
Editors' Note

Differentiated Instruction and Special Education Teaching

The U.S. Department of Education (2008) reports that 87% of students with learning disabilities are served in general education classes. This number includes both students whose educational placement is in the general education classroom for most of the day (52%) and students who are both in a resource room for part of the day and in a general education classroom for the rest of the day (35%). General education teachers are often stymied when instruction designed for the general education student does not meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. These students need a different kind of instruction. *Differentiated Instruction* is recommended to general education teachers as one method to teach students with learning disabilities and other special learning needs in general education classes (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008). It is interesting to note the many similarities between *differentiated instruction* and the philosophy and strategies for teaching special education students.

The term *differential instruction* reflects a philosophy of teaching that enables teachers to reach the unique needs of each student, capitalizing on the student's strength and weaknesses. Differentiated instruction embodies some of the qualities of special education teaching in the general education classroom. This article provides an overview of the Summary of Performance (SOP) and presents the results of a national study of SOP forms promulgated by 43 state education agencies (SEAs).

Advocates of differentiated instruction note that one of the biggest mistakes we make in teaching is to treat everyone equally when it comes to learning. With the recognition that not all students are alike, differentiated instruction applies an approach to teaching and learning that gives students multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. Differentiated instruction recognizes that a one-size-fits-all curriculum simply will not work for all children. Children process information differently; some form images, others form words, and others form sentences. Differentiated instruction takes their individual needs into account with teaching that responds to their personal talents, interests, varying background knowledge, and distinct experiences. In differentiated instruction, the teacher seeks to find the special methods that will be successful for an individual student to help that student learn (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008). The following blog (4/3/2010) titled *Defining Differentiated Instruction* by Rebecca Alber provides more information about differentiated instruction: *When I lesson plan with teachers, out of earshot from their fellow teachers and their principals, I can't tell you how often I'm asked, "what exactly does it look like?" when it comes to differentiated instruction. In the education world, differentiated instruction is talked a lot about as a policy or as a solution, but rarely do educators get opportunities to roll up their sleeves and talk about what it looks like in practice.*

The definition begins with this: Equal education is not all students getting the same, but all students getting what they need. Approaching all learners the same academically doesn't work. We have to start where each child is in his learning process in order to authentically meet his academic needs and help him grow. With a classroom full of children at different stages of learning, this certainly sounds overwhelming, I know. So I'd like to suggest a place to begin and provide some examples.

Start with the Student

If a child in your class is really struggling with reading, writing, organization, time management, social skills or all of the above, the first step is to find out as much as you can about her educational history and anything else. This includes learning about her interests, cultural background, learning style, and something about her home life (The youngest? Foster care? Single parent home?)

The fact is we are mainstreaming a larger number of our students to general education classes, who, 15 years ago, may have instead been assigned to a special education class. That's good news in so many ways but makes a teacher's job more challenging. This is also one of the reasons why differentiated instruction has become such a hot topic.

Several years ago, in one of the general education language arts class I was teaching, 8 of the 34 students enrolled had an Individualized Education Program (IEP). When a child has an IEP, it is required that all teachers provide accommodations and modifications to assignments and instruction for that student. Speaking of overwhelmed. I definitely was, to say the least.

So, I learned. I spent many of my conference periods combing through student files. It's amazing what you can discover about a child from doing this. For instance, I had a student with perplexing behaviors then I learned he suffered from schizophrenia. How did I find out? Looking at his file. I was a much better teacher for him after gaining this information. Of course, he had an IEP, and someone should have told me in the beginning of the year, but we all know how things -- and children -- fall through the cracks of large public schools in enormous school districts.

A Classroom Example

Making an assignment, task, or objective different for one student than the rest of the class is meeting that child where they are in their learning journey. It's okay, you don't have to feel bad or feel as if you are being unfair, or lowering the bar. You are the child's teacher and you spend enough time with her to understand what she needs. And remember, equality is about meeting the needs of the individual.

Here's an example from my teaching:

It's a high school language arts class, and students are reading a novel. The daily objective is practicing inference and application of this skill. They are writing a brief essay predicting what the character Crooks from Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* might do next. They must pull textual evidence from the book to support their predictions and claims.

But Diana is seated over there, frustrated. She is struggling with the concept of inference, partly because she is reading below her grade level. Knowing this about her reading abilities, and other challenges indicated on her IEP, do I expect her to stay the course, or do I admit that success for her with this assignment as it stands is not likely? I decide to give Diana the task of listing five adjectives to describe the character Crooks. She has to find one quote from the character in the book to prove one or more of the words she has chosen. There are similarities to these two assignments, but different enough to ensure a higher probability of success -- and learning -- for her.

A Matter of Fairness

Differentiated instruction for Diana, and for other struggling students, may mean providing a handout with sentence starters or a graphic organizer to help them with constructing meaning. It may mean providing extra time to complete an assignment, giving directions again, reducing the length of an assignment, or offering alternate assignments or projects altogether. You can also provide struggling students with leveled text -- less difficult reading that contains the same content.

(For more differentiated instruction ideas and examples from the classroom, check out this Edutopia group discussion on the topic.)

Do I pre-plan variations of an assignment? Not always, but when I know my struggling students and their challenges well enough to predict road bumps ahead for them, I'm ready.

One way to be ready. Create file folders filled with various graphic organizers, visual aids, and sentence starters for different types of thinking (cause and effect, chronological, compare and contrast, to name a few). You can quickly pull out one of these in a pinch. If a student finishes a differentiated assignment with time left, then assess if it was too easy, and add a step. If a differentiated assignment is too difficult, break down the directions even more, give them one-on-one time with you, or remove a step.

I've heard teachers suggest that making an assignment less difficult for one student is not

fair to the others. But I ask: Is it a matter of what is fair, or what is right?

What are ways you differentiate instruction for the grade level and content you teach? We look forward to hearing from you! (Eutopia, 2010; www.edutopia.org)

References

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Note

At the request of the Board of the Learning Disabilities Association, all Professional Advisory Board (PAB) members are to serve as Consulting Editors of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*.

Overview of Articles in This Issue

This issue of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* contains articles on important topics in the field of learning disabilities.

Preparing Special Educators to Infuse Real Life Issues into the K-12 Curriculum, by Sandra Beyda-Lorie, Effie Kritikos, and Jeffrey Messerer, shows from research that educators are not prepared to address real life issues such as substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, and bullying in the classroom. Yet, students with learning disabilities remain vulnerable to each of these pressing life issues. The purpose of the current study was to determine whether the Curriculum Infusion (CI) model increased the confidence of special educators in addressing real life issues and whether CI training altered their beliefs about their role in prevention education. This paper describes the key components of a higher education training program in CI.

Pre-service Teachers' Memories of Learning Disabilities: The Search for Markers by Maury Miller and Pamela Gresham asked preservice teachers to describe their own first memories of students with learning disabilities in school.

Science Achievement of Students in Co-taught, Inquiry-based Classrooms by Rita Brusca-Vega, Kathleen Brown, and David Yasutake follows the progress of middle students with disabilities, their peers, and teachers in co-taught science classrooms where a hands-on, inquiry-based curriculum was used. Students with disabilities (n=21), including learning disabilities, mild intellectual impairment, and mild autism were placed in co-taught classes with students without disabilities.

The Summary of Performance: The Reality and the Possibility by Joseph W. Madaus details how each local education agency must provide a transition summary document, commonly called a Summary of Performance (SOP), of all special education students who are graduating with a regular diploma or reaching the maximum age for services. This article provides an overview of the SOP and presents the results of a national study of SOP forms promulgated by 43 state education agencies (SEAs).

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