

# Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom



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# Preface

Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead.

—Louisa May Alcott

I couldn't tell you in much detail about my sixth year of teaching, or my tenth, or any other specific year in the 21 years I spent in high school, preschool, and middle school classrooms except my first and fourth years. There are memories from each of the years I taught in public school that will always reside in me, of course, but no other particular years exist in my mind with the sharp detail of those two. It was in those two years that I established my compass as a teacher.

During my teenage years, I vowed never to be a teacher. My mother was a teacher (and immensely proud of her work), which was fine with me—until she and I ended up in the same school during my 6th grade year. It was a hard year for me. Not only was I entering adolescence with an impressive case of self-consciousness, but I was attending a new school in a new town. We had just moved away from the town where I'd spent the entire 11 years of my life to a new

city where, on principle, I didn't *want* to like anything. My mom was a devoted mother. My teacher that year was one of the best I ever had. Nonetheless, it was clear to me that my mother came home with knowledge of things I had said or done during the day. I felt spied on, and that nourished my self-consciousness. With the lack of logic that is adolescence, I concluded that I did not want to be one of those "spy people" who watched kids and told on them. (Forget that my teacher was supportive and kind and tried to make my life better; she was a spy and I was the one spied upon.)

So, I declared, I would do anything but teach when I grew up. I persisted with that declaration at appropriate points in the 10 years that followed—including when my mother explained that I should take education courses in college, "just in case."

I explained with disdain that it was pointless for me to take education courses. Perhaps, I said, she didn't recall that I had long declared I would never, under any circumstances, teach. She told me she would support any college major I chose, as long as I took enough education courses on the side to become certified, "just in case."

I explained with louder disdain that I was a young adult who had earned the right to make her own decisions. She explained with remarkable calmness that she was paying the bill for my college tuition. I took the education courses, found them pointless, and renewed my vow often and vociferously that I would never, ever, under any circumstances be a teacher.

## **A Career Begins**

I got my first job as a teacher in late October during my second year out of school. I was working as an advertising manager for a university press and had discovered another job that I disliked. Introvert that I was, I still couldn't warm up to a job that called on me to sit alone in a small room, day after day working with esoteric copy for esoteric books. Then, at lunch one day in October, I found a newspaper ad for a teaching job. Magically, it sounded like a wonderful opportunity.

I took the afternoon off, went for the interview, was hired, adjusted on the spot to my new title of high school English and history teacher, and resigned from the university press. The weekend between my conversion and reality, I experienced the excited apprehension that probably typifies entry into the teaching profession.

On Monday, I arrived at my new K–12 school, which was about an hour and 15 minutes from my house. It was in an area that gave sharp definition to the word *rural*. The little town had a name, a post office, a flue shop (tobacco-curing supplies), and an auto body shop. The post office closed shortly after I arrived because it had too little business. The flue shop fared well enough because of the local tobacco growers. The body shop thrived because of its location near a railroad track where the road dipped about 12 inches with no warning.

The principal of the school where I was about to begin (what I assumed would be a one-year career) seldom came to school during the early part of the day. He was shy and, I think, quite afraid of the older students. The assistant principal took me to my new classroom as the day began and announced to the very small, elderly teacher in the classroom that he was fired. He had been the teacher for the first six weeks of school, and because he commuted with a carpool, he had no way to go home until the end of the day. He was understandably angry and told me that, since he was no longer employed, I should see what I could do with the class. Despite befuddled terror and massive shyness, I found enough voice to say to him that I'd been promised a day to observe and get textbooks before I started teaching, and so I believed it would be better if I just sat in the back of the room.

For the rest of the day, I watched from the rear of my first classroom as high school girls giggled and chatted and boys crawled in and out of the first floor window and tried (unsuccessfully) to set a large freestanding bulletin board on fire. As I watched, two thoughts played in an endless loop in my mind: "What am I going to do with this chaos tomorrow?" and "I don't think I need a job this badly."

Recall that, as a student, I found my education classes to be without merit. Whether that was the result of the classes themselves or the result of my attitude about taking them, the reality of my new situation was that I had no idea how to teach, which seemed less important than my overriding realization that I had not the first clue about how to "manage" the high school students who were clearly in need of "being managed." At that point, my sole ambition as a teacher had to do with keeping the kids in their seats.

In my overwrought condition, I arrived at my very first lesson plan at 3:42 a.m. on Tuesday morning. It was a truly stupid plan that seemed completely acceptable at the time. I would have the students complete a crossword puzzle with me. The intent of the plan was twofold. First, it would buy me a day to figure out what the students knew and didn't know about American literature and world history—the two subjects, it turns out, I had been hired to teach. Second, it would let me

establish myself as someone who gave clear and effective directions to students so we would have order in the classroom—in other words, the kids would stay in their seats.

The crossword puzzle, however, had nothing to do with the either literature or history. Its qualification for my first lesson plan was that it was the only crossword puzzle I could find in the middle of the night. It provided no window at all into my students' knowledge of our content, and the idea students would follow directions simply because I gave them was beyond naïve.

My first day as a teacher should have been a cosmic disaster. Instead, it taught me the first of many lessons I learned that year that have continued to serve me well ever since.

