

## P-4: Differentiate your plans to fit your students

## Putting It All Together: Middle School Examples

[7<sup>th</sup> Grade Math](#)
[7<sup>th</sup> Grade Science](#)

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7th Grade Math

## DIFFERENTIATION AROUND THE WORLD

My first teaching experience was actually not as a Teach For America corps member; I started teaching in the Peace Corps. I taught math in Eritrea to students aged 12-30. It was obvious to me from the beginning that all of my students could not do the same work. You wouldn't think that a middle school classroom in Washington, DC would be so similar to a mixed-age classroom in Africa, yet I saw many parallels in the ways I would need to teach my students. In the public schools in DC, I

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had one class of 25 students in which 12 received special education services; some of my students tested at the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level on diagnostics and some were on the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. The differences here were as staggering as they were halfway around the globe.

The variance in maturity level was another area of similarity between my two teaching experiences. You would expect a wide range between pre-teens and thirty-year-olds, but in my 7<sup>th</sup> grade classroom in DC I had some students with the attention span of a 5-year old and some with the maturity of a 55-year old. Some of my students would behave perfectly no matter what I did,

whereas others needed constant reinforcement and clear expectations to keep them focused on simple tasks and in their seats. Kids are in very different places academically and behaviorally, but it is my job to meet them where they are in order to teach them.

## WHERE TO BEGIN?

Luckily, I fully expected to need to differentiate, because my beginning of the year diagnostics showed a wide range of student abilities. I started with several small strategies that I think teachers of most grade levels/subject areas can use to differentiate:

- **Homework** is the easiest way to begin. For example, I would assign questions #1-15 to all of my students, and give #16-20 as bonus questions for my students who needed an extra challenge. This helps to differentiate for your higher-level students, which is important – don't let yourself fall into the trap of thinking differentiation is only to help your low-performing kids. It's for the benefit of every student in your class. Sometimes, I actually give out different homework. I have a lot of textbooks and teacher editions on various levels to help me with this...as I'm sure you hear a lot: don't reinvent the wheel. It's not

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necessary for you to come up with five worksheets a night; they're already out there somewhere.

- **Assessments** are also easy to differentiate. I always give two or more versions of tests. Sometimes I just have special learners do only selected problems that I highlight on the quiz beforehand. Sometimes I actually make simpler versions of the test with less complicated problems or with more structure and graphic organizers. And sometimes I accommodate struggling students with additional time or the use of aids, such as manipulatives, a times table, or a number line.
- **Participation** is also easy to vary based on your students' needs – some teachers forget that kids have attention struggles that need to be differentiated by giving certain students more structure, like by requiring them to participate a certain number of times during a class period. You can have different expectations on participation for each student based on their needs.

After I had these basic systems in place, I began to further develop my differentiation strategies. The main way I choose to differentiate is through my assessments. I approach the year by telling my kids: "This is what you will learn this year. This is what seventh grade is, and this is what I will test you on." I keep a running record of what my students know based on DC's Stanford 9 standardized test, which I give to them throughout the year to let both me and my students know where they are. In general, it's crucial to be up-front with your students: they should know exactly what skills they will need to know, what's essential and what's supplementary, what will be assessed, what they have mastered, etc. To me, communication with my students is a key part of differentiating their instruction. They know more than anyone what they need in order to learn.

Recently, I taught a lesson on absolute value equations. I differentiated for my students who are receiving special education services by giving the class notes to the special ed teacher that they work with before coming to my classroom, so they could copy down the notes before we even started. It was a straight-up math lesson, nothing

fancy, but having those notes already written down allowed those students to listen and follow along and focus on comprehension rather than scrambling to copy what I put on the board. That's an example of something simple you can do to meet the needs of your students – differentiation does not have to be intricate and difficult.

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*else is.*

Also for this lesson, when we got to independent practice, I let some of my students work alone, I pair up others who benefit from the mentor/student relationship, and I work with a small group myself that needs more specific, targeted help. I also let them use any materials that they need. This part of differentiation didn't apply much to my lesson on absolute value, but for example, when my students were learning probability, I let some of them have a counter on their desk during independent work or an assessment to help them process the information. I always let my students use manipulatives they need during the first week or two of a unit while they are still developing that particular skill. I have found that once they have made progress on the skill, they are confident working without the materials and no longer want them. By giving my lower-performing students what they need, they become motivated to work hard and learn so they can get to the point where everyone else is.

