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What Is a Differentiated Classroom?

> A different way to learn is what the kids are calling for . . . . All of them are talking about how our one-size-fits-all delivery system—which mandates that everyone learn the same thing at the same time, no matter what their individual needs—has failed them.
>
> Seymour Sarason
>
> *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*

In the United States more than a century ago, the teacher in a one-room prairie schoolhouse faced a challenging task. She had to divide her time and energy between teaching young children who had never held a book and could not read or write and teaching older, more advanced students with little interest in what the young ones were doing. Today's teachers still contend with the essential challenge of the one-room schoolhouse: how to reach out effectively to students who span the spectrum of learning readiness, personal interests, culturally shaped ways of seeing and speaking of the world, and experiences in that world.

Though today's teachers generally work with single classes with students of nearly the same age, these children have an array of needs as great as those among the children of the one-room school. Thus, a teacher's question remains much the same as it was 100 years ago: "How do I divide time, resources, and myself so that I am an effective catalyst for maximizing talent in all my students?" Consider how these teachers answer that question.

- Mrs. Wiggins assigns students to spelling lists based on a pretest, not the assumption that all 3rd graders should work on List Three.
- Mr. Owen matches homework to student need whenever possible, trying to ensure that practice is meaningful for everyone.
- Ms. Jernigan only occasionally teaches math to the whole class at once. More often, she uses a series of direct instruction, practice, and application groups. She works hard to give everyone "equal time" at an appropriate entry point of instruction, matching practice work to student need. She also regroups students for real-world

math applications so they hear a variety of voices in their journey to think mathematically.

• Ms. Enrico offers students a variety of options when it's time to create the final product for a unit. She bases the options on students' interests so they have the chance to link what they've learned with something that matters to them as individuals.

All of these teachers are differentiating instruction. Perhaps they practiced differentiating instruction before it had a name, or without even knowing its name. They are teachers who strive to do whatever it takes to ensure that struggling and advanced learners, students with varied cultural heritages, and children with different background experiences all grow as much as they possibly can each day, each week, and throughout the year.

Hallmarks of Differentiated Classrooms

In differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are, not the front of a curriculum guide. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus, they also accept and act on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity. In differentiated classrooms, teachers ensure that a student competes against himself as he grows and develops more than he competes against other students.

In differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's. These teachers believe that students should be held to high standards. They work diligently to ensure that struggling, advanced, and in-between students think and work harder than they meant to; achieve more than they thought they could; and come to believe that learning involves effort, risk, and personal triumph. These teachers also work to ensure that each student consistently experiences the reality that success is likely to follow hard work.

Teachers in differentiated classes use time flexibly, call upon a range of instructional strategies, and become partners with their students to see that both what is learned and the learning environment are shaped to the learner. They do not force-fit learners into a standard mold. You might say these teachers are students of their students. They are diagnosticians, prescribing the best possible instruction for their students. These teachers also are artists who use the tools of their craft to address students' needs. They do not reach for standardized, mass-produced instruction assumed to be a good fit for all students because they recognize that students are individuals.

Teachers in differentiated classrooms begin with a clear and solid sense of what constitutes powerful curriculum and engaging instruction. Then they ask what it will take to modify that instruction so that each learner comes away with understandings and skills that offer guidance to the next phase of learning. Essentially, teachers in differentiated classrooms accept, embrace, and plan for the fact that learners bring many commonalities to school, but that learners also bring the essential differences that make them individuals. Teachers can allow for this reality in many ways to make classrooms a good fit for each individual.

Although differentiated classrooms embody common sense, they still can be difficult to

achieve. In part, it is difficult to achieve a differentiated classroom because we see few examples of them. The examples that are out there, however, offer a productive way to start exploring differentiated instruction.

Portraits from Schools

Teachers work daily to find ways to reach out to individual learners at their varied points of readiness, interest, and learning preference. There is no one "right way" to create an effectively differentiated classroom; teachers craft responsive learning places in ways that are a good match for their teaching styles, as well as for learners' needs. Following are samples from classrooms in which teachers differentiate instruction. Some are lifted directly from an observation in a classroom. Some are composites of several classrooms, or extensions of conversations with teachers. All are intended to help in forming images of what it looks like and feels like in a differentiated classroom.