## **Classroom Management 101, Lesson 1**

It turns out that my students were from a universe largely unrelated to the one where I grew up. Most of them had never left the insular area where they were born. None of them had college-educated parents, and few of them had any aspirations for a career—or even a job. They had no sense of a wider world. Old suspicions and animosities permeated their community. Yet they were happy, thoughtful, full of a wisdom the likes of which I had never encountered, and wide open to new possibilities despite the fact that they were pretty sure I was from an alien planet. “Outsiders” didn’t show up very often in their world.

I got my students' attention when I asked them to take assigned seats as they entered the room. They were surprised because they were unaccustomed to assigned seats, and for a moment, they were caught off guard. Things looked promising. Then I passed out the crossword puzzles, intending to ask students to work in pairs on a specified portion of the puzzle. After a while, we would come together to check the portion of the work they had completed and then proceed in stages—work in pairs, come together, check work, go back to the pairs. It was a plan for the choreography of a teacher giving directions and students following them.

There was a problem with my plan. Not a single one of my 10th grade students, I quickly realized, had ever seen a crossword puzzle. They turned the purple ditto sheets in their hands as if they were seeking some sort of physical orientation to the task. When I realized this, I adjusted my plans accordingly. I'd just give directions to the class as a whole, and we'd figure out the puzzle together. After all, answers to the crossword puzzle were secondary. What mattered was that I gave good directions and that the students followed them.

I hit another more serious roadblock when I read the first clue to the students. It said, “Our country, abbr.” The puzzle had three blank boxes for the answer. In the moment that followed, my students’ faces and a few verbal hints revealed that (1) no one knew what the clues had to do with the boxes, (2) there might have been some confusion about “across” vs. “down,” (3) no one knew what an abbreviation was (yielding a serious problem with the abbreviation of *abbreviation*), and, most significantly, (4) not a single student knew the name of our country. Once I shared with them the information necessary to address problem 4, after sequences of guesses from students, we encountered a fifth problem—a country whose name has four parts (United States of America) and only three boxes to enter the abbreviation. In all five of my classes that day, the bell rang as I announced that our country was called the United States of America and the abbreviation for that name was USA. It took an entire class, but we were finally ready to enter an answer for clue 1 across.

At the end of the day, I was exhausted, delighted with the extreme orderliness of my classes, and devoid of ideas about what I should do on Wednesday. I was also too tired and too new to understand what I had learned that day, but my first principle of classroom management eventually became clear. When students are engaged, they have no motivation to misbehave. My students were models of deportment on that day not because I stood in front of them and gave directions, of course, but because I had happened onto a task (albeit a vacuous one) that intrigued them.

## **Classroom Management 101, Lesson 2**

My education as a teacher continued throughout the year, with a second pivotal lesson about classroom management coming about two weeks later. In the interim, we had good moments and bad. Although I was trying hard, I truly didn’t know what I was doing. I couldn’t steer a steady course because I didn’t yet know why some things worked and others didn’t.

It was to my advantage that I was a novelty for the students—a very tall teacher from the outside world who continued to do the unexpected in a school where nearly all the faculty were “lifers” in the community. We still used seating charts, and I was still big on making sure I gave clear directions, which I was attempting to do on the following Monday, when, about 10 minutes after the tardy bell, a formidable girl entered the classroom by slamming the door against the wall and standing with her hands on her hips and an “I dare you to mess with me” look on her face.

The class (which had been listening to the directions for another of my unorthodox assignments) looked at her wide-eyed, signaling that they knew her and were not about to mess with her. That flipped a switch in my head, and I recalled that a student had been absent from first period since I arrived. I smiled at the student and greeted her. "I bet you're Estralita," I said. "I'm Carol Tomlinson, and I'm the new teacher for this class. Everyone has an assigned seat now and yours is right up here." I pointed to a vacant seat in the front row. She stared for another second or two, emitted a sound that can only be described as a snort, and headed for the back of the room.

What happened next could have gone in a very different direction. I smiled at Estralita again broadly and said, "We've missed you, Estralita. I'm glad you're back. Now get your sorry self in your assigned seat up here so you can work with us." Immediately, I launched into the directions again. The class inhaled collectively. Her eyes flashed. She looked puzzled because no one was misbehaving. She pivoted and then stalked to the front of the room, threw her books on the floor, and sat like an angry bull for the rest of the class. I smiled at her again as the period ended and told her I was looking forward to getting to know her. She snorted.

The next day, Estralita was again absent as class began, but a rerun of the day before played out when the door bashed against the wall about 10 minutes into class. As Estralita filled the doorway with both her body and presence, I smiled at her and said, "I'm so glad you came today; I was afraid you were absent." The class froze. She stared. Then, with a harrumph, she launched toward the back of the class. Once again, I said, "Estralita, get your sorry self in your assigned seat" and continued without a pause with what I had been saying. Once again, she surveyed the territory, noticed that the class was with me, stalked to the front of the room, and deposited herself in the empty seat that was assigned to her.

We continued our ballet of the absurd for four days. On Friday, our dance began again. Ten minutes into class, door slamming, Estralita filling the doorway and the classroom with her bulk and anger, teacher smiling and greeting her, pregnant pause, Estralita heading toward the back of the classroom. All the moves were predictable now, except the one that would end the dance.

As she propelled herself to the rear of the room, I began my now well-rehearsed response, "Estralita. . . ." She interrupted, "I know. I gotta get my sorry self in my assigned seat." And she did. At the time, I didn't realize that something important had happened. I just plowed ahead. In that moment, though, Estralita decided to join us. She made the choice to be a member of the class, rather than a combatant.

