

Differentiation Delusion: More Exposure Needed

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To even credibly imagine that one size could come close to fitting all, it must be possible to effectively ‘differentiate’ instruction, which is [ability grouping by subject](#) on steroids. ‘On steroids’ because with the classroom diversity that can result from our current system’s practice of sorting children only by neighborhood and age, appropriately differentiated instruction can mean a different teaching approach for every child.

Finally, specific evidence of the futility of the obviously [costly and stressful challenge](#) of having each teacher develop and deliver multiple pedagogical approaches is [going mainstream public](#). The title of Dr. James Delisle’s January 7 *Education Week* Op-Ed says it plainly: “[Differentiation Doesn’t Work](#),” and now the mainstream knows ‘the Emperor has no clothes’.

Further proof and spreading the word that within-classroom differentiated instruction does not work will demolish one of the key counter-arguments to the student diversity argument for school choice. The viability of differentiated instruction is a cornerstone of the public finance monopoly business model; i.e. the status quo. Based on several specific studies cited, here’s how Dr. Delisle sees it:

“Differentiation is a failure, a farce, and the ultimate educational joke played on countless educators and students. Differentiation is a promise unfulfilled; a boondoggle of massive proportions.”

Dr. Delisle, it sounds like you’re waffling. Please tell us what you really think. Apparent long-time denial of the obvious is why I used the famous ‘emperor has no clothes’ metaphor. It is obvious from the big picture of persistent low performance that what we’re doing – our current system’s instructional strategy for a diverse population – isn’t working. But it has been politically incorrect to admit it, much less announce it, publicly.

“Differentiation, in practice, is harder to implement in a heterogeneous classroom than it is to juggle with one arm tied behind your back.”

“84% of teachers, nationwide stated that differentiation was somewhat or very difficult.”

But we have insisted that it must be made to work:

“By my (Delisle) count, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has released more than 600 publications on differentiation, and countless publishers have followed suit with manuals and software that will turn [they imagine] every classroom into a [successfully] differentiated one.”

And, “in every case, [attempts at] differentiated instruction dumbed down instruction.”

We also need to continue to argue that our experience with large comprehensive campuses tells us that between-classroom differentiated instruction is not nearly an adequate way to address student diversity. Comprehensive traditional public school campuses have become the norm, and [‘Nation at Risk’](#) low performance persists, despite a tripling of per pupil funding in the past fifty years. We need differentiation by campus; that is, specialized schooling options. We need a dynamic, diverse menu of specialized schooling options orchestrated by price change on a level playing field to exploit the diversity of our educators to address the diversity of our children.