Snapshots from Two Primary Classrooms

For a part of each day in Mrs. Jasper's 1st grade class, students rotate among learning centers. Mrs. Jasper has worked hard for several years to provide a variety of learning centers related to several subject areas. All students go to all learning centers because Mrs. Jasper says they feel it's unfair if they don't all do the same thing. Students enjoy the movement and the independence the learning centers provide.

Many times, Isabel breezes through the center work. Just as frequently, Jamie is confused about how to do the work. Mrs. Jasper tries to help Jamie as often as she can, but she doesn't worry so much about Isabel because her skills are well beyond those expected of a 1st grader.

Today, all students in Mrs. Jasper's class will work in a learning center on compound words. From a list of 10 compound words, they will select and illustrate 5. Later, Mrs. Jasper will ask for volunteers to show their illustrations. She will do this until the students share illustrations for all 10 words.

Down the hall, Ms. Cunningham also uses learning centers in her 1st grade classroom. She, too, has invested considerable time in developing interesting centers on a variety of subjects. Ms. Cunningham's centers, however, draw upon some of the principles of differentiated classrooms. Sometimes all students work in a particular learning center if it introduces an idea or skill new to everyone. More often, Ms. Cunningham assigns students to a specific learning center, or to a particular task at a certain learning center, based on her continually developing sense of their individual readiness.

Today, her students also will work at a learning center on compound words. Students' names are listed at the center; one of four colors is beside each name. Each student works with the folder that matches the color beside his or her name. For example, Sam has the color red next to his name. Using the materials in the red folder, Sam must decide the correct order of pairs of words to make familiar compound words. He also will make a poster that illustrates each simple word and the new compound word they form. Using materials in the blue folder, Jenna will look around the classroom and in books to find examples of compound words. She will write them out and illustrate them in a booklet. Using materials in the purple folder,

Tjuana will write a poem or a story that uses compound words she generates and that make the story or poem interesting. She then can illustrate the compound words to make the story or poem interesting to look at as well as to read. In the green folder, Dillon will find a story the teacher has written. It contains correct and incorrect compound words. Dillon will be a word detective, looking for "villains" and "good guys" among the compound words. He will create a chart to list the good guys (correct compound words) and the villains (incorrect compound words) in the story. He will illustrate the good guys and list the villains as they are in the story, and then write them correctly.

Tomorrow during circle time, all students may share what they did with their compound words. As students listen, they are encouraged to say the thing they like best about each presenter's work. Ms. Cunningham also will call on a few students who may be reticent to volunteer, asking them if they'd be willing to share what they did at the center.

Examples from Two Elementary Classrooms

In 5th grade, students at Sullins Elementary work with the concept of "famous people" to make connections between social studies and language arts. All students are expected to hone and apply research skills, to write effectively, and to share with an audience what they have learned as a result of the unit.

Mr. Elliott asks all his students to select and read a biography of a famous person from the literature or history they have studied. Students then use encyclopedias and the Internet to find out more about the person they have chosen. Each student writes a report about a famous person, describing the person's culture, childhood, education, challenges, and contributions to the world. Students are encouraged to use both original and "found" illustrations in their reports. Mr. Elliott gives a rubric to the whole class to coach students in areas such as use of research resources, organization, and quality of language.

In her 5th grade class, Mrs. May gives her students interest inventories to help them find areas where they may have a special talent or fascination, such as sports, art, medicine, the outdoors, writing, or helping others. Ultimately, each student selects an area of special interest or curiosity. The students and teacher talk about the fact that in all areas of human endeavor, famous people have shaped our understanding and practice of the field. She reads them a biographical sketch of a statesman, a musician, and an astronaut. Together, students and teacher describe principles about these famous people.

For example, famous people often are creative, they take risks to make advances in their fields, they frequently are rejected before they are admired, they sometimes fail, they sometimes succeed, and they are persistent. Students test the principles as they discuss historic figures, authors, and people in the news today. In the end, students conclude that people can be famous "for the right reasons" or "for the wrong reasons." They decide to research people who become famous by having a positive impact on the world.

The school media specialist helps each student to generate lists of "positive" famous people in that student's particular categories of interest. She also helps them learn how to locate a variety of resources that can help them research famous individuals. This includes brainstorming possible interview sources. She talks with them about the

importance of selecting research materials they can read and understand clearly. She also offers to help them look for alternatives if they find materials that seem too easy or too hard for them.