Again, I didn't know for several months the importance of Estralita's decision in my survival as a teacher, and it was good that I didn't. It would have undone my fragile sense of "control." Much later in the year, I learned that Estralita had been suspended from school because she had argued with the teacher I replaced and literally knocked him unconscious to the floor. She was absent for my first week because that was the term of her expulsion. I was hired not because I had great credentials in English (and clearly not because I knew history), but rather because I was physically large enough to confront Estralita.

In the end, however, it was not my size that won the day with Estralita. It was her sense that I was somehow accepting of her—that I somehow felt she belonged in the class and that there was a place for her there. In time, I came to understand my second lesson of classroom management: If students understood that I saw them as worthwhile people with significant potential, it opened doors to learning.

My "get your sorry self in your assigned seat" comment could be seen as challenging or sarcastic. It was, however, delivered with a sincere smile and a sense of endearment. She saw in my face and heard in my tone that something was different in the classroom. For the first time she could remember, someone seemed to greet her with positive expectations. It took weeks, if not months, for her to truly begin trusting me, but from our first encounter, she felt invited. That was enough to buy us both some time—and to teach me once again that my penchant for directions was not enough to make me an effective "classroom manager."

## **Classroom Management 101, Lesson 3**

I learned many lessons about life and "managing" a classroom during the remainder of my first year as a high school teacher. I learned how to pace lessons, how to organize materials, how to start and stop class with purpose, and how to shift gears if something wasn't going well, to name just a few. It was hard to leave Estralita and her peers when the year ended and I moved to another state. I still think about them nearly four decades later.

My second year as a teacher was spent as director of and teacher in a pre-school with a very international population in a metropolitan area. Once again, I had no idea what I was doing. Once again, I learned important lessons through instinct, error, and luck. Once again, my students taught me more than I was prepared to teach them.

It was in my third setting, this time in a district where I would teach for 20 years, that my third career-shaping lesson about "managing" a classroom presented itself.



As was the case with my first two schools, the student population pushed on the perimeter of my experiences. In this school, we had a bimodal population. In my 7th grade language arts classes, nearly 50 percent of students read four or more years below grade level, and nearly 50 percent of students read four or more years above grade level. There were almost no “middle” students.

At this point in my development, I was excited to see a new school year begin. I finally believed I was a teacher. The students had not devoured me in terms of “classroom management” during my initial years, and now I even had a clear sense of my curriculum. I had a thick teacher’s guide I developed with some of my colleagues during the summer after my first year in the school. Gone were the days of staying up late on Monday to figure out what to teach on Tuesday and then staying up late on Tuesday to figure out what to teach on Wednesday. Thanks to this guide, I not only knew on Monday what I should teach on Tuesday, but I knew in September what I would be teaching in May. With confidence that I was in control of the students and curriculum, I was jazzed when the beginning of my fourth year in the classroom rolled around.

My world shifted rapidly when I met Golden. He was 15 when he came up to me in the hall between classes. Two weeks into the year, he was about to join my 12-year-old 7th graders in second period. He approached me during a class change and whispered something I could not hear. The hall resonated with student talk. He was short and I was tall. He spoke with his hand over his mouth. After three tries, I said to him, “I’m so sorry, but it’s really noisy and I just can’t hear what you’re saying. Let’s try this once more. I’ll bend down so I’m closer to you so I can hear better. You keep your hand down this time. I want to hear what you’re trying to tell me.”

What he was saying to me was “I can’t read,” and he was telling me the truth. He was three years too old for 7th grade, and he did not know the whole alphabet. For my part, I didn’t know how to teach reading, but I did know that his “confession” was an act of courage and trust, and there was no way I could let him down.

In that flash of time in the hallway, a rush of questions filled my mind—and they have driven my work ever since. How do I teach reading when I’ve never been trained for that? How do I make this boy a respected member of the class when he can neither read nor write? Do I seat him near someone who is really smart and let that student help him? Do I try to hide the fact that he is so far behind? What materials will I use with him? How can I find time to work with him on the things he needs? How in the world will I handle report cards in a way that is not demoralizing? Perhaps my most frightening realization was that the

curriculum notebook I was sure would pave the way to my success as a teacher was suddenly an encumbrance—at least in my work with Golden.

For months, I obsessed about Golden as I tried to answer these questions (and others) that wouldn't leave me alone. We made some progress, and I began to figure out a rhythm for working with him in spite of 35 other students in the room. His needs were very different than what the curriculum anticipated, so I began to create a different curriculum for him that was embedded within the wider curriculum I had to teach everyone.

Then I thought about Jonathan. He had been in class all year. He was a good kid, he was smart and funny, and he made good grades. One day in the early spring, though, I really saw him for the first time. I was teaching a lesson on symbols in literature—a tricky topic for 7th graders who are often still a bit concrete in their thinking. I was proud of my concept attainment lesson on the topic. It was well planned, and the kids couldn't have responded better. After an examination of objects and photos of objects, I felt comfortable that the students were ready to name the concept we were pursuing—in this case, symbols. They offered their labels with only modest hesitation. Most students thought the objects should be called “signs.” One suggested “trademarks.” After a long silence, one final student proposed that we call them “logos.”

