



Essential Principles of Differentiation

The following document is a summarising of key elements of the Differentiation in Practice Resource Guides written by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson for Grades K – 9 (see end for references). Additional comments and graphics sourced by or created by Intuyu Consulting.



Principle 1: Good Curriculum Comes First

- The teacher's first job is always to ensure that the curriculum is coherent, important, inviting, and thoughtful.
- Only then does it make sense to differentiate that curriculum
- The Australian National Curriculum has gone a long way towards this.
- Quite often it is a lack of thinking and creativity on the part of the teacher that hinders this. Effective teachers think outside the box and create from the high-quality curriculum.

Principle 2: All Tasks Should Respect Each Learner

- While dull drills do have an occasional place in the classroom, the vast majority of the time student work should be appealing, inviting, thought-provoking, and invigorating – for ALL students!
- Every student deserves work that is focused on the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills targeted for the lesson.
- Every student should be required to think at a high level and supported to do so.
- Every student should find their work interesting and powerful
- Differentiation will not work if some students seem privileged to do certain tasks and others are not.

Principle 3: When in Doubt, Teach Up!

- The best tasks are those that students find a little too difficult to complete comfortably. Good education stretches learners.
- Differentiation is not designed to “protect” learners
- When a teacher sets tasks it is critical to ensure that the tasks are tiered to provide meaningful challenge.
- Rubrics should be designed to push the student beyond his / her comfort zone
- Ensure that there is a support system in place to facilitate a student's success at a level they doubted was attainable.
- Sometime it is worthwhile to allow a student to tackle something you might think is too demanding (with the understanding that once begun it must be finished) as they may either surprise you or learn what represents an appropriate challenge for that student.



Principle 4: Use Flexible Grouping

- In the planning stages, the teacher needs to do the thinking to work out when students will need to work as a whole class, independently or in small groups.
- There must be time for the teacher to instruct small groups and for conversations with individual students.
- Thought needs to be made about the ebb and flow of students in a classroom
- Plan time for similar readiness groups to work together, as well as mixed-readiness groups where each individual can make a meaningful contribution.
- Plan time for groups of similar interest students can work together, as well as groups of varied interest groups where they can meld their interests into a common task.
- Likewise, plan for similar and mixed learning profile groups. Similar to allow comfort when working, and mixed to extend student awareness of working modes.
- Also use random groupings as well as teacher-choice and student-choice.
- All of these will allow for very rich exchanges and learning opportunities.

Principle 5: Become an Assessment Junkie

- Everything a student says and does is a potential source of assessment data
- We often think of assessment narrowly (that which takes place at the end of learning so we can put numbers in a grade book) despite being surrounded by assessment options.
- Assessment is an ongoing process, conducted in flexible but distinct stages
 - Pre-assessment: a means to determine student knowledge, understanding or skill related to an upcoming unit or lesson. This can be via a formal quiz, journal entry, or many other ways. It is critical to have a sense of student starting points.
 - During: to determine the student knowledge, understanding or skill at key points in the unit. Can be done via taking notes during class discussions, checking homework, observational notes as you monitor student work and coach for quality, journal prompts, concept maps, quizzes, and so on. This allows for the teacher to differentiate based on what you find out.
 - Final: plan to use more than one assessment format and modify them to maximise the likelihood that each student opens for you the widest possible window into their learning.

Principle 6: Grade for Growth

- A portion of a teacher's marking should reflect a student's standing relative to set benchmarks
- However, a portion should also reflect a student's growth
 - A student who is very bright, gets consistent A's, and is never stretched will become a damaged learner
 - A student who constantly struggles but persists and progresses will give up if the "good" grades remain out of reach.
 - The most we can ever ask of any person is that they be accountable for being and becoming their best.
 - It is the job of the teacher to guide and support the learner in this endeavour.



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References

Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum – Grades K-5, Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson, ASCD (2003).

Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum – Grades 5-9, Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson, ASCD (2003).



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