Chapter 2

Differentiation Is What Happens When Teachers Focus on Student Growth

The year 2001 was my first year as a teacher. It was one of the best and worst years of my career. It was also the year I started to differentiate for my students. I didn't differentiate instruction for my students to comply with my district's strategic plan. I hadn't (yet) read about differentiation in a book, and I certainly hadn't been taught in differentiated classrooms as a student. Rather, I had an experience that was so emotionally compelling that I saw no other option but to differentiate for my students.

At the time, I taught seventh- and eighth-grade gifted humanities in a small suburban community just north of Chicago. The teacher who held this role previously, Dawn, had been promoted to Director of Engaged Learning for the district. In her new role, Dawn was to work with *all* teachers (veteran and new) on their instruction. Dawn was beloved by students, parents, teachers, and administrators. She was a living legend—her face is literally memorialized in bronze on a plaque outside of the district office . . . next to the street named in her honor.

I, on the other hand, like most 22-year-olds, thought I already knew everything. I mean, I had a lot of educational experience. I had just

completed 17 years of school as student and was still taking grad school classes. I knew what to do. I would teach my students the way I was taught. My students were high-achievers, so I simply gave them "harder" and "longer" assignments. And, for a few months, all seemed to be going just fine.

November came, and I experienced my first parent–teacher conferences. I spent extra time preparing to meet with the parents of a student who I believed was not putting forth any effort. Frankly, I had no idea why Joey (not his real name) was in the gifted class. I remember sitting across from the parents of this seventh-grade boy and telling them that their son could benefit from putting forth more effort, completing his homework, and being more respectful to his classmates and me.

I expected the parents to apologize on behalf of their son. I expected them to feel embarrassed by his performance. But, this is not what happened. Instead, the parents started asking me questions like: "Is it possible that Joey isn't completing homework because the homework is not useful? Do you think that Joey would be more respectful to you if you were more respectful of his needs?" As I stumbled over my answers trying desperately to defend my professional actions and authority, the father of this child interrupted me and said,

> "You have some big shoes to fill, and from the looks of it, you will never be able to fill them."

Ouch! What a blow to my ego and a test of my emotions. I bit the inside of my cheeks so as to not break down in front of them. Finally, the conference ended. But, my journey was just beginning . . . *what was I going to do now?*

Luckily for me, conferences directly preceded a 5-day Thanksgiving break. During that break, I spent 2 days sulking, 2 days being angrily defensive, and on the 5th day, something changed. I asked myself:

> "Could these parents be right?"

Perhaps the homework I assigned was irrelevant. Come to think of it . . . I hadn't ever thought about students' learning needs; I was simply focused on covering content. Then it hit me.

> "Maybe, just maybe, I was the one who needed to change and not the student."

This was a very scary realization. I had absolutely no idea what this change would look like or where to start. I knew I wanted to teach in a way that would best meet the academic and social-emotional needs of each

of my students, but how in the world would I do this? Plus, what if the other parents didn't agree with my new approach? What if they were upset that I was no longer going to give homework for the sake of giving homework? What if they were upset that their child was assessed using a different method than one of his classmates?

The following Monday, I arrived at school early and found Dawn (my predecessor). I told Dawn everything that happened at conferences. I rallied off all of my fears and questions. Dawn acknowledged my concerns and said:

> "These are the experiences that mold us as educators. You can choose to try something new, or you can continue doing what you are doing and see what happens."

I chose to try something new. This was the best decision I ever made. Dawn partnered with me to ensure that I was able to meet all of my students' needs. Our work together largely centered on our joint learning from another legend, differentiation expert Carol Ann Tomlinson. Tomlinson's book, *The Differentiated Classroom* (2014), became our bible.

Differentiation Lessons Learned

The year 2001 was the start of my path to learn how to best differentiate for my students, and even as a differentiation instructional coach and consultant, I am *still* learning more about the how and why of differentiation. What helps me the most in my work with differentiation is to remember the following five lessons I have learned and keep them in the forefront of my mind as I plan instruction or work with others to plan instruction.

