

Differentiated instruction

EDCompass newsletter

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The Difference is Differentiation

By Kim Hamill

Finding ways to connect students and learning

Lisa Parisi doesn't believe in teaching to the top of the class, to the bottom, or even to the middle. She believes in using every available tool, resource and strategy to reach every student in her classroom.

So during a lesson, her students may be sitting on the floor, fiddling with a Koosh® Ball or using a tape recorder. In fact, Parisi encourages her students to find different ways to help them be successful in learning.

"I have to allow students to be able to recognize what they need in order to be successful with their learning, and then give them the tools that they need to do that. So I have a classroom that might look a bit chaotic, because I have students working all over the place," says Parisi, a fifth-grade teacher at [Denton Avenue School](#) in New Hyde Park, New York.

"I have students gathering materials in the middle of a lesson. Somebody will suddenly get up to get some tool – the spell check, the talking dictionary or a computer – or they walk up to the SMART Board™, and they start moving things around on the board, because that's what they need to do," she says.

Principles of success

Providing a variety of learning tools and encouraging their use are essential parts of Parisi's teaching philosophy, which is to help every student feel successful.

"In order for them to be successful with the same curriculum, we differentiate the instruction, so they can meet the requirements and connect with each other on their own level," says Parisi, who co-teaches with a special education teacher in a full-time inclusion program.

Following the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction, Parisi uses three main teaching and learning strategies – she makes every tool and resource available for every student, her lessons are structured around project-based learning and flexible grouping and she uses educational technology to meet the needs of all learners.

"The fact that we have the most amazing tools ever means that teachers who don't use technology are missing a huge opportunity to differentiate instruction and run a UDL classroom and have success for every child. It just makes learning so much easier," Parisi says. "If I have students in my fifth-grade class who are struggling with reading – reading maybe on a second-grade level – they still have tools they can use to show that although they can't read on a fifth-grade level, they can certainly understand content on a fifth-grade level."

In addition to web-based resources and computers, Parisi uses a [SMART Board interactive whiteboard](#), [SMART Notebook™ collaborative learning software](#) and a [SMART Slate™ wireless slate](#).

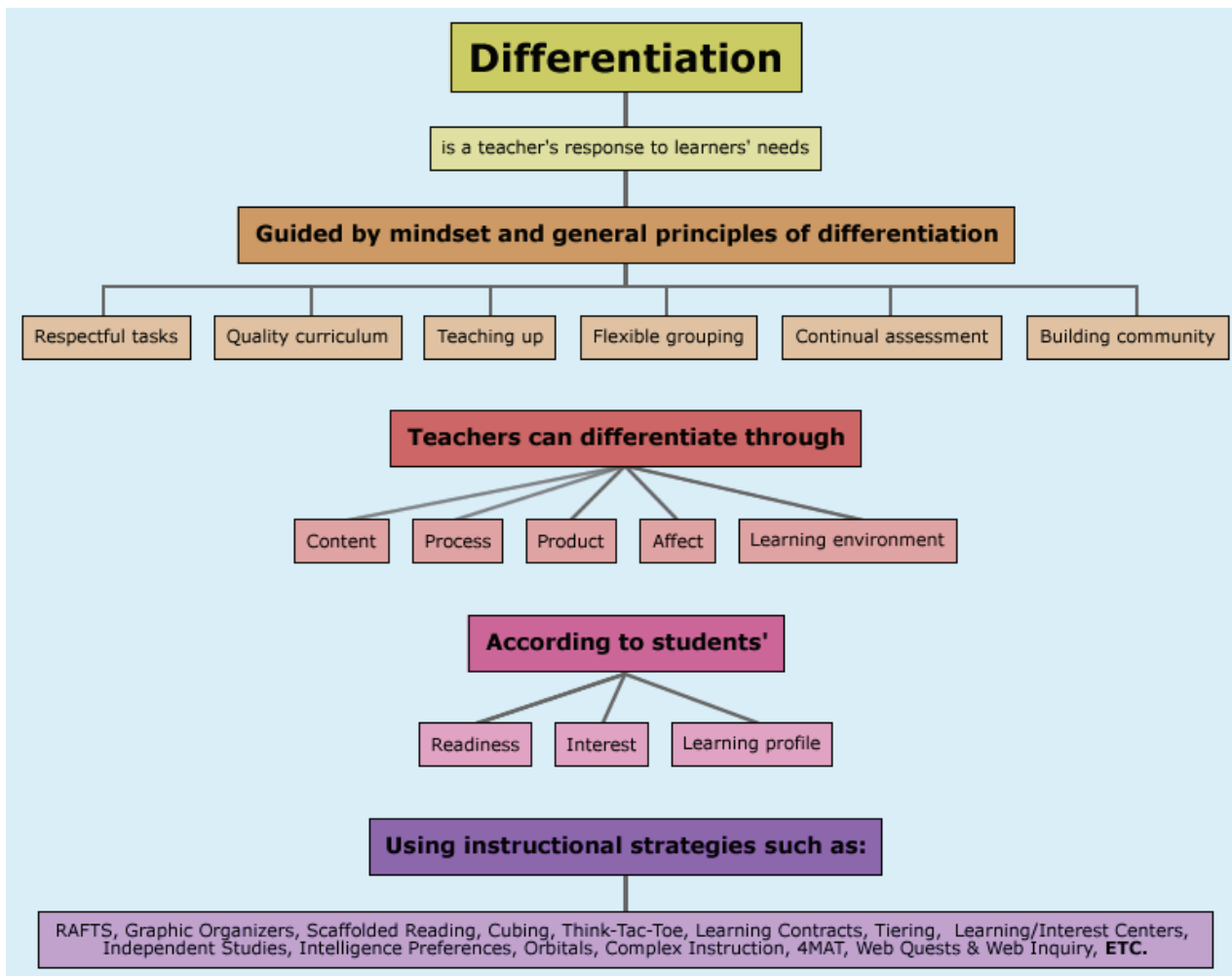
Because her students work in groups about 80 percent of the day, it's important to Parisi that the use of classroom technology is student centered and not teacher directed. She says that the SMART Board interactive whiteboard "has really opened up the use of technology in the classroom," enabling her students to explore lesson content, create and deliver presentations and play educational games.



