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How “Differentiation” Became a Dirty Word To Teachers

Differentiation has been relegated to yet another buzzword in educational circles.



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A few years ago, I sat through another professional development session focused on differentiation. While listening to the presenter drone on and on about how to teach diverse students with diverse methods, I noticed the negativity permeating throughout the room. The general feeling was that this is yet another **trend** that teachers are **forced** to embrace to keep their jobs and their bosses happy.

While I am a proponent of differentiation, I can certainly appreciate the struggle of teachers who try to individualize instruction in a system set-

up for mass learning.

According to differentiation expert Carol Ann Tomlinson, Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership at the University of Virginia, differentiation takes “*what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn.*”

Therein lies the issue. Teachers are tasked with providing individual support in classrooms where “**teaching to the middle**” is what most of us manage to do. The design of our classrooms limits the amount of personalization that students deserve. Students of all ability levels coalesce in one room with one adult given the edict to ensure every student learns.

Differentiation is ideal; it makes complete sense that students should receive instruction that meets them where they are.

However, according to 2008 national survey administered by The Fordham Institute: “*more than 8 in 10 teachers said differentiated instruction was “very” or “somewhat” difficult to implement.*”

Differentiation is difficult because the structure of school works against us. And because it is so difficult, teachers resist because ultimately we fear what we do not understand.

When the word “differentiation” is tossed around in professional development, teachers openly ignore or scoff at the idea of individualizing instruction. Not because they do not want to, but because it is exceedingly idealistic to expect individual instructions in heterogeneous classrooms.

The Teacher’s View

I have worked with many educators over the past decade of my career that grapple with differentiation. To some, the expectation that all students should be completing the same assignment at the same pace means instruction is fair and equal. Why should students be allowed to

complete a project in an alternate format? Why should students be allowed to read a different text? That’s not fair.

As Chester E. Finn, a Distinguished Senior Fellow and President Emeritus at Fordham, noted teachers are *“being given an all-but-impossible assignment, akin to presenting a general-practitioner physician with twenty-three patients who manifest different symptoms, differing degrees of illness, and, upon examination, very different ailments.”*

This is the reality of a general education classroom. So while I do fault some teachers who refuse to try, it is difficult to fault all teachers when the system sets them up to fail. Asking one person to personalize instruction for twenty five different students with a vast array of differences in background knowledge, skill, and ability looks ridiculous even in writing.

Finn noted the same thing I have seen over the years: *“when speaking to audiences of teachers, I’ve noted that any suggestion that “differentiated instruction” works better in theory than in reality usually elicits applause or, at minimum, a knowing and somewhat cynical chuckle.”*

A cynical chuckle is exactly the response I have witnessed countless times, both in and out of professional development. In fact, while working with my colleagues, it has been a constant source of stress trying to find common ground in our own pedagogical approaches to differentiation. While some teachers are on-board with flexibility in the classroom, most are not.

Ultimately, differentiated instruction requires extra work.

“Regular” teachers are tasked with customizing, tailoring, and individualizing their instruction so that administrators and policy types can declare with straight faces that their classrooms are diverse and inclusive and that every child’s singular education needs are being satisfactorily met”—Charles E. Finn

In short, most of the differentiation movement has centered upon the perception that teachers are individualizing instruction. But it is not

actually happening. In 2010, another national survey showed the same result, “*more than 8 in 10 said differentiated instruction was very or somewhat difficult to implement.*”

Despite the extensive professional development and “all manner of courses, books, in-service programs, itinerant experts, and summer workshops,” teachers still grapple with trying to individualize instruction.



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The Researchers' View

Although the research coffers are not overflowing with evidence to support the success of differentiation, there are studies that validate instructional practices that support students of diverse abilities.

The *Educational Leadership* publication compiled a summary of the research that has been conducted on differentiation in the classroom.

Tieso (2005), found evidence to support that students in math performed at a higher level in heterogeneous classrooms with differentiated instruction. Lawrence-Brown (2004) ascertained that high-level students and those with disabilities thrived in classrooms with individualized instructional strategies, and suggested “*manipulatives, visual aids, charts, audiotapes, and explicit expectations, while also offering an enriched curriculum to gifted students*” as

resources. Baumgartner, Lipowski, and Rush (2003) also found success in differentiation through a study of reading programs employing *“flexible grouping, student choice of learning tasks, self-selected reading time, and access to a variety of texts.”*

While I applaud the research that has been conducted and can validate similar results in my own classroom, it is still difficult for most teachers to truly differentiate their classroom in a way that benefits all.

The Educational Reform View

One of the primary issues in education is the structure of our schools. There is no doubt that pushing students lock-step through grades K-12 is a disadvantage to the development of unique individuals.

However, altering the structure of schools is in the beginning stages, and we should not expect a vast change to our system anytime soon.

What educational reformers can do now is focus on the systematic change in instruction at the classroom level **and** focus on how differentiation is taught to teachers.

Tomlinson advocates for differentiation in content, process, or product. But the only way to differentiate instruction is to have a clear set of standards that guide the instruction in the first place.

Once standards are clearly delineated in a classroom, differentiation becomes much simpler when teachers can find ways for students to meet the standards without compromising on the “fairness” that so many teachers hold dear.

In addition, differentiation does not work without buy-in from administrators. Tomlinson recommends *“leaders first develop a solid understanding of differentiated instruction so that they can present it coherently to teachers and provide committed school-level leadership.”*

I have yet to work with an administrator who understands differentiation. If the leader in the building does not understand what teachers are supposed to do, then it is unlikely that teachers will follow suit on their own.

Even more pressing is the way teachers are educated about differentiation. We literally sit through hours-long presentations delivered via PowerPoint on how to make our instruction interesting.

A bit ironic, isn't it? We are forced to sit through hours of lecture on differentiation.

So here is a crazy idea: differentiate professional development.

Modeling is one of the most powerful learning tools in the educational arsenal. Utilize diverse instructional strategies to actually teach teachers. Reduce the persistent eye-rolling by engaging teachers in their own development. Make it worthwhile.

Differentiation is difficult but not impossible. There are many barriers to meaningfully individualizing instruction.

Incorporate clear learning standards, educate leaders and teachers, and model differentiation strategies throughout the school.

As educators, we are the models of personal growth and learning. We need to practice what we preach, walk the walk, do what we say, etc.

After all, we are in the profession of making the impossible, possible.

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