

Differentiation at Home as a Way of Understanding Differentiation at School

by Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson



An early teaching colleague of mine became a close friend. Over the past couple of decades, I've loved watching her three sons grow into young men. I've also enjoyed watching her pleasure in their differences—and, sometimes, her bafflement in the face of those differences. She's a teacher, so she's read the textbooks on human variance

and has observed it in every class she taught. Nonetheless, Christopher, David, and Jay seem in so many ways to challenge the notion of “family traits.” Thinking about how this parent has responded to the differences in her children has been helpful to me on two levels. Certainly it has made me more aware of ways in which effective parents “differentiate” their parenting in response to varying needs of their children. Thinking about the natural kind of differentiation that occurs at home has also helped me make important comparisons of the need for and nature of effectively differentiated classrooms.

Different Children, Different Needs

Christopher is the oldest of the brothers. His prodigious attention span as a two-year-old was a precursor of things to come. He came programmed to read, compute, and see the elegance of the scientific method. There has not yet been an academic challenge that has called his hand. Academics simply are and always have been his arena.

David is the middle brother. He does well in school, but has never been drawn to it. What has always claimed his attention is creating and fixing things. Not simple things—although he fixes those too—but complex machines and technology. He built a remote controlled airplane alone at six. And David also has a passion for work—just plain old “helping out.” He is intuitive and effortless with it and raises it to the level of giftedness.

Jay, the last of the trio, also does well in school, but experiences it largely as a social event. Jay is a leader. He was a comedian even as a baby and has learned that humor is a magnet. He uses the magnet and his general charm with the aplomb of someone well beyond his early adolescent years. Jay came programmed to lead. Carol is the mother of Christopher, David, and Jay. She would be the first to say that while parenting skills are somewhat cumulative, much of what she did with and for Christopher was of little use with or for David, and much of what she did with or for David was irrelevant for Jay. In other words, this teacher-mom of three learned quickly, if not always easily, that she had to “differentiate” her parenting if she wanted to be an effective catalyst for helping each of her sons become what it seems he was meant to be.

Reflecting on what Carol learned as she effectively parented three very different children is helpful in thinking about what effective teachers do when they “differentiate instruction” in their

classrooms. In fact, her experiences closely parallel those in what we call a differentiated classroom. Examining her experiences at home can help parents understand why differentiation should happen at school, what differentiation means at school, and even how it might look at school. In today’s academically diverse schools, it is important for parents to understand the concept of “differentiated instruction” so that they can affirm teachers’ positive efforts to address learner variance and encourage continued efforts in that direction.

Making it Safe for the Child to Be Who He or She Is

Much of Carol’s success—and ultimately her boys’ success—can be linked to the environment she helped create for her sons. While she consistently presented the boys with clear standards for behavior, responsibility, and interactions with others, she also provided a place where each of the boys felt safe as he was. There was never a sense that one of the boys’ proclivities or strengths was preferable to the others’. From their earliest days, the boys saw her celebrate the uniqueness of each of them.

In such environments it is safe to be oneself. It is safe fully to explore one’s possibilities. In such environments, young people know they are valued for who they are and will be supported as they discover and develop their unique potential. In such places, expectations are high enough to be personally challenging—but also there is support for the journey ahead.

Environments are abstract and intangible. They are constructed day by day and act by act. In the busyness of daily existence, there is little time set aside to ask the question, “How does it feel here for the people who must live in this space?” Nonetheless, the quality of the environment shapes everything that takes place for the young people in it.

Reading Signals about Children’s Differences

It was evident from the earliest days of the three boys that their differences would be significant. In addition to their predictably different interests, they matured at different rates in different areas. They were not ready to play in the yard unattended, stay home alone, or get summer jobs at the same ages. They required very different sorts of parental support for homework, from conversational interest to dogged vigilance. They seemed pre-programmed to learn in different ways. Christopher learned through books and reasoning, David through practical and creative approaches, and Jay in the company of peers.

The boys did not require the same amount or same kind of discipline from their parents in their early years. Christopher seemed almost not to need rules and guidelines. David, who ultimately became the most sensitive of the three boys, was a pistol as a toddler. His parents took parenting classes to figure out how to provide the kind of guidance he needed. Jay was neither Christopher nor David in his need for early parenting.

Adolescence was also completely different for each of the three. They experienced it at widely different ages. If one boy experienced it gently, another was more explosive. If one was mouthy another was withdrawn. One of the boys was an early girl magnet. One showed only peripheral interest in girls until very late adolescence because so many other things were so much more interesting to him.

