

COMMENTARY

Differentiation Doesn't Work

By James R. Delisle

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Editor's note: This Commentary by James R. Delisle provoked an avalanche of reader comments. Because of the extraordinary level of interest in the essay, Education Week published a response by one of differentiated instruction's foremost proponents, Carol Ann Tomlinson, "[Differentiation Does, in Fact, Work](#)". (See also Mr. Delisle's [letter to the editor](#) in response to the online comments and [our primer on the issue](#).)



Let's review the educational cure-alls of past decades: back to basics, the open classroom, whole language, constructivism, and E.D. Hirsch's excruciatingly detailed accounts of what every 1st or 3rd grader should know, to name a few. It seems America's teachers and students are guinea pigs in the perennial quest for universal excellence. Sadly, though, the elusive panacea that will solve all of education's woes has remained, well, *elusive*.

But wait! The solution has arrived, and it's been around long enough to prove its worth. What is this magical elixir? Differentiation!

Starting with the gifted-education community in the late 1960s, differentiation didn't get its mojo going until regular educators jumped onto the bandwagon in the 1980s. By my count, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (now known simply as ASCD) has released more than 600 publications on differentiation, and countless publishers have followed suit with manuals and software that will turn every classroom into a differentiated one.

There's only one problem: Differentiation is a failure, a farce, and the ultimate educational joke played on countless educators and students.

In theory, differentiation sounds great, as it takes several important factors of student learning into account:

- It seeks to determine what students already know and what they still need to learn.
- It allows students to demonstrate what they know through multiple methods.
- It encourages students and teachers to add depth and complexity to the learning/teaching process.

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Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? The problem is this: Although fine in theory, differentiation in practice is harder to implement in a heterogeneous classroom than it is to juggle with one arm tied behind your back.

Case in point: In a [winter 2011 Education Next article](#), the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Michael Petrilli wrote about a University of Virginia study of differentiated instruction: "Teachers were provided with extensive professional development and ongoing coaching. Three years later the researchers wanted to know if the program had an impact on student learning. But they were stumped. 'We couldn't answer the question ... because no one was actually differentiating,' " the researcher, Holly Hertberg-Davis, told Petrilli.

And, Ms. Hertberg-Davis herself wrote in a **2009 article in *Gifted Child Quarterly***: "It does not seem that we are yet at a place where differentiation within the regular classroom is a particularly effective method of challenging our most able learners."

Too, Mike Schmoker, in a 2010 Commentary for *Education Week* titled "**When Pedagogic Fads Trump Priorities**," relates that his experiences of observing educators trying to differentiate caused him to draw this conclusion: "In every case, differentiated instruction seemed to complicate teachers' work, requiring them to procure and assemble multiple sets of materials, ... and it dumbed down instruction."

As additional evidence of the ineffectiveness of differentiation, in a **2008 report by the Fordham Institute**, 83 percent of teachers nationwide stated that differentiation was "somewhat" or "very" difficult to implement.

It seems that, when it comes to differentiation, teachers are either not doing it at all, or beating themselves up for not doing it as well as they're supposed to be doing it. Either way, the verdict is clear: Differentiation is a promise unfulfilled, a boondoggle of massive proportions.

The biggest reason differentiation doesn't work, and never will, is the way students are deployed in most of our nation's classrooms. Toss together several students who struggle to learn, along with a smattering of gifted kids, while adding a few English-language learners and a bunch of academically average students and expect a single teacher to differentiate for each of them. That is a recipe for academic disaster if ever I saw one. Such an admixture of students with varying abilities in one classroom causes even the most experienced and conscientious teachers to flinch, as they know the task of reaching each child is an impossible one.

It seems to me that the only educators who assert that differentiation is doable are those who have never tried to implement it themselves: university professors, curriculum coordinators, and school principals. It's the in-the-trenches educators who know the stark reality: Differentiation is a cheap way out for school districts to pay lip service to those who demand that each child be educated to his or her fullest potential.

Do we expect an oncologist to be able to treat glaucoma? Do we expect a criminal prosecutor to be able to decipher patent law? Do we expect a concert pianist to be able to play the clarinet equally well? No, no, no. However, when the education of our nation's young people is at stake, we toss together into one classroom every possible learning strength and disability and expect a single teacher to be able to work academic miracles with every kid ... as long as said teacher is willing to differentiate, of course.

The sad truth is this: By having dismantled many of the provisions we used to offer to kids on the edges of learning (classes for gifted kids, classes for kids who struggle to learn, and classes for those whose behaviors are disruptive to the learning process of others), we have sacrificed the learning of virtually every student. In the same Fordham Institute report cited earlier, 71 percent of teachers reported that they would like to see our nation rely more heavily on homogeneous grouping of advanced students, while a resounding 77 percent of teachers said that, when advanced students are paired with lower-achieving students for group assignments, it's the smart kids who do the bulk of the work.

A second reason that differentiation has been a failure is that we're not exactly sure what it is we are differentiating: Is it the curriculum or the instructional methods used to deliver it? Or both? The terms "differentiated instruction" and "differentiated curriculum" are used interchangeably, yet they are not synonyms. Teachers want and need clear guidance on what it is they are supposed to do to reach differentiated Nirvana, yet the messages they receive from the "experts" are far from consistent. No wonder confusion reigns and teachers

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feel defeated in trying to implement the grand goals of differentiation.

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Differentiation might have a chance to work if we are willing, as a nation, to return to the days when students of similar abilities were placed in classes with other students whose learning needs paralleled their own. Until that time, differentiation will continue to be what it has become: a losing proposition for both students and teachers, and yet one more panacea that did not pan out.

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