

## **Eight Principles of a Differentiated Classroom**

Use these principles to guide you (Tomlinson 1998):

### **Be Clear About What Matters in the Content Area**

Know the standards. Adjust instruction so that all students can succeed. Students may meet the standard at different levels, and this is one of the joys in the challenge of teaching—how to help a student progress from reaching the standard at a minimum level to a maximum level.

### **Understand, Appreciate, and Build Upon Student Differences**

Have you ever been visited by a “specialist” who is there to “examine” your students to see if they qualify for Special Education services? How do they test the students? Some of the criteria on the checklists would qualify every student for Special Education, and probably many of the teachers, too. While Special Education is a worthwhile and necessary part of a successful school experience, too many students are improperly labeled or placed in programs simply because they don’t fit the mold of the model student.

All students have special needs, and the only labels we should place on students are positive ones, since students tend to rise to our expectations. Treat your students like geniuses, and they will act accordingly. In other words, don’t be so quick to judge and dismiss your students. They may surprise you.

### **Partner Assessment with Instruction**

Assessments are more than tests. Assessments are meant to inform and guide instruction. Period. Feedback is more critical than labeling or pigeon-holing kids. There are two types of teachers: The ones who tell students, “You’re

wrong,” and the ones who ask students, “Why did you say that?” Teachers must question students as to how they arrived at their answers. Students are often sophisticated in their reasoning. Their reasoning may simply differ from ours. Understanding this can help us learn better ways to meet their individual learning needs.

I once worked at a preschool where I enjoyed working with a four-year-old named Francisco. One day I showed him the words *Francisco* and *Papá*, and I asked him to point to the word that said “Papá.” Francisco pointed to the word *Francisco*, and so I told him he was wrong, right? Wrong! I asked him why he thought that was the word, and he informed me that it was bigger. Hmm, that was interesting. Francisco associated the size of words with the size of people and objects, so of course he thought the longer word, *Francisco*, represented the large image Francisco had of his father. While he may have been technically “wrong,” Francisco had shown his teacher a glimpse of how he was thinking. Based on that kind of understanding, any teacher could better serve his needs.

Remember, assess for understanding, to inform instruction, not just at the end of a lesson. Assessment is for the teacher—it provides the justification for the next lesson.

### **Create a Classroom Community that Honors Learning**

Community is everything, and teachers need to build a community of learners in their classrooms. A number of years ago, Dreyer’s Ice Cream conducted a study that found three in 10 Americans do not know their neighbors’ first and last names. That is completely unacceptable. Students must work together and learn to get along. Do not stand in the front of the classroom all day—sit in the seats beside your students. See the room from their perspectives. Each student has so much to offer. Each is an amazing resource waiting to be discovered.

Additionally, teachers need to “teach to the heart,” as the Dalai Lama says. Teachers are not there to make their students smarter. They are there to make them lifelong learners. The world is changing, and people who are willing to investigate and learn new things will have more success adapting to whatever the future holds.

### **Collaborate with Students in Learning**

Ever notice that the landscaping in neighborhoods with high ownership rates is often nicer than on streets with more rentals? Why do you think this is so? Homeowners take better care of their yards because they are more invested. Japanese schools do not employ janitors. Students clean the schools themselves. As a result, their schools are pristine, since no student wants to clean up a big mess. Teachers need to empower their students to take ownership of their classroom. When students see the classroom as belonging to them, they collaborate in making it a better environment. The same goes for assignments. Give students some choices and they will own their work. Ownership fosters pride, diligence, and tenacity. Aren't these the kinds of qualities that will serve our students as they journey through school?

### **Adjust Content, Process, and Product in Response to Student Readiness, Interests, and Learning Styles**

This is known as differentiation. Teaching is like riding a 10-speed bicycle up a hill: You have to shift gears from time to time. Only the stubborn teacher fails to realize the importance of making adjustments. Some subjects lend themselves to easy understanding, while others take a lot more work for the teacher to convey. What kind of knowledge did students have already when they entered the room? Is the lesson relevant to them, or to you? Are you

referencing stories, television shows, movies, experiences, or songs that are well-known to them, or foreign? Are the conditions in your room suitable for students to attend to and participate in instruction? How's the noise level outside? How's the lighting inside? Did your students have breakfast this morning? If you have 40 students in your room, there are 40 different reasons why learning may be difficult. Find out, and adjust.

### **Make Maximum Growth and Continued Success the Goals of a Differentiated Classroom**

It should go without saying that teachers differentiate in order to achieve the best results with students. Everything we do needs to be in the interest of student learning.

### **Stay Flexible (It Is the Hallmark of a Differentiated Classroom)**

Good teachers roll with the punches. A colleague told me about a study conducted to see which professionals made the highest number of decisions per hour. Of all professionals, teachers ranked second. Air traffic controllers came in at number one. I would argue that a kindergarten teacher sometimes has a more difficult job than an air traffic controller.

Say you are trying to teach your students how to add  $2 + 2$ .

“Two plus two equals...,” you say, before a student yells, “Teacher, can I go to the bathroom?”

You stop to write a bathroom pass. Then you resume your lesson.

