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August 10, 2017

Faculty Conversation: Carol Tomlinson on Differentiation



In education circles, Carol Ann Tomlinson is known as the guru of differentiation. Her research-based work is in such high demand that she has made more than 700 presentations and keynote addresses to school districts and professional associations across the country and abroad since joining the Curry School in 1991. She has authored 17 books on the topics of differentiated instruction and curriculum, some of which have been translated into twelve languages.

In this Curry conversation, Tomlinson offers her take on what makes differentiation so important for students.

What is the essence of differentiation?

Tomlinson: Differentiation is an instructional approach to help teachers teach with individuals as well as content in mind. Differentiation really means trying to make sure that teaching and learning work for the full range of students, which really should be our goal as teachers. We've often taught as though all the kids in the classroom are wired exactly alike to learn, as though they should come in programmed to learn on the teacher's schedule. Really, to me, differentiation is the common sense of saying, if we take on the responsibility of

teaching, we accept the responsibility of making sure that every kid learns as well as he or she possibly can.

What empirical evidence exists for the effectiveness of differentiation?

Tomlinson: The model of differentiation that I've been working with is sort of a Robin Hood model – it steals from lots of discipline areas and tries to synthesize what we know from many specialties into one specialty. Some of what we talk about in differentiation really comes from the work of special education and has been there for a long time. Some of it comes from gifted education. Some of it comes from the field of reading and how you work with students in developing literacy when they don't master the skills right on schedule. There's work that comes from the emerging and new science of the brain. And things that people have done in multicultural education.

What we've tried to do with this model is to synthesize a lot of those things so that it fits together as a whole and so the teachers don't have to go to 14 places to find guidelines and strategies they need. The research that supports the principles and practices of differentiation comes from many specialties.

There is also newer research that suggests academic benefits to the model's key principles and practices. There's always the caveat that it's easy to say you use a model and much harder to maintain fidelity to that model. What we find, not surprisingly, is when somebody differentiates effectively, the gains are really strong. The trick is always to help people understand that you can't pick and choose pieces of a model, implement five percent of it and dismiss the other 95 percent.

What is the strongest argument for differentiation?

Tomlinson: The strongest argument for differentiation to me is looking at the kids sitting in the classroom. It's rare to go into a classroom where kids are all from the same language group, the same culture, the same socioeconomic status, the same background experience, the same wiring in terms of abilities, areas of weakness, that sort of thing. Realizing how seldom you go into a classroom and find virtually everyone fully engaged and participating in an optimistic way signals a need for instruction that addresses individual variance as well as common content requirements. We have way too many students who bring to school with them needs and differences that we just don't take into account in our thinking and planning. And we fail many learners when we do that.

What are some of the misconceptions educators hold about differentiation?

Tomlinson: The model of differentiation is very multifaceted, but it can be boiled down to three student needs which call for differentiating instruction: student readiness, student interest, and student learning profile. Learning profile refers to preferred modes of learning and has four facets—gender, culture, learning styles, and intelligence preferences.

We find a good number of classrooms where teachers do some work with students' learning styles, and they assume that they have therefore differentiated instruction. In essence, they have picked one fourth of one third of the information that we have about significant differences in learners for which they plan a response. In other words, they have neglected readiness differentiation, interest differentiation, how culture influences us, how gender

influences us, and how intelligence preferences influence us and assume that if they've done something with learning styles they've done what needs to be done.

“Not to address readiness and to assume that a focus on learning styles is going to take care of everything, is generally way off base.”

We have such a huge range of readiness in classes that not to address readiness and to assume that a focus on learning styles is going to take care of everything, is generally way off base. In terms of both needs of learners and in terms of what research tells us, readiness is where we need to begin and focus, and then we can open things up by looking at those other categories.

Another misconception is that our current massive emphasis on testing speaks to a need for standardization—everybody needs to pass the same test under the same circumstances on the same day, with the same parameters. I think that whatever your learning outcome needs to be, even if you think it needs to be highly standardized, students will still learn at different rates. They need to be taught in different ways, and they need different materials or approaches to learning. So as paradoxical as it may sound, the need for differentiation is even more critical if you're supposed to get everybody to the same point at exactly the same time—not less so. Differentiation doesn't suggest changing the outcome for students, but rather finding different avenues to success with those outcomes.