In their readiness to take on various aspects of life, in their interests, and in their approaches to learning, Christopher, David, and Jay might as well have been born to different parents. Those differences necessarily shaped the opportunities their parents needed to provide for them if the goal was to help each of the young men become what he wanted to be—and seemed meant to be.

Opportunities Follow Need

If it ever occurred to the parents of the three young men to provide identical opportunities for each of them as they developed, the boys quickly showed them the folly of those thoughts. Their particular readiness to learn, personal interests, and approaches to learning made it necessary to carve out different paths for three very different human beings.

Sometimes, of course, parental inclinations resulted in common directions. Their father plays several instruments. Thus the boys wanted to play a musical instrument as well—but not the same instrument, and not with the same duration or degree of enthusiasm. All of the boys participated in athletics, but their choice of sports reflected their inclination for the solitary vs. the group. Passions for sports waned in proportion to their various capacities to tolerate failure, or waxed in proportion to their various needs for perpetual motion or to be part of a team.

Even the choice of schools for the boys was not a matter of course. At various points in his public schooling, Christopher needed far more challenge than even a very good neighborhood school could offer. David needed a school that ensured that his considerable talent did not recede in the noisy crowd. Jay was fine anywhere there were peers.

The camp Christopher thought was fine for one summer, David found marginally acceptable for the same span, and Jay couldn't wait to return year after year. David sought out part-time jobs as a youngster. Christopher acquired them at a much later age and only with considerable impetus from his parents.

Two things have always been evident to me in watching my friend and her three boys. First, she and her husband want “the best” for their children. Second, what they found “best” for one would not necessarily be “best” for the others. They have worked as good parents do to make sure each boy has the opportunities he needed to be as secure, happy, and productive as possible. None of the boys has had better opportunities than his brothers. But because these parents accepted the responsibility to maximize the possibilities of three distinctly different young lives, each boy has had different opportunities based on need.

Parallels between Home and Classroom

There's a story called “The Three Ralphs” that tells of parents who determined that the best parenting would result in treating all of their children precisely alike. Naming the first one Ralph, they decided it was only fair to name each subsequent child Ralph also—even the girl. Because the baby needed to sleep in a crib, the older Ralphs did so as well. When one Ralph was hungry, all of them had to eat. The problem becomes clear pretty quickly—except to the parents who found their child rearing plan both fair and sensible. Ultimately, the children saw the flaws in the plan and counseled their parents to continue to treat all the kids just alike—except when it didn't make sense to do so.

Christopher, David, and Jay are fortunate to have parents who always recognized, took pleasure in, and nurtured their uniqueness. In the context of an environment that balances high expectations, love, and support, the three boys have consistently been nurtured in accordance with their varied developmental patterns, inclinations, and learning strengths. What these parents did is much like what excellent teachers do. Connecting “differentiation” at home with “differentiation” at school clarifies the purpose and nature of what needs to take place in a classroom where twenty to thirty students are anything but duplicates of one another. Note the similarities between responsive teaching and responsive parenting.

Carol and Dick accepted responsibility for helping each of their sons become the best that particular child could be. Essential to that goal was establishing a healthy and positive learning environment in which everyone valued individuality. Likewise, teachers who accept responsibility for maximizing growth in each of their learners begin by investing heavily in a learning-en-

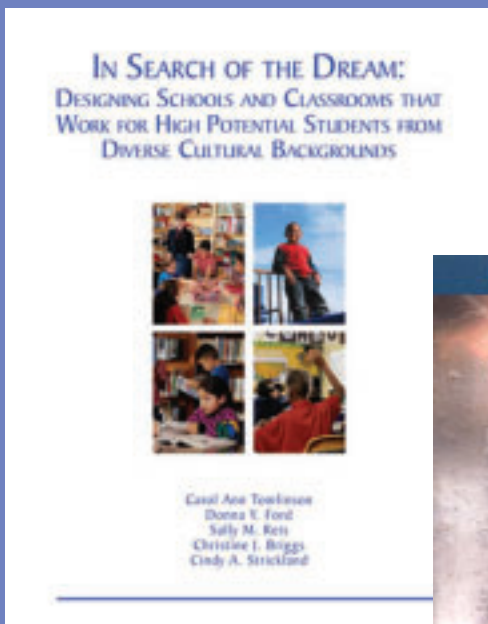
vironment that values the individuality of each student—a place where it feels safe to be oneself, where expectations are high, and where there is consistent support for the journey.

