

and perspectives into their everyday decisions and actions – educational and personal – and so do students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2000).

Many students of color have an understanding of and some have internalized negative images of their race (Gay, 2000). These negative images, promoted by the larger society, affect how they perform in school (Noguera, 2003). Schools are uniquely positioned to help students interpret and interrupt this imagery through interactions with curriculum and teachers that validate their culture. Tatum (2003) described an oppositional identity development in which Black students are forced to choose between affirming their culture and academic success. When their culture is not present, Black students may feel that academic success is not part of being Black. In contrast, students who see their culture represented in the curriculum are more likely to have a higher self-concept, and when students feel good about themselves they are more likely to be open with others and to learning (Gay, 2000).

A culturally responsive pedagogy allows for the discussion of difficult topics – like racism, discrimination and prejudice – and offers students of all ages the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion that enhances learning. Because a culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges the presence of racism that creates distorted and negative images of the cultures, histories and possibilities of people of color (Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 1999), culturally responsive classrooms can create a space where harmful images can be deconstructed and positive self and cultural affirmations portrayed.

The principles of differentiated instruction lend itself to the culturally responsive pedagogical approach because it creates opportunity for a myriad of investigations into one lesson or topic at the same time. With differentiated instruction, students of color can explore a topic through a teaching approach that best meets their learning style, while examining the values, beliefs, and ideas that shape their experiences.

## Getting Started: The Seven Building Blocks of Differentiated Instruction

Forsten, Grant and Hollas, (in progress) have identified the “building blocks” of successful differentiated instruction. These elements address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students because they reflect an approach to teaching and learning that requires teachers to do things differently for different children. The researchers suggest these building blocks and invite teachers to add elements to each.

**1. Knowing the Learner:** Teachers need to know as much as possible about their students to teach them well, including learning styles and pace, multiple intelligences, personal qualities such as personality, temperament and motivation, personal interests, potential disabilities, health, family circumstances, and language preference.

**2. Traits of a Quality Teacher:** The teacher believes all students can learn, has the desire and capacity to differentiate curriculum and instruction, understands diversity and thinks about students developmentally, is a risk taker, is open to change and well-versed in best practices, is comfortable challenging the status quo, knows what doesn't work, is able to withstand staff dissension that may arise.

**3. Quality Curriculum:** Curriculum needs to be interesting to students and relevant to their lives, appropriately challenging and complex, thought provoking, focused on concepts and principles and not just facts; focused on quality, not quantity; stress depth of learning, not just coverage.

**4. Classroom Learning Environment:** The ideal learning environment includes a balanced student population, appropriate grade and program placement, priority seating based on student needs, has a reasonable class size, practices positive discipline, arranges furniture to promote group work, uses flexible grouping, and has adequate teaching supplies.

## 5. Flexible Teaching and Learning Time

**Resources:** Includes team teaching, block scheduling, tutoring and remediation within school, before and after-school programs, homework clubs, multiage/looping classrooms.

## 6. Instructional Delivery and Best Practices:

Includes flexible grouping, cooperative learning, learning stations and centers, web quests, tiered assignments, individual contracts, literature circles.

## 7. Assessment, Evaluation and Grading:

Includes portfolios, observations, skills checklists, oral and written reports,

demonstrations, performances, work samples, models, taped responses, drawings, graphs and posters, quizzes and tests, and standardized tests

When teachers teach students the same thing in the same way, usually the result is that some students “get it” and some don’t. To gain a better understanding of what differentiated instruction is, it is helpful to compare traditional and differentiated classrooms. The chart below highlights some differences (Tomlinson, 1999a). Examine the approaches between the typical traditional classroom and a differentiated classroom.

**Table 1: Comparison of Traditional and Differentiated Classrooms**

| <b>Traditional Classroom</b>   | <b>Differentiated Classroom</b>  |
|--|--|
| Student differences masked or acted upon when problematic            | Student differences are studied as a basis for planning  |
| Assessment is most common at the end of learning to see “who got it” | Assessment is ongoing and diagnostic to understand how to make instruction more responsive to learner need   |
| A relatively narrow sense of intelligence prevails                   | Focus on multiple forms of intelligence is evident   |
| A single definition of excellence prevails                           | Excellence is defined in large measure by individual growth from a starting point                            |
| Student interests infrequently tapped                                | Students are frequently guided in making interest-based learning choices                                     |
| Relatively few learning profile options are taken into account       | Many learning profile options are honored  |
| Whole class instruction dominates                                    | Many instructional arrangements are used   |
| Coverage of texts and curriculum guides drives instruction           | Student readiness, interest, and learning profile shape instruction  |
| Mastery of facts and skills out of context are the focus of learning | Use of essential skills to make sense of and understand key concepts and principles is the focus of learning |
| Single option assignments are the norm                               | Multi-option assignment are frequently used  |
| Time is relatively inflexible  | Time is used flexibly in accordance with student need  |
| A single text prevails   | Multiple materials are provided  |
| Single interpretation of ideas and events may be sought              | Multiple perspectives on ideas and events are routinely sought   |
| The teacher solves problems  | Students help other students and the teacher solve problems  |
| The teacher provides whole-class standards for grading               | Students work with the teacher to establish both whole-class and individual goals                            |
| A single form of assessment is often used                            | Students are assessed in multiple ways   |