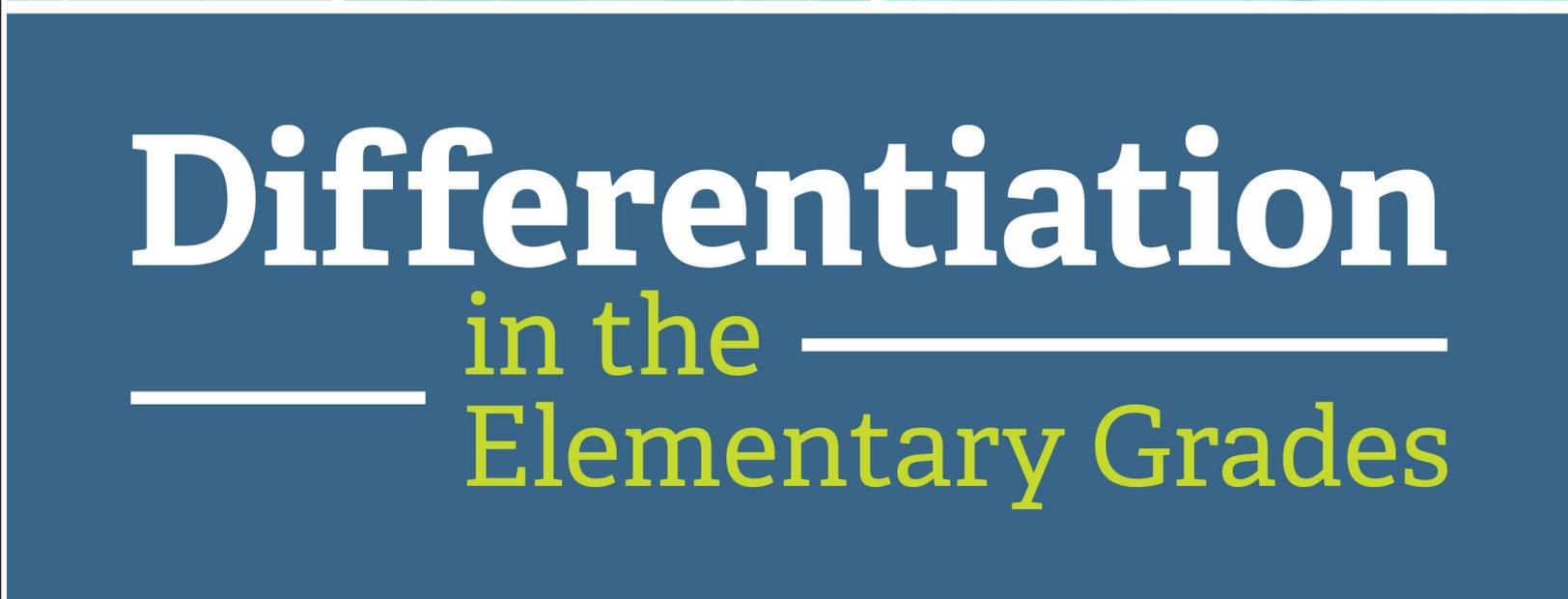
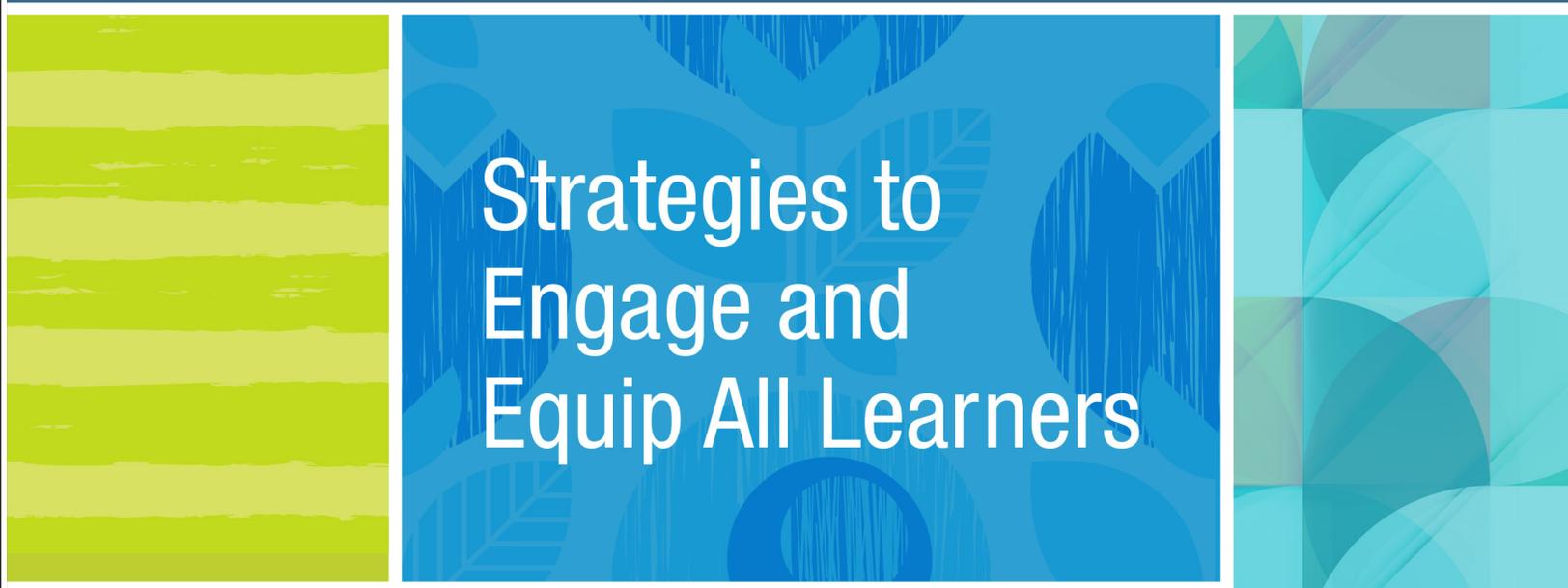




