

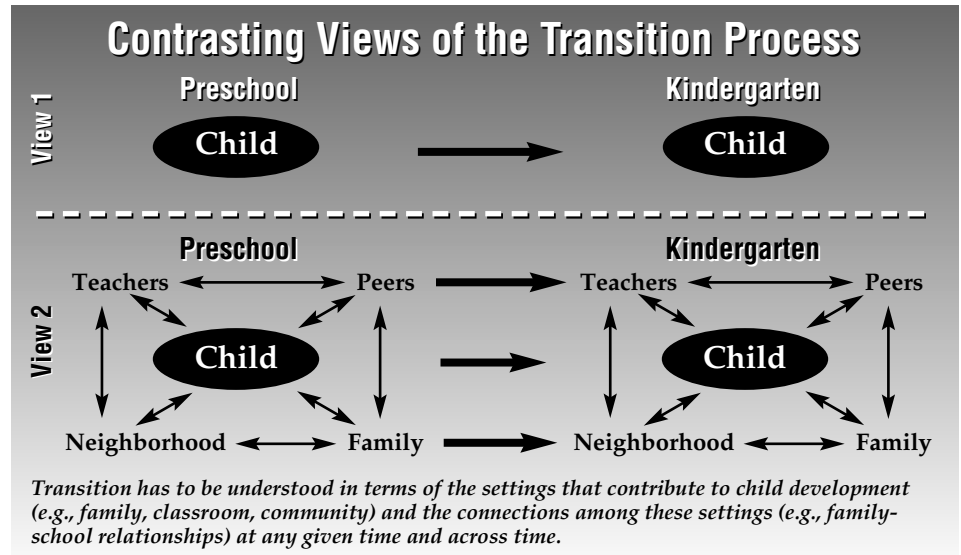
Of Primary Interest

Published by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education • Summer 2002 Vol. 9 No. 3

Preschool to Kindergarten: A New Model for the Transition Process

The first National Education Goal, "By the Year 2000 all children will start school ready to learn," emphasizes not only child-related skills that promote school success, but also the importance of family, school, and community-level factors (e.g., access to high-quality preschools) that support the development of children's competencies. School readiness is not a property of a child (*View 1 in graphic*) but is a product of interactions among key settings in which the child participates (*View 2 in graphic*).

In a model developed by the National Center for Early Development & Learning, the transition to school for a given child is not just a matter of that child getting on the bus and going to school on the first day. A serious problem in nearly all policies and practices related to the transition to school has been the sole focus on children's skills (e.g., readiness) instead of a broader view that encompasses the settings that influence those skills. Transition policies and



practices that focus solely on children's skills most often result in undue attention to the assessment of readiness.

There are two problems with approaching school transition as a function of a child's skills and abilities. First, a child's skills and abilities are very limited predictors of early school success. Understanding how well a child will adapt to kindergarten requires attention to factors beyond just characteristics of children.

Second, the transition period involves not only how children adjust to kindergarten but also how families and schools interact and cooperate. It is not just the child who makes a transition. Families are also involved in the transition, and to best use family resources for a child's education requires attention to how schools and families can form partnerships during this transition period.

Good policy and good practice have to build on a solid conceptual foundation that recognizes that young children's success in school is intertwined with their experiences in multiple settings: family, peer group, preschool, and school and that this transition period is a critical time for building partnerships between schools and families that can support children's progress.

School readiness is not a property of a child but is a product of interactions among key settings in which the child participates.

The above information is reprinted with permission from an article entitled "How Should We Think About Transition?" in *Early Childhood Research & Policy Briefs* (Winter 2002, Volume 2, Number 2), a synthesis of current issues by investigators and affiliates of the National

Center for Early Development & Learning prepared for the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education. The full brief may be downloaded from the NCEDE home page at <www.ncedl.org>. Hard copies of this and other NCEDE publications may be obtained through the National Center for Early Development & Learning, FPG Publications Office, CB #8185, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-8185, (919) 966-4221. The website of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education is located at <www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/>.

