

Busting Myths about Differentiated Instruction

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PREVIEW

Differentiated instruction maximizes students' ability to learn and apply knowledge, but it is often misunderstood.

Ten of the most common misperceptions are debunked by a veteran middle level educator.

Principals can ensure that teachers understand differentiated instruction and practice it in their classrooms.

Many teachers and principals claim that their schools differentiate instruction for diverse learners, but when pressed to define differentiated practice, some of them offer contrasting and even misinformed descriptions. If teachers and principals are going to promote differentiated lessons and assessments, then both need to be clear about what they are and are not. So, let's bust a few myths.

Myth 1: Students Will Be Unprepared for Tests

First, differentiated instruction and standardized tests are not oxymoronic. Some principals think that if teachers differentiate in their classes, students will be disabled when they take state assessments that are not differentiated. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Students will do well on standardized assessments if they know the material well, and differentiated instruction's bottom line is to teach in whatever way students best learn. Here's a definition that works for many educators:

Differentiating instruction is doing what's fair and developmentally appropriate for students. It's a collection of best practices strategically employed to maximize students' learning at every turn, including giving them the tools to handle anything that is undifferentiated. It requires us to do different things for different students some, or a lot, of the time. It's whatever works to advance the student. It's highly effective teaching.

Students will do well on standardized assessments because of differentiated approaches. Do teachers also teach test-taking savvy and offer some classroom assessments that are similar to state tests? Sure, these are life skills. Educational Testing Service and other producers of standardized assessments, however, will tell you that their products shouldn't be the sole focus of educators. Such assessments can only sample learning, making observations about mastery inferential at best, and they are meant to look at trends and patterns for a school, not exclusive evidence about an individual student or teacher's performance. State policymakers and legislators want educators to focus on their true goals: to teach students how to interpret graphs, obtain insight from historical events, understand the scientific processes of living organisms, incorporate healthy diet and exercise into everyday life, and create the jarring beauty of music written with just the right dynamics. Anything teachers do to enable students to become their own advocates in this cause is worthy, and differentiated practices do just that. Some educators think that we hurt students' performance on standardized tests when teachers offer alternative assessments in their classes. Students will expect it everywhere, they argue. Here's the rule of thumb: If the final product is required as part of the legally mandated state curriculum, then the product is nonnegotiable. In Virginia, for example, all students have to write a persuasive essay. Teachers do not yield to students' whining, "I don't write very well. Could I do a persuasive diorama instead?"

If, however, students are learning the Krebs cycle in biology, the demonstration of mastery does not require a specific product. It really doesn't matter how students do it. Let them make a poster or Web site devoted to the topic. Let them conduct a debate or create a coloring book on the topic, or let them take the test orally. The goal is to get an accurate rendering of mastery. If a student can express what he or she knows more accurately by using an alternative format, get out of their way and let them do it. Teachers dilute a grade's accuracy and thereby usefulness when assessments are tests of the test format more than the content itself. Give students some training in how to take standardized tests, but don't get in the way of them demonstrating true mastery.

Myth 2: Differentiation Equals Individualization

Differentiated instruction is not individualized instruction, although sometimes teachers may individualize as warranted. An individual teacher would go nuts implementing an individualized education program for every secondary student. No one expects educators to do this. When a teacher answers a confused student's question, stands near to a student to quiet him or her down, suggests an alternative research resource, or suggests that a student turns lined paper sideways to create columns, the teacher is individualizing and, yes, differentiating instruction. The individualizing is temporary, done as necessary.

Related to this myth is the idea that differentiated classrooms always ask students to work individually or in small groups. Some students learn primarily in whole-class instruction, some in small groups, and some working individually. Successful teachers offer all three formats over the course of a week or unit of study. This is the "ebb and flow" that differentiated instruction expert Carol Ann Tomlinson talks about in her books.

There is a problem in some classes, however: Teachers teach one or two of these ways on most occasions, rarely using the third, whichever it might be. Teachers who avoid this other approach are concerned that students might not be working, learning, and benefiting from the experience. Often, this doubt is more a matter of the teacher's lack of expertise with that third approach, not its usefulness within their discipline. In every class, students need to encounter content and skills in the large group, in small groups, and in their independent work. Because teachers cannot afford to be weak in any area, they must improve their ability to use the third way. Teachers can't trust that other classes will provide students with the experience.

Some teachers make the mistake in thinking that multiple groups in class or multiple choices for a final unit project means that they are differentiating. This may or may not be an indicator of differentiation. The important factor is whether those students were grouped, or those project choices were offered, on the basis of specific information the teacher knew about his or her students. If teachers divide students into groups or offer project choices without regard for students' needs, it's called "being creative" or "breaking up routine," not "differentiated instruction." It becomes differentiated practice when teachers use assessment to guide instructional decisions. In an effort to promote such practices, it's completely reasonable for principals to ask teachers, "Tell me how you used assessment to guide an instructional approach this week."