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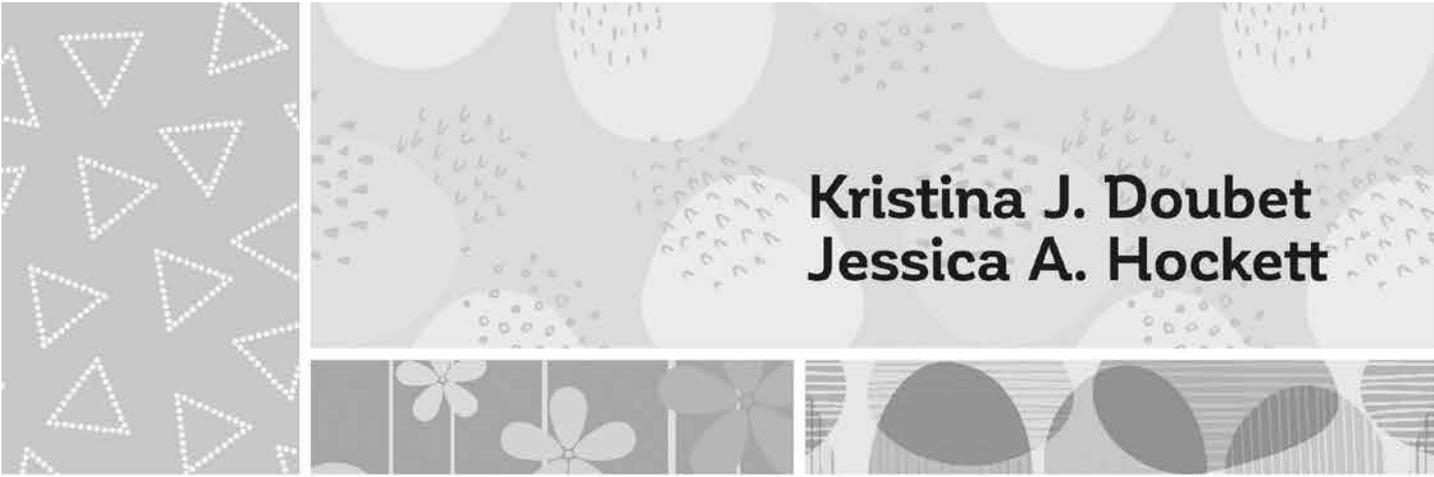
# **Differentiation** \_\_\_\_\_ **in the** \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ **Elementary Grades**



**Strategies to  
Engage and  
Equip All Learners**



**Foreword by Carol Ann Tomlinson**



**Kristina J. Doubet  
Jessica A. Hockett**

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# Differentiation

in the \_\_\_\_\_

# Elementary Grades



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# Foreword: Learning from Literature— and Children

By Carol Ann Tomlinson

A century ago, Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote a children's book called *Understood Betsy* (1917) that has continued to appeal to young readers across the decades. It's a story about 9-year-old Elizabeth Ann, later known as Betsy, whose world is upended when she has to leave the neat and highly structured world she has known in a city to move to rural Vermont and live with her mother's relatives. Everything in her new surroundings seems so alien to Elizabeth Ann. For starters, her "new" aunt calls her Betsy—and she treats Betsy as though she were capable of doing useful things rather than merely being taken care of. When it's time to go to school, she tells Betsy how to walk across fields and over fences to get to the one-room schoolhouse that will welcome her. In the city, people walked her to and from school, holding her hand all the way.

The new school is disorienting as well. There are little kids and big kids all in the same room. The teacher appears delighted to include Betsy in the class and has her read aloud so that she can get a sense of Betsy's starting point as a reader. Because Betsy reads fluidly and with feeling, the teacher lets her read a very long passage. Although that is something Betsy has always wanted to do, it makes her feel as if the teacher doesn't know how to "do school"; in her old school, where students were carefully sorted by age into separate rooms, each student read one sentence during reading time, with the next student picking up the sentence that followed.

During math time in Betsy's new school, she comes close to tears. She doesn't know how to work the problems she is given, and she feels like a failure.

Later in the day, the teacher tells Betsy that tomorrow she will work with the level seven readers and with the level three math group. Confused, Betsy says to the teacher, "How can I be level seven in reading and level three in math when I'm in Grade 2?" The teacher responds, "What's the point of reading things that are way too easy for you or working on math problems you don't understand? And what difference does it make what groups you're in? You're just you, aren't you?"

It seems so reasonable. When a teacher works from that perspective, it's not a problem if the students aren't a matched set chronologically. She figures out where a student is in a sequence of learning and helps the student move ahead. The day is ordered so that sometimes everyone works together. Sometimes students work alone. Sometimes they help one another. Sometimes they work in small groups. The goal, informed by common sense and reality rather than by research in psychology and neuroscience, is to create a growth-centered learning environment that contemporary researcher John Hattie would call a "plus-one classroom": a place where each student can expect to move ahead at least one step a day from his or her entry point.

