

Second Cup of Coffee: Differentiation Themes

Differentiation is a student-centered philosophy that calls for a wide variety of best practice teaching strategies.

The Joseph Sears School has a long history of supporting the needs of all learners through the practice of differentiation. Put simply, differentiation is a way for teachers to meet students where they are in the learning process and help maximize their learning and achievement. Teachers may vary content, process, product, and learning environment based on student readiness, interests, and preferred learning styles to achieve optimal learning outcomes. Student learning begins with a rigorous curriculum, and teachers can adjust the degree of support, depth of knowledge, and modes of delivery to find ways to meet the needs and preferences of various students within the classroom.

Teachers may differentiate for students in a wide variety of ways through both proactive planning and adjusting instruction responsively.

When teachers differentiate instruction, teachers may adjust several elements of curriculum, instruction, and assessment:

Content: This is WHAT students learn and how students access information. Teachers may vary the breadth or depth of the content and provide opportunities for students to explore self-selected topics.

Process: This is HOW students make sense of what they are learning. Teachers can provide students with multiple pathways to common, high-level learning outcomes. This approach allows for varying degrees of depth of understanding.

Product: This is WHAT students create to show their learning. Teachers can provide students with a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning.

Environment: This is WHERE students learn. Teachers can balance routine and structures with flexibility to allow for student differences. Within the classroom environment, teachers organize space and may utilize flexible configurations in various ways to optimize student learning.

Our student-centered approach and knowledge of students inform instructional practices.

Teachers seek to provide relevant, interesting and challenging learning experiences for all students. Students are encouraged to take on increasing responsibility for their learning as well as develop their own inquiries.

When differentiating, teachers may take into consideration students':

Learning Profiles: Students' preferences for exploring, understanding, and expressing content. This can include learning preferences, gender, affective, and cultural considerations.

Readiness: Readiness changes from topic to topic and skill to skill. It is based on students' prior knowledge and their starting points for learning.

Interests: Motivation to learn is enhanced when students are engaged through their interests.

Flexible grouping forms the foundation for differentiated instruction.

Flexible groupings are fluid, impermanent ways to configure students for a particular instructional purpose. Teachers use data (*forms of assessment, knowledge of students, and student input*) to arrange students in a wide variety of flexible groups. These flexible groupings include whole-class, small group, partner, and individual instruction. Depending on the instructional purpose, students may be grouped based on similar interests, readiness, or learning preferences. For instance, teachers may group students who need additional practice with a particular skill and reteach the skill in a different way. In the same classroom, teachers may group students who are interested in the same topic together to participate in an inquiry-based activity. Through the use of flexible groupings, teachers are able to customize learning in response to the unique needs of students.

Teachers effectively collaborate to meet the needs of all learners within the classroom.

Differentiated instruction necessitates thoughtful preparation at every stage of the learning cycle. In order to support responsive practices, teachers can work collaboratively to enhance and expand student learning opportunities. Working together, professionals ensure that learning experiences are engaging, in-depth, multi-modal, and sufficiently challenging. Ultimately, through this collaborative approach, we are able to maximize student learning.

Works Consulted:

Sousa, D. A., & Tomlinson, C. A. (2018). *Differentiation and the brain: how neuroscience supports the learner-friendly classroom*. Moorabbin, Vic.: Hawker Brownlow Education.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2016). *The differentiated classroom: responding to the needs of all learners*. Boston: Published by Pearson Education, Inc., by special arrangement with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Wormeli, R. (2018). *Fair isn't always equal: assessment and grading in the differentiated classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.