



ENHANCED

Learning

FAIRNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Questions Answered

- What does fairness mean?
- How does fairness apply to accommodations?
- What is differentiated instruction?
- What does research say about adjusting to the needs of students?
- How can you make your class fairer to students?

ACCOMMODATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS

What is fairness in the classroom? Does it mean the teacher treats everyone in the same way? If the last sentence is true, then everybody should wear a pair of glasses or everybody should wear a size 7 shoe. However, because their academic needs are different, students are to be treated in special and unique ways.

Some teachers are under the impression that fair and equal are the same thing. But equality is often unfair! Fairness is often unequal. Fairness in the classroom is not always about giving equal tasks. It can be about giving students an equal chance to succeed. A student with a learning disability

or ADHD will need a different instructional method than his typical peers.

Thomas Jefferson once said, "There is nothing more unequal, than the equal treatment of unequal people." In a truly differentiated classroom, what is fair for one is not always fair for all. Fair does not mean that every child gets the same treatment, but that every child gets what he or she needs.



A teacher must not worry about carrying out a different disciplinary action on two different students, There may be good reason to enforce a more strict action on a student who requires a more drastic action to correct an

inappropriate behavior. The same idea also applies in the context of instruction.

We cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all model when it comes to classroom instruction. We must know our students and their individual needs, keeping them in mind when we prepare our lessons. Additionally, when we reflect on a completed lesson, we must gather inferential data about which students did not succeed, and attempt to find ways to meet needs that we did not meet in our past instruction. Most importantly, we must never take the easy road of giving equal tasks to unequal students; but instead, we must find a way to help every student succeed as much as is possible. Every child, with special needs or not, deserves this approach to her education.

Everybody gets what they need; and if someone needs an accommodation, it will make their learning environment more equitable. If the accommodation works for other students in the class, then they can have it too! A student does not need a special diagnosis to get what they need to learn.

Think about your teaching history. Did you ever rephrase the question, extend the deadline, provide extra examples to help the student learn, reorganize a class according to student interest, or give students a choice in their assignment, based upon their individual interests? These are examples of differentiated instruction. You may not have called it "differentiated" teaching at that time; but that's what was happening.

A philosophical issue for the teacher to examine is that of fairness. As parents and educators, we mold children's values and morals. We teach them valuable lessons related to honesty, courage, integrity, loyalty, and so on. Yet, it seems that we allow children to dictate to us the concept of fairness. When

asked to define fairness, most children respond: "Fairness means everybody gets the same." Unfortunately, we often allow children to convince us that this, indeed, is the definition of that concept.

Similar phrases are repeated time and again in households, as parents attempt to handle their children in a fair and equitable fashion. The juggling of fairness and equality presents a never-ending conundrum for parents; and few of us realize that these concepts are not synonymous. In fact, they are often total opposites. The classic work in moral development conducted by Laurence Kohlberg at Harvard University indicates that children, in their initial stages of moral development, define fairness thusly; "Fairness means that everyone gets the same." (Kohlberg, 1981)

Unfortunately, in many households children have convinced their parents that the



above definition is a true and accurate one. Consider: How many fathers would return from a business trip bearing a gift for only one child? How often do you resist the temptation to purchase a special gift for one child,

because you would feel the wrath of the siblings who received nothing? At holiday time do you carefully compute and monitor each child's gift list to ensure that all receive the identical number of gifts? If this sounds familiar, you should understand that you are applying the concept of fairness at the level of a seven- or eight-year-old child.

In actuality, the definition of fairness has little to do with treating people in an identical manner. The true definition of fairness is: "Fairness means that everyone gets what he or she needs."

As a result of buying into the faulty definition of fairness, we attempt to deal with all children in an identical manner. When a teacher modifies a lesson for an LD child or

adjusts the course requirements for him, his classmates charge that the situation is "unfair!" Rather than respond to their complaints, the teacher should explain that the mature conceptualization of fairness is not equal, identical treatment; rather, fairness means that every student receives what he

needs. Because each individual's needs are different, fairness dictates that their programs and expectations will be different. Children are capable of understanding this concept, if it is explained clearly and if it is observed daily in the teacher's modeling behavior.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Teachers know that every class includes diverse learners—some struggling, some advanced, and all with different life experiences, learning preferences, and personal interests. Differentiated instruction adapts instruction to meet the needs of individual learners, providing all students with the appropriate level of challenge and the appropriate supports to help them reach learning goals.

