

## Excellence in differentiation to increase student engagement and learning outcomes

*Differentiation: "A proactively planned approach to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and/or how they can express what they have learned." Carol Ann Tomlinson (2013)<sup>1</sup>*

### OVERVIEW

This Professional Practice Note provides advice to teachers on classroom-based strategies to support differentiated learning for all students, whether they are below, at or above the standard, so they can maximise their learning growth and achieve individual learning excellence.

The [Victorian Teaching and Learning Model](#) is designed to deliver the FISO priority: *Excellence in teaching and learning* and can be used by teachers and leaders seeking to adopt a whole-school approach to differentiated learning.

This note provides further advice to school leaders about how you might use equity funding to improve differentiated instruction and intervention supports to assist students to bridge learning gaps, maximise learning gains and overcome educational disadvantage.

### DEFINING DIFFERENTIATED TEACHING AND LEARNING

Differentiated teaching refers to methods teachers use to extend the knowledge and skills of every student in every classroom, regardless of their starting point. The objective is to lift the performance of all students, including those who are falling behind and those ahead of year level expectations. Differentiated instruction is the pedagogical

approach of teachers who think creatively and flexibly when approaching teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup>

The availability of individualised student information, together with learning data can be used to identify what students already know, what they should learn next and highlight gaps in their knowledge and skills for targeted learning intervention. Data can also assist teachers when making decisions about a student's Individual Education Plan\*. Data enables teachers to plan well-scaffolded learning pathways so that all students have a point of entry.<sup>3</sup>

Learning is optimised when teachers pitch the content and the instruction 'at or just above' each student's developmental level, considered to be their 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1978). Differentiated teaching provides the right level of challenge and promotes engagement by responding to each student's individual differences in readiness, interest and learning profile.<sup>4</sup> Differentiation benefits students across the learning continuum, including students who are highly able and gifted.

The most effective differentiation practices focus on all aspects of teaching: content, process, product and learning environment.<sup>5</sup> A coherent and engaging differentiated curriculum is important but will be ineffectual without differentiating classroom instruction. As Dylan Wiliam says, "a bad curriculum well taught is invariably a better experience for students than a good curriculum badly taught: pedagogy trumps curriculum".<sup>6</sup>

Differentiation also describes provision of reasonable adjustments for students with learning difficulties, including disabilities (see the *Disability Standards for Education*). Adjustments should take account of student knowledge and skills, and what they need to learn next based on the *Victorian curriculum achievement standards*. Adjustments can include individualised and small group targeted learning interventions for some students when learning gaps are evident.

\* Note: this was formerly referred to as an *Individual Learning Plan (ILP)*

1 Tomlinson, Carol Ann and Moon, Tonya. (2013). *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom*. ASCD Books.

2 Subban, Pearl. (2006). *Differentiated instruction: A research basis*. International Education Journal, 2006 Vol 7, 935-947.

3 Hattie, J. (2011). *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*. Routledge: New York, NY.

4 Subban, Pearl. (2006).

5 *ibid*.

6 Wiliam, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment*. Bloomington, Solution Tree.

Finally, differentiation works best when teachers create a climate for learning that is inclusive, safe and responsive.<sup>7</sup> This approach maximises emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement and helps students to invest in their learning. Quality teaching starts with the belief that all students can learn given the right support and learning pathway.

### THE VALUE OF A DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH FOR LEARNERS AT RISK OF DISENGAGEMENT

The average classroom is heterogeneous, with a diverse range of learners from different cultural, social and educational experiences. The 'one-size fits all' learning pathway and 'teaching to the middle', ignores students who require different entry points in the learning continuum.

Learners at risk of disengagement can be at any stage of schooling and there are many factors that may contribute to a child or young person becoming or being disengaged. These include family and community factors, personal factors such as physical, mental health or behavioural issues, as well as school-related factors.

Highly-able or gifted students are also at risk of disengagement. Therefore, differentiated teaching offers strategies to engage all students, so that they become personally invested in, and take ownership of, their learning regardless of their learning starting point or ability.

