

Beliefs That Guide Differentiated Instruction

As discussed previously, differentiation is a teacher’s proactive response to learners’ needs. These needs can be cognitive (needs for knowledge, meaning, and intellectual stimulation) and emotional—such as the need for belonging and connection, the need to feel respected and accepted, and the need to feel secure and important.

What’s important to remember is that “learners come to school not to seek mastery of math or literature, but rather to address more basic needs first,” write Tomlinson and Imbeau in *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom* (2010, p. 39). They describe the more basic needs as needs for **affirmation** and **contribution**. Once these basic needs have been met, learners focus on **purpose, challenge, and power** (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

A Responsive Teacher

Teachers respond to student needs in a variety of ways. They address some needs and ignore others; they understand unique needs of some individual students, and they also generalize students’ needs.

To effectively respond to student needs for affirmation, contribution, purpose, challenge and power, Tomlinson (2003, p. 28) recommends that teachers consistently respond to their students with **invitation, opportunity, investment, persistence, and reflection**. These responses, together with the messages that help convey them, are provided in the table on the next page.

| Teacher Response | Teacher Messages Conveying the Response |
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| Invitation | <p>I have respect for who you are and who you can become.</p> <p>I want to know you.</p> <p>You are unique and valuable.</p> <p>I believe in you.</p> <p>I have time for you.</p> <p>I learn when I listen to you.</p> <p>This place is yours, too.</p> <p>We need you here.</p> |
| Opportunity | <p>I have important things for you to do here today.</p> <p>The things I ask you to do are worthy things.</p> <p>The things I ask you to do are often daunting.</p> <p>The things I ask you to do open new possibilities for you.</p> <p>The things I give you to do here help you become all you can be.</p> <p>You have specific roles that make us all more efficient and effective.</p> |
| Investment | <p>I work hard to make this place work for you.</p> <p>I work to make this place reflect you.</p> <p>I enjoy thinking about what we do here.</p> <p>I love to find new paths to success.</p> <p>It is my job to help you succeed.</p> <p>I am your partner in growth.</p> <p>I will do what it takes to ensure your growth.</p> |
| Persistence | <p>You are growing, but you are not finished growing.</p> <p>When one route doesn't work, there are others we can find.</p> <p>Let's figure out what works best.</p> <p>There are no excuses here, but there is support.</p> <p>There is no finish line in learning.</p> |
| Reflection | <p>I watch you and listen to you carefully and systematically.</p> <p>I make sure to use what I learn to help you learn better.</p> <p>I try to see things through your eyes.</p> <p>I continually, ask, "How is this partnership working?"</p> <p>I continually ask, "How can I make this better?"</p> |

A Word About Mindset

A teacher’s response to student needs is shaped by the teacher’s mindset—a set of beliefs about the human ability to learn and to succeed. Likewise students’ attitudes toward learning are shaped by their beliefs about learning and success.

According to research on motivation by Carol Dweck, beliefs about the nature of intelligence and success form at a young age. To describe these beliefs, Dweck uses two terms—a *fixed mindset* and a *growth mindset* (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). These two mindsets, as well as the beliefs of students and teachers that are guided by them, are described in the table below.

| | Fixed Mindset | Growth Mindset |
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| People with this mindset believe that | Being smart and successful is an innate characteristic that cannot be changed. In other words, a person is either born smart and successful—or isn’t. | Success is shaped by persistent and deliberate effort. Through hard work, people can succeed. |
| When faced with challenges at school, students with this mindset | Tend to give up, concluding that they aren’t smart enough to succeed. They have minimal motivation to work hard, even though they may have high ability. | Believe that they can master even the tasks and skills that are difficult. They are motivated to work hard because they believe that they will reap the rewards of their efforts. |
| Teachers with this mindset believe that | Some students will learn, and some won’t. | With hard work and support for their effort, all students can learn. |

In practice, teachers with the fixed mindset may underestimate student capacity and motivation to work hard and may “teach down” based on student’s language, culture, socioeconomic status, race, and other characteristics. Even when teaching students with high ability, they may accept their high grades or grade-level work as adequate.

On the other hand, teachers with a growth mindset encourage and insist on student effort and hard work—and, over time, they are able to change the mindset of students by creating the conditions in which students can experience success through hard work (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Differentiation Mindset

According to Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau (2010), “differentiation is a growth mindset endeavor—it asks teachers to find an academic entry point relative to essential learning outcomes, to make instructional plans designed to move students to mastery of those outcomes, and to adopt a ‘whatever it takes’ approach in doing so. It also calls on teachers to work with students to show them the direct link between effort and success” (p. 33).

