



BC Confederation of  
Parent Advisory Councils



# MEETING A STUDENT'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

## A GUIDE FOR BC PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Prepared for: British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils

Prepared by: Anya Goldin, Justine Jawanda, and David P. Burns

Kwantlen Educational Policy Incubator, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Surrey, British Columbia, 2016

[kpu.ca/kepi](http://kpu.ca/kepi)



## DIFFERENCE

Every parent, guardian and educator knows that each child is unique. The challenge faced by stakeholders in education is to find a practical and sustainable way to recognize that fundamental diversity. Building and sustaining an education system that reflects the diversity of its students and communities requires changes in policy, but it also requires changes in the ways that children, educators, parents and guardians, and administrators communicate. In a system as large as British Columbia's, this is an extraordinary task. As the Ministry of Education undertakes its own changes – aimed at ensuring “personalized learning is at the heart of the new curriculum” (Ministry of Education, n.d.) – it becomes increasingly important that parents and guardians across British Columbia become involved not just in what goes on in the day to day life of schools, but also in the wider conversations about how schools should reflect the children they serve.

It is for this reason that we produced this report. As people across British Columbia join the conversation about flexibility and personalization in BC Schools, the need for information about what personalization looks like, and what it requires to be successful, grows. This document is intended to provide background information, critical questions, and interesting resources, for use by parents and guardians across BC, as we all ask *how can schools recognize the individuality of a single child?*

This report was researched and written at the Kwantlen Educational Policy Incubator [KEPI], a non-profit student research group at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey, British Columbia. Between August and October, 2016, the KEPI team reviewed over 100 scholarly articles, governmental and non-governmental reports. While this work was requested by the British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, funding for this study was provided exclusively by Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Correspondence related to this document may be sent to Dr. David P. Burns at [david.burns@kpu.ca](mailto:david.burns@kpu.ca). Special thanks to the Faculty of Arts and the Office of Research and Scholarship.

Anya Goldin, Justine Jawanda, and David P. Burns

<https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum-updates>

---



**MS ANYA GOLDIN** is a B.A. student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Anya is an aspiring educational policy scholar and analyst.

**MS JUSTINE JAWANDA** is a B.A. student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Justine is an aspiring teacher.

**DR. DAVID P. BURNS** is the Chair of Arts Curriculum at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. David has written over two-dozen articles on educational topics ranging from instructional technology to moral education. He is a former high school teacher and the parent of a young child.

THIS DOCUMENT CAN BE FOUND AT [KPU.CA/KEPI](http://KPU.CA/KEPI) 

This document is published under Creative Commons license [CC BY-NC-ND](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) for all parties aside from the British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils [BCCPAC]. To BCCPAC the authors grant the right to modify the document as they see fit provided that the BCCPAC either 1) obtains the approval of the authors for the altered document; or 2) removes the authors' names as well as all references to Kwantlen Polytechnic University and the Kwantlen Educational Policy Incubator.

(c) 2016 David P. Burns

All images not otherwise attributed are taken from databases of open-access, non-attribution photographs.

---

## WHERE DID INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING COME FROM?

The story of personalized learning begins, in part, with the literature on *special needs* students. While it is difficult to date this change, by the 1990s it became clear that thinking of some students as having special needs set those students apart in a way that wasn't entirely productive. This label set them up as being different, and as having a kind of deficit that *normal* students don't have (Ainscow, 2009). This realization led to a number of changes in the ways educators considered special needs students. It became increasingly important to shift the focus away from what these students can't do, and towards what they can do. This is today called "strength-based educational planning" (Bianco, Carothers, & Smiley, 2009, p. 214).

It was around the same time that educators began to consider *gifted and talented* students as a special category of learner, alongside special needs students. Gifted students, it is now argued, also need their own personalized experience (Smit & Humpert, 2012). The addition of gifted and talented students to the special needs conversation resulted in broad use of the term *exceptionalities* – which refers to students in both categories. Recent educational research has even begun to deal with the "twice-exceptional" (see Foley-Nicpon, Assouline, & Colangelo, 2013, p. 177) – students who would be, in the past, categorized as both *special needs* and *gifted*.