### ADVICE FOR TEACHERS

#### Know your students

Differentiation starts with knowing your students, in particular their learning skills and current capabilities, as well as their passions, motivations and interests. The cultural perspectives and social emotional readiness are additional factors to consider. Draw upon existing data sources such as:

- NAPLAN, On Demand and other standardised or diagnostic test data
- Previous school reports, teacher judgements or student work samples

- Professional conversations with other staff
- Observations of students in a range of settings
- Pre-test or formative assessment data
- Ongoing feedback from students & parents/carers.

#### Plan the learning pathway

Plan the learning objectives (concepts, knowledge or skills to be covered, informed by the Victorian Curriculum) and the associated success criteria (evidence of learning from students). Success criteria can be differentiated to be applicable to *All*, *Most* and *Some* students in the class, with clear descriptions of what learning excellence looks like.

Based on information about the student's readiness, interests and learning profiles, teachers can also plan the learning sequence. They may need to differentiate the:

1. **Content:** *what* students are expected to learn.
2. **Process:** *how* teachers will teach and how students will explore or undertake their learning. Type of instruction and activities in the lessons.
3. **Product:** *how* the students demonstrate their learning.
4. **Learning environment:** physical and affective nature of the classroom. Classrooms should be stimulating and conducive to learning, and places where students feel valued, safe and supported to take risks to support their learning.<sup>8</sup>

#### Differentiated instructional approaches

The gradual release and acceptance of responsibility model (GRR) is a structured, evidenced based approach to differentiated instruction recommended by Sharratt (2019). It incorporates the, 'teach, practice and apply' approach many

<sup>7</sup> FISO:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/improvement/Pages/improvement-model.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Tomlinson, Carol Ann. (2013). *Differentiated instruction*. Fundamentals of Gifted Education- considering multiple perspectives. Routledge. New York.

teachers already use to scaffold learning for students.<sup>9</sup> It steps students through their learning using a 5-step approach: modelling, shared practice, guided practice, independent practice and student's application.<sup>10</sup>

Apply a 'Teaching up' approach, where the learning progression starts with basic concepts and skills, scaffolding the learning through the proficiencies toward mastery or deeper learning.<sup>11</sup> Bloom's Taxonomy (verbs) assists to qualify a deepening in the learning, allowing all students an individual entry point.<sup>12</sup>

Check-in regularly and make the learning visible by gathering data with formative assessments and instructional practices such as questioning techniques and exit tickets (formative activities at the end of the lesson to evaluate the learning progress). Adjust your teaching plan in response to formative feedback, for example adjust the lesson pace or re-teach certain concepts.

Consider group and targeted interventions to cater for learning difficulties. These interventions could be planned, for example, as part of a Professional Learning Community, or in collaboration with Literacy and Numeracy Improvement Teachers (for secondary schools).

Use a range of flexible (not fixed) group activities including collaboration and cooperation with mixed-ability (based on learning profile or interests) and ability-based groups to best support learning. Students grouped well with appropriate materials and scaffolds, can learn from each other. Small group instruction is an excellent teaching strategy to advance student learning.

### **Differentiation and student agency**

Students can become agents in their own learning when teachers engage them in the learning process. This can be achieved when teachers:

- Share the learning objectives and reflect on the learning progress and what learning is yet to come.
- Negotiate realistic and challenging learning goals.

- Support students to focus their efforts on making learning gains (or progress) as a measure of success, rather than high grades.
- Provide choice of content, process and product.
- Use a variety of collaborative, independent and teacher-directed instruction and a variety of activities: hands-on, writing and discussions.

Seek input from colleagues, access the expertise of your Professional Learning Community and/or learning specialists in your school, to implement a range of teaching strategies that support the different learning needs.

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### **ADVICE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS**

International evidence shows that increased funding targeted towards disadvantaged students improves educational outcomes.<sup>13</sup> *The Equity Funding Planner in SPOT* can assist leaders to allocate equity funding to support initiatives and practices that improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Consider how groups of students who would benefit from differentiated interventions could be prioritised when developing your school's Annual Implementation Plan and how best to use equity funding that your school may receive. Key questions to consider include:

- Whether your organisational design and resource allocation are targeted to meet the needs of learners at risk of disengaging from school
- How your school's leadership structure and workforce can better support gains in student achievement, engagement and wellbeing.