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Lisa Parisi

Fifth-Grade Teacher
Denton Avenue School
New Hyde Park, New York



Courtesy of differentiatedcentral.com

More space for learning

Using a variety of tools and teaching techniques is one key to successful differentiation, according to [Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson](#), a differentiated instruction expert with 40 years' experience in education.

Tomlinson has written more than 200 articles, book chapters and books, including *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* and *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*.

She says that differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching, and that the goal is to "make more space in a classroom for more kids to be able to learn."

"What you are trying to do is extend the ways that kids can take in information.... Extend the ways that they have to explore or make sense of the information that they take in, and extend the ways that they have to express what they've learned, so there's more opportunity for more kids to find that point that really works for them," Tomlinson says.

These goals are always top of mind for Mary-Kate Hagmann, a first-grade teacher at [Carl E. Gilbert Elementary School](#) in Buena Park, California.

Hagmann begins every lesson thinking about the needs of her students and how she can help them understand the content in a way that meets those needs.

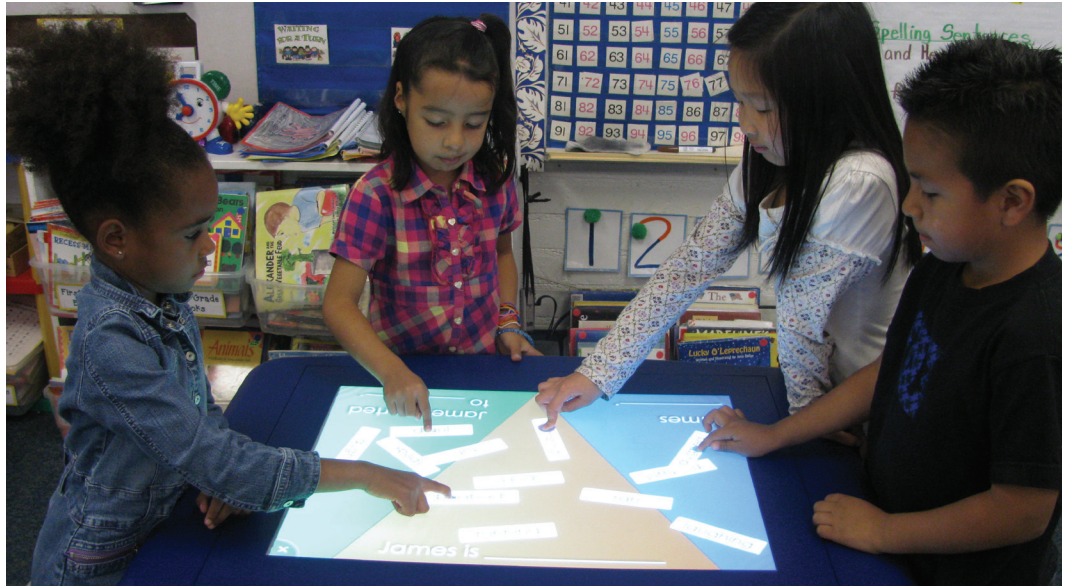
"I can't imagine a day without planning each lesson with differentiation in mind," Hagmann says.