PARTICIPATING STATES

Iowa Department of Education
Massachusetts Department of Education
Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Montana Office of Public Instruction
Nebraska Department of Education
North Carolina Office of Public Instruction
Rhode Island Department of Education
Vermont Department of Education

NAECS/SDE

Editor: Frank Fielden
303-866-6674 voice
303-866-6599 fax

Differentiation of Instruction in the Elementary Grades

Carol Ann Tomlinson

In most elementary classrooms, some students struggle with learning, others perform well beyond grade-level expectations, and the rest fit somewhere in between. Within each of these categories of students, individuals also learn in a variety of ways and have different interests. To meet the needs of a diverse student population, many teachers differentiate instruction. This Digest describes differentiated instruction, discusses the reasons for differentiating instruction, discusses what makes it successful, and suggests how teachers can start implementing it.

What Is Differentiated Instruction?

At its most basic level, differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, that teacher is differentiating instruction.

Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile: (1) content—what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information; (2) process—activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content; (3) products—culminating projects that ask the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a unit; and (4) learning environment—the way the classroom works and feels.

Content. Examples of differentiating content at the elementary level include the following: (1) using reading materials at varying readability levels; (2) putting text materials on tape; (3) using spelling or vocabulary lists at readiness levels of students; (4) presenting ideas through both auditory and visual means; (5) using reading buddies; and (6) meeting with small groups to re-teach an idea or skill for struggling learners, or to extend the thinking or skills of advanced learners.

Process. Examples of differentiating process or activities at the elementary level include the following: (1) using tiered activities through which all learners work with the same important understandings and skills, but proceed with different levels of support, challenge, or complexity; (2) providing

interest centers that encourage students to explore subsets of the class topic of particular interest to them; (3) developing personal agendas (task lists written by the teacher and containing both in-common work for the whole class and work that addresses individual needs of learners) to be completed either during specified agenda time or as students complete other work early; (4) offering manipulatives or other hands-on

Expert teachers are attentive to students' varied learning needs; to differentiate instruction, then, is to become a more competent, creative, and professional educator.

supports for students who need them; and (5) varying the length of time a student may take to complete a task in order to provide additional support for a struggling learner or to encourage an advanced learner to pursue a topic in greater depth.

Products. Examples of differentiating products at the elementary level include the following: (1) giving students options of how to express required learning (e.g., create a puppet show, write a letter, or develop a mural with labels); (2) using rubrics that match and extend students' varied skill levels; (3) allowing students to work alone or in small groups on their products; and (4) encouraging students to create their own product assignments as long as the assignments contain required elements.

Learning Environment. Examples of differentiating learning environment at the elementary level include: (1) making sure there are places in the room to work quietly and without distraction, as well as places that invite student collaboration; (2) providing materials that reflect a variety of cultures and home settings; (3) setting out clear guidelines for independent work that matches individual needs; (4) developing routines that allow students to get help when teachers are busy with other students and cannot help them immediately; and (5) helping students understand that some learners need to move around to learn, while others do better sitting quietly (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999; Winebrenner, 1992, 1996).

Why Differentiate Instruction in the Elementary Grades?

A simple answer is that students in the elementary grades vary greatly, and if teachers want to maximize their students' individual potential, they will have to attend to the differences.

There is ample evidence that students are more successful in school and find it more satisfying if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels (e.g., Vygotsky, 1986), interests (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and learning profiles (e.g., Sternberg, Torff & Grigorenko, 1998). Another reason for differentiating instruction relates to teacher professionalism. Expert teachers are attentive to students' varied learning needs (Danielson, 1996); to differentiate instruction, then, is to become a more competent, creative, and professional educator.

What Makes Differentiation Successful?

The most important factor in differentiation that helps students achieve more and feel more engaged in school is being sure that *what* teachers differentiate is high-quality curriculum and instruction. For example, teachers can make sure that (1) curriculum is clearly focused on the information and understandings that are most valued by an expert in a particular discipline; (2) lessons, activities, and products are designed to ensure that students grapple with, use, and come to understand those essentials; (3) materials and tasks are interesting to students and seem relevant to them; (4) learning is active; and (5) there is joy and satisfaction in learning for each student.