Why are some school leaders reluctant to integrate differentiation in the classroom?

Tomlinson: What I more commonly find is leaders who ask for or demand differentiation but don't know how to support it fully or wisely enough. They are typically people who believe they are doing the right thing, but function in counterproductive ways. I hear really often, “We're going to do differentiation in our school this year.” Differentiation is one of those things that people who are experts in the field of change call second order change. First order change is the kind of thing most teachers can implement with modest effort. Differentiation requires second order change. It really requires many teachers to change their approach to teaching as a whole—how we think about students and their capabilities, how we use assessment, how curriculum is crafted, flexible instruction to ensure that students go where they need to go. Perhaps most challenging, it asks teachers to learn to handle a classroom where two or three or four things are sometimes happening at the same time.

Second order change is demanding. It's also much more promising.

People whom we find providing teachers with sustained and intelligent support understand that they are there for the long haul, that everyone needs to be immersed in the ideas, that they don't ever go away, that they're in the foreground all the time, that you can hear the drum beating constantly. I don't find a whole lot of leaders saying, “No I don't want to support this. This doesn't make any sense.” What I find is people who support the transition to differentiation as though it were a first order change and don't understand the depth of leadership required to facilitate second order change.

This sounds really hard to do. How do you make it happen?

Tomlinson: It is hard to do. When you look at the literature on expertise, one of the differences between an expert and a novice is that experts see many different aspects of what's going on around them, they know what those elements mean, and they know how to respond to them in targeted ways. They know what to dismiss and what to act on.

Differentiation asks for that expert level of discrimination when observing and responding to students in a learning context. So the question becomes, “How do we help teachers develop expertise?”

Where we see differentiation really thrive, we see principals who understand the power of knowing and responding to students and who are willing to lead consistently and persistently in order to help teachers do so.

In any school you’ll find some teachers who realize that differentiation makes the classroom work much better for many more students. Those teachers will develop the skills of responsive or differentiated instruction on their own. To change a whole school takes a principal who has vision, understands where teachers are on a continuum toward achieving that vision, knows what to do to help or get help to support each teacher’s growth, and in effect, differentiates for the faculty.

Where leadership for differentiation is effective, you have leaders say, “Sure, it’s hard, but there’s a way to get there and we’ll work together to learn how to make all of our classrooms responsive to all of our students.” The leaders literally help teachers enact change in their own classrooms. They bring teachers together in teams to share insight and to support one another. It’s that sense of intelligent, persistent leadership that signals the difference between a school where a few teachers get better at attending to the learning needs of students and one where everyone is invested in that goal.

We see differentiation catching hold either in individuals or in little clusters of individuals where there is a really strong department chair or a really strong grade-level leader. When the school as a whole is focused on addressing the full range of learner needs, it’s inevitably the principal’s leadership that makes the difference.

What the secret to managing differentiation in the classroom

Tomlinson: One of the major obstacles for teachers in learning to differentiate instruction is figuring out how to handle a classroom where the teacher is not in front of the kinds all the time pulling the strings like a master puppeteer. We’re used to frontal control in classrooms. The differentiation philosophy indicates that students become stronger learners when they can accept more responsibility for their own learning and when they become more proficient in understanding their goals, their status relative to those goals, and how to adjust their approach to learning in order to achieve the goals.

The case that we’ve tried to make in our new book [*Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*, co-authored with Marcia B. Imbeau] is that there are two elements that teachers need to think through: leading people and managing details. Leading people involves asking students to consider what it feels like when the classroom doesn’t work for them or for their friends, to envision what a classroom would be like if it functioned in a way that helped each student grow as far and fast as possible—and to participate in developing that kind of classroom.

When you go into classrooms where teachers lead kids in that way, management is not the problem we tend to think it is, because kids feel empowered and interested and invigorated.

Still, however, there is the need to make sure the room doesn’t get too noisy or that the materials aren’t all over the place when students leave. There are plenty of details that need

managing, but when teachers do that in the context of leading their students to help create a more effective place to learn, handling the details works much more smoothly and naturally.

by Lynn Bell

This article appeared in the Spring 2011 edition of Curry magazine.