Whitney Shakuri-Rad

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Writing Assignment 3

**Why Differentiation Does Not Work**

Evan is a seventh grade student in my second period reading class. He works hard and comes to school every day, but he can not read above a second grade level. Gage is another student in the same reading class. Gage reads at a twelfth grade level, if not better. How am I supposed to teach these two students the same material, while not singling out either one as being different from the other? Some teachers claim that they can easily achieve this task. The question that arises is: are you truly meeting the needs of both students, and how?

Inclusion and differentiation are two different concepts that are tied together. Inclusion consists of including students with special needs into all classes. Differentiation is the next step in the process where educators must alter, omit, and modify their content to fit the abilities of individual students. This may occur at the cost of simplifying the content to the point where the chance of failure is nearly eradicated. Then the problem of accountability arises because the student’s responsibilities in their education are diminished. This will hinder the student’s educational growth due to the lack of obligation to show any progress. If these students were instructed in a class together, then the teacher could focus on what they can do on their own and not worry about changing what the other students are working on. If a group of students are truly at a lower educational level, no modifications will be enough.

“Special education changed with the passage of the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its 1997 amendments. The landmark legislation moved children with special needs from segregated classrooms into regular classrooms.”(educationworld.com) Before this legislation we had “tracking.” Students would be placed in a high, mid, or low level track based on their abilities. Some believed that this was unfair to students because it singled them out. Parents and educators also worried that it might make the students feel poorly about themselves if they were in a low level class. Therefore, the legislation was passed that mandated classes be inclusive. This means that students at various levels are in the same class.

As I see it the problem with differentiation is that some student is always left out. In the past it was the students who could not perform as well as the others in the class. They would be left off to the side to fend for themselves or just sit there as they fell farther and farther behind. This practice was incredibly detrimental to the student. Now these low performing students are placed at the front of the room and receive modifications that help them when they need it. With this system, however, another group of students is getting bypassed.

Students who are above average or excel in a subject can be left to the side to wait while their teacher focuses on the students in need. All students deserve an equal education and should be given whatever it is that they need. The problem is that there may only be one teacher per twenty five students, which is the case in almost all of the classrooms in my school. That teacher cannot provide adequate attention to all of the students, so they have to focus on the ones who really need help.

The reason this does not work for either student is because they need different things from their teacher. My student, Evan, needs focused time to build on his meager reading skills. Gage on the other hand needs a challenge. He would thrive in an environment where more difficult texts and higher level activities would allow him to further flourish and advance his education at a more appropriate content level. Some may argue that one could achieve both tasks in the same classroom where each student receives different material to work on. There are, however, two main obstacles to this proposal. First, the available budget hinders my ability to purchase more than one set of books and other reading material. There are grants and parental help available, but that will not cover the diversity of all of my students. Second, I cannot single out one student from another due to the system that my school has adopted. Singling out Evan or Gage and students at their respective level would be no different than employing a system of tracking.

This predicament led to a middle of the road curriculum. The material I chose was above Evan’s abilities but below Gage’s skills. I provided Evan more support in class and gave Gage more difficult questions, but by all appearances they were doing the same work. This is a typical pictorial of the current system of differentiation in today’s classrooms. One may ponder the problems that this type of system creates. For me, the problem is that I have failed both students. Neither student received the education that they really needed. Today, instead of leaving behind one child, we are leaving them all behind. The fact that no child should be left behind and they all deserve a fair education and equal opportunities is mutually agreed upon. However, our currently system cloaks the very problem we are trying to resolve by tailoring the classroom to one child while sacrificing thirty.

There may, however, be a rather simple solution. Evan and Gage should be in completely different classes. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that students with disabilities must be incorporated into regular education classes. (educationworld.com) This Act demands that schools combine students like Gage and Evan into the same classes. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 located on the United States Department of Education website states that “The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.” (ed.gov) This title is listed under the heading of “Improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged.” (ed.gov) Under current legislation what I am proposing is not legal. I am not recommending a swift policy change, but I think certain concepts need to be addressed. These pieces of legislation mention all students, but we have stopped focusing on all students. Nowhere does it question the implications on students who are not disadvantaged. The government is currently discussing why our education system is so far behind other countries, and I believe our focus on full inclusion is a big part of the problem. Many students are being ignored so that a minority of students can be focused on, but not even necessarily helped. Evan is not benefiting from having his work severely modified and trying to keep up with others who are far above his ability.

Evan and Gage should be grouped according to their abilities so that I can help them in an area of need and focus on improving their reading skills. Without this separation Evan will continue to struggle with material that is far above his ability, while his teachers struggle to drag him along. In my class I had to cut his assignments in half and read most material to him. On paper it looks as if he and Gage are on the same level because they were in the same class and received the same grade. Gage will continue to cruise on by without having to put in any real effort because his classmates cannot keep up with him. Gage always finished half way through the class and sat and did his homework in his free time. The feeling of failing both students has become more evident and this has become a common observation with other classes and students.

The above view is often vilified due to its current unpopularity and the misconception behind the phrase: no child left behind. Nevertheless, many of my colleagues share the same views and opinions as they are experiencing the same dilemmas in their classrooms. Perhaps we should focus on the question of what is best for the majority of our students while also providing support for outliers on both ends of the spectrum. We need to focus on what the students really need and what their deficiencies are, not what looks best on paper or what is politically correct. Pretending a student can do something that they are clearly unable to achieve is not only detrimental to their current educational state but also set them up for certain failure in their future endeavors. I want every one of my students to have the same opportunity and educational prospect, but I want them to receive it in a way that helps them the most, not gives them the least.

Works Cited

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