Myth 3: Differentiation Means Unbalanced Workloads

Another myth is that teachers differentiate instruction and assessments by changing the workload or difficulty of the task. Example: If a student is an unusually gifted reader, teachers don't give him longer or more books to read. If he's really that smart and teachers give him additional tasks to do, he'll learn to play dumb. Instead, teachers increase the challenge of the reading, pushing the student to use reading and the author's ideas in new ways.

If possible, teachers try to keep the task roughly the same for students because it was something the teachers deemed important to instruction. If we change that task, however, it's fine, but we have to make sure it's not an increase in the workload. We don't ask advanced students to complete something in two days that we allow the rest of the class an entire week to do. Are there times we allow struggling students to do a representative subset of math problems the rest of the class is doing in full because it will take these struggling students longer to complete them? Sure. We'll build automaticity with the concepts down the road. Right now, we're just working on concept attainment.

Borrowing from cognitive science, teachers don't want students to confabulate (Sousa, 2001). Confabulation is when students get a partial understanding of something but the brain requires the whole picture, so it makes up information or borrows from other memories and inserts information in the missing holes, convincing itself that this was the original learning all along. It takes more emotional and intellectual energy to go back and undo bad learning than it does to teach for mastery the first time around. For example, teachers who are differentiating instruction sometimes tell some students to not do homework others are doing. Homework is meant to reinforce, practice, extend, and prepare, not to learn new concepts from scratch. Teachers can reteach partial-understanding students tomorrow and give them an alternative assignment that combines practice from today and tomorrow's concepts.

What is fair isn't always equal. At every turn, principals and teachers are not out to be equal. Instead, they are pushing to be fair and developmentally appropriate. This is sometimes hard to accept, but it enables schools to push students farther, thereby achieving more than they would if schools practiced only one-size-fits-all pedagogy. Consider two students, one with glasses, one without, standing at the back of the room. The teacher asks the students to learn the material on the chalkboard at the front of the classroom. In an effort to be equal, however, the teacher removes the one student's glasses.

Did we just make it easier or harder for the student who needs glasses? Most educators claim we made it harder. On the contrary, we made it much easier. The brain is a survival organ: It's out for its own self-preservation. Now the student can cop out. When we return the student's glasses, which are analogous to scaffolding (providing support) and differentiating, the student is compelled to read the board and consider its content. And the student thrives. We didn't make it easier; we made it more demanding. Differentiated approaches are not crutches with which teachers make things easier. Undifferentiated classes are the easy classes because a my-approach-or-nothing teacher mentality means students can coast or drop out if it's not working for them. In differentiated classes, teachers know students so well that they know which buttons to push to get students engaged with their learning, and they push them. These classes are incredibly challenging. Students are accountable for and achieve more.

Myth 4: Lack of Mastery at the Same Time as Classmates Means Lack of Credit

Another myth: All students must demonstrate mastery on the same day of the grading period or it's unfair to give them the same full credit. Every well-respected principal knows that students aren't always ready to accept what teachers have to offer. Educators learned this from early childhood education. Imagine how silly, even abusive, it would be to say to a group of one-year-olds, "Listen up: Everyone needs to be walking on the third day of the 11th month, or that's it. We divide you into walkers and nonwalkers and never allow nonwalkers to fully demonstrate proficiency when they eventually learn to walk."

Yet this is what teachers do when they say, "All 160 of my students will demonstrate 100% mastery with 100% of this material in this one particular test format at 10:00 a.m. on this

Tuesday morning, or else." This is what education expert Nancy Doda calls a "learn, or I will hurt you" attitude. The truth is that it doesn't matter when students demonstrate mastery. If they give a sincere effort all along, let them retake tests and assignments for full credit when they are ready. Adults don't play these games with one another; we're allowed to redo all certification and licensure exams over and over until we pass. Teachers should extend the same courtesy and hope to their students. Teachers teach so students learn, not just to document deficiencies. If readers worry about student accountability and the paperwork associated with redoing work, figure 1 has some protocols that might help.

Myth 5: "I Taught It. It's Up to Students to Learn It."

Some teachers think their job is done if they just tell students the information. Mark Twain wisely quipped, "Teaching is not telling. If it were telling, we'd all be so smart we couldn't stand ourselves." Teaching isn't just telling or presenting. This is where mediocre teachers stop. Accomplished teachers present in such a manner that students find the information and skills meaningful.