This expansion from largely negative views of special needs students to the more modern notion that many students have exceptional needs (and strengths) begs the question, if some students are exceptional because of gifts they have, challenges they face, or ways they experience the world, why doesn't this apply to other forms of diversity? There is a need for "culturally responsive teaching" (van Garderen & Whittaker, 2006, p. 14) too, isn't there? What about teaching that is responsive to English language learners (Dobbins & Draper Rodriguez, 2012)?

This leaves schools in what looks, at first, like an impossible position. If the list of groups that deserve personalized learning experiences keeps growing, how can they all be accommodated? The answer is that, if you go down the list of exceptionalities and other characteristics that deserve accommodation, the practices prescribed to address them are remarkably consistent. **What is good for exceptional students is, more often than not, simply good teaching.**

So while providing targeted support to certain exceptional groups of students remains important, it has become widely agreed upon that the best practices discovered in our discussion of exceptional students should be spread across the education system. Student learning should be based on strengths and interests (Bianco, Carothers, & Smiley, 2009); should be planned, in part, by students themselves (Konrad, 2008); should involve cooperative learning and tutoring (Tant & Watelain, 2016); and should be based in general on an understanding of what differentiates each child from his or her peers. It is for these reasons that this form of personalized learning is often called *differentiated instruction*.

---



## WHAT IS DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION?

Differentiated instruction involves two key components (Roy, Guay & Valois, 2015). The first is the adaptation of instruction to widen the range of student needs being addressed. The second is increased attention to individual progress. These two key components are represented in a wide range of teaching and learning practices, ranging from the role of the teacher to the nature of the assignments and tests (assessments) being employed.

“Effective differentiated core instructional practices are [based on] ... constructivist learning theory, the hierarchical order of learning activities, the maximization of students’ active participation in the learning process, the reduction of teachers’ talking time during teaching, the variation of activities, the opportunity for students to work at their own pace, the personalized support that students receive, the differentiation of activities according to students’ interests and learning profile and the continuous evaluation of students’ achievement with a simultaneous and ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the learning process.” (Valiandes, 2015, p. 22)

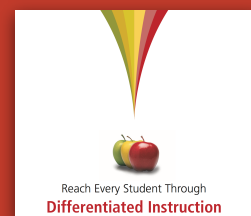
## WORTH READING

### Reaching Every Student Through Differentiated Instruction

This open access document was published by the Government of Ontario to help new teachers understand differentiated instruction.

[Click here](#), or go to

<http://www.edugains.ca/resources/DI/Brochures/DIBrochureOct08.pdf>



# PERSONALIZED PATHWAYS



“In [differentiated instruction] all learners focus on the same essential understandings, but are provided with multiple access routes to make sense of and demonstrate these understandings.” (Tobin & McInnes, 2008, p. 3)

One key component of differentiated instruction is that a differentiated classroom permits students to take more than one route to their learning goals (Tobin & Tippett, 2013). A truly differentiated learning experience provides a wide range of resources with which students may conduct their work. Students

should have the choice, whenever possible, to engage with different texts, media and experiences based on their interests and abilities. This differentiation should, it is argued (Tobin & Tippett, 2013), also extend to the ways in which students express their learning. The differentiated classroom, in other words, permits students to demonstrate their achievement in more than one way by “providing students with multiple, flexible means of representation, expression, and options for engagement” (Tobin & Tippett, 2013, p. 424). This means adapting to different abilities, but also different learning styles, forms of intelligence, cultures and creative abilities (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

## HOW WOULD I KNOW?

- Does my child have access to different kinds of texts when developing their literacy skills?
- Can my child learn a particular lesson at a different pace than their classmates, and is that pace respected?
- Can my child show that they are learning in a way that is different from what is “normal” or “expected”?

## HOW CAN I HELP?

Your child’s teachers need to respond to an enormous range of student diversity. Keeping in contact with them about your child’s needs and progress is crucial. Teachers can only respond to needs when they know about them.

Differentiated learning cannot be confined to the classroom. Children need to connect what they are learning in school to what they do at home. Everyday experiences like going to the grocery store should be opportunities to allow children to express what they have learned about nutrition, finances, sustainable and ethical farming practices, and much more.

