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Reconcilable Differences? Standards-Based Teaching and Differentiation

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Standards-based instruction and differentiated learning can be compatible approaches in today's classrooms.

Recent demands for more standards-based teaching can feel like a huge impediment to encouraging differentiated instruction, especially for teachers and principals who recognize student variance and want to address it appropriately. A relatively new phenomenon (at least in its current form), standards-based instruction dominates the educational terrain in a time of great academic diversity in contemporary classrooms. In fact, standards-based instruction and the high-stakes testing that drives it can often feel like a locomotive rolling over everything in its path, including individualized learning.

When any phenomenon in education suggests that we may have to jettison common sense and good pedagogy, we must first examine it in light of what we know about high-quality instruction. In other words, if we understand how standards-based teaching does or does not align with sound teaching and learning practices, we can then approach what look like barriers to differentiation. In truth, the conflict between focusing on standards and focusing on individual learners' needs exists only if we use standards in ways that cause us to abandon what we know about effective curriculum and instruction.

Differentiation: A Way of Thinking About the Classroom

What we call *differentiation* is not a recipe for teaching. It is not an instructional strategy. It is not what a teacher does when he or she has time. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is a philosophy. As such, it is based on a set of beliefs:

- Students who are the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their interests, their styles of learning, their experiences, and their life circumstances.
- The differences in students are significant enough to make a major impact on what students need to learn, the pace at which they need to learn it, and the support they need from teachers and others to learn it well.
- Students will learn best when supportive adults push them slightly beyond where they can work without assistance.
- Students will learn best when they can make a connection between the curriculum and their interests and life experiences.
- Students will learn best when learning opportunities are natural.

- Students are more effective learners when classrooms and schools create a sense of community in which students feel significant and respected.
- The central job of schools is to maximize the capacity of each student.

By definition, differentiation is wary of approaches to teaching and learning that standardize. Standard-issue students are rare, and educational approaches that ignore academic diversity in favor of standardization are likely to be counterproductive in reaching the full range of learners.

Differentiation must be a refinement of, not a substitute for, high-quality curriculum and instruction. Expert or distinguished teaching focuses on the understandings and skills of a discipline, causes students to wrestle with profound ideas, calls on students to use what they learn in important ways, helps students organize and make sense of ideas and information, and aids students in connecting the classroom with a wider world (Brandt, 1998; Danielson, 1996; Schlechty, 1997; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Differentiation—one facet of expert teaching—reminds us that these things are unlikely to happen for the full range of students unless curriculum and instruction fit each individual, unless students have choices about what to learn and how, unless students take part in setting learning goals, and unless the classroom connects with the experiences and interest of the individual (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999). Differentiation says, "Building on core teaching and learning practices that are solid, here's what you do to refine them for maximum individual growth."

We first need to ask, Is a given teaching or learning approach likely to have a positive impact on the core of effective teaching and learning? When we are content with the answer, we can ask further, What is the effect of the practice on individuals in an academically diverse population? The latter question always helps us refine the effectiveness of the former but cannot substitute for it.

Standards-Based Teaching

For many teachers, curriculum has become a prescribed set of academic standards, instructional pacing has become a race against a clock to cover the standards, and the sole goal of teaching has been reduced to raising student test scores on a single test, the value of which has scarcely been questioned in the public forum. Teachers feel as though they are torn in opposing directions: They are admonished to attend to student differences, but they must ensure that every student becomes competent in the same subject matter and can demonstrate the competencies on an assessment that is differentiated neither in form nor in time constraints.

To examine the dichotomy between standards-based teaching and differentiation, we must ask questions about how standards influence the quality of teaching and learning. What is the impact of standards-based teaching on the quality of education in general? Then we can assess ways in which standards-based approaches make an impact on gifted or academically challenged students whose abilities are outside the usual norms of achievement.

- Do the standards reflect the knowledge, understandings, and skills valued most by experts in the disciplines that they represent?

- Are we using standards as a curriculum, or are they reflected in the curriculum?
- Are we slavishly covering standards at breakneck pace, or have we found ways to organize the standards within our curriculum so that students have time to make sense of ideas and skills?
- Does our current focus on standards enliven classrooms, or does it eliminate joy, creativity, and inquiry?
- Do standards make learning more or less relevant and alluring to students?
- Does our use of standards remind us that we are teaching human beings, or does it cause us to forget that fact?

If we are satisfied that our standards-based practices yield positive answers, we can look fruitfully at how to make adaptations to address the needs of academically diverse learners. If our answers are less than satisfactory, we should address the problems. Such problems inevitably point to cracks in the foundation of quality teaching and learning, and we diminish our profession by failing to attend to them. Differentiating curriculum and instruction cannot make up for ill-conceived curriculum and instruction.

