

Differentiating for Success in Inclusive Classrooms

This *Considerations Packet* provides an overview of differentiation in inclusive classrooms. A general philosophy of differentiation is presented, along with several definitions. Instructional and management strategies for differentiated classrooms are discussed and illustrated with practical examples.

Philosophy of Differentiation in Inclusive Classrooms

Inclusive service delivery for students with mild to moderate disabilities is designed to provide these students with a successful school experience comparable to that of typically developing peers. Students with mild to moderate disabilities may have average or above average intellectual ability, yet not experience school success due to the nature of their disabilities. In an inclusive delivery model, these students participate in normal classroom activities with additional supports and services as specified by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. Inclusive service delivery has proven successful for many students with mild to moderate disabilities in helping them achieve academically and socially.

Differentiation takes the philosophy of inclusion a step further to provide for the individual needs of all students within a general education classroom. Differentiation describes a philosophy that seeks to make education more meaningful for all students, from high achieving gifted students to those who are struggling in school (Tomlinson, 1999).

Ellis (1999) describes differentiation as having three key dimensions: (a) targeting students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), (b) capitalizing on students' intellectual skills and talents, and (c) fostering authentic motivations. The ZPD is the range of instruction within which a student is appropriately challenged but not yet frustrated. In targeting the ZPD, the teacher closely observes student progress and provides support as needed without making the task too easy. To capitalize on student skills and talents, the teacher makes an effort to know the capabilities of each student and plans instruction that supports those areas of strength while developing areas of need. Some information regarding skills and talents may be provided in the Present Level of Performance (PLOP) on the IEP. Other insights into skills and talents may be gained through student interviews, surveys, informal conversation, and observation. One way to foster authentic motivation is to create assignments and projects that have a true audience. Rather than writing or developing projects that only the teacher will read, students publish on the web or write for an audience of their peers.

Another way of differentiating instruction is to adapt or modify various aspects of the classroom or instruction to meet specific needs of students with disabilities. Some examples of differentiation in various areas include:

Environment Preferential seating Supplemental Lighting Background music Adapted furniture	Presentation Lecture notes in advance Textbooks on tape Advance organizers Written and oral presentation
Instructional Materials Large print materials Highlighted materials High interest/low vocabulary books Applicable software	Evaluation Choice of oral or written tests Evaluation based on progress Student self-evaluation Project-based evaluation

Tomlinson (1999) presents a broader view of differentiation. She presents a differentiated classroom as one guided by the following principles:

- The teacher focuses on the essentials (those skills that are most important).
- The teacher attends to student differences.
- Assessment and instruction are inseparable.
- The teacher modifies content, process, and product.
- All students participate in respectful work (all tasks are equally engaging and interesting to students).
- The teacher and students collaborate in learning.
- The teacher balances group and individual work.
- The teacher and students work together flexibly.

Tomlinson further suggests that content, process, and product may be differentiated based on student needs and interests. *Content* refers to the knowledge or information that students will learn. *Process* refers to the activities and experiences that will bring students to the desired learning outcomes. Not only can students learn concepts and skills in different ways, they can also demonstrate that learning through different *products*. Each of these may be differentiated to meet student interest, readiness, or learning profile. Each student has something in which they are interested. For a high school senior it might be auto mechanics or popular music; for an elementary student it might be dinosaurs or the current popular cartoon. These areas of interest can be used to engage the student, develop skills, and make connections to content. Often strong student interest in a topic can help overcome a skill deficit, since students are more willing to persevere when the task is difficult.

Differences in readiness are very real in today's classrooms. Even homogenously grouped classrooms have students at varying levels of proficiency in reading, writing, attending, and other academic skills. Developing lessons that engage all students at their appropriate levels is a challenging but necessary task for the teacher.

Students also differ in their learning profiles. Adults and students have preferences for how and where to learn. Some people work most effectively in a quiet environment; others prefer background noise. Some works best under a tight schedule; while others find time pressure inhibiting and need to plan ahead to allow plenty of time. A teacher can make an effort to understand and support the learning preferences of students with disabilities, while providing support to help students broaden their skills.

