

## BALANCING THE ACT OF TEACHING DIVERSE LEARNERS:

How top-performing schools support low achievers while keeping high achievers challenged

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**SUMMARY:** Just as everyone has a unique fingerprint, each learner has an individual style of learning and intellectual ability. This means that not all learners in a classroom learn a subject in the same way or at the same pace, but all learners have the same learning goal. So, how can teachers reach diverse learners in their classes so that:

- low-functioning learners do not find it impossible to keep up in a lesson?
- high-performing learners are not held back to the speed of the less-able classmates?

In this policy brief, teachers in schools that work share how, through **differentiated instruction (DI)**, they balance the scale to best reach each learner and match a variety of learning styles. To do this, these teachers differentiate the following:

### The content

Varying the level of content learners need to learn

### The process

Activities that help learners make sense of what they learn

### The product

Different ways learners can show what they have learned

### The learning environment

How teachers provide a variety of learning environments

that he could fit into the box. If, on the other hand, a soldier was tall, his limbs were chopped until they fitted into the box. In the end, *short* and *tall soldiers* ended-up dead. Only the *perfect-sized soldiers*, who fitted into the box perfectly, survived.

This myth finds expression in many classrooms. Teachers in many schools present “one-size-fit-all” lessons. That is, their lessons are pitched to the level of the average learner. They actualise the Greek myth by “stretching” the low-functioning learners (“the *short soldiers*”), while at the same time “chopping” the limbs of the high-performing learners (“the *tall soldiers*”) in order to “fit” in a “one-size-fit-all” lesson designed for an average learner (“the *perfect-sized soldier*”).

In a “one-size-fit-all lesson,” both groups of learners (the low-functioning and high-performing learners) do not benefit from the lesson and end up being frustrated and bored because the lesson is beyond the level of the low-functioning learners while it is too easy for the high-performing learners. As in the Greek myth, by aiming to middle, teachers are “killing” the low-functioning and high-performing learners. That is, when an entire class moves forward to learn new skills and concepts without any individual adjustments in time or support, the low-functioning learners are doomed to fail while the high-performing learners do not achieve to their full potential.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Greek mythology, all soldiers were required to be of the same height. To achieve this, a measuring box was used to establish each soldier’s height. A soldier was expected to fit into the box perfectly. If a soldier was short, his body was pulled and stretched so



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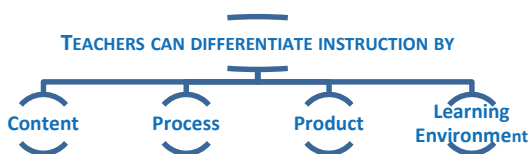
In every classroom, teachers have to teach diverse learners. Not only do these learners differ culturally and linguistically but they also have different cognitive abilities, background knowledge, and learning preferences. High-achievers often share a class with learners who struggle mightily with one or more school subjects.

Whatever differences each learner brings to a classroom, all learners have the right to expect teachers who are ready to teach them as they are, and to meet high expectations.

Balancing the act of teaching diverse learners does not mean that teachers must aim to the middle, i.e., teach to the average learner. On the contrary, instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach, when faced with such diversity, an expert in the area of differentiated learning, Tomlinson (quoted in the *Schools that Work II*<sup>1</sup>), argues that **differentiated instruction** (DI) is one of the best tools available to teachers to accommodate differences between learners in mixed-ability classes so that all learners in a class have the best possible chance of learning.

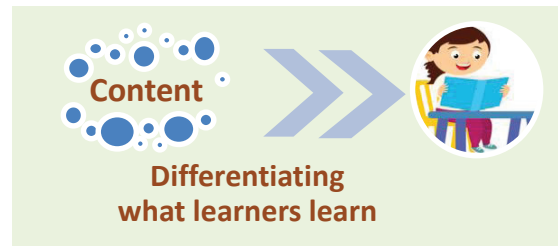
## WAYS TO PREPARE A DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

According to Tomlinson, teachers must differentiate instruction by adjusting one or more of the following classroom elements:



<sup>1</sup> In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: [www.education.gov.za](http://www.education.gov.za).

To meet every learner's needs, teachers in schools that work or top-performing schools differentiate their lessons by modifying the **content** (what is being taught), the **process** (how the content is taught), the **product** (how learners demonstrate their learning) and **learning environment** (the way the classroom works and 'feels'). Each of these methods of differentiation is briefly discussed below but is detailed in the *Schools that Work II* report.



Teachers in schools that work use a variety of ways to explore the content to enable all learners to connect with it. To differentiate the **content** teachers:

- Use continuous, formative assessment to identify learners who need help and to monitor learners' progress after a teacher has differentiated instruction by content.
- Differentiate their teaching by adjusting the content, including knowledge, concepts, and skills that learners need to learn, e.g. producing different sets of worksheets or exercises depending on students' abilities, or using a single worksheet comprised of tasks which get progressively challenging.
- Set different tasks for learners of different abilities guided by a six-level Bloom's taxonomy or other taxonomies to enable learners to progress to more challenging levels of the taxonomy.
- Re-teach a concept or skill to struggling learners, and to give high-performing learners more challenging work.

Following is an example how a teacher in a top-performing school differentiates a lesson: In a traditional maths classroom, a teacher might assign the odd-number problems from the textbook and all the learners would complete them during the lesson. Instead, in a



differentiated lesson, a teacher in a top-performing school teaches the same maths concepts by organising learners into three groups and moving around the three groups:

- ✚ One where the maths problems are presented visually in a traditional way
- ✚ One using manipulatives
- ✚ One focusing on solving the problem (see **Best Practice 6.1** how teachers group learners)



In this type of differentiation, the focus shifts to the **process** that teacher has to adapt to present the content to learners of different abilities. To help learners with different abilities and learning styles absorb the content taught, teachers in schools that work:

✚ Vary presentation skills so that detailed explanations in simple language are given to struggling learners while quick or more sophisticated dialogue is reserved for high-performing learners.

