

Book Study

Prepared by the
Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) Project

The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners

Carol Ann Tomlinson
(ASCD, 1998)

Book Description:

The Differentiated Classroom by Carol Ann Tomlinson is a great resource for understanding the purpose, elements, strategies, and examples of differentiated classrooms in elementary and secondary schools. Teachers will appreciate the specific guidelines and suggestions for starting at the classroom and building level.

Target Audience:

This book study is a perfect match for any K-12 building or district looking at how to make Tier 1 instruction effective for ALL students.

Chapter 1: What Is a Differentiated Classroom?

Overview

This chapter raises the question of “What is Differentiated Classroom?” and discusses examples and non-examples of such classrooms.

Helpful Hints

As a kick-off to your book study, it might be interesting to brainstorm characteristics of a differentiated classroom. What would it look like? What would the students be doing? What would the teacher’s instruction consist of? You might collect these ideas on chart paper and revisit this list later on throughout the book study. It is beneficial to boost prior knowledge and have some idea of each teacher’s perspective on differentiation.

Discussion Questions:

1. Knowing that one of the beliefs of the Multi-Tier model is to match instruction to student needs, reflect on what the teachers in the “School Portrait” section of the chapter did or did not do to match lessons to different needs of the students.
2. Creating independent learners is a goal for all teachers. What are some of the ways teachers in this chapter structured the lessons and instructional choices so that students were motivated to be engaged in learning?

Chapter 2: Elements of Differentiation

Overview

This chapter discusses eight principles that guide differentiated instruction. Tomlinson also provides two organizers to help the reader visualize more clearly the concept of a differentiated classroom.

Helpful Hints

Use Figure 2.2 on page 16 as a “*Think, Pair, Share*” talk structure. This is an excellent method for teachers to reflect about characteristics of their own classrooms and if they fit under the Traditional or Differentiated categories.

Discussion Questions

1. Tomlinson writes, “*Assessment is today’s means of understanding how to modify tomorrow’s instruction.*” Discuss some of the formative assessment methods mentioned in this chapter (and others that your teachers may use) that are easy and effective in identifying students’ skill level and their response to instruction.
2. In the Multi- tiered System of Support’s problem solving model, we encourage teachers to brainstorm different strategies or interventions that will “unstick” struggling students. Discuss how modifying Tomlinson’s components of instructional lessons, “*content, process, and product,*” may apply to the problem solving process.
3. One of the principles of differentiation discussed in this chapter is “*The Teacher Balances Group and Individual Norms.*” (p.13) Discuss how identifying and understanding a student’s growth compared to his own goals and to grade level goals can be used for identification of Tier II and Tier III intervention.

Chapter 3: Rethinking How We Do School – and for Whom?

Overview

This chapter covers three principles of teaching and learning that have recently been clearly defined by research. The reader then applies that new research to the students of today's classroom and realizes how we confront challenge and resistance in meeting their needs.

Helpful Hints

The three principles of teaching and learning covered in this chapter are *critical* to effective instruction. Teachers may want to refer to the original research studies (cited in the bibliography) for further details and implications for their understanding of these important concepts.

Discussion Questions

1. Tomlinson discusses the three important conclusions drawn from multiple intelligence research on page 18. How can classroom instruction amplify or diminish students' intelligence?
2. The brain research done by Caine and Caine in 1991, states that learning is a process of connecting the unfamiliar to the familiar. Discuss how the three part task (outlined on p. 19) can be applied to a Science or Social Studies lesson in your classroom.
3. Vygotsky (1978) states the individuals learn best when presented with a moderate challenge (their Zone of Proximal Development). Share with your colleagues some methods of planning lessons that provide for students' different levels of moderate challenge.

Chapter 4: Learning Environments That Support Differentiated Instruction

Overview

Tomlinson discusses how the teacher, the students, and the content all work together to create a healthy classroom environment.

Helpful Hints

A fun activity might be to have each teacher share with a partner their image of themselves as an instructional leader. If you could observe yourself, what image of teaching would you see? How does that image lend itself to differentiating instruction in the classroom?

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on Figure 4.1 on page 27, the Artful Teaching triangle. Tomlinson states that if any side goes unattended and gets out of balance with the others, artfulness is lost. Discuss with your group, how the breakdown of this triangle can lead to defective Tier I instruction.
2. In the example of Mary Ann Smith's classroom on p. 28-29, Tomlinson mentions that she was big on standards, but short on standardization. What does that mean to you?

Chapter 5: Good Instruction as a Basis for Differentiated Teaching

Overview

This chapter covers the elements of a differentiated unit or lesson. It discusses the levels of learning that are expected by the student (and planned by the teacher), as well as the curriculum elements that must be present.

Helpful Hints

It would be interesting for each grade level to think about one of the units that they teach and compare it to figure 5.2 on p.45 to identify the key facts, concepts, principles for their particular unit of study.

Discussion questions

1. On p. 38, Tomlinson identified two elements essential for durable learning. Discuss with your group specific examples of how a student's engagement can be critical to their understanding or "wrapping around an important idea."
2. Share with your colleagues how identifying levels of learning (facts, concepts, principles, etc.) in areas of curriculum can facilitate the alignment of instruction between Tier I, II, and III.
3. When considering students' level of intensity of instruction and intervention as they move up the tiers of the pyramid, how can the content, process and product of the lesson be varied to meet the child's needs? (Refer to figure 5.2 on 45 for clarification)

Chapter 6: Teachers at Work Building Differentiated Classrooms

Overview

This chapter begins by discussing three questions that teachers need to consider when developing differentiated lessons:

- What is the teacher differentiating?
- Why is the teacher differentiating?
- How is the teacher differentiating?