In addition to communication, a lot of the differentiation that goes on in my classroom is about choice. For example, we do a significant amount of group work, and I change my groups as often as I need to based on input from my students. I'll ask them directly: do you feel like you know what you are doing? Do you still need your classmate to helping you? I also let them choose what version of the tests they will take, and what level of homework assignment they will do. I place the emphasis on their choice in the matter, and I try to help them develop the ability to make choices. It's amazing how honest my students are about what they need when I show them I respect them enough to ask them. It's so important to have the class meet the needs of your students, not the students meeting the needs of your class (as is often the case, unfortunately). If a student can experience success and he believes that you are really trying to help him succeed, you can get a lot more out of him. Differentiation, along with communication and choice, really help establish that belief and a positive student-teacher relationship.

## MORE ON TEACHER-STUDENT COMMUNICATION

Although my students and I have an open and honest relationship, most of them have never asked why their classmates are doing different work. Differentiating my instruction has not had a negative

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impact on the culture of my classroom at all, and I think I can attribute most of that success to ensuring that my students are focused on their own learning. I hope I've emphasized to them enough that the important thing is that they are all challenged and all learning.

If someone were to ask my students to describe the differentiation that takes place in my classroom, I would hope that they would say, "Everyone does what they can." When a student finishes an assignment or a test early, there are always advanced problems to complete for extra credit. If a student needs more help or a manipulative to understand the concept, it's always available. If you are going to differentiate (or even if not) is crucial to get to know your students and encourage an open conversation about their abilities and learning process.

## WHY YOU SHOULD DIFFERENTIATE, TOO

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To put it simply, if you're not giving kids information they can understand, they're not going to learn. Conversely, if you're not giving them material that is challenging, they're going to be bored. For kids to be able to do the work *and* motivated, which is necessary in order to really move them forward academically, you have to give them work on the appropriate level—one small step ahead of where they currently are.

I'm sure there are a lot of people reading this who are hesitant to differentiate their instruction because of the extra amount of work it requires. Well, I'm not going to lie to you, it *is* more work – but even at the beginning, I didn't spend more than an extra hour a day planning my instruction. Plus, the benefits to student learning are too great to measure, as are the benefits to classroom management. You'll be shocked at how much more engaged and better behaved your students will be once you start teaching to their levels. But before you jump in and start to differentiate, I suggest you make sure you do your homework: have control over your classroom, know the most important aspects of your curriculum and standards, and know your students and their needs. If you need help coming up with ideas on how to differentiate, it might be helpful for you to read materials on English Language Learners or special education, which provide suggestions for great accommodations or modifications that can be used for all students.

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I'd like to leave you with one more important piece of advice: be patient. Most kids who will benefit from differentiation just need more time and more practice. It takes time to learn a concept. You have to discover it, practice it, and chew on it a while before it actually sticks with you. Also, I've seen teachers differentiate one lesson, get frustrated with a lack of immediate results, and claim differentiation doesn't work. That's not true – you may just need to give it some time, and you and your students will get better at it. After six years in the classroom, I still have to keep trying different ways to teach things to reach every student in my classroom, and I constantly have to remember to be patient and encourage my students to practice. I have to have confidence in my ability to teach and my students' abilities to learn, and believe that they will eventually get it. Once I believe in them and communicate with them, my students can do anything. I've seen it happen.

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### **Differentiation Example: Middle School Science**

Mr. Ojalate planned a thematic science unit on erosion for his 7th graders. On the first day of the lesson, he introduced the concept to the entire class through direct instruction, and highlighted the major types of erosion. His lesson included the presentation of videos of long-term erosion played at high speed. During the second lesson, his students explored the concept through designated lab activities. Even though there were two labs, each student would only complete one, and was assigned to the experiment appropriate for his or her level and learning style. All the students would achieve the same objective: being able to identify different types of erosion, and the respective causes.

In the first lab, the students worked with different physical models to emulate and view the effects of erosion. Mr. Ojalate worked closely with this group during this phase of the lesson. The students compared the lab results to the different erosion types. Then, in five groups of three, the students worked without Mr. Ojalate to summarize their understanding of each type of erosion, and its principal causes, by creating a graphic organizer of their own design (a skill they were comfortable with) that represented their classifications and explanations.

In the second lab, the other students reviewed a series of photos, an activity that did not require Mr. Ojalate's presence. Each photo corresponded to a different type of erosion. After viewing all of the photos, the students classified them by erosion type. Then, in pairs, students verbally summarized their understanding of how each type of erosion shapes the earth. The students then constructed erosion prevention devices for at least two of the erosion types studied in the photographs. Mr. Ojalate was present and available to assist this more complicated task, since the other group could independently create the graphic organizers.

On the third day, Mr. Ojalate brought all the students together to share their findings. The first group drew their graphic organizers on the board to present them to the second group, and the second group presented and explained their erosion prevention measures.

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