✚ Augment learning and teaching time by providing extra classes in the morning, during break, in the afternoon, during week-ends or holidays (see **Policy Brief No. 01** for further detail about what teachers do during these sessions).

✚ Adjust the pace of learning by providing extra support for struggling learners to complete a task and allocate more challenging extension tasks to the more advanced learners.

✚ Encourage learner peer-support to allow learners to help one another (see **Policy Brief No. 09** for further detail how this is done).

✚ Deliver a lesson using a wide spectrum of materials, technologies and means that appeal to different learning styles in order to attain a single learning outcome (see **Policy Brief No. 13**).

✚ Pace the lesson so that learners who quickly grasp the content of the lesson are not held back to the speed of their less-able classmates who need more time.

Unlike in the traditional classroom where activities and lessons are completed within a single time frame, irrespective of the level of difficulty for some learners, teachers in schools that work differentiate lesson planning and presentation so that the available time is used flexibly in order to meet all learners' needs



Differentiation by **outcome** or **product** is defined as a technique whereby all learners undertake the same task but a variety of results is expected and acceptable. The **product** is what a learner creates at the end of the lesson to demonstrate the mastery of the content (Weselby, quoted in the main report).

In top-performing schools, teachers make sure a **product** ranges in complexity to align it to respective levels for different learners. To do this, teachers:

✚ Set tasks to assess learning but instead of working towards a single 'right' answer, they vary the tasks depending on their level of ability.

✚ Use different form of tests, projects, reports or other activities to allow learners to demonstrate and apply what they know, understand, and are able to do after a lesson.

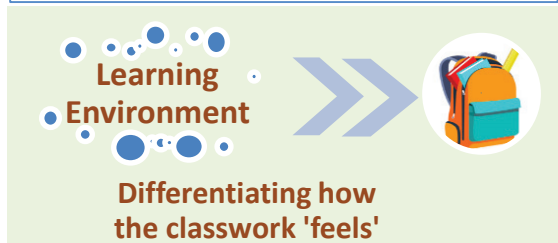
✚ Allow for varied working arrangements, for example, assigning learners tasks to work alone or as part of a team to complete the product.

✚ Assign different activities to learners at varying degrees of difficulty to match learners' varying abilities.


✚ Assess learners on an on-going basis in order to profile them in order to identify areas for improvement, reflect and continuously adjust methods of differentiation, i.e., content, process, product and learning environment (see **Policy Briefs No. 4 and 7** about assessment).





*We give all learners the same tasks but expect them to work them out at different cognitive levels. I expect the top performers to complete that task at level 5 [in Bloom's taxonomy]. But I expect my struggling learners to do at least level 1 and 2 of the task.*  
(Teacher, School EE-Quintile 4)



Teachers in schools that work differentiate the **learning environment** by:

 Making sure that there are spaces in the classroom for learners to work quietly individually or in groups and without distraction, as well as places that encourage learner collaboration.

 Incorporating various types of furniture and arrangements to support both individual and group work.

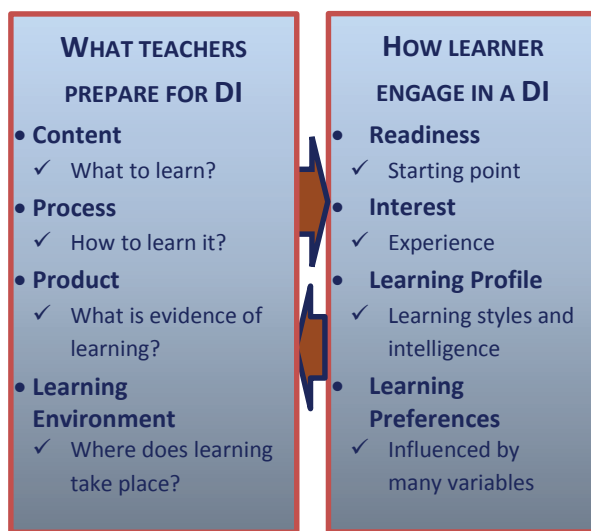
 Using classroom management techniques that support a safe and supportive learning environment.

In one school, creating a supportive learning environment means adjusting learners' seating arrangement, which one teacher describes as follows:

*Because we have a smaller class in science, I arrange the furniture such that learners are seated in groups because I have realised that they learn much better if they do work in groups. Peer coaching works in my class. After presenting a lesson, I reserve a couple of minutes in my period and give learners a task to do in their groups to see if they can apply what I have just taught.*  
(Teacher, School GO-Quintile 4)

### LEARNER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP:

At the core of differentiation is the relationship between teachers and learners. As discussed above, the role of a teacher in differentiated learning is to connect **content**, **process**, **product** and **learning environment**. Learners, on the other hand, respond to learning based on **readiness**, **interests**, and **learning profile/preferences**. Illustrated below is the teacher's role in the effective planning of DI and how learners respond to it.



### CONCLUSION

In every classroom, there are learners with different personalities, interests, learning styles and background knowledge. While teachers in schools that work acknowledge that planning a DI is time-consuming, they do not see this as a hindrance to planning a good lesson. Their practices, as discussed in this policy brief, reflect the belief that, although learners are at different stages in their learning and may be progressing at different rates, they are *all* capable of learning successfully if motivated.

Teachers in top-performing schools speak in one voice that their goal for providing DI is to do what Tomlinson calls "teaching-up." This means bringing all learners to "grade level" or to ensure that *all* learners master prescribed curriculum in a specified length of time.