Mrs. May and her students talk about how to take notes and try various ways to take notes during their research. They also consider different methods of organizing their information, such as webs, outlines, storyboards, and matrices. They talk about all the ways they can express their understandings: through essays, historical fiction, monologues, poems, caricatures, or character sketches. Mrs. May provides students with a rubric that guides them on the content, research, planning, and outcome of their work. Students also work with Mrs. May individually to set their own goals for understandings, working processes, and final products.

As the assignment continues, Mrs. May works with individuals and small groups to assess their understanding and progress and to coach them for quality. Students also assess each other's work according to the rubrics and individual goals. They ensure that each report shows someone who has made a "positive" contribution to the world. In the end, the whole class completes a mural in the cafeteria that lists the principles of fame in the shape of puzzle pieces. On each puzzle piece, students write or illustrate examples of the principle from their famous person's life. They then add ways in which they believe the principles are or will be important in their own lives. Students also share their final products with an adult who knows something about, or is interested in learning about, the person they researched.

Comparisons from the Middle Grades

In Mr. Cornell's science class, students work in a specific cycle: read the text chapter, answer questions at the end of the chapter, discuss what they have read, complete a lab, and take a quiz. Students do the labs and complete their reports in groups of four. Sometimes Mr. Cornell assigns students to a lab group as a way of managing behavior problems. Often, students select their own lab groups. They read the text and answer the questions individually. Mr. Cornell typically conducts two or three whole-class discussions during a chapter. All students enter the science fair in the spring, with a project based on a topic studied in the fall or winter.

Mrs. Santos often assigns students in her science class to reading squads when they work with text materials. At this stage, group assignments usually are made so students of similar reading levels work together. She varies graphic organizers and learning log prompts according to the amount of structure and concreteness the various groups need to grasp essential understandings from the chapter. She also makes it possible for students to read aloud in their groups or to read silently. Then they complete organizers and prompts together. As students read, Mrs. Santos moves among groups. Sometimes she reads key passages to them, sometimes she asks them to read to her, but she always probes for deeper understanding and helps to clarify their thinking.

Sometimes Mrs. Santos asks students to complete labs, watch videos, or work with supplementary materials before they read the chapter so they have a clear sense of guiding principles before they work with the text. Sometimes they read the text for awhile, do a lab, and go back to the text. Sometimes labs and supplementary materials follow text exploration. Frequently, she will have two versions of a lab going simultaneously: one for

students who need concrete experiences to understand essential principles and one for students who already grasp the important principles and can deal with them in complex and uncertain contexts.

Mrs. Santos gives quizzes and diagnostic learning log entries several times in the course of a unit. Thus, she is aware of which students need additional instruction with key understandings and skills and which students need more advanced applications early in the unit. Students have several choices for a major science project:

- Work alone or with peers to investigate and address a problem in the community that relates to the science they are studying.
- Work in a mentorship role with a person or group in the community using science to address a local problem.
- Study scientists past and present who have positively influenced the practice of science in an area they have studied.
- Write a science fiction story based on the science they have studied with the goal of submitting the story to the school's literary arts anthology.
- Use classroom cameras to create a narrated photo essay that would help a younger student understand how some facet of the science they have studied works in the world.
- Propose another option to the teacher and work with her to shape a project that demonstrates understanding and skill in science.

In Mr. O'Reilly's 8th grade English class, students read the same novels and have whole-class discussions on them. Students complete journal entries on their readings.

In Mrs. Wilkerson's 8th grade English class, students often read novels around a common theme, such as courage or conflict resolution. Students select from a group of four or five novels on the same concept, and Mrs. Wilkerson provides classroom sets of the books. Mrs. Wilkerson also makes sure the novels span a considerable reading range and tap into several interests.

Mrs. Wilkerson's 8th graders meet frequently in literature circles with students reading the same novel. There they discuss what they are reading. Although the various literature circles reflect different degrees of reading proficiency, students in each group take turns serving in one of five leadership roles: discussion director, graphic illustrator, historical investigator, literary luminary, and vocabulary enricher. There are printed guides for each role to help students fulfill them well. Mrs. Wilkerson also varies journal prompts, sometimes assigning different prompts to different students. Often, she encourages students to select a prompt that interests them. There also are many opportunities for whole-class discussion on the theme that all the novels share, allowing all students to contribute to an understanding of how the theme "plays out" in the book they are reading and in life.