When it was clear that no one else had any options to offer and silence overtook the class, many students literally looked across the room to Jonathan. In compliance with their silent signal to save the teacher, he raised his hand, sighed, and said with audible weariness, “They're symbols.” The students were satisfied to know that if Jonathan had spoken, the right answer was on the table. I was pleased because the awkward silence ended.

We then tried to define the things we'd been happily investigating. The task was too ambiguous—too risky—for most students. I didn't know about Think-Pair-Share or reflective journals or even wait time, and so the silence wrapped around us again. Once more, students looked to Jonathan, and once again, he raised his hand. “What do you think a symbol is?” I asked him gratefully. Once again he sighed and, without pause, provided the definition he carried in his head—had carried in his head for goodness knows how many years. “A symbol,” he said, “is an abstract representation of a concrete entity.”

In that moment, I understood my third principle of classroom management: The classroom can't work for anybody until it works for everybody!

The problem wasn't that Golden had one set of needs and everyone else had another. The problem was that I had a room full of students with widely differing

needs. I couldn't make the classroom work for Golden as well as it needed to because I was trying to "fit him in" around the edges of "the real" agenda. At that point, I saw clearly that my magical curriculum guide failed Jonathan as surely as it failed Golden. I somehow had to learn to plan a classroom where flexibility provided opportunity for everyone.

In other words, I understood at that moment that an effective teacher is not someone who just teaches content. He or she is someone who teaches content to human beings, and the classroom has to work in such a way that each individual in it has a legitimate opportunity to grow as much as possible from his or her starting point.

I realized, then, that classroom management is the process of figuring out how to set up and orchestrate a classroom in which students sometimes work as a whole group, as small groups, and as individuals. The goal would be to have everyone work not only on things they all need to do in common but also on things that were of particular importance for their own individual growth.

This insight indicated considerable growth in me as a teacher. I had progressed from defining "classroom management" as (1) keeping kids in their seats, to (2) giving good directions, to (3) being rooted in engaging curriculum, to (4) stemming from genuine respect for each student, and, finally, to (5) making room for individual and group needs. Each new realization built upon and broadened my understanding of what it meant to be a teacher. Each year in the classroom, each class and each student were catalysts for my continuing growth in understanding and practice.

In time, I came to be a little uncomfortable with the term "classroom management." I don't like being *managed* myself, and I realized that I respond much better to being *led*. Ultimately, I understood that a part of my role was leading students and managing the details and mechanics of the classroom. Therefore, I began to think about the distinction between being a leader in and a manager of the classroom. Still later, I came to understand the interdependence of learning environment, curriculum, assessment, and instruction. I understood more clearly the ways in which classroom leadership and management were part of one system and how they could enable me to use all of the classroom elements to reach each of my students.

Throughout my career, I learned to think about time, space, materials, groups, and strategies in ways that balanced content requirements and the needs of young learners. I happened upon and invented ways to make the classroom more efficient

for me and more effective for my students. Likewise, I happened upon and invented ideas that appropriately met a quick demise. This book reflects much of that learning, both things worth considering and things to avoid.

The book that follows is presented in two parts. The first part focuses on what it means for a teacher to effectively *lead* a differentiated classroom. The second part focuses on the mechanics of *managing* a differentiated classroom. In practice, of course, teachers must think about both elements at once. It's likely, however, that looking at the roles of leader and manager separately clarifies two complementary but distinct lines of thinking that contribute to teacher and student success.

My coauthor for this book is Marcia Imbeau, a good friend, colleague, and stellar mentor for novice teachers. Her own teaching experience is as rooted in the elementary classroom as mine is rooted in the secondary classroom. We both know that the principles of managing or leading an effectively differentiated classroom are the same across grades and subjects, but we also know that teachers want and need to see illustrations that match their teaching assignments. We hope to provide authentic and tested examples of the principles at work in varied grade levels and in varied subjects.

In addition, we both know there is no recipe for effective leadership and management in a differentiated classroom. We don't pretend to provide one. Our goal is to think aloud from the principles that govern our experiences, invite you to think along with us, and discover ways to expand your capacity as a teacher who works tirelessly to make room for each student.

For us, this is an "aspirational guide." We have no illusions that any teacher—even the best among us—reads a book and emerges with a radically different teaching style in tow. We do believe, however, that there are many teachers who aspire to grow as professionals every day. We believe there are teachers who will read and reread ideas in pursuit of understanding and insight. We believe there are teachers who, despite powerful forces to the contrary, will act with professional integrity in their classrooms and give reality to both deeply held and emerging beliefs to benefit their students. We believe those teachers exist because we have been taught by them and watched them teach. We've written this book for those aspirational teachers who mean to change themselves and their students—and do.

Carol Tomlinson

# Leading a Differentiated Classroom



The teacher's overriding moral purpose is to meet the needs of students, even when it conflicts with personal preferences.

—Lorna Earle, *Assessment as Learning*

A chorus of voices—representative of experts in virtually every aspect of education—continually asserts that current ideas about “how to do school” are inadequate both as a reflection of our current knowledge of teaching and learning and as a means to address the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population. In terms of incorporating contemporary knowledge of how people learn into the classroom, experts make the analogy that we’re settling for a Model-T Ford instead of drawing on 21st century automotive engineering.