Other research supports teaching learners in their zones of proximal development or at a level of moderate challenge. Betsy's teacher in the one-room schoolhouse predated that research in both psychology and neuroscience. What she had to work from, however, was not trivial. She constructed her practice on the basis of common sense and observation. "Why," she might have asked, "would you assume all students in your classroom need to be taught the same things on the same day at the same rate and with the same support system?" Had she ever visited Betsy's school in the city, she might have added, "Do you really think all 7-year-olds are alike as learners?"

Almost 100 years after Betsy joined that one-room schoolhouse, Mr. Clifton, an elementary math teacher in Lisa Graff's book *Absolutely Almost* (2014), helps 5th grader Albie consider some ideas much like those of Betsy's teacher. Albie is struggling with math—and almost everything else in school, for that matter. He just wants to be "good" in his subjects, as he believes everyone else is. Albie knows Mr. Clifton is on his side and wants to help him enjoy math, but Albie wants a quick solution, an act of magic. Mr. Clifton is more pragmatic when he says to Albie, "You can't get where you're going without being where you are."

As teachers, we know Mr. Clifton is right. You can't learn fractions if you haven't learned to multiply. You can't write a persuasive paragraph if you can't yet write a sentence.

Today's classrooms don't group adolescents with 1st graders, but students who read at a 1st grade level do share classrooms with students who read like adolescents. Students who have only ever known English as their language of communication share classrooms with students who are encountering English for the first time. Students whose independence outstrips their years learn alongside students who have the barest sense of self-efficacy.

Some would argue that the wise course is to further sort students, so that they learn only with others who are "like" them—so that teachers don't have to teach students whose entry points into grade-level curriculum vary significantly. I'd argue the opposite—that there is great opportunity and richness in helping students learn to see the strengths that each human being brings to a community and that we are extended as human beings when we come to understand the array of perspectives and experiences that constitute our world.

That richness and opportunity, however, can be realized only when teachers grasp and respond to the twin realities that learners differ and that we only help them flourish by enabling them to move forward from their current points of development—academically, socially, and emotionally. Pressures to bypass those realities come at teachers from every side every day.

Certainly a powerful antidote to the pressures that favor one-size-fits-all teaching comes in the form of informed and practical toolkits that help us craft mental images of what a student-focused classroom could look like, inspire us to turn those images into actions, and support us in succeeding as we do so. This book is such a toolkit.

Kristina Doubet and Jessica Hockett understand differentiated classrooms at a deep, rather than a surface, level. Because the philosophy of differentiation is a belief system for them, it is worth the investment of a significant portion of their personal and professional lives. They understand the complexity of teaching in general and of teaching that responds to students more than to mandates. They also understand that all of us can achieve complex goals with sound guidance and a stepwise approach.

In this book, these two authors provide sound, research-based explanations of differentiation, informed guidance on how to grow in confidence and competence with student-focused instruction, and a robust array of examples of differentiation in many subjects and all elementary grade levels. Their work encompasses all key facets of effective differentiation: learning environment, curriculum, formative assessment, responsive instruction, and classroom leadership and management. Its already impressive trove of examples of classroom applications of differentiation is further enhanced with online forms and tools.

This is a book that, like differentiation itself, can meet teachers who are at varying points of development as educational practitioners, serving as a catalyst for growth wherever they are in their trajectories. This book merits reading and rereading—studying and restudying—over the course of a career. I have learned from these two over many years and will continue to learn from them as a student of this book.

A number of years ago, I met an elementary teacher in Canada whose devotion to her students both as individuals and as a group was evident from our earliest conversations. One winter Friday afternoon, she had taken her students ice-skating. As they came back to their room at school and were putting away their coats, gloves, and hats, a student asked, “Did anybody notice how many different sizes of ice skates we wore today?” Another student pointed to the coat rack and said, “I guess we shouldn’t be surprised. It’s just like our clothes sizes.” A third chimed in, “It’s how we learn.”

The teacher, Mrs. Gilewicz, generally concluded the week by asking her students to write a reflection on something that had taken place during the week. Overhearing the students’ conversation, she asked them to write their reflection this week on “different-size learning.” She shared their writing with me, and I’ve always appreciated

at least three things about their thoughts each time I return to them. First, it was evident (as it nearly always is in school) that the students' writing was developing at quite different rates. Some of them wrote almost eloquently, some minimized words and sentence length, and others included drawings as a more successful way of making their points than words yet afforded them. Second, it was evident to me through their work that their teacher had helped them develop a common understanding of what differentiation is and how it can make a classroom better for its inhabitants. Third, in that understanding, I saw a child's sense of what Betsy's teacher and Albie's teacher were trying to convey to those fictional children: "It's good to be who you are, and to grow in your own way." Here are just a few excerpts from Mrs. Gilewicz's 5th graders.

David: "If everybody had to learn the *same* thing in the *same* way at the *same* time, it would be too easy for some people and too hard for others. We'd be frustrated or bored a lot of the time because everybody is different, not the *same*."

Jeremy: "What would happen if we had to learn everything just alike? Well, we'd probably ask not to go to school. Thank goodness our class isn't like that."

Shelby: "Different-size learning is the way we are in all subjects because no one is the same in a subject. People are just different in learning."