One challenge for teachers leading a differentiated classroom is the need to reflect constantly on the quality of what is being differentiated. Developing three avenues to an ill-defined outcome is of little use. Offering four ways to express trivia is a waste of planning time and is unlikely to produce impressive results for learners.

There is no recipe for differentiation. Rather, it is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that values the individual and can be translated into classroom practice in many ways. Still, the following broad principles and characteristics are useful in establishing a defensible differentiated classroom:

- *Assessment is ongoing and tightly linked to instruction.* Teachers are hunters and gatherers of information about their students and how those students are learning at a given point. Whatever the teachers can glean about student readiness, interest, and learning helps the teachers plan next steps in instruction.
- *Teachers work hard to ensure “respectful activities” for all students.* Each student’s work should be equally interesting, equally appealing, and equally focused on essential understandings and skills. There should not be a group of students that frequently does “dull drill” and another that generally does “fluff.” Rather, everyone is continually working with tasks that students and teachers perceive to be worthwhile and valuable.
- *Flexible grouping is a hallmark of the class.* Teachers plan extended periods of instruction so that all students work with a variety of peers over a period of days. Sometimes students work with like-readiness peers, sometimes with mixed-readiness groups, sometimes with students who have similar interests, sometimes with students who have different interests, sometimes with peers who learn as they do, sometimes randomly, and often with the class as a whole. In addition, teachers can assign students to work groups, and sometimes students will select their own work groups. Flexible grouping allows students to see themselves in a variety of contexts and aids the teacher in “auditioning” students in different settings and with different kinds of work (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999).
- Frequently reflect on the match between your classroom and the philosophy of teaching and learning you want to practice. Look for matches and mismatches, and use both to guide you.
- Create a mental image of what you want your classroom to look like, and use it to help plan and assess changes.



- Prepare students and parents for a differentiated classroom so that they are your partners in making it a good fit for everyone. Be sure to talk often with students about the classroom—why it is the way it is, how it is working, and what everyone can do to help.
- Begin to change at a pace that pushes you a little bit beyond your comfort zone—neither totally duplicating past practice nor trying to change everything overnight. You might begin with just one subject, just one time of the day, or just one curricular element (content, process, product, or learning environment).
- Think carefully about management routines—for example, giving directions, making sure students know how to move about the room, and making sure students know where to put work when they finish it.
- Teach the routines to students carefully, monitor the effectiveness of the routines, discuss results with students, and fine tune together.
- Take time off from change to regain your energy and to assess how things are going.

- Build a support system of other educators. Let administrators know how they can support you. Ask specialists (e.g., in gifted education, special education, second language instruction) to co-teach with you from time to time so you have a second pair of hands and eyes. Form study groups on differentiation with like-minded peers. Plan and share differentiated materials with colleagues.
- Enjoy your own growth. One of the great joys of teaching is recognizing that the teacher always has more to learn than the students and that learning is no less empowering for adults than for students.

For More Information

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.

Danielson, C. (1996). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. ED 403 245.

Sternberg, R.J., Torff, B., & Grigorenko, E.L. (1998). “Teaching triarchically improves student achievement.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(3), 374-384. EJ 576 492.

Tomlinson, C. (1995). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. ED 386 301.

Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. ED 429 944.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Winebrenner, S. (1992). *Teaching gifted kids in the regular classroom*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Winebrenner, S. (1996). *Teaching kids with learning disabilities in the regular classroom*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

What Is the Best Way to Begin Differentiation?

