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# Differentiation: The Current Puzzle

Posted by [Tricia Ebner](#) on Thursday, 02/05/2015

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My sixth graders sat up a little straighter when they saw the pink sheets in my hand. One asked, “Are those our verb contracts?” As I handed the papers out, students began calling out to each other. Questions like “What was your score on the pretest?” and “What does it say you need to work on?” rang through the room.

For many students, grammar is boring and irrelevant. In my classroom, much of what we do with grammar is embedded in our writing and reading; however, I handle some of the basics by giving pretests and then assigning activities and reviews for each student’s specific needs. This form of differentiation has worked well for my students and me for several years.

So I was surprised to read Dr. Jim Delisle’s column in *EdWeek* entitled "[Differentiation Doesn’t Work.](#)" This column shared Dr. Delisle's thoughts, along with supporting research, on why differentiation is NOT the cure for education's woes.

I'll admit—when I first read it, I found myself thinking, "Great. So what I've been encouraging and supporting colleagues in doing, as well as implementing myself, is really a waste of time and effort."

But here's the thing: it's not.

Ideally, in theory, differentiation is an amazing tool with powerful potential. Teachers identify the needs of their students and then plan tasks and activities at varying levels to meet the needs of the wide range of students in their rooms, and help those

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students continue to learn and grow through these differentiated activities. This is the ideal.

However, the reality can be very different.

What Delisle was pointing out is that **if we rely solely on differentiation to meet the needs of every single child, in every single classroom, we're doomed to failure in this effort.**

And he's exactly right. As Delisle notes, “Although fine in theory, differentiation in practice is harder to implement in a heterogeneous classroom than it is to juggle with one arm tied behind your back.”

The reality is this: the spread of needs in general education classrooms is huge. Given the economic realities of the past eight or so years, most general education classrooms are larger, not smaller. Teachers know that in a class of 28, there is likely to be a huge range of skills, abilities, and needs. And it's more challenging to implement strong differentiated lessons and activities for 28 or 30 kids than it is for 18 or 20.

Of course, most teachers are going to do their very best. That's who we are. When kids need something, we do what we can to help meet that need—whether it's adjusting or adapting classwork, or providing lunch money so they aren't hungry all afternoon. We work hard.

Those of us who have been striving to routinely implement differentiated strategies in our general education classrooms probably know better than any of us that this approach is not the cure-all for education's woes. It can be useful for certain students and certain lessons, but it is not a “magic bullet” in education.

My point is this: if we view differentiation as the one cure, the one “fix” that will allow all students to grow and achieve their maximum potential, we're going to frustrate ourselves, our

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colleagues, and our students.

However, there are times and places when it's effective and useful. Classroom teachers need to carefully consider their students, their students' needs, the standards they're working with, and how best to bring all that together. There is research that supports the use of differentiation and points to some very specific situations where it is most effective, such as [this study](#) about high-achieving third graders in low-achieving schools.

#### Resources and Supports:

There are resources and supports available to help teachers use differentiation as one of many strategies. And teachers don't have to do all this on their own. In fact, [a study](#) by the National Research Center on Gifted and Talented points out that it takes a great deal of time, support, and the right kind of educational community to make differentiation happen in a diverse middle school. Teachers who are still working to use differentiation with high-ability students can find some [good suggestions and strategies here](#).

One of my colleagues whose expertise includes strategies for teaching students with Asperger's once told me, "Once you've met a child with Asperger's, you've met a child with Asperger's." Just because a particular set of strategies works with one student doesn't guarantee that set will work with another student.

That's not true only of students who have an Asperger's diagnosis—it's true of all students. The strategies that work with one class and subject will not necessarily be as successful elsewhere. It takes time to set up differentiated activities and lessons, just as it takes time to get to know those students and their strengths and needs.

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## Solution?

Perhaps the solution isn't to give up on differentiation. The solution may rest in how we structure our schools, classes, and teachers' work days. Perhaps with some innovative new thinking, we can arrive at solutions that will make differentiation and other teaching strategies more powerful and effective for students and their teachers. What do your experiences show you about differentiation? What do we need to make differentiation better?

*Note: “[Solving Jigsaw Puzzle](#)” by [Yoel Ben-Avraham](#) is licensed [CC by 2.0](#)*

## 1 Comment

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**Carl Draeger** commented on February 4, 2015 at 10:55pm:

### Tomlinson fan

I, too was flustered by Dr. Jim Delisle's column in *EdWeek*. Why was I spending all this precious time so foolishly. Fortunately, Carol Ann Tomlinson wrote a passionate, yet graceful, rebuttal. Ok, it was a bit more 'in your face'. Tomlinson wrote:

*Common sense and experience tell the story, as well. As the wise Bart Simpson told his teacher in one episode of "The Simpsons": "You think I'm not smart so you're gonna*

*put me in a remedial class and slow down what I do. At the same time, the other kids will keep moving ahead, and you think someday I'll catch up?"*

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She also included a zinger:

***I absolutely understand that differentiating instruction well is not easy. But then, I've never felt that teaching should be easy.***

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You spoke so eloquently about who teachers are. You also asked the million dollar question about how can we do differentiating better. I am pretty sure that the million dollar question has an even more expensive answer. You said, "The solution may rest in how we structure our schools, classes, and teachers' work days." I think that the best answer lies in transformation of schools as opposed to a mere reformation. I don't care if you have the shiniest, longest-lasting and efficient telegraph ever made. No amount of re-engineering is going to make it relevant again. Similarly, the 19th century institution of public education doesn't need a face lift. It needs a resurrection.

The School District in which I work spent a hunk of money on creating and supporting a "Transformation Task Force" made up of community members, employee union representatives, teachers, and administrators. Our charge was to design the optimal school day for students and teachers. We were instructed

to disregard costs and current constraints. We spent 2 years talking/dreaming/planning about 'what could be'. In the end, costs and current constraints ended the discussion. All we had to show for our time and effort was a shelf document.

The good news is that our teachers (myself included) felt empowered to have bolder conversations with other stakeholders. Although no physical changes are evident, the political culture is more open to innovation by the experts in education (teachers). It's my hope that this ending has yet to be written.

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by Tricia Ebner

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