Samples from High School

In Spanish I, Mrs. Horton's students complete the same language pattern drills, work on the same oral exercises, read the same passages, and take the same quizzes.

In French I, Mr. Adams's students often work with written drills at differing levels of complexity and with different amounts of teacher support. Their oral exercises focus on the same basic structures, but completion requires different levels of sophistication with the language. Sometimes students can "opt out" of review sessions to create their own French dialogue or to read a French language magazine. Students often work in teacher-

assigned, mixed-readiness pairs to prepare for what the teacher calls "fundamentals quizzes." Students who wish to do so can, from time to time, select a partner to prepare for a "challenge quiz." Success on a challenge quiz nets students "homework passes" they can use to be excused from homework assignments when their work on the quiz indicates they have mastered the homework material.

In Mr. Matheson's Algebra II class, students typically complete the same homework, work independently on in-class drills, and take the same tests.

In her Algebra II class, Mrs. Wang helps students identify key concepts and skills in a given chapter. After various chapter assessments, students are encouraged to look at their own assessment results and select homework assignments and in-class miniworkshops that will help them clarify areas of confusion. She encourages students to decide whether they work most effectively alone or with a partner and to make that choice when there are opportunities to do so. Toward the end of a chapter, Mrs. Wang also gives students individual "challenge problems," which they can tackle alone or with a classmate. She designs the problems to be a mental reach. On end-of-chapter tests, students find challenge problems similar but not identical to the ones Mrs. Wang gave them earlier. There may be five or six different challenge problems distributed among the tests of 30 students.

In physical education, Mrs. Bowen's students usually all work with the same exercises and basketball drills. Mr. Wharton helps his students diagnose their starting points with various exercises and basketball skills, set challenging goals for personal improvement, and chart their personal progress. He particularly stresses growth in two areas: a student's best and weakest area.

In U.S. History, Miss Roberson and her students cover the information in the text sequentially. She lectures to supplement information in the text. Miss Roberson includes a special emphasis on women's history and African American history during the months designated by the school for those emphases.

Mrs. Washington's U.S. History students look for key concepts and generalizations that recur in each period of history they study. They also look for concepts and generalizations unique to each period. They study various points of view and the experiences shared by various cultural, economic, and gender groups. They use a variety of text, video, and taped materials of varying degrees of difficulty. Mrs. Washington sometimes lectures, but she always uses overhead transparencies that provide key points of her lecture to help visual learners. She also stops throughout the lecture to encourage students to talk about key ideas in the lecture and to ensure their grasp of those ideas. Essays and projects often ask students to take their understanding of a period in U.S. history and contrast it with what was going on in another culture and in another geographical area during the same period. Project assignments always offer several options for how a student can express his or her understanding. At the end of each quarter, students have the option of taking their whole grade from an exam, or they can take half of it from an alternative assessment proposed by the teacher and modified by the student with teacher guidance and approval.

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Differentiated classrooms feel right to students who learn in different ways and at different rates

and who bring to school different talents and interests. More significantly, such classrooms work better for a full range of students than do one-size-fits-all settings. Teachers in differentiated classrooms are more in touch with their students and approach teaching more as an art than as a mechanical exercise.

Developing classrooms that actively attend to both student similarities and student differences is anything but simple. The chapters that follow describe classrooms with differentiated, or responsive, instruction, and they offer guidance on how you can, over time, make such classrooms a reality for your class or school.

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Elements of Differentiation

> The biggest mistake of past centuries in teaching has been to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual, and thus to feel justified in teaching them the same subjects in the same ways.
> Howard Gardner (in Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1994)
> *Phi Delta Kappan*

Most effective teachers modify some of their instruction for students some of the time. Many of those teachers also believe they differentiate instruction, and, to some degree, they do. It is not this book's goal, however, to recount the sorts of modifications sensitive teachers make from time to time, such as offering a student extra help during lunch or asking an especially able learner a challenging question during a review session. This book offers guidance for educators who want to develop and facilitate consistent, robust plans in anticipation of and in response to students' learning differences.

Principles That Guide Differentiated Classrooms

There is no single formula for creating a differentiated classroom. What follows are a few of the key ideas about differentiation. As you read and consider them, you might want to think about your own classroom, or refer to Chapter 1 and the illustrations of differentiated classrooms to see how the principles look in action.

