A Broad View of Differentiation as Students Likely Return to Remote Learning in Fall 2020

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"We should not be trying to 'implement' school learning at home. Rather, we should be taking advantage of our new circumstances, and draw on the strengths that come with learning at home." - Jal Mehta

This fall, it will be incumbent upon teachers to meet students' differing needs—that is, differentiate: "an approach to instruction that aims to make teaching and learning work for the full range of students," explains differentiation expert Carol Ann Tomlinson. Without a vaccine available to curb COVID-19, fall learning will inevitably include some degree of remote instruction challenging differentiation through learning due to strains in communication and lack of technology access. In addition, educators will be faced with increased child trauma will make differentiation both more necessary and more difficult by increasing the range of student need to be accounted for.

Because of the expected pandemic-related learning challenges this fall, all teachers should receive broad training in differentiation in the areas of *online best practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and trauma-informed approaches*.[1]

Three Recommended Subsets of Differentiation

Online teaching - These differentiation strategies are founded on the view that simply delivering content is insufficient to meet the needs of all learners. We must instead focus on delivering *learning*.
Best practices for remote instruction include:
- Offering clear expectations
- Building teacher-student relationships
- Teaching students how to learn cooperatively at a distance

- Providing digestible assignment activities
- Encouraging learning routines and protecting designated, quiet workspaces—as extensively researched and published by universities, psychologists, industries, and researchers of K-12 online instruction.[2]

Remote culturally responsive teaching – Both differentiation and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) share the primary goal of meeting the individual needs of students. CRT uses the "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them."[3] Culturally responsive instruction from a distance encourages students to connect new things that they are learning to existing schema or background knowledge that relates directly to their culture, and interests.[4] This pedagogy is about giving students the agency and tools to helping students become independent learners.

The main features of culturally responsive teaching include:
- Communicating high expectations and actively engaging students in learning
- Using scaffolding to facilitate learning
- Understanding that the student's guardians have important assets worth investigating
- Ensuring that the curriculum is grounded in the students' daily lived lives

Some remote Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies:
- Using interest inventories to assess students' affinities
- Connecting with parents
- Employing thinking routines
- Teaching vocabulary acquisition practices
- Demonstrating visual thinking routines (VTRs) and sketch noting

Remote Trauma Informed Practice – "When people are facing stress and difficult life circumstances, it can particularly affect three areas: a sense of safety, feelings of connectedness and feelings of hope."[5] When Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is imperiled, academics suffer. Differentiation practices during a COVID-19 fall will necessitate acknowledging and addressing trauma (including the active rejection of the notion that communities that struggle with economic insecurity somehow deserve that status). As teachers use trauma informed practice (TIP) as a lens through which to ascertain how crises impact students and their families, they can also employ mitigation strategies at a distance to enhance *safety, connectedness*, and *hope.*[6]

Connectedness strategies include social-emotional learning, peer group work, virtual recesses, and "relational rituals" such as starting class with the sharing of positive and troubled feelings. [7] Classroomscreen.com is a powerful tool for charting feelings and encourages predictable routines which enhance children's feelings of *safety*. Additionally, web-based mindfulness practice will significantly reduce students' stress and anxiety[8] as well as the secondary

traumatic stress on teachers.[9] Also, schools can disseminate information to guardians about bedtime routines as a cost-effective and research-supported means to support the well-being of children, "particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged and other at-risk young children."[10] Finally, children's sense of *hope* can be increased when they see adult caregivers demonstrating that they have the sensitivity to recognize trauma and the power to help in the midst of uncertainty.

In due course, COVID-19 related uncertainty can be an occasion to foster effective online differentiation tactics, informed by culturally responsive pedagogy and trauma informed instruction. Used together, these approaches have the potential to vault us out of pre-pandemic inequities, as long as our aspirations are not limited to replicating pre-pandemic practices.

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