Negative Cases

The following examples are recent and real. Sadly, they are not rare. They also show how good intentions can go awry.

- In one standards-driven district, primary grade teachers attended a staff-development session that they had requested and in which they had high interest. The staff developer asked them to list some concepts that they taught so that the session would be linked to what went on in their classrooms. When—even with coaching and examples—no one was able to name the concepts they taught, the staff developer asked for the topics they taught. More awkward silence followed. A few teachers said that they sometimes took a day or two to talk about holidays, such as Halloween, Christmas, or Kwanza, because young students were excited about special occasions. Other teachers explained that they no longer taught units or topics (and certainly not concepts). Their entire curriculum had become a list of skills that students learned out of context of any meaning or utility—except that the test was coming, and all 6-through 8-year-olds were expected to perform.
- A highly successful elementary school was started two decades ago to serve a student population that speaks more than 25 languages and whose homes are often marked by economic stress. The librarian in the school recently remarked, “This has always been the best place in the world to teach. The students have loved it. Their parents have trusted it. Our students have done well. The teachers have always been excited to come to work. It has been a place of energy and inspired teaching. In the last two years [since the inception of a standards-based program and high-stakes testing], I've watched us become what we were created to avoid. We are telling instead of teaching. We fight to find time to reach out to the kids. Joy in classrooms has been replaced by fear that is first felt by the teachers and then by the students. We're trying hard to keep alive what we believe in, but I'm not sure we can.”
- In another standards-driven district, middle school teachers listed student names in one of three columns: *Definitely*, *Maybe*, and *No Hope*. The designations showed who would surely pass the standards tests, who might pass, and who had no chance of passing. The teachers separated the students into columns because, they said, there was no point in worrying about students who already knew enough to pass the test, and there was no point in wasting time on students who could not be raised to the standard. “It's the only way to go,” said one teacher. “It's what we have to do to get the points on this year's test.”

In all these places, teachers feel torn between an external impetus to cover the standards and a desire to address the diverse academic needs. In truth, the problem is not a contradiction between standards and appropriately responsive instruction. The problem lies in an ill-conceived interpretation and use of standards that erode the underpinnings of effective teaching and learning.

The problem is not that we can't attend to the needs of individual learners, but rather that we've lost the essential frameworks of the disciplines in addition to the coherence, understanding, purpose, and joy in learning. Our first obligation is to ensure that standards-based teaching practice does not conflict with best teaching practice. Once those are aligned, differentiation—or attention to the diverse needs of learners—follows naturally.

Standards and Differentiation

There is no contradiction between effective standards-based instruction and differentiation. Curriculum tells us *what* to teach: Differentiation tells us *how*. Thus, if we elect to teach a standards-based curriculum, differentiation simply suggests ways in which we can make that curriculum work best for varied learners. In other words, differentiation can show us how to teach the same standard to a range of learners by employing a variety of teaching and learning modes.

Choose any standard. Differentiation suggests that you can challenge all learners by providing materials and tasks on the standard at varied levels of difficulty, with varying degrees of scaffolding, through multiple instructional groups, and with time variations. Further, differentiation suggests that teachers can craft lessons in ways that tap into multiple student interests to promote heightened learner interest in the standard. Teachers can encourage student success by varying ways in which students work: alone or collaboratively, in auditory or visual modes, or through practical or creative means.

Positive Cases

- Science teachers in one small district delineated the key facts, concepts, principles, and skills of their discipline for K–12. Having laid out the framework, they examined the state-prescribed standards for science and mapped them for K–12. They found that the standards in their state did a pretty good job of reflecting the facts and skills of science but did a poor job of making explicit the concepts and principles of science. With the two frameworks in front of them, the teachers could fill in gaps—and more important, could organize their curriculum in ways that were coherent and manageable. Their work helped their colleagues see the big picture of science instruction for K–12 over time, organize instruction conceptually, and teach with the essential principles of science in mind. The result was a districtwide science curriculum that made better sense to teachers and students alike, helped students think like scientists, reduced the teachers' sense of racing to cover disjointed information, and still attended to prescribed standards.
- In a high school Algebra II class, the teacher acknowledged that some of her students lacked prerequisite skills, whereas others learned as rapidly as she could teach or even without her help. At the outset of each chapter, the teacher delineated for students the specific skills, concepts, and understandings that they needed to master for that segment of the curriculum—both to have a solid grasp of mathematics and to pass the upcoming standards exam. She helped students make connections to past concepts, understandings, and skills. She divided each week into segments of teacher-led instruction, whole-class instruction, and small-group work.