## SHIFTING GROUPS

As a result of the need to provide multiple pathways to the same educational goal, differentiated classrooms include heavy use of small group work. While a lesson might begin with a large group discussion or explanation by the teacher, students should then be grouped into smaller clusters (Levy, 2008). Groups might be based on ability and work with different texts (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009), or might be based on interest. It is important, though, that these groups not be static (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Putting students into the same ability group every day leaves them stuck in the same divisions (between high and low performers) that differentiated instruction was, in part, designed to avoid. Student strengths and interests will vary according to the day and the lesson (Lawrence-Brown, 2004), and the groups in which they work should reflect this. One “organizational format” does not provide enough differentiation (Tobin & McInnes, 2008, p. 4).



### HOW WOULD I KNOW?

- Is my child being given the opportunity to work with different classmates, and in different roles?

### HOW CAN I HELP?

Parents and guardians naturally want their children to be in the educational environments that best fit their unique needs - and some interpret this to mean that their children should be placed in segregated enrichment or special needs programs. These programs are often helpful, but it is also important to recognize that educational research generally indicates that children are neither universally gifted nor universally challenged by particular lessons. Each child is at different points in their learning in different areas. Mixed ability classrooms present the opportunity for students to learn from each other's strengths, and often equip students with a broader range of tools and perspectives than would be accessible in a separate, or segregated, learning environment.

---

# PERSONALIZED ASSESSMENTS

Providing multiple paths to the achievement of learning outcomes is a sound approach to teaching and learning only if the tests and assignments (assessments) used to measure student achievement are also diverse. Differentiated instruction involves increased attention to informal assessments (Parsons, Dodman & Burrowbridge, 2013), as teachers rely more and more heavily on frequent observations about what is going on in the everyday life of the classroom (and less on large exams at the end of the reporting period). They may also provide different tasks for different students, or different amounts of the same task (Smit & Humpert, 2012). This differentiation applies to homework, as well (Walker-Dalhousie et al., 2009).

## HOW WOULD I KNOW?

- Does my child always have the same homework as everyone else, or do they have homework that reflects what they are good at, and what they are struggling with?
- Is my child getting a chance to struggle with a learning experience, and receive feedback, before the big test at the end of the unit?



## HOW CAN I HELP?

Don't wait until report card time to check in about your child's progress. A truly personalized experience involves many small measurements of learning, and many small adjustments based on them.

---



---

## FAMILIARITY WITH STUDENTS

The ability of a teacher to create or illuminate multiple pathways and a wide range of individually appropriate assessments is based on the assumption that teachers will be closely familiar with the individual nature of each learner (Tobin & Tippett, 2013; Valiandes, 2015). A teacher should, in this model, work to understand the strengths, interests, and modes of expression of each student. It is only with this knowledge that a teacher may provide a learning environment that encourages growth in line with those attributes, and that challenges students to grow beyond them.

This level of familiarity with students allows teachers to continually assess both student achievement and their own lessons, and to adjust based on learner progress. Indeed, it has been argued that the moment-to-moment decisions teachers make as lessons proceed are a critical and overlooked element of differentiated instruction (Parsons, Dodman & Burrowbridge, 2013).

### HOW WOULD I KNOW?

- Is the feedback you receive about your child's learning specific to your child, or is it a generic comment applicable to many students?

### HOW CAN I HELP?



Understanding enough about each student to provide true differentiation is time consuming and challenging for the best of educators. They can't do it alone, and your child may not start these conversations. Sometimes, asking your child's teacher, "*how can I help?*," or, "*what do you need to know about my child?*," is the best way to start.