The Teacher Focuses on the Essentials

No one can learn everything in every textbook, let alone in a single subject. The brain is structured so that even the most able of us will forget more than we remember about most topics. It is crucial, then, for teachers to articulate what's essential for learners to recall, understand, and be able to do in a given domain.

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher carefully fashions instruction around the essential concepts, principles, and skills of each subject. She intends that students will leave the class with a

firm grasp of those principles and skills, but they *won't* leave with a sense that they have conquered all there is to know. The teacher's clarity ensures that struggling learners focus on essential understandings and skills; they don't drown in a pool of disjointed facts. Similarly, the teacher ensures that advanced learners spend their time grappling with important complexities rather than repeating work on what they already know. Clarity increases the likelihood that a teacher can introduce a subject in a way that each student finds meaningful and interesting. Clarity also ensures that teacher, learners, assessment, curriculum, and instruction are linked tightly in a journey likely to culminate in personal growth and individual success for each child.

The Teacher Attends to Student Differences

From a very young age, children understand that some of us are good with kicking a ball, some with telling funny stories, some with manipulating numbers, and some with making people feel happy. They understand that some of us struggle with reading words from a page, others with keeping tempers in check, still others with arms or legs that are weak. Children seem to accept a world in which we are not alike. They do not quest for sameness, but they search for the sense of triumph that comes when they are respected, valued, nurtured, and even cajoled into accomplishing things they believed beyond their grasp.

In differentiated classrooms, the teacher is well aware that human beings share the same basic needs for nourishment, shelter, safety, belonging, achievement, contribution, and fulfillment. She also knows that human beings find those things in different fields of endeavor, according to different timetables, and through different paths. She understands that by attending to human differences she can best help individuals address their common needs. Our experiences, culture, gender, genetic codes, and neurological wiring all affect how and what we learn. In a differentiated classroom, the teacher unconditionally accepts students as they are, and she expects them to become all they can be.

Assessment and Instruction Are Inseparable

In a differentiated classroom, assessment is ongoing and diagnostic. Its goal is to provide teachers day-to-day data on students' readiness for particular ideas and skills, their interests, and their learning profiles. These teachers don't see assessment as something that comes at the end of a unit to find out what students learned; rather, assessment is today's means of understanding how to modify tomorrow's instruction.

Such formative assessment may come from small-group discussion with the teacher and a few students, whole-class discussion, journal entries, portfolio entries, exit cards, skill inventories, pretests, homework assignments, student opinion, or interest surveys. At this stage, assessment yields an emerging picture of who understands key ideas and who can perform targeted skills, at what levels of proficiency, and with what degree of interest. The teacher then shapes tomorrow's lesson—and even today's—with the goal of helping individual students move ahead from their current position of competency.

At benchmark points in learning, such as the end of a chapter or unit, teachers in differentiated classrooms use assessment to formally record student growth. Even then, however, they seek varied

means of assessment so that all students can fully display their skills and understandings. Assessment always has more to do with helping students grow than with cataloging their mistakes.

The Teacher Modifies Content, Process, and Products

By thoughtfully using assessment data, the teacher can modify content, process, or product. *Content* is what she wants students to learn and the materials or mechanisms through which that is accomplished. *Process* describes activities designed to ensure that students use key skills to make sense out of essential ideas and information. *Products* are vehicles through which students demonstrate and extend what they have learned.

Students vary in readiness, interest, and learning profile. *Readiness* is a student's entry point relative to a particular understanding or skill. Students with less-developed readiness may need

- someone to help them identify and make up gaps in their learning so they can move ahead;
- more opportunities for direct instruction or practice;
- activities or products that are more structured or more concrete, with fewer steps, closer to their own experiences, and calling on simpler reading skills; or
- a more deliberate pace of learning.

Advanced students, on the other hand, may need

- to skip practice with previously mastered skills and understandings;
- activities and products that are quite complex, open-ended, abstract, and multifaceted, drawing on advanced reading materials; or
- a brisk pace of work, or perhaps a slower pace to allow for greater depth of exploration of a topic.

Interest refers to a child's affinity, curiosity, or passion for a particular topic or skill. One student may be eager to learn about fractions because she is very interested in music, and her math teacher shows her how fractions relate to music. Another child may find a study of the American Revolution fascinating because he is particularly interested in medicine and has been given the option of creating a final product on medicine during that period.