Lesson 1: Differentiation Is Not a Goal—It Is a Result

Contrary to popular belief, differentiation is not something else teachers "have to do." Rather, differentiation is what happens when teachers' focus is student growth. In fact, differentiation is the natural byproduct of correct implementation of almost all research-based, high-impact instructional strategies. *In short, differentiation is not the goal: It is the result.*

Take for example the samples of teacher goals in Figure 2.1, one goal in each category of **the Big Four**

> The **"Big Four"** (classroom management, content, instruction, and formative assessment) is a framework for improving instruction (Knight, 2007, p. 141).

(classroom management, content, instruction, **formative assessment**) set by teachers during instructional coaching cycles (these goals are applicable to teachers who work with a coach or who work with teammates or administrators to achieve professional goals) (Knight, 2007, p. 141). You can see that while all of these goals resulted in differentiation, none of the teachers had the word differentiation in their stated goal.

> Differentiation is what happens when teachers' focus is student growth.

Figure 2.1   Professional Goals Resulting in Differentiation

Classroom Management

Goal: I want to decrease the number of disruptions.

- *Data collected:* Number of disruptions in a 40-minute period
- *Strategy used:* Break up whole group instruction with structured partner work
- *How did differentiation ensue?* Rally Coach allowed for students at different places in their learning to partner and be challenged appropriately

Content

Goal: I want students to see the relevancy of the content in a unit.

- *Data collected*: Student engagement data
- *Strategy used:* Essential question(s)
- *How did differentiation ensue?* Students self-identified areas of relevance to the content and then wrote pieces on different topics all related to the subject area, rather than in previous years where all students wrote on the same topic.

Instruction

Goal: I want to engage more students in class discussions.

- *Data collected:* Types, kind, level of questions asked and number of students volunteering to answer
- *Strategy used:* **Questioning** (using Bloom's taxonomy and **Webb's Depth of Knowledge**) and options for multiple students to answer simultaneously (using various tech tools)
- *How did differentiation ensue?* Asking questions at various levels (more open than closed questions, more analysis questions than knowledge questions) increased the number of students contributing answers that allowed the teacher to assess students' understanding of concepts more thoroughly and adjust pacing for those students (differentiate the process) accordingly.

> **Formative Assessment**
>
> Goal: I want to involve students in the formative assessment process.
>
> - *Data Collected:* Type of peer feedback offered
>
> - *Strategy used:* Peer feedback and video analysis of feedback
>
> - *How did differentiation ensue?* Student products were differentiated as peer feedback promoted student autonomy and allowed choice in showing mastery of a concept or skill.
>
> Goals aligned to The Big Four Framework outlined by Jim Knight in *Instructional Coaching* (2007).
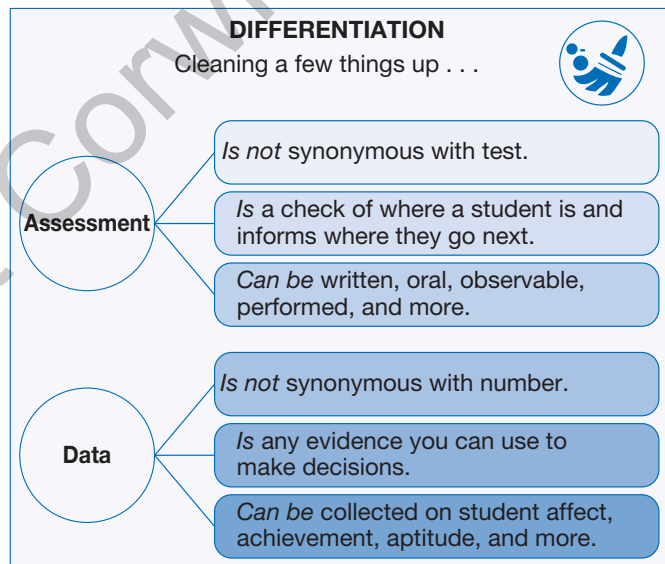
Lesson 2: The Terms *Data* and *Assessment* Are Often Misunderstood

I was never the best geometry student, but the one thing that stuck with me was "all squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares." The same can be said about assessments, "all tests are assessments, but not all assessments are tests."

