



What are the Hallmarks of a Differentiated Classroom?

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.



Characteristics of effectively differentiated classrooms

1. There is a strong link between assessment and instruction

- Teacher pre-assesses to find out where students are relative to upcoming knowledge, skill and understanding
- Teacher develops units and plans based on what they learn from the pre-assessment and on accumulated knowledge of the learners
- Throughout the unit the teacher continually assesses student knowledge, understanding and skill in both formal and informal ways, making ongoing adjustments to plans to ensure progression towards individual and group goals.
- Teacher assesses learner interest and learning profiles in order to enhance individual motivation and efficiency
- Teacher provides more than one way for students to show what they know, understand and can do. Multiple assessment formats are used to ensure students have a way to show what they have accomplished.

2. The teacher is clear about learning goals

- Teacher specifies what students should know, understand and be able to do for each unit of study. This allows the teacher to focus on essential learning goals with all the students, with varied support systems, degrees of complexity, etc.
- Teacher maps the sequence of skills and understanding that precede and extend beyond the set curriculum. This enables the teacher to support students with learning deficits and students who are well advanced in an organised fashion.

3. The teacher groups students flexibly

- At times the class works as a whole
- At times students work alone
- At times the teacher groups students for readiness based on similar learning needs
- At times a teacher groups students in mixed-readiness groups ensuring that the tasks call on each student to contribute to the success of the group



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- At times the teacher has similar-interest groups and mixed-interest groupings, depending on the nature of the task.
 - At times the teacher groups students with similar learning profiles and at other times with differing learning profiles.
 - At times the teacher empowers the students to form their own work groups or make the decision to work on their own.
 - As often as possible the teacher meets with the students individually or in groups to monitor progress, coach them on their next steps, and support them to set new goals.
 - The aim of flexible grouping is to balance the need to teach students where they are and to provide them with opportunities to interact in meaningful and productive ways with each other.
4. The teacher uses time, space and materials flexibly
- Teacher looks for ways to arrange the classroom to enable students to work in a variety of ways, to use time flexibly, to match materials to the learner, and to meet with students in varied formats.
5. The teacher involves students in understanding the nature of the classroom and making it work for everyone.
- Teacher guides the students in sharing responsibility to accomplish the goal of supporting everyone to receive the support they need to grow academically.
 - Students can establish class rules, make suggestions for smooth movement from place to place, help their peers, distribute materials, keep records of their own goals and progress, or many other aspects that builds a learning community and impact classroom efficiency.
6. The teacher emphasises individual growth as central to the success of the classroom
- The teacher works consistently with students AND parents to help them understand the importance about competing with oneself to achieve one's personal best
 - Each student is held responsible for working to progress themselves towards goals that are personally challenging. The teacher is responsible for guiding and supporting that progress. If progress does not happen it is an indicator for either the student or teacher or both to make an adjustment.
 - Parents will still want indication of a student's standing relative to benchmarks, standards or peers. Teachers will need to find a way to support both student and parents chart personal growth in relation to designated benchmarks.



7. The teacher works to ensure that all students have “respectful” work

- While students display different interests, readiness levels and learning profiles every student should consistently have work that respects him or her as an individual.
- Students are asked to focus on essential knowledge, understanding and skill core to the task.
- Students are required to think at a high level to complete their work
- Students are assigned work that looks as inviting and important as the work of their colleagues.
- Advanced learners are not indicated by tangential tasks but extend tasks on core knowledge, understanding and skills.

8. The teacher makes sure differentiation is always “a way up” never a “way out”

- It is very easy to underestimate the learning potential of any learner. Differentiated tasks are designed to stretch the learner to complete the tasks.
- Tasks are difficult but achievable with a support system to assist them in navigating the unknown portions of their work.
- An effective teacher teaches up to a student rather than down.

9. The teacher sets their own sights high, just as they ask their students to set their sights high

- An effective teacher is reflective about their students and their own practice.
- Teachers are aware of lessons that work well for most of their students and constantly extend their own practice.
- They expect of themselves no less than they expect of their students (maximum effort to achieve maximum potential) and are as excited by their own learning growth as that of their students.

10. The teacher seeks specialists’ active partnership in their classes

- An effective teacher is ready to call on the expertise of specialists (much like a GP does) whenever a student’s needs indicate it would make a difference
- Specialists have focussed their careers on developing knowledge and skills often unfamiliar to the general teacher.
- An effective partnership benefits not only the student but the specialist’s and teacher’s professional development bringing benefits for years to come.



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11. The teacher's differentiation is largely proactive rather than reactive.

- Teacher proactively plans for student differences
 - There isn't a single plan for all learners which is adjusted on the spot if it isn't working well for one or a few learners.
 - Plans are purposeful accounting for student variance with improvisation as needed.

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).