Learning profile has to do with how we learn. It may be shaped by intelligence preferences, gender, culture, or learning style. Some students need to talk ideas over with peers to learn them well. Others work better alone and with writing. Some students learn easily part-to-whole. Others need to see the big picture before specific parts make sense. Some students prefer logical or analytical approaches to learning. Other classmates prefer creative, application-oriented lessons. (See the Appendix and the end of this chapter for sources to learn more about readiness, interest, and learning profile.)

Teachers may adapt one or more of the curricular elements (content, process, products) based on one or more of the student characteristics (readiness, interest, learning profile) at any point in a lesson or unit. However, you need not differentiate all elements in all possible ways. Effective differentiated classrooms include many times in which whole-class, nondifferentiated fare is the order of the day. Modify a curricular element only when (1) you see a student need and (2) you are convinced that modification increases the likelihood that the learner will understand important ideas and use important skills more thoroughly as a result.

All Students Participate in Respectful Work

In differentiated classrooms, certain essential understandings and skills are goals for all learners. However, some students need repeated experiences to master them, and other students master them swiftly. The teacher in a differentiated classroom understands that she does not show respect for students by ignoring their learning differences. She continually tries to understand what individual students need to learn most effectively, and she attempts to provide learning options that are a good fit for each learner whenever she can. She shows respect for learners by honoring both their commonalities and differences, not by treating them alike.

For example, some students grasp an idea best when they see it directly tethered to their own lives and experiences. Others can think about the idea more conceptually. Some students strive for accuracy and eschew the uncertainty of creativity. Others thirst for the adventure of divergence and deplore the tedium of drill. Some students want to sing their understanding of a story, some want to dance the story's theme, some want to draw it, and some want to write to the author or a character.

In the end, it is not standardization that makes a classroom work. It is a deep respect for the identity of the individual. A teacher in a differentiated classroom embraces at least the following four beliefs.

- Respect the readiness level of each student.
- Expect all students to grow, and support their continual growth.
- Offer all students the opportunity to explore essential understandings and skills at degrees of difficulty that escalate consistently as they develop their understanding and skill.
- Offer all students tasks that look—and are—equally interesting, equally important, and equally engaging.

The Teacher and Students Collaborate in Learning

Teachers are the chief architects of learning, but students should assist with the design and building. It is the teacher's job to know what constitutes essential learning, to diagnose, to prescribe, to vary the instructional approach based on a variety of purposes, to ensure smooth functioning of the classroom, and to see that time is used wisely. Nonetheless, students have much to contribute about their understanding.

Students can provide diagnostic information, develop classroom rules, participate in the governing process grounded in those rules, and learn to use time as a valuable resource. Students can let teachers know when materials or tasks are too hard or too easy, when learning is interesting (and when it isn't), when they need help, and when they are ready to work alone. When they are partners in shaping all parts of the classroom experience, students develop ownership in their learning and become more skilled at understanding themselves and making choices that enhance their learning.

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher is the leader, but like all effective leaders, she attends closely to her followers and involves them thoroughly in the journey. Together, teacher and students plan, set goals, monitor progress, analyze successes and failures, and seek to multiply the successes and learn from failures. Some decisions apply to the class as a whole. Others are specific to an individual.

A differentiated classroom is, of necessity, student-centered. Students are the workers. The

teacher coordinates time, space, materials, and activities. Her effectiveness increases as students become more skilled at helping one another and themselves achieve group and individual goals.

The Teacher Balances Group and Individual Norms

In many classrooms, a student is an "unsuccessful" 5th grader if he falls short of 5th grade "standards." That the student grew more than anyone in the room counts for little if he still lags behind grade-level expectations. Similarly, a child is expected to remain in 5th grade even though she achieved those standards two years ago. About that student we often say, "She's fine on her own. She's already doing well."

Teachers in a differentiated classroom understand group norms. They also understand individual norms. When a student struggles as a learner, the teacher has two goals. One is to accelerate the student's skills and understanding as rapidly as possible for that learner, still ensuring genuine understanding and meaningful application of skills. The second is to ensure that the student and parents are aware of the learner's individual goals and growth and the student's relative standing in the class. The same is true when a learner has advanced beyond grade-level expectations.

A great coach never achieves greatness for himself or his team by working to make all his players alike. To be great, and to make his players great, he must make each player the best that he or she possibly can be. No weakness in understanding or skill is overlooked. Every player plays from his or her competencies, not from a sense of deficiency. There is no such thing as "good enough" for any team member. In an effectively differentiated classroom, assessment, instruction, feedback, and grading take into account both group and individual goals and norms.