These views of differentiated instruction are supportive of inclusive education for students with disabilities in that they seek to provide meaningful instruction to students at an appropriate level of challenge. In a classroom that truly reflects the intention and spirit of differentiation it is not difficult to see how students with disabilities might be included. However, the nature of student's disabilities must be considered when making instructional decisions regarding differentiation. Teacher knowledge and expertise in disabilities can make the process less frustrating and more rewarding for both teachers and students. General education teachers who have not had experience working with students with disabilities may wish to consult with specialists within the school including special education teachers, school psychologists, and related service providers. In addition, a wealth of information representing a variety of perspectives is available on the Internet. Disability specific organizations, advocacy groups, and government organizations host informative and useful sites. (Visit the T/TAC web page <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/resources/links/index.php> for a current list of links to disability related sites.) Talking with students and parents about their particular needs related to the disability also yields helpful information for differentiation.

A curriculum that is rich in meaning and powerful for student learning is the key to effective instruction in any setting. In a differentiated classroom that curriculum is made available to all students. In an inclusive classroom student Individualized Education Programs (IEP) guide and support the work of classroom teachers and specialists in meeting the particular needs of students with disabilities. The IEP can provide a wealth of information regarding student interest, readiness, and learning profile. The IEP can also spell out the responsibilities of various professionals in developing, implementing, and evaluating the program for students with disabilities.

Management Strategies

To create a successful differentiated classroom requires a high level of student independence. In planning and managing a differentiated classroom, the teacher will informally assess levels of student independence and develop management strategies. In general, it may be beneficial to view the student habits and skills necessary for independent work as important content and develop lesson plans and assessment tools accordingly. For example, a teacher may want the students to transition to a new activity within a given period of time. In addition to telling the students to do this, she would model the behavior for them, have them practice, reinforce appropriate performance, and provide corrective feedback as necessary. However students with disabilities may have extra difficulty in this area. Based on the nature of their disabilities and past school experiences, students may be passive or unmotivated learners. These student deficits may be addressed in the student IEP, providing valuable baseline information and a framework for enhancing these areas of student functioning. If a student has particular difficulty making the transition to new activities, the teacher can provide additional support to help that student. That support may take the form of an early signal to that student that transition time is approaching or a checklist that serves as a reminder of the steps for transitioning.

Instructional Strategies

Any instructional strategy that attends to student differences and maintains the richness of the curriculum can be used in a differentiated classroom. One strategy that allows teachers to differentiate instruction based on readiness is that of tiered lessons. In developing a tiered lesson, the teacher selects meaningful curriculum goals and specifies clearly what each student should know, understand, and be able to do as a result of the lesson. After appropriate introductory experiences, students complete activities at varying levels of complexity and abstraction. For example, in a third grade lesson on fractions, all students would be working with the concept of fractions as parts of a whole. Some students would work with concrete examples of fractional parts of groups; how many students in our class are girls and how many are boys? To answer that question students count the students present in the room and sort them by gender. Another group of students would complete a project at a more abstract level; based on the birthday chart how many students were born in January? In this example students read data from a chart to answer the question regarding fractional parts.

Lessons can also be differentiated based on interest. One way of doing this is through the use of student contracts. A contract is an agreement between the teacher and student about what is to be learned and how that learning is demonstrated. Contracts allow for student choice based on interest within teacher-specified parameters. In a unit on plants, one student might choose to interview a gardener, while another student might do research on the Internet to answer the same questions. Consider these general guidelines in developing contracts for students with disabilities.

- Contracts should support attainment of IEP goals.
- Contracts should include accommodations and modifications specified on the IEP, as appropriate.
- Contracts need not be specified on an IEP to be utilized in an inclusive or differentiated classroom.
- Contracts should provide tasks with appropriate level of academic challenge for students with disabilities.
- Contracts may be used to support attainment of behavior, organization, and social skills as specified on the IEP.
- Contracts should provide tasks that move students with disabilities towards self-regulation and autonomy.
- Contracts for students with disabilities should be as much like contracts for typical students as possible.