Tomlinson then presents many examples of differentiation in two categories of skilled based instruction and concept based instruction.

Helpful Hints

For a fun talk structure, doing a jigsaw cooperative learning activity with the different classroom scenarios in this chapter would fit well. Have each group of teachers choose or assign a particular skill focused instructional lesson (p.49-54) to read and discuss. Then have them regroup into mixed groups to report back the comments and essential points from their “expert group”, so that all teachers can be familiar with all the lessons in the book.

Discussion questions

1. After reading one of the differentiated examples in this chapter, what might be a challenge for you in doing something similar in your classroom?
2. Did you agree with the teacher in your example with answers to the 3 questions: Differentiate What? Differentiate How? Differentiate Why?
How might you answer the questions differently for that same lesson?
3. When beginning differentiated instruction in your classroom would you begin with a Skills-Focused lesson or a Concept-based lesson? Why?
4. Now think about an example from your own curriculum and classroom. How might you answer the “what, why, and how” questions?

Chapter 7: Instructional Strategies That Support Differentiation

Overview

This chapter gives examples that describe 4 different instructional strategies that work effectively in differentiated classrooms. These strategies are Stations, Agendas, Complex Instruction, and Orbital Studies.

Helpful Hints

This chapter, along with chapter 8, is the “meat and potatoes” of this book. Teachers will love the actual description and examples of specific strategies that they can be using in their classrooms. This might be an occasion to slow down and provide more time for thoughtful processing for your teachers. This could lead to teachers being inspired and motivated to try one of these strategies with their students.

Discussion Questions

1. After reading about the example of Math Stations, on p. 62-65, how would that structure fit into the Tier I instruction in your classroom? Would you change something or adapt it to another subject area?
2. How would the concept of Agendas (p.66-68) work with students also receiving Tier II and Tier III support (for lower and higher achieving students)?
3. How is this example of Complex Instruction (p. 68-71) similar to other cooperative learning strategies that you are familiar with? How would this benefit all kinds of learners in your classroom? What would be the challenges?
4. The independent study strategy described in this chapter as Orbital Studies, (p.71-74) would require the student to have good time management skills and an independent work ethic. What are some methods of supporting students to become more successful at being independent workers?

Chapter 8: More Instructional Strategies to Support Differentiation

Overview

As a continuance of the previous chapter, Chapter 8 gives more examples of additional strategies that support differentiated classrooms. These strategies include Centers, Entry Points, Tiered Activities, Learning Contracts, as well as brief descriptions of others.

Helpful Hints

After having read chapter 7 and 8, it might be a perfect time to have your teachers individually or in groups select a specific strategy that they want to try in their classroom(s). They, then, may choose to share their experiences with the staff. Was it difficult or easy to plan and implement? Why? How did the students respond? Did all students learn and meet your expectations?

Discussion Questions

1. Briefly scan the chapter and select one of the strategies: Centers, Entry Points, Tiered Activities, or Learning Contracts to read and think about in more depth. When thinking about your strategy, consider the following questions:
 - How would this strategy differentiate for the students in your Tier I curriculum?
 - What the important steps in planning for this strategy?
 - What would be some changes you might need to implement to make it doable for you?
 - How would this instructional process align with the Tier II and Tier III instruction some of your students receive?

Chapter 9: How Do Teachers Make It All Work?

Overview

Tomlinson gives five tips for “Getting Started with Differentiation.” She suggests students can be partners in this concept, and believes in establishing a support system in order to sustain the practice over time.

Helpful Hints

Reflecting on the actual classroom management of this process will be critical to all teachers. This chapter helps teachers examine their own beliefs and practices and gives them permission to start small and go slow! Real discussions among teachers about their transitions from more traditional ways of teaching to these new strategies would provide a stronger assurance of success with students in your building.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the benefit of using an “anchor activity” when you start the process of differentiation in your classroom?
2. Discuss how teachers, just like students, need a “moderate challenge” (Vygotsky’s term) in order to make growth. (p. 97 Grow Slowly-but Grow).
 - Give an example of a selecting a moderate challenge for you in starting this process.
3. As you read the four ideas of involving students in creating your differentiated classroom, (p.99-100) which idea would you choose to implement? Why?
4. Identify specific people (colleagues, administrators, parents, and community members) that can be supportive to you in this process of setting up and sustaining a differentiated classroom. How can each of these people benefit your cause?

Chapter 10: When Educational Leaders Seek Differentiated Classrooms

Overview

This chapter is directed to principals and administrators that are interested in embarking on the implementation of differentiated instruction at the building level. Tomlinson talks about the challenges of the change process for an organization as well as gives advice for starting and supporting this practice along the way.

Helpful Hints

Principals or Building Leadership Teams that plan staff development for their teachers will want to consider many of the issues that Tomlinson brings up in this chapter. Your team will want to discuss how differentiation fits into your model of MTSS and supports your tiers of instruction effectively. Looking at your student data may give you a starting point in choosing a particular curricular area to begin and how it will be implemented in all three tiers.

Discussion Questions

1. After reading the recommendations for beginning your implementation, sketch out a plan and a timeline for your staff. (It may be a multi-year plan.)
 - Will you start with a few teachers or a specific grade level?
 - Will school schedules need to be adjusted?
 - How will you communicate with parents?
 - What will ongoing assistance and staff development look like?
 - Think about the notion of “Applying pressure and offering support.” (p.114) How would that work in your building? Are there teacher leaders or coaches to offer support?
 - What decisions will you make about encouraging novice teachers to be a part of the initial start-up?