Using a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework is an effective whole-school approach to differentiated teaching and learning practices. RTI relies on primary prevention

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9 Campbell, Bruce. (2009). *To- With- By: A three-tiered model for differentiation instruction*. The NERA Journal (2009), Vol 14.

10 Sharratt, L. (2019). *Clarity: What Matters Most in Learning, Teaching, and Leading*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

11 Tomlinson, Carol Ann and Moon, Tonya. (2013)

12 Australian Government Department of Education and Training. (2019). Digital Technology Hub. Retrieved 15 April 2019: <https://www.digitaltechnologieshub.edu.au/teachers/assessment/assessment-framework/blooms-taxonomy>

13 OECD. (2012). *Equity and Quality in Education, Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*. OECD Publishing: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264130854-en>

through the provision of consistent, quality differentiated teaching practices for all students, followed by learning interventions to address learning gaps for some students.<sup>14</sup>

Additional data is now available to school leaders through the Panorama Dashboards that individually identifies students considered as 'disadvantaged' and who attract equity funding. Using this information alongside other sources of data can help school leaders identify students requiring extra support to reach their potential. Leaders can then tailor programs, interventions and initiatives to address their disengagement. Sources of data could include Panorama Dashboards, Attitudes to School Survey data, On-Demand data, attendance data and direct feedback from students.

Promote the use of diagnostic tests and tools for teachers and specialist staff with students who are showing limited or no learning growth, to determine their specific learning gaps.

Prioritise intervention support from trained staff with small group and individual students in and out of class.

Support teachers to develop effective differentiated instructional practices by resourcing professional development in areas such as data literacy, using explicit instruction and quality formative assessment for learning.

Encourage staff to use existing initiatives within the school to plan and facilitate group interventions to address learning difficulties. For example, this could be undertaken within a Professional Learning Community or by Literacy/Numeracy Improvement Teachers (secondary setting).

Encourage collaboration among teaching staff and instructional specialists to implement a range of teaching strategies to support planning and implementation of different learning programs to address students' individual learning needs. The Victorian Teaching and Learning Model is a useful resource to guide these collaborations.

Use the High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS 10) continuum of practice to reflect on whole-school practices and to promote common understanding of what excellent differentiated teaching may look like.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS OF PRACTICE

<sup>14</sup> DET. In Our Classrooms. Retrieved 30 April 2019:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/classrooms/Pages/aproachesepdiff.asp>

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**Case Study: Diggers Rest Primary School** is a small school in the South West Region that has experienced significant growth in recent years from a school of 68 to its current enrolment of 265 students. While the student population may have changed, a school-wide focus on quality differentiated teacher instruction has enabled all students to participate in a learning program that caters for their individual needs. This approach has had very positive impact on the students' learning confidence and their literacy and numeracy skills.

Read the case study: [Using data to drive differentiated teacher practice](#)

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## START A CONVERSATION

The questions below offer conversation starters for group discussions in Professional Learning Communities, Communities of Practice, teaching teams, or individual conversations with learning specialists and other teachers:

- How can we assess prior knowledge?
- What ongoing formative assessment tools can we employ to respond to student needs?
- How well do we collaborate with students to co-design goals to progress their learning?
- How can the classroom environment support the student to learn?
- Where are we located on the continuum of practice for HITS 10: Differentiated teaching practice?
- What professional learning will support us to improve our practice?

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## RESOURCES AND TOOLS

Relevant resources and tools include:

- [Abilities Based Learning and Education Support](#)
- [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#)
- [Middle years literacy and numeracy support initiative](#)

- [Pedagogical Model](#)
- [Disability standards for education](#)

### *For school leaders*

- [Insight assessment platform tools](#)
- [Panorama Dashboard](#)
- Equity planning and intervention guide (Found within the resources in [SPOT](#))
- [Strategic resource management guidelines for schools](#)

For more information or to share your feedback, please email: [professional.practice@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:professional.practice@edumail.vic.gov.au)