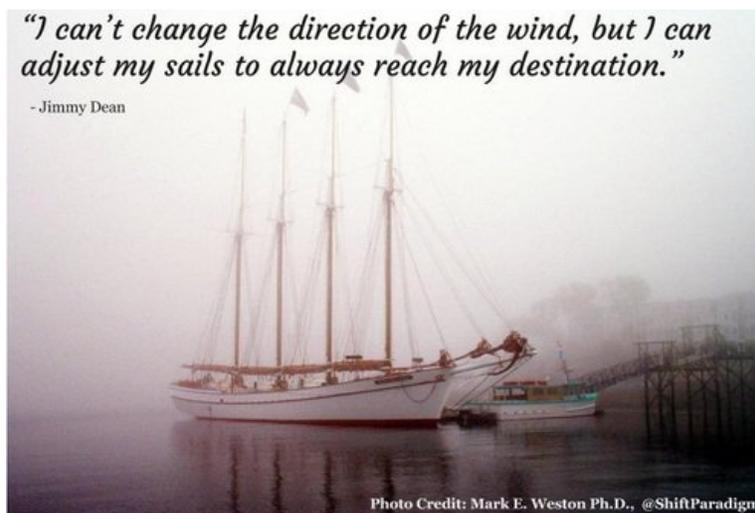


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## Why Differentiation Misses the Mark for Gifted Students

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on April 20, 2017 6:25 AM

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Today's guest post is written by frequent Finding Common Ground blogger Lisa Westman. Lisa is an instructional coach specializing in differentiation for Skokie School District 73.5 in suburban Chicago. She taught middle school gifted humanities, ELA, and SS for twelve years before becoming a coach.

Last week I wrote **Differentiation: Attainable or Somewhere Over The Rainbow** which addresses some common objections related to differentiated instruction. One of these arguments being that many educators and gifted education advocates believe the needs of gifted students are not being met in the 'regular' classroom through differentiation.

Dr. Jim Delisle, author and gifted education expert, brought this topic to the forefront in his 2015 EdWeek Commentary Piece, **Differentiation Doesn't Work**. I was first alerted to Delisle's article via a Facebook update posted by a teacher I attended graduate school with thirteen years earlier. I remember initially feeling quite defensive when I saw her post:



Delisle claims (and my former classmate concurs) that differentiation is nothing more than a great proposition which is impossible to achieve: *"It seems to me that the only educators who assert that differentiation is doable are those who have never tried to implement it themselves: university professors, curriculum coordinators, and school principals."*

Delisle goes on to warn readers that it is our high-achieving students who stand to lose the most from the unfulfilled promise of differentiation and suggests there is only one possible solution to meet the needs of these students: *"Differentiation might have a chance to work if we are*

and suggests there is only one possible solution to meet the needs of these students. Differentiation might have a chance to work if we are willing, as a nation, to return to the days when students of similar abilities were placed in classes with other students whose learning needs paralleled their own."

### **Delisle is not entirely wrong.**

If a teacher wants to differentiate effectively in a traditional classroom setting, I agree with Delisle when he says, *"Although fine in theory, differentiation in practice is harder to implement in a heterogeneous classroom than it is to juggle with one arm tied behind your back."*

Effectively differentiating instruction in a customary classroom setting (teacher imparts knowledge and students show they retain the information) is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Of course, one teacher cannot conduct three different lectures simultaneously. And, it is quite likely that we have experienced assigning group-work where the high kids do all of the work. And, ultimately, when a teacher in a traditional classroom is presented with a class made up of all types of learners they are forced to teach to the middle which will undoubtedly build frustration for gifted and struggling students alike.

Therefore, I can understand when Delisle suggests reverting back to tracked classes, with students sorted neatly into groups with similar learners. All students deserve the opportunity to learn at a pace that is appropriate for them and tracking students certainly does make pacing easier.

### **Except, we are solving the wrong problem**

Now, before the gifted folks jump on me again, let me preface, as a former gifted teacher and a differentiation instructional coach, I am an ardent proponent of identifying gifted students just as we identify special education students. The needs of gifted students, without question, require special consideration, action plans, follow-through, and monitoring.

With that being said, I also strongly believe that these students' needs can be met through differentiated instruction in a "regular" classroom. Because, **differentiation in it of itself, is not the problem. Rather, our nation's lack of ubiquitous implementation of differentiated instruction is a symptom of a much larger problem.**

The actual issue is the lingering remnants of the factory model/mindset of education still largely ingrained in our educational system today. Case in point, tracking students is a direct result of schools which prepared students for predetermined career paths.

During the industrialization era students were placed on tracks with finite destinations: factory worker, tradesman, professional with a higher-level degree. Future tradesman sat next to other future tradesman, future professionals learned alongside other future professionals.

But, putting students on these same tracks today poses a significant problem because these tracks no longer lead to known destinations. As first indicated in a report from U.S. Department of Labor called **Future Work Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century** and later analyzed for potential implications and solutions for schools by **ISTE Connects**, 65% of jobs to become available in the future have yet to be created.

Job trends since 1999 support this statistic as new jobs and categories in the services provided industry continue to experience exponential growth, while other industries like manufacturing, continue to trend downward (**U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics**).

With this information in mind, our focus must shift from preparing students to interact with similar learners to finding ways to ensure our students can productively collaborate with all types of learners. Doing so is critical for our students' long-term success.

