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# Introduction

*If children grew up according to early indications, we should have nothing but geniuses.*

—Goethe

**T**he first edition of this book aimed to help primary teachers respond to the highly diverse learning needs of primary students. Drawing on the root of the word “curriculum”—an active verb meaning “to run” in Latin (*currere*)—we decided to use the metaphor of a journey as a vehicle for exploring the many pathways primary teachers can take (or create) to differentiate in their classrooms. If “curriculum” began as a verb, then, we felt, wouldn’t it make sense to frame the whole discussion in terms of travelers on a journey, each one with his or her own terrain to discover and learn and a variety of routes to explore? This metaphor enabled us to examine differentiated instruction in all its practical detail while still preserving the sense of adventure that we feel captures the heart of learning for most young children.

This second edition has the same aim as the first but with some significant adjustments. It evolved from the thoughtful responses, concerns, and hopes of primary teachers who openly shared their experiences with differentiation, including their triumphs and frustrations. A recurring sentiment we found was the desire for ways to differentiate more simply—to be able to make choices and introduce new strategies without having to devote so many hours to study and preparation. For those trying to differentiate for the first time, many felt overwhelmed by the amount of information they had to digest and were unsure of how to begin. Some teachers never got around to starting.

One of the things that became clear to us as we listened to teachers is the need for them to think through and create their own plans on how they and their students would best be served by differentiation. This is key.

Some teachers have filled their minds with strategies for every student need and attended many workshops and still cannot get the process off the ground. Too often, we discovered, teachers don't recognize that differentiation is *their* journey as well. In fact, its success depends on their being able to establish priorities—to carefully consider which student needs they should address first, which strategies they feel would work best in certain areas, which techniques are too time-consuming at a particular moment in time and which ones they can attempt, and so forth. In essence, they need to map out their own journey before they begin planning their students' paths. Without this process of sifting and sorting, differentiation quickly becomes too demanding and time-consuming for many teachers.

New to the second edition of this book are the following features:

Throughout the text, we have made adjustments to give teachers more choices in how they can respond to the learning needs of their students.

We have addressed the overwhelming nature of differentiation for many teachers by pinpointing how they can be more gradual and stay focused on the most important priorities in each teaching day. We use focus questions to help teachers quickly clarify their own priorities and target student needs efficiently.

A completely revised first chapter addresses the growing need to make differentiation more responsive to the responsibilities and accountabilities of primary teachers, particularly since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. It features an "inventory" chart that helps teachers take stock of *what they are already doing* in their classrooms to accommodate different learning needs.

The third chapter on strategies includes a useful roadmap of the different "routes" teachers can take to differentiate, based on student needs and on the learning goals in each subject.

We have added charts in the subject Chapters 5 through 8 that provide useful snapshots of differentiation in language arts, social studies, science, and math. The charts explore both high- and low-preparation strategies to help teachers respond to student learning needs without feeling obligated to pursue the most difficult strategies before they feel ready to do so.

Each subject chapter also helps readers identify the following: strategies they can do now; teaching practices they're already using that, with minor adjustment, could support their efforts to differentiate; new strategies they would like to learn and adapt to the needs of their

own students; and the skills and information they would need to implement these strategies.

At the end of each chapter, we've included some Web sites for further research and support.

As you travel through this book, think about your own needs and those of your students. The first chapter ("Preparing for the Journey of a Differentiated Classroom") explores the most important elements of a differentiated classroom: (a) an understanding of the students (their needs, strengths, habits, challenges, culture, and so forth); (b) teachers' assessment of their own preparedness and preferences (based on experience, teaching style, approach, knowledge, and expertise); (c) identification of the most essential concepts, knowledge, and skills in the curriculum that will give teachers the flexibility they need to make adjustments; and (d) a classroom environment and resources that will enable children with different needs and abilities to learn in unique ways.

The second chapter ("Assessing Primary Learners") clarifies the "why, what, when, who, and how" of assessing young students. Because understanding the students is the cornerstone of differentiation, the chapter illustrates how student assessment determines what will be taught. It includes strategies for preassessing students, such as testing, observations, portfolios, and parent consultations, and describes how to measure their progress during and after a unit through further observations, rubrics, and questioning.

The third chapter ("Strategies for Differentiating the Learning Journey") offers a summary of the different kinds of strategies you can use as you improve the fit between your curriculum and the students in your class. It has suggestions on how to prepare the children to take on more responsibility than they might be used to and shows how these strategies apply to specific learning situations and student needs. It asks this: What needs to be differentiated? In some cases, you need to vary the pace and level of the assignment. In other situations, a student or group may benefit from a difference in learning style, from integrating content with other disciplines, or from creative processes. The chapter also includes information on different grouping strategies—cluster, interest, tiered—and independent study.

The fourth chapter ("Using the Arts to Differentiate the Primary Curriculum") is a guide for exploiting the full potential of the arts as a resource and medium for differentiating the curriculum. Too often, the arts are relegated to the category of enrichment and are rarely recognized as catalysts for significant cognitive and creative growth in young children.

This chapter applies the visual and performing arts to the four subject chapters (language arts, social studies, science, and math). It shows how the arts can be the *process* by which students explore, conceptualize, synthesize, or analyze content or the *products* that embody the learning they have done in a unit. The chapter has examples within the four general subject areas and a guide for assessing the suitability of specific art forms for assigned work.

Chapters 5 through 8 use a five-step sequence for traveling through the vast and various terrain of language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics and for mapping out *different routes* for the journey. They focus on what is *essential* (concepts, processes, and skills) in each of these subjects as well as on the curriculum standards to guide teachers in selecting suitable learning goals for young children. To use the journey motif, we might ask the following: What mountains must all children scale? What rivers do I want them to dip their toes into? What forests must they pass? Each of the subject chapters clarifies (a) what the students are bringing to the table (abilities, learning styles, culture, etc.), (b) what the destination is (a topic related to some essential concept or skill), and (c) what evidence (products, behaviors, etc.) will show that they understand it. Drawing on this information and on teachers' own unique instructional approach and style, the chapters provide a map for planning learning activities that lead students to selected "destinations" (learning goals), using a range of resources and making adjustments where needed. The last step in each of the chapters offers a number of ways teachers can gauge student progress and make adjustments after or during units. This is critical for determining whether students are getting what they need. Examples of the process draw all of these elements together.

We have not planned out every step you need to take to apply the principles of differentiation to your classroom, and we have not included every known strategy used. We believe that teachers know best how to incorporate new ideas into their classroom and that to nail down every step may defeat our purpose. What we have done is present the key elements of a differentiated classroom as simply as possible and in a way that, we hope, will inspire you to move in new directions. You can best determine what ideas to synthesize into your own planning and what may have to wait until a later time. We only hope that the structure and ideas we have presented will help you meet the diverse needs of young students.

Finally, let it be said that teachers of young children play a crucial role in the future success of their students. Without some measure of love for learning, few children can thrive in any real way. Working for approval or the attainment of good grades cannot carry students to the deeper realms of learning as can the "sense of wonder."

Rachel Carson (1998) put it best when she wrote the following:

If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength. (p. 54)

Because the primary grades influence all the years that follow, young students who have been inspired, curious, and intrigued in their first encounters with new learning draw on this foundation into the middle and upper grades. It is in the earliest years that their sense of themselves as learners first emerges. It is in the earliest years that their love of learning is awakened, and, through you, extended. So let the journey begin!