Rebecca: "Without different-size learning, we wouldn't learn so much. When we work so it's right for us, we grow. We work our way up."

Danyk: "If we all had to learn everything alike, it would be just plain disastrous. A better thing is to be myself and work so it works for me."

Shaun: "If it weren't for different-size learning, we would have no challenge at all. Lots of people have lots of different learning abilities. Without different-size learning, we would be frustrated, or else start anticipating everything. If you destroy the balance between student and challenge, you plunge the school into chaos, a sort of educational Dark Age."

Kudos to each of you who works daily to meet young learners where they are and mentor them forward!

Carol Ann Tomlinson

Former high school and middle school teacher

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# Introduction: Differentiation Gets an Upgrade

## The Challenge

Elementary school classrooms in the United States today are blessed with students from a rich range of racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This vibrant diversity expands students' understanding of what makes us *us*, and helps equip them to become productive, empathetic, and ethical citizens who can thrive in an ever-changing global society.

At the same time, the country's commitment to educating all children well has driven the push for more rigorous standards. These standards are meant to ensure that today's children are ready for tomorrow's world. A high-quality education is no longer the province of the few or the affluent, but the right of every child in every community.

These two factors—greater student diversity and increased academic rigor—mean that today's teachers have greater accountability for a more heterogeneous population of students than ever before. In many schools, appraisal of teachers' performance is based at least in part on their ability to ensure the progress of every student, regardless of background, native language, motivation, or school experience.

These realities present every teacher with a fundamental, persistent question: "How do I divide time, resources, and myself so that I am an effective catalyst for maximizing talent in all my students?" (Tomlinson, 2014a, p. 2). Herein lies the challenge.

## Differentiation: Meeting the Challenge

Good teachers have always recognized and responded to the inherent diversity in their classrooms. At minimum, they understand that they have content and skills to teach, students who need to learn those things, and differences among the students that make one-size-fits-all approaches ineffective. This, in essence, is *differentiation*. A teacher who differentiates instruction (Tomlinson, 2014)

- Creates an atmosphere in which students' unique qualities and needs are as important as the traits they share.
- Uncovers students' learning needs through pre-assessment and formative assessment and tailors tasks accordingly.
- Plans experiences and tasks that are bound together by common and important learning goals.
- Presents varied approaches and avenues for students to take in, process, and produce knowledge.
- Varies grouping configurations frequently and strategically as a way of granting access to learning goals, providing support and challenge, and building community.
- Orchestrates fluid routines and management systems.

For many elementary teachers, cultivating a differentiated classroom is a natural and intuitive response. Most kindergarten teachers, for example, understand and *delight in* the fact that the 30 faces they see belong to individuals as unique as their fingerprints. Embracing and planning for the variance is what skilled teachers just *do*.

Yet not everyone "does" differentiation the same way. In reality, there are significant misconceptions about what actually constitutes defensible differentiated instruction. Figure I.1 addresses some of those misconceptions and their respective "truths" (Tomlinson, 2003, 2014a).

### Figure I.1 | What Differentiation Is and Is Not

Differentiation <i>Is</i>	Differentiation <i>Is Not</i>
. . . A philosophy rooted in effective teaching and learning.	. . . A bag of tricks or set of strategies that can be plunked into low-quality curriculum.
. . . Regularly examining evidence of student learning and making thoughtful instructional decisions accordingly.	. . . Either an every-moment necessity or a once-in-a-blue-moon "event."
. . . Tailoring instruction in response to patterns in student needs.	. . . Writing individualized lesson plans for every student.
. . . Designing respectful tasks and using flexible grouping.	. . . Sorting or pigeonholing students into static groups or levels.
. . . A way <i>up</i> to standards and learning goals.	. . . A way <i>out</i> of standards and learning goals.
...Critical to improving instruction for <i>all</i> students.	. . . More important for certain groups of students (e.g., students with IEPs or English language learners).

Source: From *Differentiation in Middle and High School: Strategies to Engage All Learners* (p. 3), by K. J. Doubet and J. A. Hockett, 2015, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2015 by ASCD.

## Upgrading Differentiation: Ensuring Continued Growth and Progress

Don't good elementary teachers *already* differentiate? Because differentiation is a journey rather than a destination, it's something a teacher can never truly be finished with. A teacher's efforts to plan for students' needs improve with time, practice, and feedback in the same way that new technologies are constantly "upgrading" to improve the user experience.

For many elementary-grades teachers, upgrading involves shifts in beliefs about what differentiation is, as well as changes to methods and approaches that, in some cases, have become automatic or widely accepted or otherwise gone unquestioned. In the following sections, we discuss five commonly adopted practices that impede true differentiation and explain how to upgrade them to more sophisticated applications of differentiation.

### 1. Designing differentiated tasks vs. tasks that are just "different"

Variety is a hallmark of a differentiated classroom, but that variety should come in *how* students learn, not in *what* they learn. Differentiated tasks, therefore, are not just "different"; they are designed to address a given set of learning goals with different levels of scaffolding, within different areas of interest, or via different methods for taking in, processing, or demonstrating understanding, knowledge, and skills. An "upgraded" approach would ensure that students arrive at the same learning destination even if they get there through a variety of learning paths.