“So, two plus two equals...,” you say, and then the school secretary knocks on the door and says, “Yo, teacher! You’ve

got a late attendance sheet. You keep on turning in late attendance sheets, and you're going to get late paychecks, you know what I'm saying?" So you apologize and fill in your late attendance sheet. You resume your lesson.

"So, two plus two equals...", you say, and a child from the class next door knocks on the door and asks if students have turned in their pledge sheets for the school's latest fund-raising effort. So you ask students to pass along the sheets, and then you resume your lesson.

"So, two plus two equals...", you say, and then a garbled announcement comes over the intercom, interrupting your lesson again. After taking a moment to try to decode the gibberish, you resume your lesson.

"So, two plus two equals...", you say, and then a parent bursts into the classroom with hands waving, saying, "Maestro, mi hijo no está aquí porque se duele su estomago." You try your best to formulate an answer for her in Spanish before resuming your lesson.

"So, two plus two equals...", you say, and then a cafeteria worker knocks on the door and asks how many students will be eating hot lunch. You do a quick count of student hands before resuming your lesson.

"Okay, kids, two plus two equals three," you say, because you have just lost your mind! Consider everything you just dealt with: students, bureaucracy, and unintelligible intercom speak! No wonder we lose so many teachers in their first three years. We ought to be surprised more are not committed to mental institutions.

## **Tricks of the Trade**

Many teachers fear the word *differentiation* because they are overwhelmed, annoyed, or confused by it. In reality, differentiation is something any good teacher is already striving for, because good teachers constantly adjust their classrooms to

meet the needs of different students. To save your sanity, though, take small steps toward implementing systematic differentiation. It takes time to get the hang of it, but once you do, you will probably wonder how you ever taught without differentiating. You and your students will be happier and more productive for it.

Many teachers differentiate the delivery of their instruction without even realizing it. One of the greatest pleasures is watching great teachers. They constantly experiment, refine, and perfect their classroom strategies. When you come across an idea you like, try it out. If it bombs, hold on to it for another day. What bombs today can save you tomorrow.

Teachers should create classrooms that meet state and federal standards. Maintaining high levels of student understanding is accomplished by supporting all students' learning modalities, and by differentiating through content, activities, and product—based on students' readiness, interests, profiles of learning, and environments. Sound like a lot to remember? Use a simple mnemonic trick to help keep differentiation in mind: "Each student is *RIPE* for learning when the teacher uses his or her thinking *CAP*." *RIPE* stands for Readiness, Interests, Profiles of Learning, and Environments; *CAP* stands for Content, Activities, and Product (Brassell and Rasinski 2008).

## **Organization of This Book**

This book refocuses teachers on the basics. Abraham Maslow developed his Hierarchy of Needs model for understanding human motivation and personal development. Used extensively in businesses, it provides a great model for teachers to keep in mind when working with students. Indeed, each of us is motivated by these needs. Our most basic needs are inborn, and Maslow attempted to explain how these needs motivate us all. Maslow's original Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow 1954) included five levels, from lower-order needs of physical and emotional well-being to higher-order needs of influence and personal development. They are:

1. Physiological needs (biological needs for basic survival)
2. Safety needs (needs for security and stability)
3. Love and belonging needs (affection and attention from different groups)
4. Esteem needs (status, value, and confidence)
5. Self-actualization needs (a person's need to be and do what the person was born to do)

Maslow's model teaches that we must satisfy each need in turn, beginning with basic survival needs. Only when the lower-order needs of physical and emotional well-being are satisfied can we focus on the higher-order needs of influence and personal development. The remainder of this book is organized into five sections based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Many of the anecdotes from this book are drawn from movies, newspaper clippings, reports on National Public Radio, personal experiences, my colleagues, my pastor, and online devotionals. The goal of this book is to demonstrate how we can bring joy back into the classroom by differentiating instruction to meet the various needs that drive us and our students.

It is a dark time out there. Public schools—teachers, in particular—have been taking a beating. While policymakers from both parties push their way in front of microphones to announce what is best for the nation's youth, educators find their opinions almost completely ignored. Government mandates have prompted many great teachers to leave the classroom. This must end.

Let there be light! The goal of this book is to get teachers to "lighten up" and remember—you became teachers to make a lasting, positive impact on students. Constantly consider "AYP." (Besides Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP means asking yourself, "Are You Playing?") The intention of this book is to cram some fun down your throats, so beware! People can argue

about the quality of schools, funding shortfalls, or any number of other educational issues until they are blue in the face, but one variable stands out as a tried-and-true indicator of student success: quality teachers. Haven't you enjoyed inspirational books and movies about teachers who inspired students to write through poetry, who challenged impoverished students to excel at calculus, and who taught all of their standards through music? Yet how many books or films about teachers tell the story of one who dramatically changed students' lives by following a school district's scripted reading program? Great teachers inspire by being a little unorthodox in their approaches. It is my hope that this book inspires your "unorthodoxy."

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Who was your favorite teacher? What do you remember the most about him or her?
2. What is it that brings you the most joy in the classroom?
3. How could you make a conscious decision to choose joy?