

## The Content of Staff Development on Differentiation

If we honor the premise that teachers would benefit from differentiation exactly as their students would, we should approach staff development in terms of varied levels of complexity, based both on varying teacher proficiency and the school's or district's evolution in moving toward more effectively differentiated classrooms.

While the levels of staff development suggested here are somewhat artificial, you should keep in mind the sorts of information, concepts, and skills that educators need to develop as they progress in their understanding and application of differentiation. Remember that educators reside at each level of development, and that each topic discussed in the following sections can be explored at varied levels of complexity. Remember, too, that teachers themselves are valuable sources of topics and conditions for staff development. [Three matrixes or checklists included in the Appendix (Figures A.1, A.2, and A.3) may be useful to teachers at varied levels of proficiency or with varying professional development goals in diagnosing their own learning needs related to differentiation, planning differentiated classrooms, and reflecting on their differentiated teaching.]

### Basic-Level Staff Development

The basic level of staff development needs to involve all staff members in a school or district to at least some degree to ensure a common understanding of district or school goals for differentiation and shared vocabulary and principles related to differentiation. Beyond that initial exposure, some teachers are likely to need additional work with the rudiments of differentiation, while others may have already progressed to a more complex understanding and application of it.

Experiences at this level are introductory. Methods of content delivery are likely to take the form of presentations, hands-on workshops, videos, readings, and discussion groups. Where possible, classroom visitations are useful at this stage. Staff development can also prepare teachers to begin immediately to apply in their classroom the concepts and skills they learn through staff development. Coaching and consultation should be a part of many basic-level staff development options. Approaches to basic-level staff development and activities to support them include

- Awareness of the need for differentiation—including the rationale and evidence that supports the need to differentiate instruction.
- Identifying key vocabulary, features, concepts, and principles of differentiated instruction.
- Identifying and applying some basic instructional strategies that are currently employed in the teacher's classroom and ways in which those strategies might be used most effectively for differentiation.
- Effective use of multiple teacher presentation modes and multiple student materials.
- Introducing and applying other basic instructional strategies that invite differentiation (for example: reading buddies, varying writing prompts, varying questions, and so on).

- Creating “respectful” tasks.
- Differentiating according to one student trait (readiness, interest, or learning profile).
  - Using instructional strategies to meet key learning goals and to build student engagement and understanding.
  - Planning for whole-group vs. small-group or individual work.
  - Developing specific guidelines for implementing the targeted approaches to differentiation so that the teacher has a comfortable plan for managing basic differentiated classroom routines (giving directions, monitoring group functioning, starting and stopping group tasks, setting expectations for student behavior, plans for students who finish work early, etc.).

### **Staff Development at Mid-Level Proficiency**

As teachers develop a sense of comfort and competence with the rudiments of planning for and managing a multitask classroom, staff development should begin to deal with somewhat more complex issues and approaches. Guided work times with hands-on application are especially useful at this point. Additional readings on topics relevant to teacher need and interest, ongoing classroom visits, and consultation with specialists in varying areas of student need can also be powerful. Among topics that may serve as the focus of mid-level staff development on differentiation are

- Student assessment: diagnosing student readiness, interest, and learning profiles and assessing student progress.
- Consistent use of assessment as a catalyst for instructional planning.
- Planning high-quality instruction as a baseline for differentiation.
- Classroom management strategies: establishing student expectations, managing groups in the classroom, preparing students for ongoing differentiation, keeping track of student progress.
  - Purposeful planning for flexible grouping.
  - Balancing teacher-choice and student-choice options.
  - Using a variety of specific instructional strategies to differentiate content, process, and product.
  - Understanding and planning instruction responsive to cultures.
  - Differentiating by readiness, interest, and learning profile in a single learning experience or within a brief sequence of lessons.

- Establishing clarity about what students should know, understand, and be able to do as a result of a given lesson, lesson sequence, and unit.
- Creating a classroom environment that supports learner differences.
- Helping students become more self-reliant learners.
- Communicating with parents and students about differentiation.

### **Staff Development at More Advanced Levels of Proficiency**

Teachers who are comfortable with basic routines of differentiation and who comfortably use a number of instructional strategies to differentiate content, process, and product are ready to explore differentiation in greater depth. While guided workshops, advanced readings, and opportunities for collaboration with peers and specialists remain important to teachers at greater levels of proficiency with differentiation, another aid is to work with proficient teachers to develop differentiated curriculum that stretches their own competence while generating materials valuable to other, less proficient teachers who are learning to differentiate as well. Teachers at a more advanced level would also benefit from multipart sessions or an extended session on a single topic. Staff development at a more advanced level of proficiency might include

- Exploring various models of differentiation.
- Selecting key concepts, principles, and skills for a lesson or unit.
- Designing differentiated lessons and units around key concepts, principles, and skills.
- Application of more sophisticated instructional strategies that invite differentiation.
- Dealing with issues of assessment and grading.
- Effective use of alternative assessments.
- Working collaboratively with students to build a more effective and responsive classroom.
- Coaching and scaffolding for student success.
- Specialized approaches for specific learning needs.
- Means of evaluating degrees of success of differentiation in the classroom.

## Extended Study

In time, some administrative leaders and teachers will become in-house experts. These educators, too, will need continued honing of their understanding and skills in order to grow. Their staff development will likely include developing differentiated curriculum and assisting in the implementation of differentiated instruction on a schoolwide or systemwide basis, as well as areas of focus proposed by group members. Staff development opportunities may include teams working over extended periods of time, attendance at national and state conferences related to differentiation, and extended course work. Working with colleagues from different schools or districts is particularly important at this level.

## A Productive Focus for Leadership

Addressing the specific learning needs of teachers in a way that makes the concept of differentiation more accessible and relevant to them as individuals is perhaps the most fundamental role of leaders for differentiation at every stage of district growth. A coherent and high-quality staff development plan for supporting differentiation also provides our best platform for demonstrating the power of the differentiation concept itself. Further, such a plan continually provides information useful in effectively adapting growth plans and in assessing district or school progress toward its goals.

## Resources for Staff Development on Differentiation

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (1996). *Differentiating instruction for mixed-ability classes* [A Professional Inquiry Kit]. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (1997). *Differentiating instruction* [A Video Staff Development Set, with Facilitator's Guide]. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2000). *Differentiating Instruction* [Professional Development Online course]. Alexandria, VA: Author. Available: <http://www.ascd.org>.