### 2. Designing engaging *and* substantive tasks vs. tasks that are just "fun"

Elementary teachers recognize how important it is for children to find joy in learning. They want their students to be excited about what they're doing in school and take pride in what they produce. Sometimes, in an effort to make sure that students are actively engaged, teachers lose sight of the goals and purpose of a task and, in the name of differentiation, substitute "fun" for substance. Teachers with an upgraded approach to differentiation ensure that student excitement and investment are poured into tasks that have meaning and purpose. In other words, differentiated tasks are both joyful *and* important.

### **3. Differentiating for all students within the classroom vs. sending students out of the classroom**

As the term is used in this book, *differentiation* is not synonymous with pulling students out for special programs, sending students to another teacher's classroom for one or more subjects, or regrouping students between classrooms for part of the day. Rather than describing *where* students learn, an upgraded conception of differentiation refers to *how* the classroom teacher makes important curricular goals accessible to all learners within the *same* classroom.

### **4. Recognizing *all* areas of strength and need vs. regarding reading level as an indicator of overall ability**

Without question, a student's ability to decode and comprehend text serves as a requisite skill to completing many other tasks. It is *not*, however, synonymous with her or his intellectual capacity. Nor does a student's reading level reflect his or her competence in math, understanding of science, or familiarity with history, for example. Although reading skills are the most overt and frequently assessed or reported indicators of student achievement, they do not paint the whole picture of a child's ability. A student may struggle with reading but excel in math; conversely, a fluent and capable reader may struggle to make sense of numbers and mathematical relationships. A teacher using an upgraded approach to differentiation recognizes that each student possesses a *collection* of strengths and areas for growth—and adjusts instruction accordingly.

### **5. Using flexible grouping vs. maintaining static groups**

Small groups and small-group instruction are the norm in many K–5 classrooms. Most teachers would agree that breaking the class into partners, trios, or quads for certain tasks can make teaching more responsive and learning more efficient. But when groups are static—that is, when students are in the same groups with the same peers for weeks or months at a time—grouping can work against the goals of increasing student learning and motivation. A teacher with an upgraded understanding of grouping uses many different configurations *flexibly* to meet a range of student needs and to grant access to rich learning opportunities. In doing so, the teacher not only builds students' capacity to engage with differentiated tasks but also strengthens camaraderie and respect among learners.



Teachers may recognize one, several, or all of these ineffective practices in their own classroom or school. Each one can serve as a launching point for a “differentiation upgrade.” In that spirit, the rest of this book provides comprehensive guidance, tools,

and examples for teachers seeking to build on how they are already successfully uncovering and addressing student differences, while propelling their journey toward expertise.

## What's Ahead

This book is organized around entry points for a differentiation upgrade that we have posed as questions for teachers to consider:

- How do I build a family of learners?
- How do I focus what I have to teach?
- How do I know what students already know?
- How do I get students engaged with the content and with one another?
- How do I know if students are getting it?
- What if students are in different places?
- How do I increase motivation and investment?
- How do I manage it all?
- How can I continue to upgrade?

The answers to these questions form the backbone of this book, which aims to be a comprehensive guide to differentiation in the elementary grades. Teachers might choose to start with Chapter 1 or to begin with the chapter that most closely reflects their area of interest. Here's a brief look at what each chapter addresses:

Chapter 1 presents techniques for building a healthy community of learners in which students see *all* of their classmates as family members with important strengths to share and areas of growth to support.

Chapter 2 shows teachers how to prioritize, focus, and “translate” curriculum, texts, or programs into manageable and meaningful learning goals that are fit to be differentiated.

Chapter 3 offers guidelines on how best to gather information about what students already know, understand, and can do prior to beginning a unit or lesson.

Chapter 4 explains strategies for actively engaging *all* students in making sense of content and practicing skills through interaction and discussion.

Chapter 5 provides strategies and prompts for gauging the progress of student learning—both during the course of a lesson and at its completion—with the goal of using that information to inform future instructional decisions.

Chapter 6 focuses on approaches to adjusting content, process, and product for student readiness, with an emphasis on closely analyzing and planning instruction directly from formative assessment results.

Chapter 7 offers strategies for maintaining students' interest, enthusiasm, and investment throughout lesson and units, as well as techniques that provide students with varied avenues for taking in, processing, and demonstrating mastery of learning goals.

Chapter 8 offers practical tools for effectively managing a classroom that supports techniques described throughout this book.

The Conclusion provides encouragement and suggestions to help teachers continuously “upgrade” their practice and make progress in their quest to create more responsive classrooms.

This book recognizes that the most powerful and efficient learning often happens by example. Accordingly, Part 2 of each chapter provides a plethora of tools and examples\*spanning a range of grade levels and content areas that were developed *by, for, or with* real teachers. These can be used to support teacher growth in myriad contexts, including professional learning communities, department or team planning meetings, and instructional coaching relationships. In addition, each chapter closes with a “before” and “after” example of a teacher experimenting with the principles and practices of differentiation. Our intent is to illustrate the kind of process and thinking that all teachers undertake in their journeys toward expertise.

Used well, this book and its tools have the potential to elevate what happens in elementary classrooms and, ultimately, to improve the learning and the lives of both teachers and their students.

#### **A Note to Primary-Grades Teachers**

The primary-grades examples in this book are written so that *teachers* understand the process or task. Primary-grades teachers can use these examples as the basis for delivery that is most appropriate for the skills of their learners, many of whom are at different stages of development in learning to read and write.