More to the point, the old images of effective classrooms are anachronistic in terms of today’s students and their needs. Not only do learners compose an

increasingly diverse group, but they are also young people who live in a world of personalization—at least outside of school. They are accustomed to watching a particular television show when it's convenient rather than when it's broadcast. They no longer buy entire albums to “own” a particular song but rather download just the selections they like. They order computers specifically designed for their needs. They get news on demand and information they need when they need it. In school, however, we teach them as though their variance in readiness, individual interests, and particular approaches to learning were of no consequence. It is becoming increasingly difficult to pretend that batch processing of a vastly diverse student population supports them as learners or that we are preparing them for productive citizenship in a world with complexities, uncertainties, and challenges that demand the very best from each of them.

Consider the following excerpts from five current key educational documents in the United States. The first comes from the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Standards and reflects professional consensus about what new teachers should know and be able to do, regardless of their specialty areas. The second comes from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards—the body that provides the framework for National Board certification of top teachers in the United States. The third through fifth excerpts come from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Middle School Association, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This collection represents the sweep of professional expectations for teachers—novice to expert and preschool through high school—and the message is clear and consistent: Student differences matter and effective teachers attend to those differences thoughtfully and proactively.

### **Some expectations for new teachers**

The candidate:

- Designs instruction appropriate to students' stages of development, learning styles, strengths, and needs.
- Selects approaches that provide opportunities for different performance modes.
- Accesses appropriate services or resources to meet exceptional learning needs when needed.
- Adjusts instruction to accommodate the learning differences or needs of students (time and circumstance of work, tasks assigned, communication and response modes).

- Uses knowledge of different cultural contexts within the community (socio-economic, ethnic, cultural) and connects with the learner through types of interaction and assignments.
- Creates a learning community that respects individual differences.
- Assumes different roles in the instructional process (instructor, facilitator, coach, audience) to accommodate content, purpose, and learner needs. (INTASC, 1992)

### **Some criteria for recognition as a National Board Certified Teacher**

- National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) are dedicated to making knowledge accessible to all students. They believe all students can learn.
- They treat students equitably. They recognize the individual differences that distinguish their students from one another and they take account of these differences in their practice.
- They respect the cultural and family differences students bring to their classroom.
- NBCTs know how to assess the progress of individual students as well as the class as a whole. (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2010)

### **Some expectations for early childhood educators**

The face of America is rapidly changing. In three states, European-Americans are no longer the majority group. U.S. babies born today will reach adulthood in a country in which no one ethnic group predominates. By the year 2005, children and adolescents of color will represent 40% of all U.S. school children. The largest proportion of individuals with disabilities is found in the preschool population. Thus, tomorrow's early childhood teachers must be prepared to serve and to value a far more diverse group of young children and families than at any time in the past. (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2001)

- Development and learning proceed at varying rates from child to child, as well as at uneven rates across different areas of a child's individual functioning. Individual variation has at least two dimensions: the inevitable variability around the typical or normative course of development and the uniqueness of each child as an individual. Children's development follows individual patterns and timing; children also vary in temperament, personality, and aptitudes, as well as in what they learn in their family and within the social and cultural context or contexts that shape their experience.

- All children have their own strengths, needs, and interests. Given the enormous variation among children of the same chronological age, a child's age is only a crude index of developmental abilities and interests. For children who have special learning needs or abilities, additional efforts and resources may be necessary to optimize their development and learning. The same is true when children's prior experiences do not give them the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in a specific learning environment. Given this normal range of variation, decisions about curriculum, teaching, and interactions with children should be as individualized as possible. Rigid expectations of group norms do not reflect what is known about real differences in development and learning. At the same time, having high expectations for all children is essential, as is using the strategies and providing the resources necessary to help them meet these expectations.
- To be effective, teachers must get to know each child in the group well. They do this using a variety of methods—such as observation, clinical interview (an extended dialogue in which the adult seeks to discern the child's concepts or strategies), examination of children's work, individual child assessments, and talking with families. From the information and insights gathered, teachers make plans and adjustments to promote each child's individual development and learning as fully as possible. Developmental variation among children is the norm, and any one child's progress also will vary across domains and disciplines, contexts, and time.
- Children differ in many other respects, too—including in their strengths, interests, and preferences; personalities and approaches to learning; and knowledge, skills, and abilities based on prior experiences. Children may also have special learning needs; sometimes these have been diagnosed and sometimes they have not. Among the factors that teachers need to consider as they seek to optimize a child's school adjustment and learning are circumstances such as living in poverty or homelessness, having to move frequently, and other challenging situations. Responding to each child as an individual is fundamental to developmentally appropriate practice. (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009)

### **Some descriptors of quality middle school teachers**

- Teaching and learning approaches should accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents; cultivate multiple intelligences; draw upon students' individual learning styles; and utilize digital tools. When learning experiences capitalize on students' cultural, experiential, and personal backgrounds, new concepts are built on knowledge students already possess.



- Continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment measures, including both formative and summative ones, provide evidence about every student's learning progress. Such information helps students, teachers, and family members select immediate learning goals and plan further education. (National Middle School Association, 2010)

## Some guidelines for high school teachers

It is inconvenient that no two students are exactly alike and that no individual student stays exactly the same over her or his travel through the high school years. [However,] batch processing does not work, at least for most adolescents. Personalization is a necessity. . . . While our students differ in wonderful (and sometimes exasperating) ways, we serve them well by taking a "core mission" and playing it out in teaching and learning that reflects each student's strengths and weaknesses, learning styles, and special needs. The mission has to be lean and focused; the necessarily rich variety emerges from individual students' interests, abilities, and weaknesses, as these wax and wane over time. It requires that each student be known well. Student "anonymity" has been the most consistent criticism of America's high schools. It must end, whatever it takes. (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004)

- Many reports have been issued in the past few years that reveal deep problems with the achievement levels of U.S. high school students as compared to international students. There is also a significant achievement gap along race and income lines as well as low graduation and college attendance rates for low income and minorities. More often than not, these low rates can be traced back to the large numbers of students entering high schools reading below grade level. The vast majority of high schools, to a great degree, have a climate of anonymity where little focus is placed on identifying the personal learning needs of individual students and using such information to foster improved teaching and learning.
- To be fully committed to high school reform, we must systemically reculture and improve the high school. The historical structure and purpose of the U.S. high school is no longer adequate to serve the needs of all of the nation's youth and provide them with the skills necessary to compete in the global marketplace of the 21st century. Significant improvement is needed, but such improvement can only be attained through a substantial change in the structure and culture of the high school. We recommend this be accomplished through support for
  - Increased academic rigor that reflects the integration of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

- Personalized instruction and learning that is based on the academic needs of individual students.
  - Schoolwide initiatives to improve reading and writing literacy skills.
- (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005)

These voices—which represent the best thinking in our profession—tell us unequivocally that student differences do matter and that quality teaching makes room for these differences. Yet, despite the consistent and often urgent calls for teachers to attend to individual learners’ needs, and in spite of daily evidence that one-size-fits-all instruction fails many, if not most, students, it is extraordinarily difficult for us to pull away from antiquated conceptions and embrace more contemporary and effective ways of thinking about teaching and learning. There are many reasons why the idea of teaching with the individual in mind is challenging (if not confounding), not the least of which are classroom images that are indelible in the minds of teachers, students, and parents alike.

These familiar images and impressions have become second nature to so many of us because they are continually reinforced throughout our young lives. We all think we know the right way “to do school.” Even very young children who play school at home know the rules: The “teacher” is in charge and the “students” sit silently in straight rows and watch the teacher, who tells the students what to learn. Students learn what they’re told and repeat it back to the teacher. The teacher teaches everyone alike (which is only fair), and students who can’t follow the rules or get restless with the routine get booted “out of class.”

While this description may sound like a caricature of an actual classroom, it represents a set of beliefs about teaching and learning that are deeply embedded in most people. Whether we are teachers, parents, or students, these beliefs are a common set of blueprints for thinking about the right way “to do school”; it is difficult to conceive of the classroom in any other way. Nevertheless, if we aspire to teach so that our students are prepared to assume leadership roles in a world that is quite different from the factory-based era that the current model of schooling was designed to serve, learner-focused change is not an option, but an imperative.

## **Classroom Teachers as Leaders for Change**

Responsibility for supporting change toward student-focused instruction belongs to many kinds of educators. Superintendents, principals, curriculum coordinators, specialists, grade-level coordinators, department chairs, media directors, and counselors are some of the educational players who have pivotal roles to play

in recrafting classrooms so that they more effectively teach the diverse learners that populate them. This job is vastly easier when everyone works as a team toward a shared goal, and it is unacceptable for anyone in the chain to abdicate his or her responsibility to make school work for each student who enters the door. Nonetheless, the role of the classroom teacher in bringing about such change is central. No one else is as vital. If every other educator fails to assume the responsibility of leadership for student-focused change, the classroom teacher still has the power to reenvision and reinvent teaching and learning.

It is the classroom teacher who has an unspoken contract with each learner to make productive use of time spent in the classroom. It is the classroom teacher who is in a unique position to see beyond multilayered distractions and disguises to know each learner as an individual human being. It is the classroom teacher who identifies or creates the links that exist between each individual learner and the critical content. It is the classroom teacher who taps into hidden motivations, builds bridges to span damaged trust, and reveals to each student how the learning process makes us fully human. Quite simply, the classroom teacher is an irreplaceable leader in moving differentiation from an abstract idea on paper or in a professional development session to a fundamental way of life in the classroom.

This book will highlight four different audiences for which teacher leadership is essential to make student-focused instruction a reality. First, teachers must do the daily work of motivating *themselves* to plan and implement instruction that keeps students in the foreground and of primary concern. Second, teachers must motivate, lead, and direct *students* to understand, contribute to, and participate in a classroom that is designed to take into account the needs of individuals and the group. Third, teachers need to lead *parents* to understand the goals of a student-focused or responsive classroom, how those goals will benefit their children, and how they can contribute to the success of their children and of the classroom. Finally, teachers can be important leaders for *other teachers* and for *school administrators* in understanding and contributing intelligently to academically responsive instruction.

Successful teachers are natural leaders. Along the way, we manage the details necessary to achieve goals that we have every reason to believe will benefit those who follow us. Genuine leadership indicates an ethical orientation—one that merits the trust of followers. To achieve such a level of leadership, we must

- Work from and aspire to an objective that is an improvement over the status quo.

- Articulate this vision so that those who are asked to follow have a compelling reason to do so.
- Move knowledgeably toward this vision while simultaneously attending to the voices and needs of those who will necessarily help enact it.
- Be patient with and supportive of followers, yet impatient with artificial barriers to progress.
- Maintain a pace that consistently ensures visible progress without pushing the system beyond its capacity to change.
- Monitor outcomes of the change and be willing to adapt, when necessary, to achieve desirable outcomes and eliminate undesirable outcomes.

