

A Helping of Academic Alphabet Soup: What is D.I.?

By David Wolff, District Coordinator of Gifted & Talented Services in Austin, MN

Have you ever had a conversation with an educator and you felt like they were speaking another language? Chances are you've heard us speak, 'Educatorese;' full of acronyms and vogue terms. It is my goal to support parents by serving a 'helping of academic alphabet soup' to explain the meaning of the terms and how they apply to your child's learning.

Q: What is D.I. stand for? A: Differentiated Instruction

Parent: *"How do you meet my child's learning needs in math class?"*

Teacher: *"Oh, I just differentiate my instruction for them to make it easier or harder for them."*

I am confident you've had a similar conversation with a teacher before. Many parents do. I often hear similar explanations when talking with teachers, too. Unfortunately, responses like this do not get to the heart of Differentiated Instruction but only scratches the surface of it. Differentiated Instruction [also known as Differentiation] is not about making the content easier or harder for students, rather it is about supporting students' learning so that they have the appropriate supports so they learn something new each day.

Q: What do educators mean when they say D.I.?

Differentiated Instruction recognizes each individual's learning needs; this is inclusive, no matter the level of readiness a student is at for the content. True differentiation provides multiple learning opportunities to learn the content. Below are three ways Differentiated Instruction is described by experts:

"Differentiation means providing learners with different tasks and activities than their age peers – tasks that lead to real learning for them." Susan Winnebrenner, *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*

"Differentiated instruction means changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction you provide in response to individual learners' needs, styles, or interests." Diane Heacox, *Differentiated Instruction in the Regular Classroom*

"Differentiating does not mean that all students receive the same instruction, materials, and tasks. It means they receive the instruction, materials, and tasks they need to maximize their learning." Caroline Eidson, Bob Iseminger, Chris Taibbi, *Demystifying Differentiation in Middle School*

Q: How does D.I. impact my child's learning?

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Differentiation does not mean different expectations but rather every student is working toward the same learning goal just in different ways. Teachers should start with the desired goal [this could be the state standard] then determine how they will assess the students' readiness or prior knowledge of the topic. Pre-assessments are an essential part of differentiation because they tell which students already know the content and which students have misconceptions about the topic. Pre-assessments do not need to be multiple-choice or true/false quizzes; often discussions or interest inventories can reveal a lot of what a student knows. This is very important for gifted learners. I once heard differentiated instruction described as an escalator offering gifted learners continuous learning; in comparison to waiting at the staircase landing waiting for the others to catch up. Once prior knowledge is established, teachers can design multiple pathways to match students with appropriate levels of challenge so they can make sense of the content. An important thing to keep in mind is that with true differentiation, teachers will regroup students based on their readiness. Flexible Grouping, ensures a "right fit, right now," philosophy because a child may be advanced in one topic but may need additional support in another.