---

---

## WORKS CITED (AND A FEW WORTH NOTING)

- Ainscow, M. (2005). Developing inclusive educational systems: What are the levers for change? *Journal of Educational Change*, 6(2), 109-124.
- Adam, T., Rigoni, A., & Tatnall, A. (2014). Designing and implementing curriculum for students with special needs: A case study of a thinking curriculum. *Journal Of Business Systems, Governance & Ethics*, 1(1), 49-63.
- Adebayo, A., & Shumba, C. (2014). An assessment of the implementation of differentiation in primary schools, Kabwe district, Zambia. *European Scientific Journal*, 10(7), 295-307.
- Alquraini, T., & Gut, D. (2012). Critical components of successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities Literature review. *International Journal of Special Education*, 22(1), 42-59.
- Barnard-Brak, L. & Lechtenberger, D. (2009). Student IEP participation and academic achievement across time. *Remedial and Special Education*, 31(5), 343-349.
- Bianco, M., Carothers, D., & Smiley, L. (2009). Gifted students with Asperger syndrome: Strategies for strength-based programming. *Intervention In School And Clinic*, 44(4), 206-215.
- Dobbins, N. & Draper Rodriguez, C. (2012). Providing support for English language learners with behavioral needs. *Intervention In School And Clinic*, 48(3), 152-158.
- Fitzgerald, J., & Watkins, M. (2006). Parents' rights in special education: The readability of procedural safeguards. *Council for Exceptional Children*, 72(4), 497-510.
- Foley-Nicpon, M., Assouline, S., & Colangelo, N. (2013). Twice-exceptional learners: Who needs to know what? *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 57(3), 169-180.
- Hyslop, K. (2011). Schools of the future, Today. Inside BC classrooms where every student has a laptop or iPad, and the learning is 'child-centred.'. The Tyee. Retrieved 5 October 2016, from <http://thetyee.ca/News/2011/11/15/Schools-Of-The-Future/>
- Ingersoll, B. & Dvortcsak, A. (2006). Including parent training in the early childhood special education curriculum for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 26(3), 179-187.
- Kamenopoulou, L. (2012). A study on the inclusion of deafblind young people in mainstream schools: key findings and implications for research and practice. *British Journal of Special Education*, 39(3), 137-145.
-

- Konrad, M. (2008). Involve students in the IEP process. *Intervention in School And Clinic*, 43(4), 236-239.
- Lawrence-Brown, D. (2004). Differentiated instruction: Inclusive strategies for standards-based learning that benefit the whole class. *American Secondary Education*, 32(3), 34-62.
- Levy, H. (2008). Meeting the needs of all students through differentiated instruction: Helping every child reach and exceed standards. *The Clearing House: A Journal Of Educational Strategies, Issues And Ideas*, 81(4), 161-164.
- Martin, J., Marshall, L., & Sale, P. (2004). A 3-year study of middle, junior high, and high school IEP meetings. *Exceptional Children*, 70(3), 285-297.
- Parsons, S., Dodman, S., & Burrowbridge, S. (2013). Broadening the view of differentiated instruction. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(1), 38-42.
- Roy, A., Guay, F., & Valois, P. (2015). The big-fish–little-pond effect on academic self-concept: The moderating role of differentiated instruction and individual achievement. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 42, 110-116.
- Smit, R. & Humpert, W. (2012). Differentiated instruction in small schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28(8), 1152-1162.
- Tant, M. & Watelain, E. (2016). Forty years later, a systematic literature review on inclusion in physical education (1975–2015): A teacher perspective. *Educational Research Review*, 19, 1-17.
- Tobin, R. & Tippet, C. (2013). Possibilities and potential barriers: Learning to plan differentiated instruction in elementary school. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 12(2), 423-443.
- Valiandes, S. (2015). Evaluating the impact of differentiated instruction on literacy and reading in mixed ability classrooms: Quality and equity dimensions of education effectiveness. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 45, 17-26.
- van Garderen, D. & Whittaker, C. (2006). Planning differentiated, multicultural instruction for secondary inclusive classrooms. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 38(3), 12-21.
-

Walker-Dalhouse, D., Risko, V., Esworthy, C., Grasley, E., Kaisler, G., McIlvain, D., & Stephan, M. (2009). Crossing boundaries and initiating conversations about RTI: Understanding and applying differentiated classroom instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(1), 84-87.

Watts-Taffe, S., Laster, B. P., Broach, L., Marinak, B., McDonald Connoer, C., & Walker-Dalhouse, D. (2012). Differentiated instruction: Making informed teacher decisions. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(4), 303-314.

Weinfeld, R., Barnes-Robinson, L., Jeweler, S., & Shevitz, B. R. (2005). Experiences in providing adaptations and accommodations for gifted and talented students with learning disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 38(1). 48-54.

Westwood, P., & Arnold, W. (2004). Meeting individual needs with young learners. *ELT Journal*, 58(4), 375-378.

Williams-Diehm., K. L., Brandes, J. A., Chesnut, P. W., & Haring, K. A. (2014). Student and parent IEP collaboration: A comparison across school settings. *Rural Special Education Quarterly* 33(1), 3-11.