The Teacher and Students Work Together Flexibly

As in an orchestra composed of individuals, varied ensemble groups, sections, and soloists, the differentiated classroom is built around individuals, various small groups, and the class as a whole. They all work to "learn and play the score," albeit with varied instruments, solo parts, and roles in the whole.

To address the various learning needs that make up the whole, teachers and students work together in a variety of ways. They use materials flexibly and employ flexible pacing. Sometimes the entire class works together, but sometimes small groups are more effective. Sometimes everyone uses the same materials, but it is often effective to have many materials available. Sometimes everyone finishes a task at 12:15, but often some students finish a task while others need additional time for completion. Sometimes the teacher says who will work together. Sometimes students make the choice. When the teacher decides, she may do so based on similar readiness, interest, or learning profile needs. Sometimes she places students of differing readiness, interests, or learning profiles together. Sometimes assignment to tasks is random. Sometimes the teacher is the primary helper of students. Sometimes students are one another's best source of help.

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher also draws on a wide range of instructional strategies that help her focus on individuals and small groups, not just the whole class. Sometimes she

finds learning contracts helpful in targeting instruction; at other times, independent investigations work well. The goal is to link learners with essential understandings and skills at appropriate levels of challenge and interest.

Two Organizers for Thinking About Differentiation

Figure 2.1 presents an organizer for thinking about differentiation, and it is a way of thinking about this book as well. In a differentiated classroom, a teacher makes consistent efforts to respond to students' learning needs. She is guided by general principles of facilitating a classroom in which attention to individuals is effective. Then she systematically modifies content, process, or product based on students' readiness for the particular topic, materials, or skills; personal interests; and learning profiles. To do so, she calls upon a range of instructional and management strategies.

The teacher does not try to differentiate everything for everyone every day. That's impossible, and it would destroy a sense of wholeness in the class. Instead, the teacher selects moments in the instructional sequence to differentiate, based on formal or informal assessment. She also selects a time in her teaching plans to differentiate by interest so that students can link what is being studied to something that is important to them. She often provides options that make it natural for some students to work alone and others together, for some to have a more hands-on approach to making sense of ideas and for others to arrive at learning in a visual way. Differentiation is an organized yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning to meet kids where they are and help them to achieve maximum growth as learners.

All classrooms are multifaceted. A differentiated classroom, however, differs in key ways when compared with traditional classrooms. Figure 2.2 (p. 16) suggests some ways in which the two approaches to teaching may vary. Feel free to add your own comparisons to the chart as you think about your own classroom and as you read through the rest of the book. Remember that there is much middle ground between an absolutely traditional classroom and an absolutely differentiated one (assuming either extreme could ever exist). For an interesting self-assessment, think of the two columns in the chart as continuums. Place an X on each continuum where you believe your teaching is now, and place an X on where you'd like it to be.

For More Information

To learn more about the concept of differentiating instruction through readiness, interest, and learning profile, see the Appendix and the following sources:

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Figure 2.1
Differentiation of Instruction