## **Teacher Leadership for Differentiated Classrooms**

The three chapters in Part I of this book are designed to help teachers be more confident and effective leaders for and in student-focused/responsive/differentiated classrooms. We do not presume that these chapters contain all there is to know about the topics they address. We are aware that each chapter provides, at best, an overview of a much more complex issue. We also know that individuals who invest their energies in any approach continue to transform and augment that approach. Our goal, then, is not to present the final word in regard to teacher leadership for differentiation but rather offer a framework for an intelligent beginning.

In our experience, teachers who are most effective with differentiation operate from strong (and growing) knowledge bases that are rooted in a philosophy of what classrooms could be like if they maximized the capacity of each learner. These teachers invite learners to help them construct such a classroom and to attend to its health as the academic year progresses. For these teachers, differentiation is not a set of strategies but rather a demographically necessary, ethically focused, pedagogically informed, and empirically tested way of thinking about the work they do.

Effective leaders are knowledgeable about and continue to nurture their knowledge of the area(s) in which they seek to lead. Chapter 1 reviews the elements of differentiated instruction for teachers who want to lead toward differentiation. Effective leaders work from a philosophy or belief system that informs the vision they commend to others. Chapter 2 articulates the philosophy that undergirds what we call “differentiation” so that teachers who seek to lead

toward differentiation are grounded in their own views on teaching. Leaders engage followers in understanding and contributing to a shared vision. Chapter 3 provides suggestions for talking with students, parents, and other educators about differentiation so that teacher leaders can confidently invite them to participate in creating a place and processes that benefit the broadest possible array of learners. Chapters in the second half of the book focus on managing a differentiated classroom—a task made much easier and more reasoned when the teacher is first a leader for differentiation.

# A Study Guide for *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*

This ASCD Study Guide is designed to enhance your understanding and application of the information contained in *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*, an ASCD book written by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau and published in November 2010.

You can use the study guide before or after you have read the book, or as you finish each chapter. The study questions provided are not meant to cover all aspects of the book but, rather, to address specific ideas that might warrant further reflection.

Most of the questions contained in this study guide are ones you can think about on your own, but you might consider pairing with a colleague or forming a study group with others who have read (or are reading) *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*.

## Preface

1. The book begins with Tomlinson recalling her earliest experiences as a teacher and reflecting on several lessons she learned. Discuss your early experiences as a teacher. How do you think those events shaped how you think about your work with students? In what ways did those experiences make you a better teacher? In what ways might they have made your job more difficult?
2. *When students are engaged with what's going on in the classroom, discipline problems are dramatically reduced.* To what degree do you agree or disagree with this conclusion? What evidence can you use to support your view?
3. *When students believe the teacher cares about them and is genuinely "in their corner," they are willing to give the teacher a chance.* How do teachers most effectively communicate caring to their students? What stands in the way of genuine trust between teachers and students in today's classrooms?
4. *The classroom can't work well for anyone until it works well for everyone.* What do you take this comment to mean? In what ways does it reflect the author's belief that classrooms are systems with interdependent elements and that the robustness of each element impacts the well-being of every other element?
5. Tomlinson notes that she is uncomfortable with the idea of "managing" students, preferring instead to think about leading people and managing details. What difference might this perspective make in our approach to classroom management?

## Part I: Leading a Differentiated Classroom

1. This section includes excerpts from several major professional organizations that represent a variety of educational specialties. Review the excerpts, and write a brief summary about the common message across the quotes. Share your summaries and discuss whether you believe the message is relevant to your school. What evidence would you offer to support your view?
2. Read the first full paragraph on page 9. The authors assert that the teacher is the most important element in making changes that are necessary to serve each student effectively. Discuss each sentence in this paragraph. Which of the ideas do you think about most often in your own practice? Which do you find most challenging? Why?

## Chapter 1: Understanding Differentiation in Order to Lead

1. The chapter presents several common misunderstandings about differentiation. Why do you think such misunderstandings arise? Do you encounter any of these in your own thinking or as you interact with

- colleagues? Can you identify other ideas about differentiation in your district or school that you believe are misunderstandings?
2. Discuss your understanding of the terms *content*, *process*, and *product*. What do you think it means to differentiate each of these elements based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile? You might find it helpful to refer to Figure 1.1 on page 18 as a check for your understanding.
  3. In what ways does classroom environment impact instruction? In what ways does instruction impact environment? How do you think assessment can influence environment, curriculum, and instruction? Try to think about the experiences of specific students as you talk about the interrelatedness of these factors.

## Chapter 2: Teaching What You Believe

1. The authors suggest that few teachers enter the profession with fully developed philosophies of teaching. How have you seen your philosophy of teaching change over time? If you are an experienced teacher, what is a central belief about your work that was less clear to you when you began to teach? If you are a new teacher, what is a central belief about teaching that guides your work now?
2. This chapter proposes six key beliefs that are core to the philosophy of differentiation. Ask six individuals or small groups to present one of the beliefs for discussion. Have the whole group consider some of the questions each belief prompts educators to answer.
3. Consider the list of traits on page 41 that are evident in students who were "wounded by school." How do they reflect a mismatch between student needs and teacher responses that the authors discuss in this chapter? Then consider the traits of teachers who heal wounds (pages 41–42). How do these traits reflect a match between student needs and teacher responses? What does all of this have to do with a philosophy of differentiation?