Teachers are as different as their learners. Some teachers naturally and robustly differentiated instruction early in their careers. For other teachers, establishing a truly flexible and responsive classroom seems daunting. It is helpful for a teacher who wants to become more effective at differentiation to remember to balance his or her own needs with those of the students. Once again, there are no recipes. Nonetheless, the following guidelines are helpful to many teachers as they begin to differentiate, begin to differentiate proactively, or seek to refine a classroom that can already be called “differentiated”:

The above article is reprinted from the *ERIC Digest*, August 2000, EDO-PS-00-7. References identified with an ED (ERIC document), EJ (ERIC journal), or PS number are cited in the ERIC database. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education may be contacted at the University of Illinois, 51 Gerty Drive, Champaign, IL 61820-7469, (800)-583-4135, e-mail: <ericece@uiuc.edu>, website: <<http://ericece.org>>.

The Importance of Reading and Writing in Grades K-3

The High/Scope Approach with 'At-Risk' Children

No educational achievement is of greater concern to parents, children, and the general public than a child's learning to read and write. Literacy is the key that opens the doors to further study, academic success, choices in the job market, and the personal fulfillment that comes from reading for information and for pleasure. Some elements of literacy development require introduction in specific concepts and skills, such as phonemes, letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns, and letter formation. Other aspects of literacy development are acquired through innumerable repetitions of the literacy acts themselves—reading literature in a variety of genres and styles, reading for information and enjoyment, writing to convey information or as an act of creative expression, and carrying on a communicative dialogue with others.

The literacy strategies employed in the High/Scope K-3 approach are based on the most recent research findings and the practical experiences of High/Scope teachers. These strategies are part of the High/Scope teaching and learning framework—a comprehensive approach to all aspects of curriculum, instruction, assessment, classroom management, staff development, supervision, and program operation that has a substantial history of success with diverse populations of students and teachers in the U.S. and abroad.

While approaches to elementary education vary in style and emphasis, most effective

models subscribe to similar principles of reading and writing instruction. Most are successful, to some degree, in helping the majority of children learn to read. Many children, however, fall through the cracks and perform below other children their age in reading and writing. These children often (though not necessarily always) come from family backgrounds that did not provide them—as infants, toddlers, or preschoolers—with the kinds of early language and literacy experiences that many of their more reading-advantaged peers benefited from.

These "at-risk" children usually begin elementary school without thousands of hours of storybooks read to them, without extensive experience with the printed word, without the range and depth of oral English experience their more advantaged peers have had. If these same children have grown up in homes where English is the second language, they may have missed hearing many of the sounds of English in their early years. These at-risk children are not and will not be ready to effectively benefit from even well-developed elementary-level reading instruction until they progress through the prereading, emergent-reading, and developing-reading levels on their way toward fluency. Effective reading instruction for these children must *meet them where they are* and guide them through the early literacy levels to construct adequate foundations for subsequent learning. Engaging these children in reading experiences appropriate to their current levels of literacy is the best approach to closing the gap between their skills and those of their more reading-advantaged peers.

For the early elementary students with the lowest performance this means *going back* to strategies [recommended for] infant-toddler and preschool—back to **experiencing word sounds, hearing stories, exploring picture books, and developing book and print knowledge with simple texts (geared to the interests of older children)**. Teachers must find the reading level that works for each child and build from there. Even in second or third grade and beyond, effective reading instruction must start at the child's current reading level, building from the top of that level toward the next.

Although not seen as a compensatory model, the High/Scope approach has proven effective with "at-risk" pupil populations as well as with the general population. It is not a magic remedy that overcomes serious deficiencies in a few teacher-proof lessons; in fact, no instructional method can guarantee quick or simple success for all students. However, High/Scope is a tried, tested, and complete method that teachers and schools can use effectively to help **all** children, including those at risk, learn to enjoy, value, and benefit from schooling. The High/Scope method can and does teach students to read, write, and in general, become productive and well-adjusted citizens.

The above information is excerpted with permission from a position paper entitled *How High/Scope Teaches Reading in Kindergarten Through Third Grade*. The paper, and others focusing on reading in infant/toddler and preschool programs, is available from the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 600 North River Street, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198-2898, (734) 485-2000 [voice], (734) 485-0704 [fax], or on the web at www.highscope.org.