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Differentiated Instruction

By Elizabeth Barrett-Zahn

Learning is certainly not a “one size fits all” kind of experience. We learn in many different ways and through many different modalities and sources. Teachers have always been aware of these learning differences and have tried to accommodate and individualize learning to fit students’ needs. At times, this task of differentiating can feel overwhelming and insurmountable in terms of how to address each child’s need separately or mistakenly through defined learning styles.

Howard Gardner, the progenitor of the multiple intelligences (MI) theory, states that MI has become erroneously mixed with terms such as *learning styles* (Strauss 2013). Labeling students as visual learners or impulsive carries unnecessary consequences and are not helpful in the ultimate goal of reaching children. Gardner encourages the elimination of “learning styles” from the conversation.

So how do we go about differentiating lessons in a preschool or elementary class filled with students with individual needs? Do we individualize, pluralize, or both? How do teachers begin to address the need for individualized work with consistency?

We first need to develop a pedagogical mindset and toolkit for assessing and incorporating differentiation fluidly and with fidelity, therefore enabling students to make sense of learning as they develop skills within a framework of varying levels of support.

In the past, red, yellow, and green tiered groups were set up for reading and math. These were not differentiated groups, but rather holistic groups of students deemed to be above, on, or below grade level. Students were not treated as individuals, and with little chance to move between groups, the labels limited their ability to grow, expand, and cel-

brate strengths or accomplishments.

Differentiation needs to be case by case and day by day. Teachers need to rely on real-time data and information to make decisions about what supports are most prudent so that all students can learn. Rather than relying on summative results, we must attend to and work with students to help them achieve their goals and increase their level of independence in learning. Celebrating growth in all aspects of learning, whether it’s content, skill, or strategy, should become the norm.

Our guest editorial this month from Rhonda Bondie, faculty chair of the online course “Differentiated Instruction Made Practical” at Harvard University, will not only help demystify differentiated instruction (DI) but will offer clear examples for incorporating DI in every lesson. With her effective four-step process, teachers will be able to integrate DI into their teaching seamlessly.

As always, we’d love to hear from you about the implementation of some of the lessons and strategies in this month’s issue of *Science and Children*. Let’s keep the dialogue open as we learn about what works and what doesn’t within the walls of our classrooms.

Elizabeth Barrett-Zahn

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Answer Sheet: Howard Gardner

‘Multiple Intelligences’ Are Not ‘Learning Styles.’ October 16.

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