The *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines the word *assess* as, "to make an approximate or tentative judgment." Tests can certainly do this. However, often times, tests are the least effective way to ascertain where students are and what they need. Test results amass a certain type of information, and to differentiate successfully, other evaluations (observations, writing samples, conversations) and facets (social-emotional, aptitude, growth) of student performance must be considered.

The way we assess and the assessments we utilize give us the data we need to properly differentiate instruction for students.

Figure 2.2   Differentiation: Cleaning a Few Things Up

DIFFERENTIATION
Cleaning a few things up . . .

Assessment
- *Is not* synonymous with test.
- *Is* a check of where a student is and informs where they go next.
- *Can be* written, oral, observable, performed, and more.

Data
- *Is not* synonymous with number.
- *Is* any evidence you can use to make decisions.
- *Can be* collected on student affect, achievement, aptitude, and more.

Assessment: method used to determine where a student is in his or her learning

Therefore, we must use a variety of reliable assessments or our attempts to differentiate instruction may fall flat because the assessment data we try to use do not give us the information we need.

The unfortunate thing is that the word *data* does not have a warm connotation. Saying "data" in conjunction with student learning often feels sterile and uncaring. I often hear sentiments like, "students are more than a number."

At the 2016 National ASCD Conference, I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to present on differentiation with differentiation's foremost thought-leader, Carol Ann Tomlinson and interestingly, even Carol Ann sometimes cringes at the word data. I will always remember her response to one participant when he asked a question about using data. Carol Ann said, "Data sounds like something spit out by a machine."

I agree, students are more than a data point. They are more than a number spit out by a machine. So are data themselves. Data are more than just numbers, and they can be gathered and appraised in compassionate ways.

> Students are more than a data point.

Let's look at an analogous situation: a child's visit to his pediatrician. When a child visits his doctor, he is more than a number there, too. To form a diagnosis, pediatricians look at a variety of evidence, some of which comes from a lab or machine (weight, temperature, blood count), and some comes from other assessments (conversations, questionnaires, observing the patient perform a task). Yet, there is little complaint about using multiple types of data in a medical setting. In fact, I surmise that if a doctor made a diagnosis without various types of data, gathered through a variety of types of assessment data, there would be quite a bit of protesting by parents.

So, what is the difference? In education, we seem to think the only usable *data* we have are numbers: test scores, IQ scores, attendance rates, etc. This is like saying the only data a doctor can use is the patient's height, weight, blood pressure, etc.

If this were the case, think of how many misdiagnoses would be made from only using these pieces of evidence? The doctor would not have some of the vital information (data) he needs to diagnose the patient and prescribe a course of action.

Instead, doctors are also highly dependent on information that comes directly from the patient via conversations and observations. These are data that are collected with sensitivity and not calculated by an algorithm. Doctors use information from all of these sources to differentiate their approach for their patients, so they thrive.

The same holds true for using data to differentiate for our students in the classroom. When we say the word *data* in education, we are simply referring to the different types of evidence we gather and consider to differentiate instruction for our students, so they thrive.

Lesson 3: It Is Easy to See Different— It Is Not Easy to See Differentiation

This is because in order for something to qualify as differentiation, evidence (qualitative and quantitative) must be considered.

