

Reaching All Learners

You've Got to Know Them to Show Them

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School has always come easily to Cassie. An early reader, she entered kindergarten with a sophisticated vocabulary, strong writing skills, and a growing interest in history. Her initial eagerness to please the teacher waned over the years as she continued to earn A's no matter how much — or how little — she tried. By the time she reached middle school, Cassie had become accustomed to working ahead in the textbook, helping her classmates, and feeling bored with her assignments. She wishes her teachers and her peers had higher standards. She can't wait to go to college.

Everyone considers Juan to be a nice kid. He dutifully turns in all of his homework and behaves in class. His favorite subject is physical education. Because Juan's teachers often get distracted by outwardly struggling and disruptive students, they haven't noticed how infrequently he reads and how long it takes him to provide written explanations of his work. Juan doesn't like to ask questions in class because he doesn't want people to think he's stupid.

Stephanie is the class clown. Her teachers are alternately bemused and irritated by her antics. During a parent conference, Stephanie's core teachers complain that she is unfocused, her work uninspired. Sitting off to the side, Stephanie's art teacher is stunned to hear this. He has never known a more creative or diligent student. Stephanie's drawings and computer animation projects are meticulously detailed; she often stays after school to refine them. This teacher believes Stephanie is talented enough to earn a scholarship to college — provided some Web site designer doesn't hire her first.

These three students will be enrolled in your class next semester. How will you help them succeed in school?

"I cannot teach students well if I do not know them well," educator and author Theodore R.Sizer writes in the September 1999 issue of *Educational Leadership*. "Options without knowing the students well are not authentic options at all."

Sounds good, until you consider that the typical middle level teacher must keep up with the paperwork generated by more than 100 students a day, much less try to figure out what's going on inside their heads. Besides, the state proficiency tests are coming up, and there's still more to cover in the textbook. This is no time to develop a whole new set of lesson plans — or is it?

"A school or school system that resolutely accepts the lively but annoying diversity among its students must break away from many deeply ingrained notions about the keeping of school, from One Best Curriculum to One Best Test to One Best Schedule," Sizer concludes. "Something far more complex and more fluid must take their places. Schools must adapt to the legitimate differences among students; these adaptations will themselves be in constant flux."





Although teachers can't create individual agendas for every student, they can make learning more personal by offering instructional options that enable students to meet the objectives in their own unique way. Every assignment or assessment won't please every student. But when exposed to a variety of activities that build on their interests and strengths, adolescents can become explore's who find different routes to the same destination.

Just as method actors try to tap into a character's emotions, effective teachers seek to understand a student's particular motivation for learning. Is she grade-oriented? Does he need physical outlets during the day? Will she grasp the math concepts if she can draw them, discuss them, or write about them?

Call it differentiated instruction, preferred learning styles, or any of the education buzzwords of the day. The term isn't as important as the goal: helping students succeed by any means necessary. To do that, teachers must filter adult expectations through the prism of adolescent experience.

"In classrooms where teachers are the center of instruction and students do the same work at the same time in the same way, individuals are not really served, rather it is the class that is taught," Gert Nesin and John Lounsbury write in *Curriculum Integration: Twenty Questions — With Answers* (Georgia Middle School Association, 1999).

Over the years, in focus groups and case studies, adolescents have talked openly about how they like to learn:

- They need choices so topics will be interesting and relevant to them.
- They need examples of quality work to show them how to meet academic standards.
- They need opportunities to revise assignments so they can profit from their mistakes.
- They need an audience other than the teacher so their learning will have a purpose beyond compliance.
- They need teachers who will challenge them by building from what they know, instead of criticizing them for what they don't.

Consider these responses from students interviewed for *No Excuses: The Eighth Grade Year in Six Philadelphia Middle Schools*, a 1999 publication of the Philadelphia Education Fund:

"My favorite teacher is one who makes her lessons relate to people my age. Like we might do plays where we acted out a story. When kids do stuff together, they learn that way."

"Our teacher dresses up as 'granny grammar' and takes on a different personality. She talks about different grammar rules, like compound sentences. She makes it funny and we remember it better."

"I prefer discussions mostly. You get more out of it. The more talk we have together, the more we go over things, the more we learn. If you have an experiment and don't have a discussion about it, you wouldn't know what you were doing."

This exchange occurred between a student (S) and an interviewer (I)

S: "I don't have no favorite class. I don't like none of them."

I: "Why?"

S: "They boring."

I: "What makes them boring?"

S: "Cause we don't do something that's fun."

I: "What makes something fun?"

S: "When you do different activities."

As these students pointed out, different approaches engage different people. The key is using a variety of strategies to encourage everyone to come under the same tent. But the variety must have a clear purpose. Giving students alternative ways to express their knowledge won't help if they fail to learn something meaningful in the process.

"Our experiences, culture, gender, genetic codes, and neurological wiring all affect how and what we learn," Carol Ann Tomlinson writes in *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999).

"In a differentiated classroom, the teacher unconditionally accepts students as they are, and she expects them to become all they can be."

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