often benefit from greater independence in planning, designing, and self-monitoring than less advanced peers.
8. Quicker to slower. Learners advanced in a subject will sometimes benefit from rapid movement through prescribed materials and tasks. At other times, they may require a greater amount of time with a given study than less advanced peers so that they may explore the topic in greater depth and/or breadth.

## **Strategies for Managing a Differentiated Classroom**

Among instructional strategies that can help teachers manage differentiation and help students find a good learning "fit" are the following:

- use of multiple texts and supplementary materials;
- use of computer programs;
- interest centres;
- learning contracts;
- compacting;
- tiered sense-making activities and tiered products;
- tasks and products designed with a multiple intelligence orientation;
- independent learning contracts;
- complex instruction;
- group investigation;
- product criteria negotiated jointly by student and teacher;
- graduated task- and product-rubrics.

### **Final Thoughts**

Teachers moving toward differentiated instruction in an inclusive, integrated middle school classroom find greater success if they (1) have a clear rationale for differentiation, (2) prepare students and parents for a differentiated classroom, (3) attend to issues of classroom structure and management as they move toward more student-centred learning, (4) move toward differentiation at a pace comfortable to both teacher and learners, and (5) plan with team members and other colleagues interested in differentiation (Tomlinson, 1995b).

### **References**

Tomlinson, C. (1995a). How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C. (1995b). Deciding to differentiate instruction in middle school: One school's journey. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 39, 77-87.

A companion digest, *Gifted Learners and the Middle School: Problem or Promise* (E535) is available.

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