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\*For added utility, select forms and templates from this book can be downloaded at <http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/Doubet2017forms.pdf>. Use the password “Doubet2017117014” to unlock the PDF. In addition, a study guide for this book can be found at <http://www.ascd.org/books/An-ASCD-Study-Guide-for-Differentiation-in-the-Elementary-Grades> providing questions and prompts for use in professional development and PLCs.

# 1

## Building a Healthy Classroom Community

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## Part 1:

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# How Do I Build a Family of Learners?

Members of every family, regardless of how large or how small, share important commonalities and exhibit unique traits. The health of a family is often influenced by the extent to which its members acknowledge and even celebrate both their individual identities and their collective identity.

A classroom family operates in the same fashion. Teachers in differentiated classrooms, in particular, view each student as a family member. They seek out and celebrate students' common bonds while reveling in what makes each child an individual.

At first, students' differences may be more evident than their similarities. Although they are roughly the same biological age, students come to a classroom with distinct personalities and at different stages of development. They hail from different countries and represent a wide array of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They span the spectrum of learning needs, strengths, and interests.

Yet within this vast assortment of characteristics, patterns emerge. Students share strengths with some classmates and weaknesses with others. Common interests—in sports, animals, art, or music, for example—can unite students who, on the surface, may appear to share very little. Although students come from different households, the classroom serves as a second home for *all* of them. It's where they spend the greatest portion of their weekdays; they are bonded by the culture of their classroom family.

Perhaps most important, every student in a teacher's charge shares a basic human need: the deep desire to be seen, known, and honored for who he or she is. Although some students are anxious to share everything about their personal lives and others are more reticent, *every* student in the classroom longs to be known and treasured.

As the "head" of this family, the teacher has three primary goals:

1. To celebrate individuals
2. To cultivate relationships

3. To send the message that all students are accepted exactly as they are—yet are also expected to grow

## Celebrating Individuality

We cannot celebrate the unique qualities of each student unless we actively work to discover them. This endeavor begins by learning students' names and using them as often as possible in the first week of school. As Dale Carnegie rightly observed, "[A] person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language" (1936, p. 79). This becomes even more important in a classroom family that boasts students from varied cultures whose names may sound different, even strange, to one another. When teachers call students by name in positive contexts and expect classmates to do the same, they are affirming who students are and where they come from.

But names are only the beginning. All students "come alive" somewhere in the world beyond school. Teachers can intentionally uncover students' passions by having them make pie charts or graphs of their interests (see p. 28) or asking Attendance Questions such as "When I call your name, tell me your favorite cartoon character" (see p. 19). Once such information becomes "public domain" in classroom conversation, teachers can reference it in examples, explanations, and assignment options. Such connections honor what individual students value and enhance their sense of belonging.

## Cultivating Relationships

As the head of the classroom family, it is the teacher's job not only to connect with each student but also to connect students with one another. Because most students don't form bonds or reach out to their peers spontaneously or independently, teachers must lay a relational foundation from the first day of school and continue that work throughout the year. Surprisingly, using strategies that celebrate *individuality* can also build *community*. For example, when a teacher uses Attendance Questions, students discover things they have in common, and cries of "Me, too!" fill the room.

Community-building strategies like these can foster a sense of affirmation and plant the seeds of relationships because they help students to

- **Find common ground.** Once teachers have used Attendance Questions with the whole class, students can respond to "quick questions" before beginning partner work (e.g., "Cats or dogs?"). They may also use fist bumps, high fives, and catchphrases ("Pat your brain; you worked hard!") to begin and end activities with a personal touch. Alternatively, teachers can include a quick question at the top of any paper a student is to turn in (e.g., "How are you today?" or "Favorite ice cream flavor?"). This information gives teachers a window into children's lives as well as a means of connecting students (e.g., "We're going to form ice cream groups:

chocolate in this corner, cookie dough in that corner, strawberry near the door, and every other flavor in the front of the room”).

- **Affirm one another.** Celebrating successes, both big and small, goes a long way toward building a culture of collaboration. When an individual, a small group, or the entire class does something worthy of praise, students can celebrate with an “alligator clap” (using their arms to clap like an alligator opening and closing its mouth) or, on cue, call out, “Whale done!” while using their hands to mimic the motion of a whale sounding in the ocean. To express agreement or celebration in a more subtle way, “silent applause” (waving hands in the air) or the “shrimp clap” (quickly opening and closing forefingers and thumbs) can serve the same purpose.
- **Manage the classroom together.** There are multiple points in a day when students must come together after working individually, in small groups, or at centers or stations. In a busy classroom, these transitions are best signaled with full-group responses. Giving students a say in developing these signals provides an opportunity for student buy-in and bonding. For example, students might assist the teacher in developing a few responsive clapping patterns. Teachers can use their students’ favorite songs to signal a transition or to bring groups back together following an activity. Call-and-response phrases are another effective method for reconvening the class, especially if students help generate the phrases. For example, to signal students to await further instructions, a teacher may call out “SpongeBob!” to which the students respond in unison, “SquarePants!”
- **Build academic skills.** Teachers can use community-building activities to introduce strategies and skills that can be leveraged for academic purposes. For example, a teacher using the Matrix organizer (see p. 22) to help students find areas of commonality is also introducing the academic skills of comparing and contrasting, which students can eventually apply to characters, animals, community members, numbers, and so on. In other words, time spent helping students connect at the beginning of the year will pay off in multiple ways throughout the year.

Cultivating relationships is not an August-to-September “event”; rather, it is a process that continues until the last day of school. It establishes the expectation and the norm that students function as interdependent family members who work together to keep the classroom running smoothly.