### **Therefore, teachers must conduct orchestras, not trains.**

If our ever-evolving world is not a compelling enough reason to focus on the real problem, let's also consider this, even in a gifted or tracked class, teachers still need to differentiate for their students.

Programming alone will not meet students' needs. In **Beyond Gifted Education, Designing and Implementing Advanced Academic Programs**, authors Scott Peters, Michael Matthews, Matthew McBee, and D. Betsy McCoach state, *"Not all students who are labeled gifted require the same things in order to receive an appropriate educational experience. Just as not all gifted students require the same services, a given individual (gifted or not) does not automatically need the same services year after year."*

And, this is the bottom line. Learners' needs, gifted or not, are fluid. Learning is fluid. However, our current educational system is largely static. We hear a lot talk about student and teacher innovation. Many times we look to the silver bullet (as Peter Dewitt points out in **Can We**

we hear a lot talk about student and teacher innovation. Many times we look to the silver bullet (as Peter Dewitt points out in [Can We Destroy the Silver Bullet Mentality Before It Destroys Us?](#)) which takes on the form of implementing a tech tool or making something fit in our current practice without changing what we have "always done".

But, what is really innovative is doing what needs to be done to help shape the next education model- one where the academic and social-emotional success of all students is the only priority. Differentiating instruction for our students needs is one of the ways to do this, and as indicated above, differentiated instruction is more effective when we consider the environment in which we try to implement it and adjust accordingly.

**But, How?**

I wish I had a linear plan for how to systemically change our educational model. But, I don't. I also recognize there are people who consider school reformers to be idealistic. And, I don't know, maybe we are.

But, I also know there are steps educators can take to collectively propel us forward or there are things we can do (or not do) to ensure we stay stagnant. It is up to us to decide which route we want to take. As country music singer Jimmy Dean said, *"I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination."*

I can't help but think that, maybe, if we all adjust our sails, we may actually have a shot at changing the direction of the wind.

**Questions about this post? Connect with Lisa on Twitter.**

**Photo Credit: Mark E. Weston Ph.D. @ShiftParadigm**

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	<a href="#">LAHS</a> 11:56 AM on April 22, 2017	Score: 0	<a href="#">Report Abuse</a>
<p>The metaphor of adjusting sails with respect to wind conditions carries with it some implications that our educational system is not willing to face. If a boat adjusts its sail so that it tacks into the wind, the destination will be reached but at a much different rate than a boat sailing with the wind. As a teacher of exceptional students, I see some of the greatest success stories in students who graduate in four and a half, five, or six years. The educational system considers students who take longer to reach that destination failures and counts them as dropouts. Society and even parents decline to credit this as success. So the factory mindset is in reality not from the schools but from the external pressure to churn out 'graduates' in 12 years on a basis of time served rather than standards achieved or skills gained. Above anything else, time is the one thing that needs to be differentiated.</p>			
	<a href="#">Gen R</a> 9:32 AM on April 24, 2017	Score: 3	<a href="#">Report Abuse</a>
<p>Sorry, I agree with Mr. Deslisle. Differentiation in a full inclusion setting the way it is taught and implemented, is nearly impossible for a regular classroom teacher to effectively achieve given time and resources, and in actuality and does not meet the needs of students at the margins- or anyone. Universal Design is a slightly better concept; however, realistically, we need to look at how we group and challenge kids through a realistic lens, so that all students can achieve to maximum potential.</p>			
	<a href="#">Margaret DeLacy</a> 1:10 PM on April 28, 2017	Score: 1	<a href="#">Report Abuse</a>
<p>This is a classic rhetorical strategem. The author concedes the opponent is right but then switches the problem. In this</p>			

case, the "real" problem she proposes is a straw man: old-fashioned "factory-style" education. The solution offered to that (nonexistent) problem is modern schools that will prepare students for some future of the author's imaginings. Of course the author imagines a future that will require her own solution. In fact, DeLisle is right. Differentiation in heterogenous classrooms doesn't work for gifted children and doesn't happen in any case. Differentiation is still necessary in all classrooms--gifted or not--but it isn't the solution to gifted education. On the other hand, the evidence that separate classrooms, acceleration and ability grouping do work for gifted students is strong. And yes, "idealistic" advocates like Lisa aren't writing about the real world where time is the most constrained factor in education--both for teachers and students. Expecting students to do nothing while they wait for a chance to learn some far-off day isn't idealistic, it is cruel. Expecting teachers without special training in gifted education to teach across multiple grade levels in every classroom isn't idealistic, it is unfair and unreasonable.



[Mike Schmoker](#)

Score:

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1:21 PM on April 28, 2017

0

What puzzles me is that we talk endlessly about methods for which there is no compelling evidence of effectiveness, but seldom discuss something far more important and consequential: the implementation gap between the most effective, proven practices and their actual implementation. For instance, the use of "checks for understanding" throughout the lesson would have a game-changing impact on students at all levels--low, medium or high. Despite this, fact, checks for understanding are rarely implemented in our schools. We seldom write about this issue--about the failure of our system to ensure that all teachers know and can execute the best known practices. Why don't we read more about this? If we did, it could, at long last, begin to close the gap between effective practice and actual practice--with impressive results. Mike Schmoker



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