In a differentiated classroom, students are grouped and regrouped based on interest, readiness, and learning profile. In these groups they work with appropriate content, through various processes, to result in products that demonstrate the desired outcomes. In creating and managing groups, it is important to attend to the respectful nature of the various tasks. All the tasks and assignments should be equally appealing to students. If, as sometimes happens, the students who are struggling complete worksheets, while high achieving students work with science equipment or in the computer lab, the struggling students may become

even more discouraged. On the other hand, the high achieving students should not be asked to do more of the same thing that everyone else is doing. The following scenario shows one way to group and regroup students based on learning profiles.

Students with Disabilities			
Gene has good general knowledge and is motivated to succeed. He has difficulty with reading comprehension and is easily distracted by extraneous noise and activity.			
Valerie is identified as gifted and has attention deficit disorder. She works well independently if given choices.			
Mark is a bright student. He has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair. He works with a portable computer that is switch activated. He also has a teaching assistant.			
Objectives			
The student will know common ratios for reducing fractions ($\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{4}$).	The student will understand the process for reducing fractions. (Dividing numerator and denominator by a common factor).		The student will be able to reduce fractions to lowest terms.
	Gene	Valerie	Mark
Pre Assessment (paper and pencil)	X	X	X (with adaptations)
Direct Instruction	X (based on pre-assessment)		X
Cooperative Group Activity--game	X		
Computer Drill	X	X	X
Activity--create additional cards for game		X (students may choose the theme for the game cards)	
Individual Contract –Select 3-5 • Timed test • Write directions • Create a game • Create a book • Complete worksheet • Other	X	X	X (with adaptations and assistance)
Assessment (paper/pencil)	X	X	X (with adaptations)

It is not realistic to expect that every activity of every lesson will be differentiated all the time. Nor is that level of differentiation appropriate if the goal is to help prepare students with disabilities to transition successfully from school to post-secondary environments. Instead, teachers who differentiate make wise and careful choices about what can and should be modified in any given unit to help ensure success and prepare students for post-secondary education, jobs, and life as citizens.

Differentiated instruction also supports the benefits of professional collaboration. The role of the teacher in a differentiated classroom may be less obvious than in a traditional classroom. In a differentiated classroom, teacher-directed whole group instruction is only one strategy. Students also work individually and in small groups based on interests and skill levels. To manage this variety of activities the teacher must be aware of the interest, readiness, and learning profiles of all students and be prepared to differentiate based on that knowledge. A collaborative partnership among professionals supports the implementation of differentiation. General and special education teachers and related service providers can combine their areas of expertise to create the most effective classroom for students. By planning together and sharing responsibility for instruction, teachers are better able to manage the multiple aspects of a differentiated classroom.

This paper provided a brief overview of differentiation and how it relates to inclusive service delivery for students with disabilities. In seeking to differentiate instruction, it is tempting to look for a menu, checklist, or recipe to guide our efforts. However, differentiation done well is a complex process, based on the skillful management of multiple variables. What works well one year will need to be revised another year or with a new group of students. Teachers are encouraged to continue reading and talking about the philosophy and principles of differentiation as they seek to enhance their practice and improve outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities.

References

- Ellis, E. (2000). Project-based learning strategies for differentiating instruction. Tuscaloosa, AL: Masterminds.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2001) *How to differentiate instruction in mixed ability classrooms* (2nd.Ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Additional Resources

The following resources are available for loan through the T/TAC W&M library. Visit the website at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php> for a complete listing of all materials. Select the Library link off the home page and enter *Teaching Techniques* or *Inclusion* as the subject of your search to find additional materials related to this topic.

- *Inclusion: A Fresh Look*, L. Tilton, (IN35.1)
- *Successful Inclusive Teaching: Proven Ways to Detect and Correct Special Needs*. J. Choate, (IN33.2)

This *Considerations Packet* was prepared by Mary Holm, June 2001.