

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Taking Stock

As you read, consider the following questions:

- 1 What is your ideal learning environment? What would it look like? Feel like? Sound like?
- 2 Think of your favorite teacher. What made her or him your favorite? If you didn't have a favorite teacher, what qualities would your favorite teacher have had?
- 3 In what ways did your educational experience help you thrive or prevent you from thriving as a learner?

“I can't do this; I'm just not good at art!” How many times have we all heard this in our classrooms? I am sure that you, like me, have some tried and true responses that you pull out of your art teacher's tool kit when you hear this exclamation. Two that I often used were “YET! You're not good yet, but you will be!” and, “Not everyone likes or is great at all types of art. Maybe painting is not your thing, but I bet you will find something you are really good at as we work with other media and ideas.”

My statements acknowledged that I knew my students had different strengths and weaknesses, levels of readiness, and likes and dislikes; we all do. We are all different and engage in the world differently. I myself am a hands-on visual learner. If I am to understand something, I need to see it and touch it. This is very different from my husband who needs to read extensively about something before he picks it up or interacts with it; he is the one who reads the entire manual that comes with new products. We interact with the world around us very differently. One method is not more appropriate than another; it's just different in the way it accommodates our needs and learning styles. This reality is the same with our students' learning styles.

As teachers, we have become increasingly aware of the broadening spectrum of abilities that students use to learn and acquire knowledge, and as a result, we are searching for ways to respond to students' diverse needs. Differentiated Instruction, a term coined by teacher Carol Ann Tomlinson, uses a multifaceted approach to help teachers discover ways to meet the needs of *all* learners in the same classroom. Differentiated Instruction is not just a way of thinking about teaching and learning. It encompasses a collection of best

practices and strategies that help teachers respond to the wide array of student needs present within their classrooms. At the very heart of DI is a teacher's desire to maximize the potential of all their students by guiding them to achieve higher levels of learning success. Achieving such a goal is not always easy, but we can accomplish it through the proactive use of differentiation to design both spaces and learning experiences that provide all students of diverse learning styles the choices to access knowledge in different ways.

An Overview

Differentiated Instruction involves the interaction of three key interdependent elements: teachers, students, and curriculum and instruction. These three elements help provide teachers with direction when designing curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of their students. When these three elements are in harmony, teachers are providing the appropriate balance of support and challenge to draw students into meaningful learning that engages them and keeps them connected.

Teachers provide:

- **Opportunities** for students to be involved in learning through important real and attainable ways.
- **Unwavering support** that helps students believe in themselves and reach higher levels of accomplishment.
- **Investment** in students that shows them that they matter and that they are worth their teachers' time.
- **Reflective practices** that consistently assess teachers' actions and their students' actions, needs, hopes, and fears as a way to guide future classroom practice.