For group-work sessions, she sometimes met with students who were advanced in a particular topic to urge on their thinking, to help them solve problems in multiple ways, and to apply their understandings and skills to complex, real-life problems. Sometimes she met with students who needed additional instruction or guided assistance in applying what they were learning. Sometimes she created mixed-readiness teams of students whose goal was solving a problem in the most effective way possible. The teacher randomly called on students to present and defend their team's approach, thus maximizing the likelihood that every student had a model for solving an important problem and was able to explain the reasoning behind the solution. These problem-solving groups

often evolved into teacher-created study groups that worked together to ensure that everyone had his or her questions answered. Not only did the teacher provide some class time for the study groups, but she also encouraged regular after-school meetings in her room, where she was able to monitor group progress and assist if needed. She recalls,

“The hardest thing for me was learning to teach a class where I wasn't always working with the class as a whole, but that has been rewarding, too. I know my students better. They know Algebra II better—and I think I probably understand it better, too. I haven't made a math prodigy out of everyone, of course, but I can honestly say the students like algebra better and are more confident in their capacity to learn. Their scores on the standards test improved, even though I targeted some ideas and skills more than others. I think what that fact tells me is that if I help students organize their mathematical knowledge and thinking, they can fare better in unfamiliar territory.”

- In an elementary classroom, a teacher organized many of her standards around three key concepts—connections, environments, and change—and their related principles; for example, living things are changed by and change their environments. She used them to study history, science, language arts, and sometimes mathematics. Although she generally taught each of the three subjects separately, she helped students make links among them; she created activities for the students that called for reading skills in social studies, for example, and social studies skills in science. That approach, she said, allowed everyone to work with the same big ideas and skills in a lesson while she could adjust materials, activities, and projects for varied readiness levels, diverse interests, and multiple modes of learning. Bringing the students together for class discussions was no problem, she reflected, because everyone's work focused on the essentials—even though students might get to those essentials in different ways. “It took me some time to rethink the standards and how I taught them,” she recalled.

“But I feel as if I'm a better teacher. I understand what I'm teaching better, and I certainly have come to understand the students I teach more fully. I no longer see my curriculum as a list to be covered, and I no longer see my students as duplicates of one another.”

In these settings, teachers have retained—or, in some cases, have discovered for the first time—the essential frameworks of the disciplines and the coherence, understanding, purpose, and joy in learning. The teachers have struggled to meet their first obligation—to ensure that standards-based teaching practice is not in conflict with best teaching practice. Once the teachers aligned standards with high-quality instruction, differentiation followed naturally.

Quality and Personalization

Overwhelmed by the task, a teacher recently pleaded, “I have all these students with all these different needs; how can anyone expect me to differentiate in my classroom?” Odd as the comment sounds, she spoke for many of us. The more complex the task, the more inviting it is to retreat to the familiar—to find a standardized approach and cling to it.

Thus, we find ourselves saying, “I know I'm missing lots of my students, but if I don't hurry to cover all the standards, how will they succeed on the test?” Or, “I know it would be good to involve students in thinking and problem solving, but there's just no time.” The deeper issue is about what happens when we use any approach that allows us to lose sight of the soul of teaching and learning. A secondary factor is that such approaches make it difficult to attend to individual differences.

Do standardizing practices fail academically diverse learners? Of course they do. Whatever practices invite us to be paint-by-number teachers will largely fail students who do not fit the template. Paint-by-number approaches will fall short for all of us—teachers and students alike—because they abandon quality. Paint-by-number approaches will fail teachers because they confuse technical expedience with artistry. They will fail students because they confuse compliance with thoughtful engagement. Any educational approach that does not invite us to teach individuals is deeply flawed.

Teaching is hard. Teaching well is fiercely so. Confronted by too many students, a schedule without breaks, a pile of papers that regenerates daily, and incessant demands from every educational stakeholder, no wonder we become habitual and standardized in our practices. Not only do we have no time to question why we do what we do, but we also experience the discomfort of change when we do ask the knotty questions. Nonetheless, our profession cannot progress and our increasingly diverse students cannot succeed if we do less.

Grading Practices

The following questions help ensure that grading practices are productive for all students.

How do learners benefit from a grading system that reminds everyone that students with disabilities or who speak English as a second language do not perform as well as students without disabilities or for whom English is their native tongue?

What do we gain by telling our most able learners that they are "excellent" on the basis of a standard that requires modest effort, calls for no intellectual risk, necessitates no persistence, and demands that they develop few academic coping skills?

In what ways do our current grading practices motivate struggling or advanced learners to persist in the face of difficulty?

Is there an opportunity for struggling learners to encounter excellence in our current grading practices?

Is there an opportunity for advanced learners to encounter struggle in our current grading practices?

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