Differentiation Is Just Too Difficult: Myth-Busting

February 6, 2015

What if you could predict the winning numbers to the biggest prize of a major lottery? Would you play? Here are the odds for two lotteries:

- Powerball: 1 in 175,223,510
- Mega Millions (California): 1 in 259 million

If you could reduce the odds to 1 in 3 attempts or 1 in 1 attempts, would you play then? I would.

Teaching curriculum and ensuring that all students achieve can sometimes feel like long odds because of the many obstacles that exist in education. But what if those odds could be reduced so significantly that they led to many more students achieving on a regular basis?

Sometimes, starting to implement differentiated instruction (DI) is foggy at best. The market is full of voices touting quick-fix strategies and big, abstract philosophies without adequately connecting the dots for exactly how those approaches will lead to student growth. The result is naysayers who use their soapbox to proclaim that DI has either failed to meet its promise or simply does not exist. What are teachers to believe?

Answer: themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

By just looking inside their classrooms, teachers see mixtures of skills, personalities, and paces for developing understanding. Educators grapple with this diversity every day. In fact, at the beginning of any school year, teachers can guarantee that their student roster will not be comprised of students sharing the same skill levels, nor will they all think alike. As you consider differentiation, consider its two forms: intuitive and intentional.

Intuitive Differentiation

Teachers differentiate every day based on observations of student response to work. Take this quiz to see if you differentiate intuitively. Do you:

1. Give students choices for work options?
2. Provide mini-lessons or small-group instruction to a few students who struggle with a skill? Or provide more in-depth coaching to advanced and gifted students?
3. Explain or model content for understanding in two or more approaches (strategies) or media (video, speaker, inquiry, etc.)?
4. Group students by common academic needs for some activities based on similar skill level?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you have differentiated. Instinctively, teachers find different ways to help students succeed. While important to do, intuitive differentiation is what critics attack with impunity, because such decisions are made in the midst of the lesson. They may not align with the learning outcomes or have the refinement to fully get students where they need to be. Carol Tomlinson echoes this point in her book *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners (2nd Edition)*.

For example, during a lesson on inference-making, several students don't understand the concept. In the midst of the lesson, I intuitively think of an analogy that inference-making is like describing an object without naming it. The example helps the students make the connection, but I wonder if there might be an experience that tells less and shows more.

The next time that inference-making comes up, I'm better prepared. Prior to the lesson, knowing that some students would likely struggle to understand inference-making, I pre-planned an activity where students walked the campus and chose three or four items to describe without naming them. They share these riddles in class to see who can guess the objects. This interest-based, intentionally-differentiated activity has worked well to introduce and reinforce the concept of inference-making.

Intentional Differentiation

Differentiated instruction is most effective when used as an instructional lens that brings learners' gifts and needs into the planning. When we use formative assessment data to identify student skill levels, we can identify the strategies to be used, and differentiate them to raise student success. *Any strategy* can be differentiated, depending on what assessment data tells us what students need for a learning outcome. Learner gifts and needs are based on their readiness, interests, learning profiles, and the learning environment. Based on what we learn about our students, we have many options, such as:

- Readiness: Form homogenous groups based on common skill needs, such as Guided Reading or a tiered math activity.
- Interests: Provide choices that allow students to self-select the form or type of tasks to be executed, such as learning-center activities or reading circles.
- Learning profiles: Plan different approaches for making sense of content or crafting products. These should allow learners to process understanding in different ways, such as Think Dots or Robert Sternberg's Triarchaic Theory-based product options.
- Environment: Consider students' perception of themselves and the curriculum. We often need to mediate students' negative perceptions of their capabilities as we teach them the curriculum. The two are tightly entwined for students to engage and learn. The physical environment is also critical to how we support all learners. Consider Universal Design for Learning for additional perspective.

Intentional differentiated instruction is pre-planned based on learning targets. It anticipates that some students will struggle while others will exceed expectations, and that prior to instruction, a plan should be in place to provide appropriate support for all groups.

Gaming the System

Differentiated instruction helps us beat the odds. We know that our students' skill levels and processing time vary widely. How do we know this? Based on formative assessments, a teacher knows which students are exceeding expectations and which are struggling. This knowledge enables us to plan lessons that intentionally align to needs. We have nothing to lose by pre-planning differentiated instruction. Not doing so means that struggling students are knowingly left behind to fail, and advanced students are left adrift with few opportunities for testing their true potential.

What will you do next to ensure your students' achievement?