Taking Stock: An Inventory for Differentiation in the Primary Classroom

The Primary Classroom and Differentiation

Aspects of the primary classroom that support differentiation

Examples:
Child-centered instruction
Sensitivity to learning styles

Teaching strategies in primary education that adapt well to differentiation

Examples:
Hands-on learning
Small-group instruction
Arts applications

Student Learning Needs

Student level of mastery

Examples:
Students below or above grade level
Students at different levels in different subjects

Learning challenges and needs in evidence

Examples:
Reading difficulties in some students
Gifted students unchallenged

Cultures, languages, interests, life experiences and circumstances

Examples:
Bilingual students
Several highly creative or artistic students

The Teacher’s Knowledge and Experience

Teaching methods used most

Examples:
Whole-class instruction followed by small-group activity
Questioning techniques to support inductive thinking, followed by independent seat work

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Current ways of responding to different academic and skill levels

Examples:
- Reading groups and reading "buddies"
- Math groups that progress at different levels of mastery
- Creative processes in literacy and social studies

Knowledge and experience in differentiated instruction

Examples:
- Inservices that focused on strategies
- Workshops in developing learning centers
- Some success in helping children who need reinforcement

**Essential Concepts, Knowledge, and Skills**

Required curriculum content and learning goals adaptable to differentiation

Examples:
- Big ideas and concepts in a topic that allow for more flexible responses
- Broadly stated curriculum standards that are not prescriptive

Arts activities adaptable to different learning needs of young children

Examples:
- Theatrical games to explore history
- Visual arts as catalysts for writing or math assignments

**A Learning Environment for Young Students**

The classroom itself and how it responds to the different learning needs of students

Examples:
- Atmosphere warm and open; music to begin and end school day
- Space colorful and many displays for engaging children
- Nature center, reading corner, math games, and projects area

**Resources to Explore**

Resources applicable to different learning styles, intelligences, levels of mastery

Examples:
- Books and magazines
- Nature displays with real nests, grasses, etc.
- Computer programs
- Arts materials
Preparing for the Journey of a Differentiated Classroom

Priorities and Preparation

Greatest needs in the classroom

- Gifted
- Bilingual
- High variation in reading readiness

Greatest demands right now

- Learning benchmarks, particularly in literacy
- Preparing kids for testing in the district

Problems to tackle through differentiation

- Help struggling kids in reading
- Find new ways to get students more engaged in science
- Find more challenging assignments for gifted kids

New strategies to try

- Compacting for bright kids
- Tiered instruction in math class

The following sections examine these items more closely in order to address the questions and practical concerns many teachers have about differentiation.

THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM AND DIFFERENTIATION

Most primary teachers are differentiating already, though they may not be fully aware of it. In a first-grade classroom, for example, we would likely find students working at different levels of ability, moving around in a space with flexible seating arrangements. Colorful displays and materials that appeal to the hands-on, sensory responses of young children are often richly in evidence. From their earliest years, young children learn by exploring their environment; they finger, touch, taste, and shape whatever they can get their hands on (Morrison, 1997). This doesn’t change significantly in the primary school grades. Most primary classrooms combine...