

Characteristics of a Differentiated Class

Tomlinson, C. (1995a). How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

1. Instruction is concept focused and principle driven. All students have the opportunity to explore and apply the key concepts of the subject being studied. All students come to understand the key principles on which the study is based. Such instruction enables struggling learners to grasp and use powerful ideas and, at the same time, encourages advanced learners to expand their understanding and application of the key concepts and principles. Such instruction stresses understanding or sense-making rather than retention and regurgitation of fragmented bits of information. Concept-based and principle-driven instruction invites teachers to provide varied learning options. A "coverage-based" curriculum may cause a teacher to feel compelled to see that all students do the same work. In the former, all students have the opportunity to explore meaningful ideas through a variety of avenues and approaches.
2. On-going assessment of student readiness and growth are built into the curriculum. Teachers do not assume that all students need a given task or segment of study, but continuously assess student readiness and interest, providing support when students need additional instruction and guidance, and extending student exploration when indications are that a student or group of students is ready to move ahead.
3. Flexible grouping is consistently used. In a differentiated class, students work in many patterns. Sometimes they work alone, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in groups. Sometimes tasks are readiness-based, sometimes interest-based, sometimes constructed to match learning style, and sometimes a combination of readiness, interest, and learning style. In a differentiated classroom, whole-group instruction may also be used for introducing new ideas, when planning, and for sharing learning outcomes.
4. Students are active explorers. Teachers guide the exploration. Because varied activities often occur simultaneously in a differentiated classroom, the teacher works more as a guide or facilitator of learning than as a dispenser of information. As in a large family, students must learn to be responsible for their own work. Not only does such student-centeredness give students more ownership of their learning, but it also facilitates the important adolescent learning goal of growing independence in thought, planning, and evaluation. Implicit in such instruction is (1) goal-setting shared by teacher and student based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile, and (2) assessment predicated on student growth and goal attainment.