While they might not have thought about themselves as “studying” their three children, Carol and Dick did, in fact, invest heavily in trying to understand what made each of their children “tick”—what worked and didn’t work in helping each of the boys develop physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. Similarly, the teacher who regards the distinctness of each student as valuable will inevitably become a student of his or her students. In doing so, the teacher becomes increasingly aware of the student’s likes and dislikes, preferred ways of learning and points of readiness for the various tasks at hand. In much

the same way as an attentive parent, the teacher uses what he or she learns to craft ways to tap the student’s strengths and deal productively with weaknesses.

Whether at home or at school, what logic is there, after all, in consistently demanding far more from a child than he is ready to give—or asking far less? What is the merit in disregarding what interests a child when it is evident that interest summons motivation? And why would we habitually ask young people to explore or express important ideas in ways that are ineffective for them?

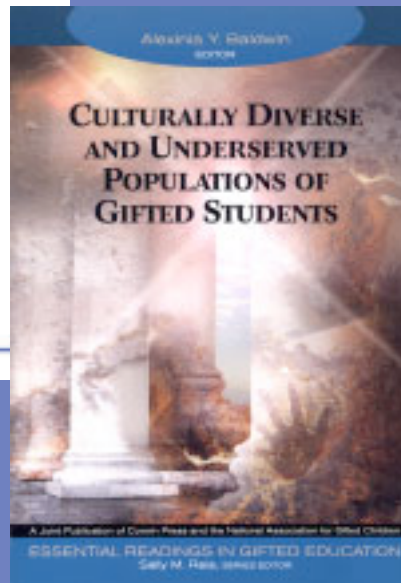
Dick and Carol didn’t favor one of their children by providing superior opportunities for growth and development. Their goal was to provide what was best for each of the boys. Responsive



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teachers likewise do not provide better opportunities for some students than for others. What they work diligently to do is to provide evolving opportunities for each learner that respond best to that learner's evolving needs.

Home Complexities Multiply in the Classroom

The parents of three boys will readily admit that it's difficult to address the diverse and changing needs of all three. Some days work better than others. Sometimes they are better able to balance the competing needs of all three young lives. Sometimes they read the signals right, and sometimes they don't. But they keep at it because they see themselves as stewards of success for their children.

If it is difficult for two parents to "get it right" all the time with a small number of young people, the challenge for a teacher is immense. The degree of student variance in a typical classroom is magnified by gender, number, race, culture, language, opportunity, economics, and myriad other factors. Further, whereas attentive parents have the capacity to study their children over a period of many years, the time of the teacher with a given student is inevitably constricted.

Nonetheless, a teacher determined to make school work for her students becomes a persistent hunter and gatherer of information on each child. By watching, listening, asking, and examining student work, that teacher develops an ever clearer image of what aids and impedes learning for each child. Drawing both on professional knowledge of students and on the day's image, the teacher designs learning options that seem most likely to benefit a particular student or group of students. Each day informs the next—and so on. To these teachers, teaching in a "Three Ralphs" fashion makes no more sense than parenting in that way.

From Analogy to Partnership

It's helpful for parents in thinking about the role of the teacher in an effectively differentiated classroom again to draw on the parenting analogy. Just as the parents of Christopher, David, and Jay found themselves having to differentiate opportunities and support based on the readiness, interest, and learning preference needs of the boys, so it is with teachers and their students.

Some students need additional time to master a skill and some need to move more rapidly through a skills sequence. Some students work with considerable independence and others require considerable monitoring. Some learn best in analytical ways, while others learn best in more practical or creative ways. Some students will learn math better if they can attach it to sports and some by attaching it to science. The most skillful teachers—as the most skilled parents—study the clues and respond accordingly. On any day, the results may be imperfect. In the long haul, however, it is highly likely that students benefit from the attention of adults who persist in trying to "get it right" for each of them.

Understanding the importance of "differentiating" for learners, the nature of the task, and its complexity is important for parents who seek to be informed about their children's educational experiences. It's also important, for parents and teachers to understand the role that each can play in making school work for individual learners. Teachers have a greater breadth of knowledge about students of a given age than most parents can hope to develop. A teacher who has taught sixth grade for ten years, for instance, has worked with hundreds of students of that age. On the other hand, parents will inevitably have greater depth of knowledge about their own children than a teacher could begin to have.

Students are fortunate when parents and teachers understand the complex responsibility of both in helping young people build strong, happy, and productive lives, and when they work in tandem, to bring their best insights to bear on the success of children whose interests they share. Parents can use their own experiences in parenting young people who inevitably differ in their needs to help them understand and support the world of the teacher who teaches in ways that also support very different young people in finding their own unique paths to success.

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