

Let the Differentiation Wars be Public

John Merrifield

March 1, 2015

The James Delisle declaration that “[Differentiation Doesn’t Work](#)” in a back-page *Education Week* Op-Ed (very prominent) was a public assault on a key rationale for the public school system. I [immediately](#) noted its significance and strong language based on research. It’s hugely significant because either extensive, skilled differentiation of instruction is possible and widely ongoing, OR the current ‘business plan’ of the public school system will leave a lot of children behind; i.e. severely uneducated. And for decades, a lot of children have been left without even adequate basic skills.

Sure enough, that declaration stirred an immediate ‘[Empire Strikes Back](#)’ response. According to an *Education Week* Editor note preceding the [full-page response](#) by leading proponent of differentiated instruction, Carol Ann Tomlinson, the response was part of an “avalanche of reader comments” received within days of the “[Differentiation Doesn’t Work](#)” Delisle Op-Ed. Why an avalanche? Because the [viability of differentiated instruction](#) is a keystone of one-size-fits-all, no need for school choice, public schooling mostly in assigned traditional public schools (TPS). This is the kind of issue (whether TPS can be the common school that deserves/needs a public finance monopoly) that seems like it can strike at the heart of people that still (despite [repeated Nation at Risk](#) declarations) genuinely believe that the current system is best for children or can be made to work acceptably.

The key difference between the Delisle “Differentiation Doesn’t Work” Op-Ed and the Tomlinson response is that Delisle cited numerous studies of differentiated instruction. Tomlinson cited none; citing only studies of teaching in homogenous vs. heterogeneous classrooms, which may or may not have included attempts to significantly differentiate instruction. As [another \[un-named\]](#)

[commenter](#) noted, “differentiation, as a concept, is sublimely beautiful, while its implementation has been "ridiculous.” Indeed, which means that imagining it can work in often highly diverse public school classrooms is an un-mitigated, wishful thinking disaster for a lot of children, and will continue to be until we get appropriate transformational change.