## Fostering Growth

As family head, the teacher is responsible not only for students’ social and emotional well-being but also for each student’s academic growth. While students need to feel accepted and valued for who they are right now, they also need to see themselves as

dynamic individuals with much potential for academic growth. This belief is essential because, as Carol Dweck's (2006) work has revealed, students who believe their intelligence is malleable—that is, those who have a *growth mindset*—tend to persevere in the face of hardship. In contrast, students who believe their intelligence is static—that is, those who have a *fixed mindset*—tend to shut down in the face of challenge. This is true whether students see themselves as high achievers or low achievers.

Students will have the greatest chance for success if both they and their teacher view intelligence as a seed or a sapling, ripe for growth. Both the teacher and the student are responsible for nurturing that plant—the student by bathing it in the sunlight of concentrated effort and the teacher by watering it with appropriate feedback and instruction. The bottom line is that both the learner and the teacher *expect* to see growth; if they don't, they adjust, tending and pruning as needed until the roots grow down and the shoots grow up. This cycle fosters hope and persistence, two key indicators of a family's health and well-being.

It's also important to introduce the idea of differentiation as a method for promoting growth. If students recognize that each classmate is a unique individual with varying strengths and needs, then it will make sense that different students require different kinds of tending and pruning. Addressing this reality early in the school year invites students to adopt the expectation that different learners will need different tools and tasks to grow.

## Strengthening Family Bonds Through Grouping

In any classroom, grouping can be either a catalyst for strengthening family bonds or a force that tears those bonds apart. Grouping is a means to an end, and no single grouping configuration is inherently better than another. More important than the grouping itself is the "fit" between the teacher's instructional purpose and the makeup or composition of the group. For example, a teacher might use a whole-group format to introduce concepts, model or reinforce processes, share work, or bring closure to a lesson or unit. That same teacher may use partners for practice or sense-making activities, and small groups for discussion or working on interdependent tasks.

Over time, a teacher's grouping decisions send powerful messages to students about their roles in and value to the classroom family. When they are put into a group, students begin to size up the learning situation (*Who's in my group? Who's in that group? What are we doing? What are they doing?*). They are conducting a kind of status check, gathering clues about what the teacher believes about the capacity of every student in the room. When groups are static—when they don't change often or in response to task purpose and evidence of student readiness, interest, or learning profile—students are likely to make inaccurate inferences about themselves and their peers.

To ensure that all students are valued and contributing family members, a teacher in a differentiated classroom groups flexibly. *Flexible grouping* is the means

through which teachers can elevate the status of—and develop a growth mindset in—all students. When teachers group flexibly, they organize students intentionally and fluidly for different learning experiences by making a series of deliberate and purposeful decisions about the size of the group, who belongs in the group, and how the groups will be formed.

Practiced well, flexible grouping can

- **Bring students together (versus keeping them apart).** By nature and necessity, breaking the class into groups separates members of the classroom family. With flexible grouping, this separation is temporary. Over the course of days, weeks, and months, students are working with a wide variety of peers. Fresh and varied groupings bring students together in new ways that continuous whole-group work, independent work, or interaction in a static group would prevent.
- **Foster genuine relationships (versus making superficial connections).** Simply plopping students next to a variety of partners or placing them in new literature circles every week doesn't automatically create close or instant friendships. Genuine relationships are formed over the course of the year and require that the teacher plan multiple opportunities for students to work with all peers, driven by authentic purposes, for both longer and shorter time frames.
- **Expose students to new and divergent perspectives (versus keeping them "stuck" with the same bunch).** Much like adults, children of all ages gravitate toward people who are like them—who share their points of view, have similar experiences and interests, and seem to value the same things. Wanting to stick with one's "buddies" is understandable, and sometimes beneficial, but students can also get *too* comfortable or even stuck in a rut working with the same peers day in and day out. Flexible grouping pushes students out of their comfort zones and into interactions with peers they might not otherwise choose or get a chance to learn from.

Flexible grouping is the mechanism through which teachers build bonds among members of the classroom family. The *ultimate* purpose for using different grouping configurations is to grant students access to rich learning opportunities, both common and differentiated.

## We Are Family

Just as with actual families, no classroom family is "perfect." But by celebrating students' unique qualities, cultivating relationships, and fostering a growth mindset as well as grouping flexibly to strengthen these pursuits, teachers can sustain the health of the classroom community. Part 2 of this chapter outlines specific strategies to support this endeavor.

**Examples of Before and After “Upgrades”**

To illustrate what this book’s principles and strategies look like in action, Part 1 of each chapter closes with an exploration of how one teacher has upgraded his or her approach to more closely adhere to the chapter’s principles. These before-and-after examples are designed to demonstrate a continuum of growth.

**A Community-Building Upgrade**

Nicole King loved to welcome her new 1st graders to her room each year. Because her established routine worked well, she tended to focus her professional goals on curriculum or instruction. But Nicole began to wonder if her opening-of-school activities could also use a “makeover.”

**Before Upgrade**

Last year, Nicole spent many days preparing for students’ arrival by setting up her room, complete with a “Welcome to Ms. King’s Class” bulletin board on which she would post the photos she took of all her students on the first day of school. During week 1, Nicole conducted detailed assessments of students’ reading levels and created a laminated grouping chart of the first quarter’s reading groups. She flipped the light switch to signal when it was time to move to those reading groups. Most other groupings were selected by students, such as when they chose centers in the afternoon or did a “turn and talk” with the classmate they sat next to during circle time. She felt her classroom was a welcoming and collaborative space but recognized that, for the most part, students worked with the same peers from day to day.

