



**Indicator:** All teachers use assessment data and match instruction and supports to individual student needs. (6827)

**Explanation:** Teachers are best able to differentiate instruction for their students when the Instructional Team has first prepared units of instruction with an array of differentiated activities aligned to standards. The individual teacher can then select appropriate activities for each student. The teacher looks at pre-tests and the student's ongoing work to assess mastery and make adjustments in the plans.

**Questions:** Are your teachers trained in instructional differentiation? Does each teacher work with formative assessments, including criteria to gauge each student's mastery as demonstrated in their work? Do your teachers use these assessments to adjust their plans for students?

Reading through the research on differentiated instruction, the idea of the "recent" development of a diverse classroom came up over and over. However, it is hard to imagine a class at any point in time that was or is not diverse. Consider this quote from a 2003 article:

Seated side by side in classrooms that still harbor a myth of "homogeneity by virtue of chronological age" are students with identified learning problems; highly advanced learners; students whose first language is not English; students who underachieve for a complex array of reasons; students from broadly diverse cultures, economic backgrounds, or both; students of both genders; motivated and unmotivated students; students who fit two or three of these categories; students who fall closer to the template of grade-level expectations and norms; and students of widely varying interests. (Tomlinson et al., p. 120)

It is difficult to imagine any classroom in which there were not students who met at least 3 or 4 of the above characteristics, so claiming a new generation of suddenly diverse classrooms is not necessarily the point to make with differentiation. The real point to make is that for all students, there is a need for instruction to meet them where they are at and take them to the next level of their learning. Hattie (2012) says that we should "emphasize teachers knowing where students are, and then [aim] to move them '+1' beyond this point....For differentiation to be effective, teachers need to know, for each student, where that student begins and where he or she is in his or her journey towards meeting the success criteria of the lesson. Is that student a novice, somewhat capable, or proficient? What are his or her strengths and gaps in knowledge and understanding?" (p. 109).

One way in which teachers collect this information on where a student is in his or her understanding is through the use of instructional team designed pre-tests. The results of these tests can be used to determine the current level of understanding and help both student and teacher to set goals for mastery. Tomlinson et al., (2003) defines differentiation as "an approach to teaching in which teachers proactively modify curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address the diverse needs of individual students and small groups of students to maximize the learning opportunities for each student in a classroom" (p. 121).

Another much quoted study is Vygotsky (1986) and the idea of ‘zone of proximal development.’ Others might call this the “sweet spot” –that place where a student “cannot successfully function alone, but can succeed with scaffolding or support. In that range, new learning with take place. The teacher’s job is to push the child into his or her zone of proximal development, coach for success with a task slightly more complex than the child can manage alone, and thus, push forward the area of independence. It is through the repetitions of such cycles that learners grasp new ideas, master new skills, and become increasingly independent thinkers and problem solvers” (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 126).

These tasks, or learning activities, are described by Redding (2007):

Learning activities, the assignments given to each student targeted to that student’s level of mastery, should be carefully aligned with the objectives included in the unit plan to provide a variety of ways for a student to achieve mastery as evidenced in both the successful completion of the learning activities and correct responses on the unit post-test. An Instructional Team’s unit plans include a description of each leveled and differentiated learning activity, the standards-based objectives associated with it, and criteria for mastery. These activities become arrows in the teacher’s quiver of instructional options for each student. (p. 104-105)

Much attention is given to differentiation in a tiered system of support and in special education. While these are both very important areas for differentiation, the point is that all students are unique and have diverse learning needs. Not every student comes to the classroom with the same skill set, the same base knowledge or the same abilities. Teachers need to be able to swiftly gather information about each student and then adjust accordingly. It is a huge task, and is one of the reasons the instructional team can be a huge support system for the teachers in the building—when they can collaborate and plan together, it makes the work manageable.

#### *For Special Education*

Instructional teams should discuss how to differentiate instruction for specific students based on assessment evidence—including the enrichment of any students who are already proficient prior to unit instruction. Select strategies accordingly. Identify specific Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention strategies to use with at-risk students and

those specific language acquisition strategies (including Sheltered Instruction) to use with English Language Learners. Consult with special educators to create specially designed instruction (SDI) for special education students that is based on students’ identified disabilities (cognitive and behavioral). Determine results indicators and the means for determining the effectiveness of the selected instructional strategies. Decide how to monitor the application and effectiveness of those strategies throughout the unit of study.

*Source: Ainsworth, L. Rigorous Curriculum Design. The Leadership and Learning Center. 2011*

#### *For English Language Learners*

Teachers must make appropriate modifications in planning and implementing instruction based on data for English language learners to allow for variations in time allocation, task assignments, and modes of teacher communication and student response. Teachers should use multiple assessments to measure English language learners’ progress in achieving academic standards and native language standards, and in attaining English proficiency. Assessment results should be used to inform classroom teaching, monitor student progress, and communicate with ELLs and their families.

Teachers must also create opportunities where ELLs work together with their native English-speaking peers to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills for the purpose of learning grade-level academic content. This group interaction will benefit ELL students with sufficient English proficiency because they will have more language directed at them, and they will be asked to produce more academic English as they interact with their peers. In arranging such group experiences, the teacher must exercise caution to ensure that ELL students participate in groups with which they have sufficient comfort.

Lucas and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) explain that teachers must be skilled at identifying the language demands of a lesson so that they can make the content accessible for ELLs. For example, students are often asked to use language persuasively, to compare and contrast ideas, or to draw inferences in various assignments. In order for ELLs to master these required skills, teachers must have the knowledge to explicitly teach the academic language requirements as they teach the content material to ELLs.

## References and other resources

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