One of the most common questions I get asked is, "What if my principal does a walkthrough? How will they *see* I am differentiating?" The answer is, they won't unless they collect some evidence from speaking with you or speaking with your students. Students could feasibly be working on different tasks in a classroom, but without some probing questions, it can be difficult to ascertain whether or not the tasks have been differentiated and even more difficult to ascertain whether or not the tasks have been differentiated appropriately.

School principals, like 2016 Principal of The Year Mark McCord, are keenly interested in whether or not differentiation is occurring in a classroom because they want to support teachers in their efforts to differentiate, not play a game of "Gotcha." Mark describes his experience observing teachers and looking for differentiation in the vignette below:

Administrator's Voice

Mark McCord, Principal

Stockdick Junior High

Katy, TX

As principal of a Title I eligible campus, I fully recognize the extreme variability in our learners. One critical element to engage our students and lead them
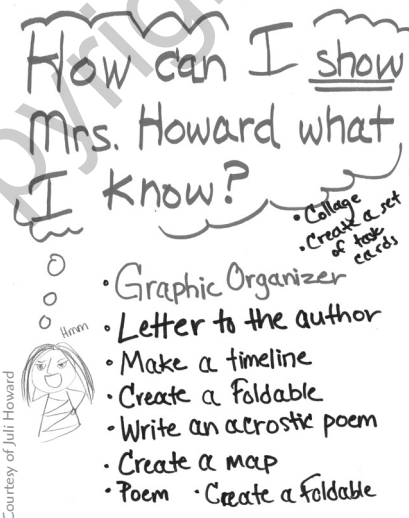
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down the path to success is differentiation. When I observe teachers (both formally and informally), I look for certain elements to determine whether or not learning is differentiated appropriately for our students. Let's explore two different language arts classrooms with different levels of differentiation occurring.

Let me start with an undifferentiated eighth-grade lesson I observed. When I entered the room, I noticed that every student had a copy of *Monster*, written by Walter Myers. Booming from a CD player at the front of the room was an audio version of the book with voice actors speaking their parts. I looked to the board for the posted activities. The only thing listed was "Audio Play of *Monster.*" During my time in the class, the teacher stopped the audio two times to ask low-level, clarifying questions. The students were compliant in following along in their books as the audio progressed. Their yawns and slumped posture were all signs that many had tuned out and were not cognitively engaged. I did not question students about their learning because of the whole class nature of the lesson. It felt like this lesson was being done *to* the students instead of *for* the students. I found myself struggling to stay in the room for the full 15 minutes.

In contrast to the eighth-grade lesson was a seventh-grade lesson in which the teacher was employing a Reader's Workshop approach. The first thing I noticed upon entering the room was that a proficiency scale was displayed on the multimedia board at the front. This learning continuum clearly identified the targets along with the scaffolding of skills necessary to show or exceed mastery. I noticed that every student had a different text. Some students were reading or writing independently, while others were working together. The teacher was quietly conferring with a student. I started asking students about their learning. I was impressed that each one of them could identify their level of proficiency based upon the projected scale. Most were working on moving from emerging to proficient. When I asked students who were already proficient how they pushed themselves to exemplary, they pointed to an anchor chart posted in the room. They shared that they were able to create a variety of self-selected products to demonstrate that they were exemplary.

I then moved to eavesdrop on the conferring conversation that

How can I **show** Mrs. Howard what I know?

- Collage
- Create a set of task cards
- Graphic Organizer
- Letter to the author
- Make a timeline
- Create a foldable
- Write an acrostic poem
- Create a map
- Poem · Create a foldable

the teacher was having with a student. She was questioning him about characters in his self-selected book. He shared different examples of internal and external character responses. She left him with the charge of looking for connections between character responses and the book's plot. She then made some notes and went to the next student. In this classroom, it was obvious that the teacher was not only differentiating by choice, but also according to their readiness. Students owned their learning in this classroom. Before I knew it, 20 minutes had passed, and I reluctantly left to explore another class.