"To me, differentiated instruction is figuring out how each child learns and making sure their learning preferences and individual interests are met, so they can demonstrate mastery and just be successful."

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Mary-Kate Hagmann

First-Grade Teacher
Carl E. Gilbert Elementary School
Buena Park, California



Groups that work together

One of the ways that Hagmann facilitates differentiated instruction is by incorporating the multitouch, multiuser **SMART Table™ interactive learning center** into her daily lessons.

“The SMART Table, in my opinion, defines differentiation. You turn it on and, whether you are doing a lesson that you can download online or whether you designed it yourself, within that one lesson, there are six to eight varieties of activities that you can have the children cooperate and do together that are going to build on their knowledge of whatever unit you are on,” Hagmann says.

Hagmann often puts students in different groups to work at the SMART Table, mixing the groups to meet students’ readiness levels, interests, learning profiles and academic needs.

This idea of flexible grouping, Tomlinson notes, is one of the “non-negotiables” of effective differentiation.

“Flexible grouping suggests that you purposely rotate students in a variety of groupings over a fairly short period of time,” Tomlinson says. “It’s important because it extends the opportunities students have to learn and, in doing that, should increase opportunities for success.”

When accommodating the readiness levels of her students, Hagmann uses different activities that focus on key content. For students who require more background knowledge of a subject, she has sorting and matching activities. Her at-grade learners can focus on multiple choice and problem solving, while her high-achieving students can use critical-thinking skills and extend their knowledge of the topic by applying it to other subjects, like math or reading.

“It’s been a dream to have the SMART Table in my class. Students are working at their own paces – they can be active, it’s student-centered and they are making meaning out of learning. And I think that’s really important, because making meaning is different for every person. And for them to be able to get that at the SMART Table – with or without me – is really beneficial,” Hagmann says.

Tools that add flexibility

Although differentiated instruction is not a new concept in the field of education, Tomlinson says that using educational technology in a meaningful way can help make it more effective.

“Teachers who reach out and embrace technology can certainly tell you that it’s much easier to address kids’ interests, because there’s a way to find almost anything you need that you can connect kids to, and that does make your subject relevant,” Tomlinson says.

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Making learning relevant is also key for Parisi, who often uses SMART products to enable project-based learning. SMART Notebook software is loaded on every laptop in Parisi's classroom, and students use it to complete projects, adding multimedia and interactive elements to their assignments.

"One of the wonderful things about project-based learning is that children are able to choose their method of demonstrating knowledge. They are given a project and they are required to meet the criteria for that project, but they can demonstrate knowledge in a variety of different ways," Parisi says.

And Haggmann integrates a variety of SMART products into her lessons to help her first-grade students build on and demonstrate their knowledge. In addition to the SMART Table interactive learning center, Haggmann uses the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, SMART Slate wireless slate and **SMART Response™ PE interactive response system** to differentiate instruction effectively.

With the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, she presents a topic or provides background information to the entire class. She then checks the students' understanding or reinforces the topic using the SMART Table and SMART Response system. Haggmann also uses the SMART Table to promote critical thinking and problem solving, and the SMART Board interactive whiteboard and the SMART Slate for group work and discussion.

The impact of differentiation

For Haggmann and Parisi, differentiated instruction has had a big impact on student success. Haggmann says that using SMART products for differentiation enhances learning and increases student excitement and motivation, which have improved test scores in her class.

Parisi's experience is similar, and she notes that differentiation increases students' ability to take responsibility for their learning experiences and independently find the tools and resources to help them understand lessons.

Both teachers have been using differentiating techniques for a long time, but Tomlinson says that any teacher can learn to effectively differentiate instruction – the key is to begin slowly.

For teachers looking to implement differentiated instruction strategies, Tomlinson recommends they ask themselves three questions:

"How can I understand my content better so that I am more flexible with teaching it? How do I understand the kids better so that I am more attuned to what they need? How do I connect content and kids, which is really the art of teaching?" she says.

Teachers who practice differentiated instruction every day know that it's an art, and that it truly makes a difference. **EC**

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Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson

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