**After Upgrade**

This year, Nicole decided that one of her professional growth goals would be to make sure that students knew and worked purposefully with all of their classmates. She started by giving her “Welcome” bulletin board a makeover. Rather than simply posting students’ photos, Nicole implemented a project she called “Our 1st Grade Timelines.” Each student received a one-by-three-foot piece of paper with a horizontal line across the middle. As a class, students talked about how they might be feeling about starting 2nd grade the following year. Then, after Nicole took each student’s photo, students pasted their pictures as the first event on their timeline, labeled the event, and added a descriptive word or phrase to represent their emotions.

Throughout the year, students selected five to seven significant moments from home or school to add to their timelines, each accompanied by a photo or student illustration and a short description. Periodically, Nicole gathered the class members to ask one another questions about their events, celebrate their peers' successes, and encourage one another in their struggles. When she formed new groups, Nicole used the timelines as fuel for an icebreaker prompt (e.g., "Before you get started on your task, take 30 seconds each to share one event from your timeline."). These routines made students more comfortable with one another.

Nicole's grouping practices were different this year, too. Instead of a laminated chart for reading groups, she posted a blank chart on the front whiteboard that she used for all kinds of grouping. The chart depicted the layout of her room, and students' names were on magnets, allowing her to quickly adjust the composition of the groups. She could fluidly adjust reading groups as well as form new groups for different subjects and purposes, such as interest-based tasks or station rotations. Nicole noticed how this frequent rearrangement kept students on their toes, ready to adjust and eager to work with new classmates. In fact, everything felt more interactive, including her signals for attention. Students even helped her develop two signals:

1. When Nicole rang a bell, students responded, "Brrrr!" while freezing in their positions.
2. Playing on her name (Ms. King), Nicole would proclaim, "Royal citizens!" to which students cried in unison, "Unite!"

Not only did these measures enliven the school day, but they also significantly enhanced the feeling among students that their class was, indeed, a family.



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## Related ASCD Resources

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses).

### **PD Online® Courses**

Differentiated Instruction: Creating an Environment That Supports Learning (#PD11OC118M)

Differentiated Instruction: Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom (#PD11OC137M)

Differentiated Instruction: The Curriculum Connection (#PD11OC116M)

### **Print Products**

*Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom* by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Tonya R. Moon (#108028)

*The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners, 2nd Edition* by Carol Ann Tomlinson (#108029)

*Differentiation in Middle and High School: Strategies to Engage All Learners* by Kristina J. Doubet and Jessica A. Hockett (#115008)

*How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms, 3rd Edition* by Carol Ann Tomlinson (#117032)

### **Video**

*The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of Elementary Learners* with Carol Ann Tomlinson (#615047)

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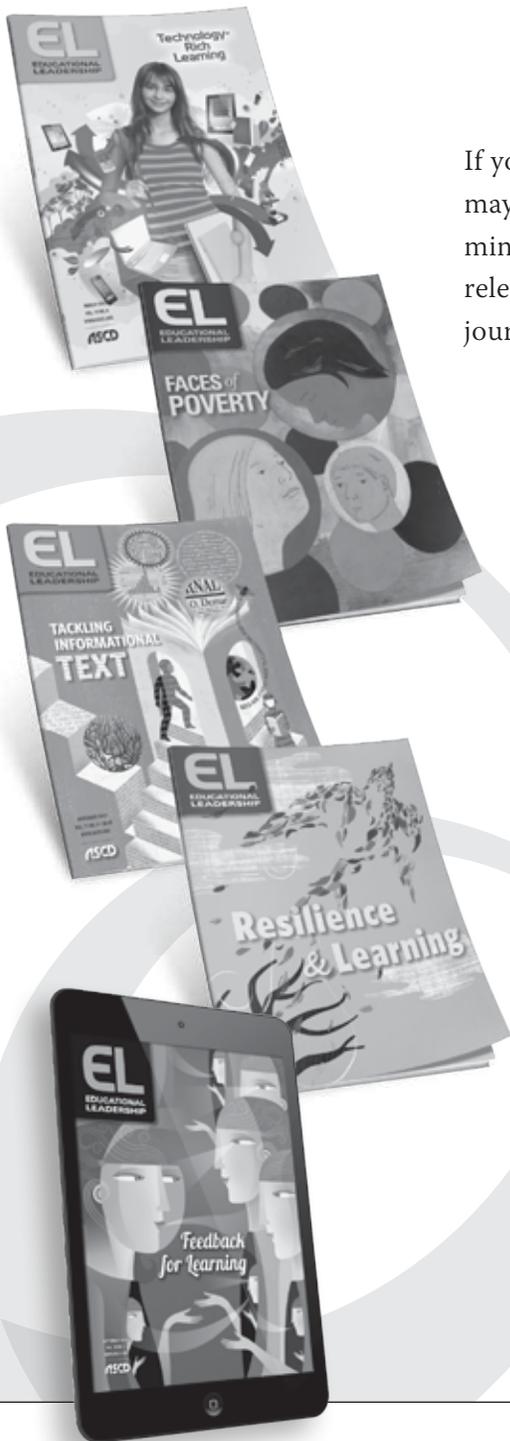
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