These two examples are at the opposite ends of the differentiation continuum. I often find it much easier to see when differentiation is not happening than when it is. If, as an administrator, you find yourself in this situation, remember to talk to the students during your time in the classroom. If as a teacher you sometimes struggle to determine the best way to differentiate for your students, again, talk with them. One can never go wrong seeking their students' voices.

Mark's advice to seek student's voice (individually or collectively) to determine how to differentiate for students will produce desirable results for teachers and likewise for administrator's during a walkthrough or observation. If administrators seek to determine whether or not differentiation is occurring in the classroom, they can consider asking students questions such the following, which slightly differ from questions typically asked of students during a walkthrough.

Lesson 4: Differentiation May Never Feel "Easy"

There has rarely been a time where I have thought to myself, "I am doing an amazing job differentiating for my students." As an instructional coach,

Figure 2.3   Questions to Ask on a Differentiation Walkthrough

Ask Students This Question	Instead of This One . . .
What is your learning goal?	What is the learning/lesson objective?
Where are you on your path to reach your goal? How have you been monitoring your success?	What are you working on?
Can you tell me about the roles your groupmates and you have?	What is your group doing?

I interact with dedicated, hardworking teachers who share heartfelt sentiments that they feel stressed because they aren't sure if they are doing a "good job" differentiating instruction. Teachers in this position, like Stephanie Sordini (who happens to be one of my former students and is now a fifth-grade teacher) tend to have a fight-or-flight reaction to differentiation as she describes below:

Teacher Voice

Stephanie Sordini, Fifth-Grade Teacher

Hawthorn School District 73

Lake Zurich, IL

The excitement on the first day of school encompasses so many emotions, not only for students, but for educators as well. The moments of meeting your students on the first day, and only getting a glimpse of their evolving personalities, ambitions, and what sometimes feels like never-ending needs, can be the most exciting, while equally exhausting day. The truth behind the first bell can be some of the most rewarding truths, accompanied by many unspoken struggles. Differentiation is one of those rewarding struggles that so many teachers face.

In today's 21st century classroom, we have the privilege to have a variety of learning abilities, background knowledge, and interests to participate in classroom discussions and activities. Our classrooms today are extremely diverse, and it would almost seem absurd to not meet every child's individual needs. Yet, there are so many teachers who oppose and shy away from differentiation. I have to admit that taking so many factors of differentiation into account is not an easy task. It is time-consuming, filled with formal and informal data, and constant self-doubt that the lesson you created meets every child's individual needs. But when incorporated into the classroom via assessment and instruction, student's academic achievement, as well as social emotional learning benefits, the effort is worth the initial struggle.

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Lesson 5: There Will Always Be Challenges and a Way to Overcome Them

Daniel Meyer, a sixth-grade self-contained teacher, has been teaching for 4 years. Daniel (like Stephanie) is a former student turned teacher. Daniel

and I have kept in touch and have spoken several times over the past few years about differentiation specifically. Daniel works in a high-needs school district and has come to realize that while differentiation is certainly challenging at times, overcoming these challenges is quite rewarding—for him and his students.

Teacher Voice

Daniel Meyer, Sixth-Grade Teacher

Chandler Unified School District

Chandler, AZ

Differentiated instruction is a topic that educators have been hearing about, learning in professional development courses, and of course trying to master in their classrooms for a long time. People tend to think differentiation is difficult, when really it just requires dedicating time, thought, and practice.

I have been a teacher at a Title I school in the downtown area of a large suburb of Phoenix, AZ, for the past 4 years. Before that, I student taught at two schools in the same district but in different parts of the same suburb where it is higher on the socioeconomic ladder. At my school, we have many English Language Learners (ELLs), along with students who come from broken homes or low poverty, which calls for my colleagues and me to greatly utilize differentiated instruction in our everyday practice. Differentiation has been stressed to me since I began my teaching program, and it's still stressed today through professional development workshops and staff meetings. At first, I thought I had to alter every single student's homework or test. When, really, what I have found is when I connect with students individually, I can better assess what they need, and often students need the same thing.