Here's the curriculum presented to a teacher to teach: CP RUSA. At first, this makes little sense, but the teacher thinks of a mnemonic for students, "Charlie Parker, aRe yoU SAD?" to memorize and moves on. Students will spit it out for a test then forget it, never finding it meaningful. However, a great teacher who is an expert in four areas: student development, cognitive theory, differentiated practice, and course content—will do something different. That teacher adjusts the pacing of delivery and grouping of information so students can make sense of it and find meaning in it. Using the associative property in mathematics, here's how the teacher presents it: CPR USA.

This analogy was adapted from cognitive theory expert, David Sousa, and it's what differentiated schools do every day. It's dangerous to say this to principals, but here it goes: What teachers teach is irrelevant. It doesn't matter what they teach. Really. What matters is what students take with them when they leave those teachers at the end of the year. This is the greatest testimony to teachers and to a school. If teachers are rallying their energy around what they're teaching, they've missed the boat. Ask them instead to spend their energy on what students are learning. Do teachers teach in a way that is likely to be retained beyond just parroting information back on a test, or do they teach to get through a section of the curriculum? If teachers are teaching for long-term retention, then they employ best practices (e.g., differentiated instruction) and do whatever it takes for students to learn.

Myth 6: Lesson Plans Must Be Turned In

It is appropriate to ask for lesson plans from teachers who are undergoing disciplinary action or need assistance, but there's little or no correlation to increased student achievement in most classes. It breeds resentment and is about control, not learning. It is helpful, however, if teachers submit general themes and unit goals. Principals should worry about pristine plan books. Teachers who have pristine books may not be responding to the needs of their students, only ensuring that lessons are delivered according to plan. Celebrate teachers who have erasures, arrows, and scribbled notes in their lesson plan books. It may not be a sign of disorganization as much as it is a sign of responsive lessons.

Myth 7: Summative Assessment Leads to Learning

Summative assessments like unit tests and final projects are done postlearning. The real powerhouse is formative assessment. This is made of smaller assessments and checkpoints done en route to mastery. Students get regular and frequent feedback in a timely manner that

they can use. Teachers should spend at least as much energy designing their formative assessments as they do their summative assessments.

Myth 8: Students Won't Be Able to Compete in the Real World

Differentiation is not about making things easier. Go back and look at the definition of differentiated instruction mentioned earlier. Teachers prepare students for whatever comes a student's way, differentiated or not. They don't teach them one way to take notes; they teach them 10 different ways to take notes and under what conditions each technique would be most useful. Teachers don't teach students to write a five-paragraph essay; they teach students to write an appropriately paragraphed essay. And teachers don't differentiate all the time—only as necessary for students to learn well. If teachers maximize learning at every turn, imagine students' competence and what they can contribute to the world.

Myth 9: If We Don't Differentiate, Students Will Toughen Up

If we don't differentiate, students won't learn; incompetence pokes in its ugly head. Imagine being asked to do things at which you are incompetent. You'd get nervous, embarrassed, then angry. Without strategic differentiated instruction, students probably don't graduate. In addition, the real world is differentiated. A brake mechanic can consult manuals, the manufacturer, and a senior mechanic if he or she doesn't know how to fix a car, and he can even extend deadlines. Military recruits get as many times as it takes to smoothly disassemble and reassemble an assault rifle in the field. Some can do it in 8 attempts and some need 24, but they get it done.

Myth 10: There Is Only One Way to Differentiate

Perhaps the biggest differentiated instruction myth of all is that there is one way to do it. There isn't. It's not a scripted, sent-from-on-high program. What works in one classroom doesn't necessarily work in another—but pieces of it might. Some teachers have little space and resources, but they differentiate brilliantly and students soar. Some have all the space and resources they need, but don't know how to use it effectively and students suffer. Principals are in a position to affect a teacher's understanding and implementation of differentiated approaches dramatically.

Half of differentiation is the teacher's mind-set: "Am I teaching so students best learn?" The rest of it is expertise in course content, cognitive theory, the developmental level of the students, and differentiated practices. Over the past 20 years, educators have learned powerful and universally accepted ideas in these areas, and they've built an effective lexicon that allows them to communicate these ideas with one another with speed and accuracy. As a result, they are progressing steadily toward even more student success, but only if teachers are inclined and have the time to study the ideas. Providing both of these is one of the principal's many roles. They ask, "What have I done this week to open differentiated instruction to my staff?"

One of the great places to start is with the principal's own attempts to differentiate staff training. Putting beliefs into action is one of the tenets of great leadership and is deeply respected by teachers. Principals can share their journey openly with staff members just as teachers can share with students. The big step, however, is to shed the myths that mire educators in complacency and keep them from seeing what can be.

References

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