In practice, differentiation mindset translates into six beliefs (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, pp. 27–37), which are summarized in the table below together with questions that teachers can ask themselves to guide their teaching practice.

| Belief | Explanation | Questions That Guide Teaching Practice |
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| Every student is worthy of dignity and respect. | <p>Teaching is viewed as the process of shaping young lives, which are valuable and should be treated accordingly.</p> <p>The teacher acts in ways that consistently respect and dignify the worth of each student.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can I gain an understanding of the particular talents, strengths, and needs of this student? • In what ways can I show this student that I respect and value him or her? • How do I help this student recognize and extend his or her strengths? • How can I ensure my own cultural competence in order to be the most effective teacher possible for each learner? • In what ways can I help students see and value the contributions and potential of every other student in the class? • How can I guide development of a sense of classroom community characterized by respect? |

| Belief | Explanation | Questions That Guide Teaching Practice |
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| <p>Diversity is both inevitable and possible.</p> | <p>All human beings have essential traits and needs that make us similar.</p> <p>At the same time, our differences make us individuals.</p> <p>Our differences don't have to separate us—they can enrich us, if we are open to them.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I contribute to my students' awareness of their core similarities and their individuality? • How do I seek diverse perspectives on issues and topics in our class? • How do I help students learn to seek and value multiple perspectives on issues and topics? • How well do I understand my own culture and how it shapes my perspectives and practices as a person and as a teacher? • How do I ensure that all students' backgrounds, cultures, languages, patterns of communication, preferred ways of learning, and traditions are represented in our classroom's operation, curriculum, and materials? • How do I ensure that each student has equity of access to the highest quality learning opportunities? • How do I create group work that draws on the particular strengths of the group's members? • How do I ensure that every student has a significant intellectual contribution to make to the work of the class? |
| <p>The classroom should mirror the kind of society in which we want our students to live and lead.</p> | <p>The classroom should be a model of an inclusive society, where differences are invited and celebrated.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I come to understand my students' diverse backgrounds and needs so that I can draw on them and build on them effectively? • How do my students and I create an inclusive learning environment in which they learn well together, not just occupy the same space? • How do I help students create a classroom in which they understand that we all have different entry points into learning, yet share a common need to learn? • How do students come to encourage and support one another's growth? • How do students learn to celebrate one another's growth? |

| Belief | Explanation | Questions That Guide Teaching Practice |
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| <p>Most students can learn most things that are essential to a given area of study.</p> | <p>Teachers are honest with students about where their skills are at a certain point in time and where they need to be in order to achieve their dreams and goals.</p> <p>Teachers assist students in developing the attitudes, work habits, and strategies necessary for accomplishing these goals.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I understand the mindset of each of my students in order to ensure that they understand their capacity to affect their own success? • How do I help each student develop and extend the attitudes, habits of mind, and strategies needed to contribute to his or her success as a learner? • How do I understand and address each student’s learning development and needs relative to designated learning outcomes for my grade or subject? • How do I ensure that there are materials and support needed for each student’s progress? • How do I ensure that classroom working arrangements build on students’ cultural preferences for learning? • In what ways can I make clear to my students that I value their effort rather than their innate ability—that I am much more interested in their growth than in their starting points? • How do I ensure that competition against oneself, rather than against one another, is the goal of this class? • How do I ensure that student growth is a key and visible component in reporting grades? |

| Belief | Explanation | Questions That Guide Teaching Practice |
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| <p>Each student should have equity of access to excellent learning opportunities.</p> | <p>Learning opportunities should focus on what is essential to learn—on how the subject makes sense and what makes it authentic, useful, relevant, and meaningful.</p> <p>The curriculum and instruction should provide consistent opportunities for students to retain, apply, and transfer what they learn.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what degree does the curriculum seem relevant to and engage each student in my class? • Is the curriculum designed to ensure student understanding of content? • Am I confident that I am “teaching up” to all of my students, rather than “watering down” for some of them? • Are all of the tasks I offer respectful—that is, are they equally appealing and focused on essential understandings, do they require students to think critically and/or creatively, and do they ask all students to work with content in authentic ways? • In what ways can I make certain that my most advanced students are being consistently challenged? • In what ways can I support each student in achieving and, if possible, surpassing established goals? • Is each student an active participant in discussions designed to help them make meaning of ideas? • How do I schedule our time so students can focus on their own academic needs and still come together around important ideas? |

| Belief | Explanation | Questions That Guide Teaching Practice |
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| <p>A central goal of teaching is to maximize the capacity of each learner.</p> | <p>Differentiation asks teachers to study the evolving profiles of students as individuals.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is this student’s next step in learning essential content today? • How can I help each student understand and contribute to his or her next step in learning? • What task will push this student a bit beyond his or her comfort zone today? • What models and indicators can I use to help this student understand what high-quality work looks like at his or her stage of growth? • How can I tap into this student’s motivation to strive for quality? • What forms of support does this student need from me and from his or her peers to persist in the face of difficulty? • How do we support one another in working for quality? • How do we chart growth and quality over time? • How do we recognize and celebrate excellence in ourselves individually and as a community of learners? |

Essentially, the philosophy of differentiation is based on the belief in the value of each individual. In practice, this belief prompts teachers to address students’ affective needs, as well as shape individual students’ growth through curriculum and instruction, making sure that each student is doing the work that is “engaging, important, focused, challenging, and scaffolded” (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 40).

The next module will review the principles that are rooted in this philosophy and that guide the practice of differentiation.