

*Education Specialist Patty Clark answered this question about differentiating instruction.*

**Q.** We are having a conversation at our school about differentiation and we don't all agree about what it is and how to accomplish it. Can you help?

**A.** Your faculty's varying ideas about differentiation are not unusual. In fact, when we work with schools and districts on the topic of differentiation, we usually pose the following questions:

- \* What is differentiated instruction?
- \* How do you do it?

These questions elicit many different ideas and present a context to begin a study of differentiation and build common views. Here are few thoughts we'd like to share with you and your faculty.

### **What Is Differentiated Instruction?**

Differentiation involves adapting classroom practices to help more students be successful. As the students in classrooms become increasingly diverse, we need to adjust our instruction to meet their varying learning needs.

One way to think about differentiation is to make an analogy to the building industry. Architects now use a practice called universal design. Building designers anticipate the physical needs of all individuals who may be entering the structure and plan the building to provide access for diverse physical needs. By doing so, they do not need to go back and remodel buildings after they are completed.

Classroom differentiation is similar to universal design. Through the use of open tasks, anecdotal records, interviews, and surveys, teachers assess the wide range of abilities, interests, and learning styles of the students in their classrooms. Using this information, teachers can modify their instruction to allow access for all students.

### **What Can Be Differentiated?**

Carol Tomlinson (1999, 2003a, 2003b), a leader in the field of differentiated instruction, identifies three areas in which teachers can adapt their instruction:

**Content:** Knowing and understanding the standards students are expected to learn is the essential first step in teaching mathematics well and in differentiating instruction. Decisions to adapt content must be made based on what a teacher knows about students' readiness. Pre-assessing, either

formally or informally, helps the teacher decide the level of content that different students can investigate and the pace at which they can do so.

**Process:** Teachers engage students in activities to help them practice or make sense out of the content they are to learn. Differentiating process provides students with activities to learn the content that take into account students' readiness, learning styles, and interests.

**Product:** A third area to adapt is product—the ways in which students can, at the end of a unit of instruction, demonstrate their ability to use and apply their new knowledge.

## Questions to Keep in Mind

In our two-book Math Solutions series *Math for All: Differentiating Instruction*, authors Linda Dacey, Jayne Bamford Lynch, and Rebeka Eston Salemi provide practical, classroom-based direction and support for differentiating instruction. They offer these questions to remember and think about when planning lessons to meet the diverse needs in today's classrooms:

- What is the mathematics my students need to learn?
- What do my students already know? What is the evidence of this? How can I build on their thinking?
- How can I expand access to this task or idea? Have I thought about interests, learning styles, uses of language, cultures, and readiness?
- How can I ensure that each student experiences challenge?
- How can I scaffold learning to increase the likelihood of success?
- In what different ways can my students demonstrate their new understanding?
- Are there choices students can make?
- How prepared am I to take on these challenges?

These questions are helpful to us as we plan lessons and think about how to meet students' needs. We hope they are helpful to you as well.

A final thought—we've learned that differentiating the three aspects of curriculum—content, process, and product is not always necessary or even possible. But keeping differentiation in mind helps us better meet students' needs and do so more consciously.

## References

Tomlinson, C. A. 1999. *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

———. 2003a. *Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum, Grades K-5*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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