

Foreword

Across the United States and around the world, academically diverse classrooms are becoming the norm. If there ever were such things as truly homogeneous classrooms, they have become a relic of the past. Inclusion has become the standard for many students with a variety of disabilities. It is unusual to find schools where all students speak English as their first language. Many schools serve students from both sides of a widening economic divide. Young people are often denizens of a technological world that shapes their learning and absorbs their interests—a world in which many of their teachers feel like aliens.

In the midst of a degree of student variety that was virtually unheard of in the schooling of our most senior teachers and rare in the schooling of our midrange teachers, one-size-fits-all teaching continues to dominate classroom practice. Even our newest teachers have experienced classroom practices that cast all learners as essentially alike, and like their more experienced colleagues, were most commonly taught in teacher preparation programs to teach all students the same thing, in the same way, over the same time span. The result of these realities is that (a) most teachers recognize that their students' learning needs and differences are profoundly important in shaping their school experiences, and (b) few teachers feel confident and competent in either planning or teaching to address the differences.

Not surprisingly, then, there is great interest in what we have come to call “differentiated instruction” in many parts of the world. That interest has escalated over the past 15 years and shows no signs of abating. Differentiation suggests that academically diverse classrooms are a reflection of the reality that human differences are normal and enriching. Students ought not to be sorted and separated into those who can learn and those who can't. Differentiation counsels that it is both possible and desirable for students to work together in academically diverse communities of learners that provide multiple avenues and multiple support systems for accessing powerful learning outcomes that will enrich the lives and prospects of virtually all students.

Differentiation asks of teachers some practices that seem both obvious and revolutionary at once. Believe in the capacity of your students to learn important things if both they and you work hard enough. Connect with them in order to teach them well. Systematically develop a learning environment that provides affirmation, safety, challenge, and support for each student in the class. Establish and articulate clear learning goals that engage students and support their understanding of the content they study. Persistently assess students for the purpose of understanding their growth toward—and often beyond—the essential learning outcomes. Use the data from ongoing assessment to inform instructional plans with the goal of providing learning options that are appropriately challenging for students, incorporate and extend their interests, and support them in learning in ways that are efficient for them individually and as a group. Manage the classroom flexibly, balancing structure and elasticity to make time, space, materials, student groupings, and other resources work *for* rather than against students.

It would be difficult to craft a definition of effective teaching that does *not* sound a great deal like the previous paragraph. Not only is there an abundance of common sense in the attributes of differentiation, there are decades of research

from a variety of fields that support its tenets. Yet these seemingly obvious goals seem revolutionary—if not out of reach or intimidating—precisely because we have so few examples of them at work in our schools. We teach as we were taught, even when presented with evidence that our students are not “us.”

In an effort to align teaching with the needs of contemporary students, many educational leaders—including teachers, principals, and district administrators—have added differentiation to their planning agendas. Honoring and addressing students’ differences is a part of many school and district mission statements. Supporting teacher growth in differentiation is central in many professional development plans. Differentiation as a teacher competency is making its way into teacher evaluation systems. And yet it remains difficult to find classrooms in which teachers proactively plan to address student variance and in which classroom routines systematically address student differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile.

Lane Narvaez and Kay Brimijoin are worth listening to for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that they moved beyond talking about differentiation to transforming a school so that effective differentiation typifies classroom practice—day after day, class after class, year after year. They didn’t “do differentiation” for a year. They have kept at it for nine years and counting. They built a team of excited, committed professionals who refused to let the discomfort of change override the needs of their students. Lane and Kay didn’t pretend to have all the answers. They listened to the teachers who were on the front lines of practice every day, and they all learned together. They didn’t present differentiation in an auditorium and hope for the best; they carved it out in classrooms, starting with whatever teachers were teaching on a given day to whoever their students were.

In this book, these two educators provide us with an inside and in-depth look at what it means to make deep, systemic, sustainable change in a classroom and in a school. The scenarios and examples they provide are rare and real. Over the years, Lane and Kay have practiced what they ask of teachers. They connected with the people they presumed to teach. They established a clear and defensible set of outcomes for effective differentiation. They systematically studied the teachers and used what they learned to tailor professional development to the varied readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of the teachers. They developed an environment in which trust, sharing, and hard work were the norm.

All of those elements are evident in the pages that follow. They teach us what quality differentiation looks like and how teachers come to understand and practice it. They also teach us what it looks like when leaders take seriously their roles in transforming classroom practice.

I have been privileged to learn from Lane, Kay, and the teachers at Conway Elementary School. Through this book, they have become my teachers again. They have reminded me once more that it is, in fact, possible to remake ourselves as educators. Such transformation is not exotic and should not be rare. It simply requires what all worthwhile pursuits require—a vision combined with devilishly hard work, persistence, and partnership.

Carol Ann Tomlinson