

Defensible Differentiation

Diane Heacox, Ed.D.

Journal of Minnesota Educators of the Gifted and Talented

Voice: Challenging Gifted Learners

January 2011

I received a rather frantic email from a teacher in a school district which has been working hard on differentiation for the past two years. She asked me about an article published in *Education Week* on September 27, 2010. The article in which Mike Schmoker contends that differentiation is a “pedagogic fad” had been copied and placed anonymously in every mailbox in her district. I provided the research that I had on hand immediately but considered what additional response might be appropriate.

Schmoker’s reference to the “architect” of the differentiation model, although unnamed, was clearly Carol Tomlinson. I heard shortly thereafter that she was preparing a response. Her response, “When Pedagogical Misinformation Trumps Reason” appeared in the November 12, 2010 online issue of *Education Week* and in the November 17, 2010 print issue. Tomlinson clearly lays out the critical elements and non-negotiables of the differentiation model as well as makes a case for its foundations in research. If the Schmoker article has been circulating in your district, I encourage you to get Tomlinson’s response out as soon as possible!

In addition, the NAGC conference in November 2010 offered several sessions sharing research on differentiation. Besides Carol Tomlinson’s session, Jann Lappien and Karen Westberg presented an excellent overview of the research that supports the practices of differentiation for gifted learners. References to this research are listed at the end of the article.

Research on a model as complex as differentiation, however, is daunting. Think about differentiation as an umbrella under which is placed a collection of best practices in teaching and learning which are most often research-based. Therefore, one cannot ask “What is the research on differentiation?” One must be specific about the strategy being used as a practice of differentiation. Ask, “What is the research on flexible instructional grouping?” Much to our frustration, we cannot approach this complex model in a simplistic manner.

What also confounds the research is that the practices of differentiation vary from school to school, classroom to classroom. Tomlinson contends that defensible differentiation must come from a *deep understanding* of the model as well as “administrators and teachers working in a *principle-guided, consistent, and coherent way* to make sure the model is *implemented with fidelity*” (Tomlinson, 2010). In other words, one cannot say “I tic-tac-toe, so therefore, I differentiate.” Differentiation is much more complex than a single or a collection of instructional strategies. There are particular elements of defensible differentiation that underpin the model:

1. Deeply knowing the interests, learning profile and readiness needs of your students
2. Being clear and focused on what you want your students to know, understand and be able to do
3. Actively using formal and informal preassessment and formative assessment to guide your instructional decisions
4. Providing opportunities to motivate learning through student choice
5. Specifically matching students to tasks that are “just right, right now” for them through the use of tiered assignments
6. Using flexible grouping to manage and organize students by likeness rather than differences

All of these elements must consistently operate within a classroom which values, honors, and respects the individual learner regardless of where they are on the learning spectrum.

The complexity of the model is also evident in the continual emergence of educational research that pulls new strategies “underneath the DI umbrella”. For example, consider two books connecting neuroscience, 21st Century Skills, and differentiation. Tomlinson and Sousa’s, *Differentiation and the Brain* and Richard Cash’s *Advancing Differentiation: Thinking and Learning for the 21st Century* both provide new and exciting classroom applications based on research in educational neuroscience. We are simply not done learning about how we can

increase the likelihood of student success. Nor are we done discovering the best ways to meet the needs of gifted learners within our academically diverse classrooms.

A commitment to differentiation is not a one workshop, one year process. It causes us to become more analytical, more reflective and more prescriptive in addressing the learning needs of our students. It is a cumulative process, built step by step, year by year into a habit of differentiation. Rest assured, when differentiation is implemented with deep understandings of the complexity of the model as well as fidelity to the model, it reflects the best of what educational research offers as effective teaching.

Tomlinson, C., Sousa, D. (2010). When pedagogical misinformation trumps reason. *Education Week*. November 12.

Samples of Research on Differentiation

Preassessment and Formative Assessment

Brimijoin, K. (2002). *Expertise in differentiation: A preservice and inservice teacher lead the way*. Doctoral dissertation. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA: Retrieved from Dissertations and Theses: Full text.

Ho, S.R. (1994). *Gifted teachers' beliefs and practices regarding standards/state standardized tests, effective assessment and differentiation in a special school for elementary gifted elementary students*. Doctoral dissertation. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA: Retrieved from Dissertations and Theses: Full text.

Stamps, L.S. (2004). The effectiveness of curriculum compacting in first grade classrooms. *Roeper Review*, 27 (1),31-41.

On Instruction and Flexible Grouping

Lou, Y., Abrami, P.C., et al. (1996). Within-class grouping: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 66, 423-428

Lou, Y., Abrami, P.C. & Spence, J.C. (2000). Effects of within class grouping on student achievement: An exploratory model. *Journal of Educational Research*, 94, 101-112.

McCoach, D. B., O'Connell, A.A., & Levitt, H. (2006). Ability grouping across kindergarten using an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Educational Research*, 99, 339-346.

Reis, S. (2010). The effects of differentiated instruction and enrichment pedagogy on reading achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*.

Tieso, C. L. (2002). *The effects of grouping and curricular practices on intermediate students' math achievement*. Hartford, CT: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.

Tieso, C. L. (2005). The effects of grouping and curricular practices on achievement. *Journal for Education of the Gifted*. 29(1), 60-89.