

# MENTOR MINUTE

## Differentiation in Early Childhood Education

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"Just because there is a predictable pattern to growth, and a predictable season for blooming, doesn't mean that every flower on the planet will bloom on the same day. Each flower opens at its own rate within the growing season. Children need to be allowed to bloom in season, just as flowers are. This doesn't mean we do nothing however. There's a big difference between feeding the plant and forcing the bloom." - Amanda Morgan (Morgan, 2015)

### What Exactly is Differentiation?

It is every teacher's desire to support the children in their classroom to reach their full potential and to help them "bloom". As teachers, we know that children enter the classroom with different background knowledge, experiences and needs. No child is the same. **How do teachers support children in the classroom with their similarities as well as their unique needs?** We can do this through differentiation.



Researchers at the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum define differentiation as a process to approach teaching and learning for children of differing abilities in the same classroom. The idea is to maximize a child's growth and success by meeting them where they are versus expecting them to adjust themselves to fit a curriculum (Huebner, 2010). "At its most basic level, differentiating instruction means 'shaking up' what goes on in the classroom so that children have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. In other words, a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each child can learn effectively" (Tomlinson, 2017, pg. 2). Teachers oftentimes don't feel comfortable with talking about differentiation or only have surface knowledge about it. Meetings or trainings on differentiated instruction often do not provide teachers with enough information to understand how to successfully implement differentiation. Hanayani, H., Tenggilis, J., & Indonesia, S. cite in their research that 83% of teachers nationwide find understanding and implementing differentiation difficult; preferring homogeneous groups of children. Furthermore, 77% of teachers responded that when grouping children by different abilities, advanced children are at a disadvantage (2017).

In the *NC Teaching Standards Rubric*, Standard IV: Teachers Facilitate Learning for Their Young Children; in the first indicator (IV-a), the expectation of a proficient teacher is that teachers "understand developmental levels of young children and appropriately differentiate instruction." In actuality, many teachers may not have a clear understanding of what differentiation means or what it looks like in early childhood education. **How do we then help teachers better understand differentiation?**



*"When a teacher tries to teach something to the entire class at the same time, chances are, one-third of the kids already know it, one third of the kids will get it, and the remaining third won't. So, two-thirds of the children are wasting their time." Lillian Katz (as cited by Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1993)*

(photo courtesy of Western Illinois University)

## What Does Differentiation Look Like In Pre-K?



In a quality Pre-K classroom, a teacher subtly differentiates instruction, and with continuous practice it becomes second nature. There are many things a teacher can do in a developmentally appropriate Pre-K environment to differentiate instruction. A teacher can carefully choose materials to fit children's needs and developmental levels. When interacting with the children, she may adjust how she speaks or the kinds of questions she asks. The teacher may model based on the uniqueness of the group of children. There may be an adjustment made to a lesson for a large group based on the children's level of understanding that can fulfill the overall goal. The environment is playful, learning is not forced; it follows the children's interests and needs and is filled with intentionality, respect and needed modifications. This is differentiation in a Pre-K classroom. (McDonald, 2018)

## Differentiation versus Individualization



Early childhood educators many times have a section for Differentiation and Individualization on their lesson plans. These terms are often used interchangeably when teachers are planning lessons to support the different needs of children in their class. What is the difference between differentiation and individualization? Simply put, differentiation focuses on supporting groups of children while individualization focuses on supporting the needs of an individual child. Below is a chart that points out what teachers do when differentiating versus what they do when individualizing instruction.

Differentiation	Individualization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• adjusts needs for groups of children</li><li>• uses the same learning objective for different groups as for whole class</li><li>• creates instruction based on needs of groups (small and large group, and sometimes for individual)</li><li>• uses multiple avenues of learning</li><li>• plans for varied approaches to content,</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• plans to accommodate learning for individuals</li><li>• plans specific objectives for individual children</li><li>• adapts learning based on needs of individual children</li><li>• makes modifications to instruction based on individual needs of children</li></ul>

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

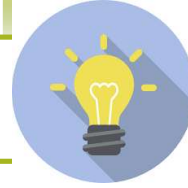
### In order to support differentiated classroom practices:

- Practices may look different based on children's needs, knowledge or interests.
- Focus on the main ideas and skills of the content area.
- Respond to children's different learning styles, interests, knowledge, etc.
- Be flexible in grouping children based by shared interest, topic, or ability.
- These should change over time.
- Incorporate ongoing and meaningful assessments along with instruction.
- Have ongoing assessment, reflection, and adjustments to the content, process, and product to support children's needs.

