MOTHERHOOD, APPLE PIE AND DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION
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A good Little League baseball coach will analyze a pitcher's performance and develop an individual prescription based on that analysis. Just as all pitchers don't receive the same remedies from high-quality coaches, Mr. VanSciver believes, neither should all students.

On a typical late spring early evening, a young Little League pitcher will be struggling. His control will be off. Some of his pitches will land in the dirt in front of the plate, while others will be wide right - very wide.

Cascading from both the dugout and the stands will be words that sound like encouragement. "Throw strikes!" offers his coach. "Don't lose him!" yells his manager. "Try harder!" chants his family.

While all this sounds supportive, it presumes that the neophyte mounds-man is choosing to struggle and just has to choose not to. In fact, he wants to throw strikes, he doesn't want to lose that batter, and he is trying as hard as he can. In addition, these exhortations offer him no advice about how he can accomplish the singular goal that he, his coach, his manager, and his family want: to hurl that baseball across the plate somewhere between the knees and the armpits of the batter.

Sound familiar?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) stands as the imposing batter to many teachers and students in our schools. Teachers want to instruct and students want to achieve. The voices they hear sound like encouragement. "Promote higher standards," offers the consultant. "Don't fail them!" yells the research. "Try harder!" chant public education's critics. But, like the empty advice shouted at our pitcher, these clichés aren't helpful at all.

Why?

NCLB dictates that educators disaggregate student performance data into cells determined by various criteria, suggesting that the performance of the students in the different categories is determined by conditions unique to their groups. It would follow that strategies for improving the scores of the students in those categories would be specifically designed to meet their needs.

However, the students are not taught in those demographic groups. In fact, members of those groups are sprinkled throughout the schedule, with students from all categories sitting in the same classrooms at the same time.

To further complicate this matter, this mixing of students is being accomplished in ways not witnessed before in schools. Student access to courses is being expanded in response to calls for all students to achieve higher standards.

More and more nontraditional students are being funneled into schools' most rigorous classes. Teachers are now dealing with a level of academic diversity in their classrooms unheard of just a decade ago. Lawmakers, the business community, and parents are demanding results. Their admonitions don't even sound supportive. And teachers, administrators, and boards of education nationwide know that the demands are there . . . and so are the consequences of failure.

A slumping Little League pitcher gets rescued by a caring coach before the damage becomes too great. Teachers and administrators are threatened with the public humiliation of negative labels if they cannot get
students to "make the grade." But there is a strategy for coming to the aid of both pitchers and students. It involves paying attention to the specific challenges facing these youths, as well as their strengths.

The caring Little League coach does more than simply extract his young athlete from the pressurized public predicament in which the child finds himself; he identifies the problem the player is having and applies a suitable remedy. This may mean suggesting that the pitcher alter his arm position, modify his stride toward the plate, bend his back, change his grip on the ball, adjust his release point, or perform any number of singular modifications, depending on what the coach observed about the young man's delivery. All pitchers don't get identical advice from high-quality coaches. Based on his analysis, the coach will develop an individual prescription, oversee its implementation, and then evaluate the results. It will take some time as the player practices the new technique over and over under the watchful eye of his mentor.

And, if this coach has several pitchers, each with his or her own specific challenge with respect to delivering the ball to the plate in the acceptable manner, each one will receive a unique formula to correct the problem. Yet the goal for each is the same: to speed the ball by the batter and into the safety of the catcher's grasp.

Schools are not much different from baseball diamonds. Using differentiated instruction, high-quality teachers attend to the differing needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. The goal in each classroom is the same: to have all students attain a similar level of mastery over specific content.

Leslie Kiernan and Carol Ann Tomlinson note, "In an appropriately differentiated classroom, all learners focus much of their time and attention on the key concepts, principles, and skills identified by the teacher as essential to growth and development in the subject - but at varying degrees of abstractness, complexity, open-endedness, problem clarity, and structure." They add that, while all learners should work toward proficiency in the subject, some may need to deal with the subject matter at a concrete level and others may learn better by working at a greater level of abstractness.

For instance, among elementary students learning how to multiply, one group of students may be able to memorize their multiplication tables and understand the connection between addition and multiplication through conversation with the teacher. A different set of students may need to see how that process works through the use of manipulatives such as groups of checkers.

Some middle school geography students see easily how they can use maps to help understand the natural world. Other students may need a guiding hand to take them to that natural world to see how the map represents its different features.

"In an appropriately differentiated classroom, all learners should work with 'respectful tasks,'" Kiernan and Tomlinson add. All students should be encouraged to think at high levels and should have consistent opportunities to be active learners by working on interesting and engaging tasks. "All students should sometimes be teachers, and all should continually be involved with learning that is new to them."

Instruction should be differentiated, not content. As Kiernan and Tomlinson put it, "An appropriately differentiated classroom offers different routes to content, activities, and products in response to differing learner needs."

Teachers who incorporate appropriate differentiated instruction methods are aware of and pay attention to various learning styles. They "begin where students are, not the front of the curriculum guide," Tomlinson points out. "In differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's."
This is not easy work. It is time-consuming, resource-intensive, and complex. But, as Seymour Sarason reports, "A different way to learn is what the kids are calling for. . . . [They see that] our one-size-fits-all delivery system - which mandates that everyone learn the same thing at the same time, no matter what their individual needs - has failed them."\(^5\)

Differentiated instruction. It is (or should be) as American as motherhood, apple pie, and baseball.

References

2. Ibid., p. 7.

3. Ibid.