For example, in one of my reading classes this year, I had a student who had moved here from El Salvador halfway through the year and didn't know any English. In getting to know her, I immediately discovered how hardworking she was and that she was determined to learn English. We worked together to decide what would be the best way for her to join our class. Ultimately, we decided that altering the content to make it accessible for her was our best option. Therefore, when our class read a story in a whole group lesson, she would listen to the story on the computer, while the rest of the class read it aloud. She was able to stop at parts when necessary to go back over something or to note when the vocabulary words of the lesson were introduced in the story and still join the rest of the class for additional activities. The interesting thing was, I found that this strategy worked well for other students, too.

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Noticing these patterns has been instrumental in helping me distinguish between differentiation being difficult versus requiring time and thoughtfulness. With the population at my school and taking into consideration some of the home lives that my students have, differentiation is vital in my class. I first look at the various levels of my students through their benchmark assessments, state assessments, and other pieces of data that help me group the students for small group rotations/teaching. This past year, I had five different levels of readers to use when meeting with my five leveled groups, one of the groups being an ELL group. Within these small groups, I then differentiate the activities to meet even more needs of the students as they self-identify them. For example, some readers within a group may need more practice with their reading fluency where others need more practice with comprehension of a text. The same thing goes for math, where some students may need more practice with operations, while others are ready to apply the content to real life applications.

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As Daniel points out, differentiation requires time and thought. In this process, teachers sometimes feel "stuck" because their thoughts lead them to perceived barriers like those indicated in the chart below. I offer additional considerations when one of these obstacles rears its ugly head and all of these concerns and considerations as outlined in Figure 2.4.

Throughout reading this book, you may feel new concerns or hesitations. I encourage you to reread this chapter and recall the pieces of advice I offer in the introduction and persevere.

Chapter 3 will examine the four areas where teachers can differentiate for student need and want: content, process, **product**, and learning environment. Part II will then detail the process for planning and implementing student-driven differentiation.

Figure 2.4   Differentiation Concerns and Considerations

Differentiation Concern	Considerations
I don't have time to plan something different for each student.	You do not need to plan for each individual student. Plan learning opportunities that correspond with the learning progressions of the standard(s) you are assessing. Then, use formative assessment results to flexibly group (and regroup) students with regard to where they are in the learning progression.

Differentiation Concern	Considerations
How do I manage a classroom of students all at different places?	Shift the way you look at management. The teacher can effectively manage students by giving them a clear road map for learning; then the students can be partners in managing their progress. The teacher then mixes whole group, small group, and 1:1 instruction to address the needs of students. When the learning intentions and success criteria are clear, students can take ownership of their learning and will be productive even during the times the teacher is working with other students.
What do I do with the students who "finish"?	Stop asking this question. We are never finished learning. Instead, ask yourself, what comes next? Plan for this at the beginning of the unit to be prepared for students who will need more.
What do I do with the students who aren't progressing?	The good news is, you are using evidence to alert you to the fact that students aren't learning and you have the opportunity to try something else. Focus on what you can do (*offer students different text and eliminate superfluous requirements*) rather than focus on what the student is not doing (*paying attention*).
The end of the quarter is Friday; everyone has to be done by then.	Nope. Learning does not know dates. Systems know dates. You can continue a unit of study even after a quarter date ends; it's ok. The key is how you report learning, and ensure all stakeholders understand this piece.

Discussion Questions

◗ Why do you think there is so much confusion around terms like differentiation, data, and assessment?

◗ What distinguishes student-driven differentiation from other definitions of differentiation?

◗ What role do student–teacher relationships play in regard to the role of feedback?

◗ In what ways can teachers engage school leaders in the benefits of differentiated instruction?

online resources

Visit the companion website at http://resources.corwin .com/studentdrivendifferentiation.