(Huebner, 2010)

For more information on differentiation, [click here](#) for Standard IV – Module

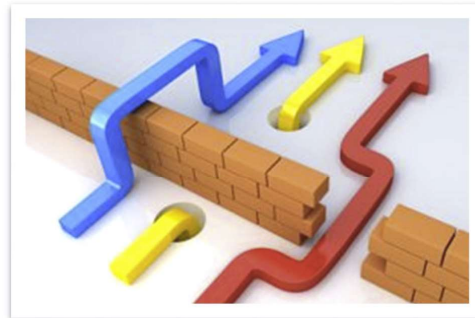
## Strategies for Supporting Teachers



- ◆ Observe and get to know your children (their interests, readiness and learning styles)
- ◆ Use your assessment data (formal and informal), to know where to start instruction and where support is needed.
- ◆ Use the developmental indicators found in Foundations to see where children fall and next steps for their learning.
- ◆ Utilize Foundations for suggested strategies (You do not have to reinvent the wheel!).
- ◆ Provide a variety of materials (open-ended, variety of levels, based on children's interests).
- ◆ Provide a variety of options for how children can demonstrate their knowledge and what they are learning.
- ◆ Plan flexible grouping with children of different abilities. Remember that children do not need to stay in their tiered group all year! They will move as you monitor their abilities throughout the year.
- ◆ Collaborate with other teachers to gain knowledge and understanding of differentiation.

"Excellence in education is when we do everything that we can to make sure they become everything that they can."

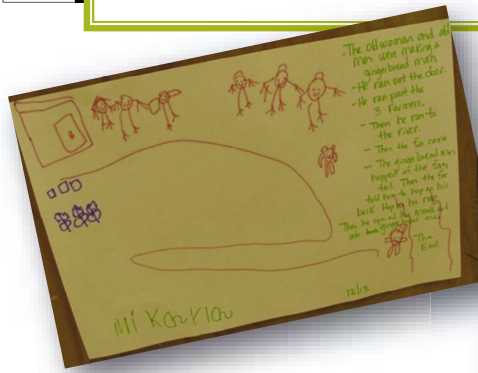
-Carol Ann Tomlinson



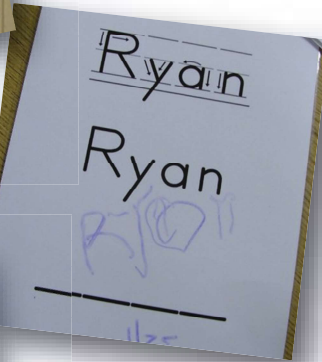
## Guiding questions to support teachers as they think about differentiation and planning:

- What does your assessment data (formal and informal) tell you about your class? (in literacy, math, etc.)
- What is the learning goal/objective of your assignment or your particular teaching component? (whole group, small group, story-time, music)
- How could you modify the content/process/product to support children in .....?
- How can children show you that they have learned a skill or met the learning objective?
- How can you create tiers to support different groups in your class?
- What are the interests of the children in your classroom? How can you use this information to support learning objectives?
- How can your curriculum be modified to meet the needs of your children (same objective but different process)?

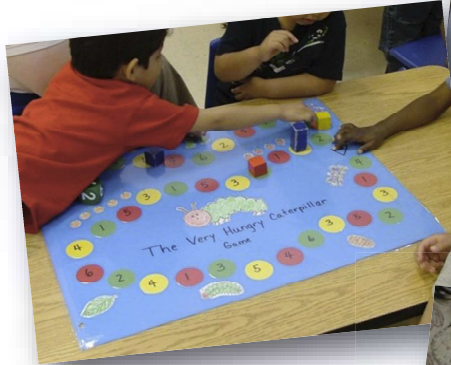
## See it in Action!



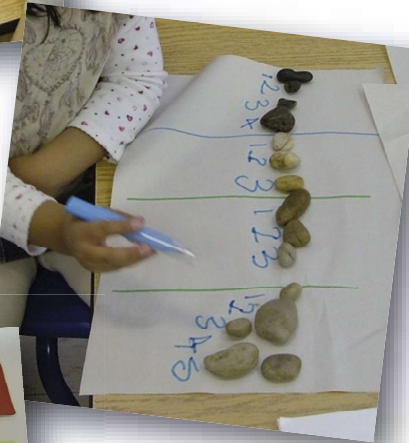
As part of morning routine, children wrote their name each morning. The teacher provided different levels of support for each child to be successful.



Board games were very popular in this classroom. Children worked together in small groups of different abilities supporting one another in their learning.



The teacher used rocks for a graphing activity in the classroom. Children participated in the sorting activity according to their understanding of sorting. Children worked in small groups or pairs.



Two of the children in the classroom seldom visited the art area to draw. The teacher introduced a dry erase board and placed a book about trucks nearby to encourage the children to draw.



The teacher planned various ways for children to revisit and share their understanding of the Three Bears (some children drew pictures of just the characters, others a detailed story (photo) while others acted out the story using props. Each child was able to share the story with the teacher in different ways.



Children were able to use their name card for support in writing their name on their art work if needed.