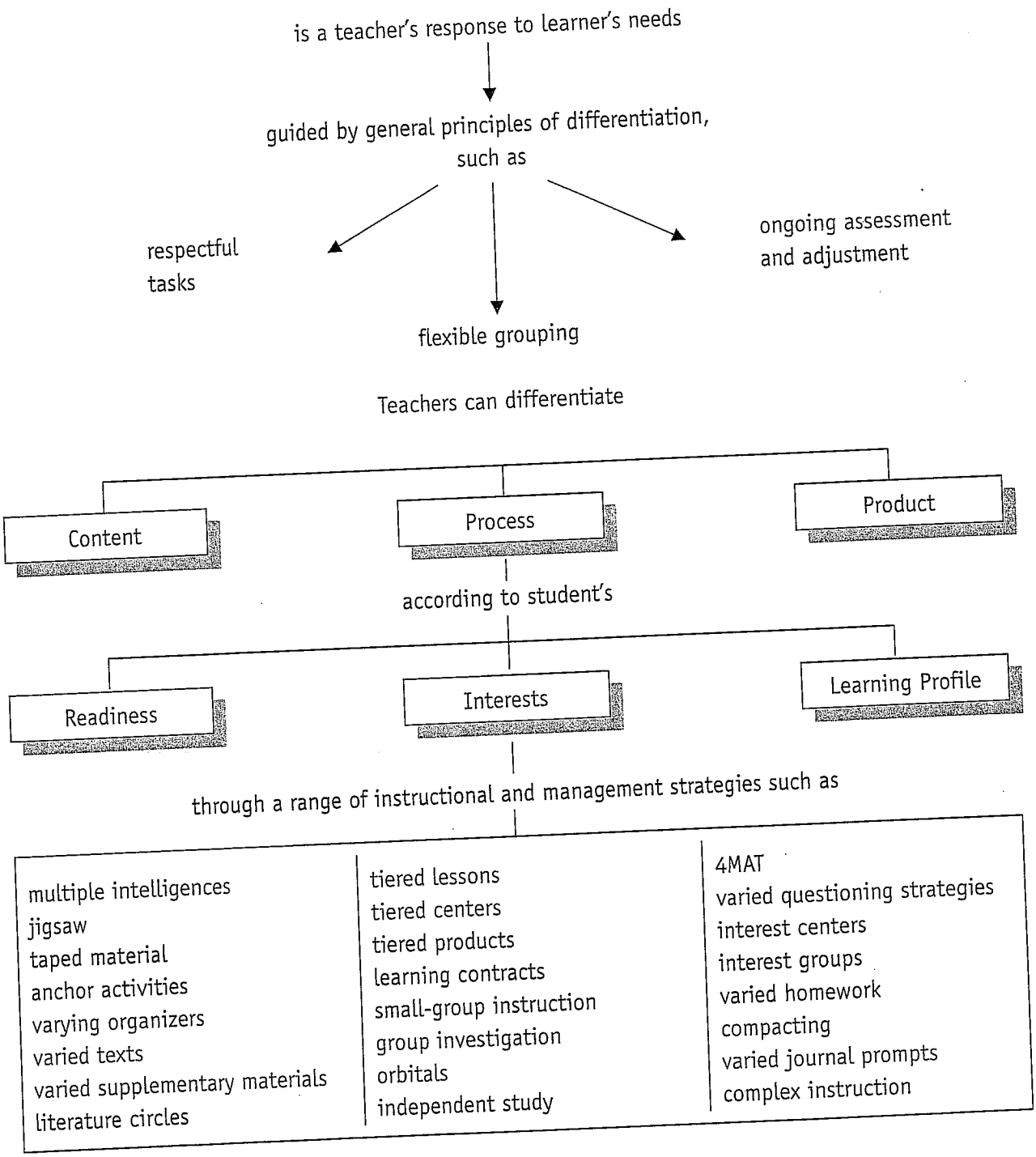

Figure 2.2
Comparing Classrooms

Traditional Classroom	Differentiated Classroom
• Student differences are masked or acted upon when problematic	• Student differences are studied as a basis for planning
• Assessment is most common at the end of learning to see "who got it"	• Assessment is ongoing and diagnostic to understand how to make instruction more responsive to learner need
• A relatively narrow sense of intelligence prevails	• Focus on multiple forms of intelligences is evident
• A single definition of excellence exists	• Excellence is defined in large measure by individual growth from a starting point
• Student interest is infrequently tapped	• Students are frequently guided in making interest-based learning choices
• Relatively few learning profile options are taken into account	• Many learning profile options are provided for
• Whole-class instruction dominates	• Many instructional arrangements are used
• Coverage of texts and curriculum guides drives instruction	• Student readiness, interest, and learning profile shape instruction
• Mastery of facts and skills out-of-context are the focus of learning	• Use of essential skills to make sense of and understand key concepts and principles is the focus of learning
• Single option assignments are the norm	• Multi-option assignments are frequently used
• Time is relatively inflexible	• Time is used flexibly in accordance with student need
• A single text prevails	• Multiple materials are provided
• Single interpretations of ideas and events may be sought	• Multiple perspectives on ideas and events are routinely sought
• The teacher directs student behavior	• The teacher facilitates students' skills at becoming more self-reliant learners
• The teacher solves problems	• Students help other students and the teacher solve problems
• The teacher provides whole-class standards for grading	• Students work with the teacher to establish both whole-class and individual learning goals
• A single form of assessment is often used	• Students are assessed in multiple ways