Differentiated instruction is grounded in an understanding of how people learn. Instruction begins with an assessment of what students already know, and builds new concepts on their existing knowledge. This differentiation provides students with varied experiences to engage with content. A differentiated classroom offers multiple ways for students to access content, to process and make sense of the concepts and skills, and to develop products that demonstrate their learning (Tomlinson, 2001).

Technology supports classroom strategies by creating new routes to learning, addressing multiple learning needs, and providing forums for individualized access to content and expression. We teach where the student is. We teach content, but we also teach individual students with unique abilities.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Intelligence is not a fixed quantity, but can be amplified through rich learning experiences. Vigorous learning actually changes the physiology of the brain (Caine & Caine, 1991).

In the public schools, a 504 accommodation plan may require extended time for assignments or tests for a student who has difficulty with writing. It may not be called a 504 plan in the private school, but it is a clear example of fair treatment for a student with



special needs.

Once you have defined fairness as teaching each student in a special and unique way, according to their needs, you will then be able to pursue some of the ideas in differentiated instruction.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in their Focus on Effectiveness website (<http://www.netc.org/focus/challenges/instruction.php>) highlights key research findings that support Differentiated Instruction.

Students learn best when presented with moderate challenges—not so difficult that the learner feels threatened, and not so simple that the learner coasts through without having to think deeply or solve new problems (Bess,

1997; Czikszenmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Tomlinson, 1999).

Struggling learners are seldom well served by homogeneous grouping (Oakes, 1985; Slavin, 1987, 1993). However, advanced learners can benefit from accelerated classes (Kulik & Kulik, 1991). In effective homogeneous classrooms, the needs of all

learners are specifically and systematically addressed (Tomlinson, 1999).

Anchoring activities help teachers manage class time. Teachers create meaningful activities that students work on independently—at the beginning of class, when students are finished with assignments, or when waiting for help (Tomlinson, 2001).

IMPLEMENTATION

The following is a brief summary of ways that you can make your class fairer to students:

- ✓ **Differentiate standards-based instruction.** Standardized learning goals do not imply one-size-fits-all instruction. Differentiation opens multiple paths to help your students reach the goals.
- ✓ **Engage students in setting their own learning goals.** Learning contracts, personal goal setting, and other strategies help students recognize that they have a stake in their own learning.
- ✓ **Build on what students know.** Recognize that students build new understanding onto what they already know. Take time to assess their individual starting points, and then provide them with a choice of ways to engage with key content.
- ✓ **Engage multiple learning styles.** Recognize that students' learning styles vary widely, and provide them with opportunities to build on their strengths.
- ✓ **Use grouping wisely.** Think about how to group students effectively for different learning activities. Avoid stable homogeneous grouping, which can be a detriment to struggling students. Support group efforts by teaching students to mediate conflicts and manage their time effectively. Help all students find a way to contribute to the group's success.
- ✓ **Teach skills for success.** Reinforce learning skills that will help all students be successful learners, such as note taking, summarizing, researching, and using collaboration.
- ✓ **Provide opportunities for student choice.** Give students ample choices and the encouragement to pursue projects that interest them as part of regular class work. Provide students who are ready for more challenge with opportunities to tackle independent research projects.
- ✓ **Vary assessment strategies.** Use multiple assessments—including portfolios and performance assessments—that will allow all students to demonstrate what they have learned.
- ✓ Rick Wormeli in his book *Fair Isn't Always Equal*, provides ideas for assessing and grading in the differentiated classroom, which you might find to be helpful.
- ✓ **Facilitate success.** Provide appropriate support and classroom management to facilitate success in a student-centered classroom. ■

Online Resources

Hott Linx is a Web site with a rich collection of resources about differentiated instruction, created by the University of Virginia. Lesson and unit plans, classroom strategies, and other resources are available. curry.edschool.virginia.edu/hottlinx/

Technology Tips for Differentiated Instruction is a resource from WestEd that provides information on using technology to address the needs of diverse learners. www.westedrtec.org/techtips

Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education maintains a Web site of resources about multiple intelligences, including information about research and best practices. pzweb.harvard.edu/index.htm

New Horizons for Learning provides a Web site on Multiple Intelligences with articles, resources, and a bibliography. www.newhorizons.org/strategies/mi/front_mi.htm

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) provides online selections from their publications on differentiating instruction. www.ascd.org/research-a-topic.aspx

Resources

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