## Chapter 3: The Invitation to Be Part of a Vision

1. The authors structure much of this chapter around six questions (listed on pages 45–46) that teachers can use to guide classroom discussions about differentiation. Through this, teachers can work with students to develop a shared understanding about the purpose and nature of differentiation—in other words, they can act as leaders to enlist the support of students in creating a classroom that works for everyone. Discuss the line of logic that these questions reflect. Why these questions and why in this order?
2. What are your preferred ways of getting to know your students as learners and as people? What ideas do you think your students might suggest if they were asked how you could address their varied learning needs and preferences? What do you think your students would say they want you to know about in order to teach them best?
3. In what ways would addressing the first four questions prepare students to answer the fifth question? How might student perceptions about fairness in the classroom change over time in an effectively differentiated classroom?
4. What are realistic indicators of success in an effectively differentiated classroom? The authors pose several possible indicators of success that we might pose to our students, including hard work, willingness to take intellectual risks, willingness to revise work to make it better, and seeking help in order to grow and succeed. What might change in classrooms if these were commonly held indicators of successful teaching and learning?
5. What do parents need to hear and see from you to believe that you are working with their children's interest at the heart of your decision making? In what ways do your responses relate to a philosophy of differentiation?

## Part II: Managing a Differentiated Classroom

1. This section transitions readers from consideration of leadership in a differentiated classroom to management of a differentiated classroom. List the questions you have about how to orchestrate the details of differentiation effectively and efficiently.
2. How will a teacher's philosophy of differentiation shape management decisions?

## **Chapter 4: Learning Environment**

1. What is the likely relationship between management style (dysfunctional, adequate, and orderly) and (a) teacher philosophy, (b) quality of student thinking, and (c) grouping practices?
2. The chapter offers several suggestions for getting to know students and building trust between teacher and students. Identify the suggestions and discuss how they might work—or already work—in your classroom.
3. Identify some of the strategies teachers have used to build a sense of community among students. From these examples, how would you assume students function in these classrooms? Why? What are these teachers trying to accomplish through the community-building approaches they use in terms of student outcomes?
4. The authors present six principles of effective grouping (pages 90–91). Discuss each of the principles in terms of the likely outcome on learning when the principle operates consistently versus when implementation is lacking or sporadic.
5. Consider the suggestions for arranging furniture, using wall space, and organizing materials and supplies. How do these tie back to the goals of differentiation and to teacher beliefs?

## **Chapter 5: Classroom Routines**

1. This chapter begins by stressing the need for teachers to determine routines, clarify the rationale for them, teach them to students, apply them in daily classroom work, automatize them with students, and revise them as needed. Examine these steps one by one. What happens when a step is skipped or skimmed over?
2. What characterizes the classroom rules or guidelines proposed on pages 102–103? How might these guidelines benefit student behavior? In what ways are they aligned with a philosophy of differentiation and with the goals of differentiation?
3. Take a look at the ideas for starting and ending the day or class (pages 104–107). Which of these ideas have you used effectively? Why do they seem to be helpful? Which of the ideas might you try? Why does a particular suggestion seem worthwhile to you?

## **Chapter 6: Routines in a Differentiated Classroom**

1. This chapter is organized around seven topics that teachers often cite as "hot spots" or areas of concern in managing a differentiated classroom. Take time to discuss each of the seven topics in detail. Consider generating a three-column chart (on chart paper, an overhead, a computer, or a white board) that lists each topic, the concerns group members have about that topic, and some strategies for addressing those concerns.
2. The authors assert that teachers are learners who, just like their students, become discouraged if work seems overwhelming. They suggest that teachers should start with design and implementation of a few key routines and add others as they and their students become comfortable with existing routines. Discuss which routines you think would be most powerful to introduce early in terms of student success.

## **Chapter 7: Yes, But ...**

1. Look at the "yes, but ..." statements and the following rebuttals on pages 137–138. The reasons for not differentiating are certainly rooted in realities of school and the classroom, yet they do not stop teachers from



differentiating when they mean to do so. To what degree do the rebuttals for the various statements address your concerns? What concerns remain regarding items on the list?

2. The suggestions made for working effectively with students who are angry, discouraged, or alienated are more positive than punitive. Why is it difficult for teachers to work in a positive and proactive way with "difficult" students? What is the general outcome of working with them in more punitive, negative, and reactive ways? Which suggestions for working with these students do you want to think about further?
3. In what ways do grading practices in your school align with the philosophy, principles, and practices of differentiation? In what ways are they potentially at odds with differentiation? Look at the principles of assessment and grading proposed in this chapter. What guidance might they offer teachers in terms of developing practices that maximize student learning? What guidance might they offer schools and districts in terms of ensuring that policies and practices evolve to maximize student learning?

*Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom* was written by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau. This 175-page, 8" x 10" book (Stock #108011; ISBN-13: 978-1-4166-1074-8) is available from ASCD for \$20.95 (ASCD member) or \$27.95 (nonmember). Copyright © 2010 by ASCD. To order a copy, call ASCD at 1-800-933-2723 (in Virginia 1-703-578-9600) and press 2 for the Service Center. Or buy the book from ASCD's Online Store.