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1998/99**Book Review: Differentiation Made Practical**Lynda Garrett, *University of Auckland*

The title of this book promises plenty and delivers it all! Differentiation can seem to be anything but practical in intent. Beginning teachers often feel they lack clarity in converting key theoretical principles such as content, process and product differentiation into effective teaching and learning opportunities for all students. For those teachers who believe that differentiation means 'extra work', and feel unable to cater effectively for their gifted learners within the 'regular classroom' setting, *Differentiation Made Practical* is a must.

Rosemary Cathcart draws on her extensive interactions with gifted students and teachers to present a well-structured and manageable process for differentiating learning for gifted students. While there is a deliberate focus on planning specifically to meet gifted learners' needs, readers are reassured that the process detailed in this book can be applied equally successfully to all students. As an expert facilitator, Rosemary's enthusiasm is infectious, as she sets out to put a sparkle and energy into your teaching, in a book that is essentially a 'workshop between two covers.'

The best workshops engage the audience from the outset, and introduce new strategies, skills or understandings. Practical examples are usually presented to illustrate key concepts in action. Time is often allowed for participants to engage with new understandings, by applying them within a relevant context. However, it is vital that participants attend to the content of the first part of any workshop to fully benefit from the practical follow-up tasks. *Differentiation Made Practical* is no different in this respect, hence the following note of caution.

The book is composed of five main sections, plus an introduction, spanning just sixty pages in total. Over half of the book is dedicated to presenting twelve differentiated units of work, framed around issues of universal relevance, and designed primarily with gifted students' advanced cognitive and affective abilities in mind. These units, presented within section five are essentially the practical component of this 'workshop between two covers.' Broad-based topics such as 'Crisis!', 'Thought', 'Fire, Fire!' and 'The Air in Your Life,' will undoubtedly entice teachers with limited time to head straight for pages 24-60, in search of those new ideas. The richness of the questions and suggested learning tasks within each unit will definitely inspire. However, those who take the time to work systematically through the first three sections of the book, in particular, will gain the full benefit of the author's intent.

Section one of *Differentiation Made Practical* presents a thought-provoking approach to planning in which the reader is scaffolded through a process of teacher questioning. Authentic examples facilitated within 'real' school settings are used to illustrate each stage of the process. The conceptual planning process is framed around the following key questions;

- **Why is it important for children to learn about this topic? Why does this topic matter?**
- **What concepts do children need to have or to develop if they are to understand this topic in depth?**
- **What issues might arise when considering this topic? How can we use this topic to help children explore and build values?**

The role of each question in enhancing teachers' thinking and effectiveness to plan child-centred learning experiences is clearly explained. The author also presents some compelling reasons for framing planning conceptually, in terms of enhancing learning outcomes for gifted students. Readers will likely find their understanding of gifted students' particular cognitive and affective attributes enhanced as a result of reading this part of the book. I was so motivated at the end of this first section that I flicked through the pages to one of my favourite teaching topics *Ancient civilisations: Ancient Egypt!* I was able to see how I could have transformed my own planning on this topic using the three key questions, and was totally convinced of the merit of this approach.

In section two, a four step multi-dimensional framework is used to transform the ideas generated within the conceptual planning approach into relevant and engaging learning activities. This truly child-centred framework is essentially a way of organising learning tasks in a logical sequential 'unit plan' format, while also incorporating all the key principles of effective differentiated teaching practice. Learning tasks can easily incorporate differentiated content, process, product and learning environment elements.

While the author has designed this framework with gifted students' advanced cognitive and affective needs in mind, readers are again assured that the flexible nature of this model will work for ALL students. Tasks can be designed to cater for varied student interests, abilities and learning preferences. All students are able to choose the most appropriate learning tasks for them. While I agree that students can make sensible learning choices, some students will undoubtedly need more intensive support in achieving this goal.

The first step, referred to as "Mind-opening query" in the sample units is a classic example of an effective 'hook', designed to stimulate children's thinking around the topic and promote learner engagement. The mind-opening query for the topic of *Ancient civilisations: Ancient Egypt* poses the question "How old must a civilisation be, before we call it 'ancient'? Is there a rule?" (Cathcart, 2010, p. 35). Gifted students would likely thrive on discussing and debating such a question with other 'like-minded' students.

The second step, "Establishing our data" presents a range of novel activities with an in-built research focus. Learning tasks incorporate differing degrees of challenge to allow for student choice. The following activity within the *Ancient civilisations: Ancient Egypt* unit, illustrates the potential role of varied research processes; "How big was the biggest pyramid? How much land space did it occupy? How high was it? Can you find a building near where you live that is about the same size?" (Cathcart, 2010, p. 35).

Step three, "Exploring our ideas" consists of more rich and varied hands-on learning experiences. Learners are free to choose how they will process new conceptual understandings or skills, and demonstrate new learning as differentiated product outcomes. This may involve using their particular strength area or areas to enhance the learning process. A student with verbal-linguistic strengths, and a vivid imagination would undoubtedly choose to "Write a news sheet to be read out to the workers who are building the next pyramid. Include news, announcements and advertisements" (Cathcart, 2010, p. 36).

The final step in this multi-dimensional model involves "Examining our thinking." Students are invited to explore relevant issues originating from the third question in the conceptual planning component of this book. Delving into issues will demand higher order thinking abilities such as analysing, comparing and evaluating and provide the chance for engaging in values exploration exercises. This example asks students to consider whether "Archaeologists are simply modern-day tomb robbers." "What's your view?" (Cathcart, 2010, p. 36).

Sections three and four of *Differentiation Made Practical* cover three pages in total. Section three reinforces the value of three key strategies for gifted students; using choice, creating challenge and providing for hands-on involvement. Those readers who are less familiar with some of the key characteristics of gifted students will undoubtedly benefit from the discussion in this section. Section four, consists of a single page reproducible list of behavioural indicators that can be used to gauge the effectiveness of this teaching approach for gifted students. The author believes that this checklist could also be used with other students as well, with some changes in learning behaviour indicative of a greater interest and satisfaction in learning.

Once you've read and digested sections one to four of *Differentiation Made Practical*, DO take the time to explore the units of works in section 5. Each unit has been constructed using the three significant questions outlined in section one to create a conceptual plan. The conceptual plan has then been developed into a classroom unit plan using the multi-dimensional model, outlined in section two of the book. These exemplary units are generous gifts from a gifted educator's work in the field. Many thanks Rosemary!

### **Acknowledgement**

Thank you to the publishers, Essential Resources, for their donation of a copy of this book for review. This and other books are available on their website:  
<http://www.essentialresources.co.nz/>

### **References**

Cathcart, R. (2010). *Differentiation Made Practical: Lessons to Satisfy Gifted Learners, Their Classmates and Teachers*. Invercargill: Essential Resources.

