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## Opinion: help student flex their metacognitive muscles instead of spoon feeding

By: Kathleen Kryza in In The Classroom, Opinion, Top Stories May 3, 2016 0

Witnessing students' eyes light up when they understand a new concept or finally grasp one they've been struggling with is what we, as educators, strive for every day. But analysis of national and international testing programs tells us those "a-ha" moments are simply not happening enough. Achievement is slipping and learning gaps are widening. In classrooms today, whether it be in my home state of Virginia, in the United States, or here in the suburbs of Australia, teachers, parents, politicians and the community understand that educational change is needed.

Any parent who has more than one child knows, each of their children needs different things to succeed. As educators we also know that our students acquire knowledge and skills in different ways. Research, experience and classroom practice have shown us there is no single silver bullet that will guarantee learning success for every child. But there are different teaching approaches, based on rigorous evidence, that educators must weave into their pedagogical repertoire to help bridge the achievement gap.



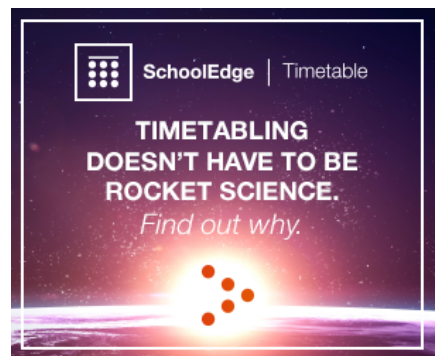
Kathleen Kryza

Research has shown us that differentiated instructional practices work. Differentiated instruction involves

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teachers getting to know their students as people and as learners, and understanding how to vary learning pathways to ensure students reach rigorous learning targets. In a differentiated classroom, fair is not everybody getting the same thing, fair is everybody getting what they need to be successful. What I see in the classrooms that I work in around the world, is that when you teach in an honouring and inspiring way, the light goes on in their eyes and learning becomes joyful.

I was in Queensland last week to lead two workshops on differentiated instruction, hosted by Independent Schools Queensland, for more than 250 passionate independent school teachers and leaders, including more than 50 teachers of students with disability. I told the participants that differentiated instruction is not a new concept; it has been around for some time. But it now has greater currency following improved understanding of how the brain works as well as groundbreaking research such as Carol Dweck's work on mindsets. Dr Dweck's research at Stanford University found that a student's mindset – their perception of their own ability to shape their mindsets and their skill sets – plays a pivotal role in their achievement. She found that students with a "growth mindset" outperformed those with a fixed mindset.

Students who have been taught to think for themselves, who can self-regulate and flex their metacognitive muscles, instead of simply being spoon fed content by teachers, make the greatest academic gains. For educators, that means being brave enough to let go of what we've always done and trust that when students are in the driver's seat of their own learning they're going to do better. In today's increasingly complex world, differentiated instruction supports teachers in equipping students with the skills critical to participate in the 21st century workforce: critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity. If we're not teaching in ways that promote and develop these skills, we're not preparing today's learners for the world they're going to inherit.

Effective differentiation is a challenging way to teach. It's hard and teachers need time to practice the strategies and share what works and what doesn't with their colleagues. It can't be done in one day and the impact on student outcomes takes time. In Queensland, many independent schools are well advanced on their differentiation journey. Independent Schools Queensland has supported a number of schools through programs such as research, coaching partnerships and differentiated mathematics projects. This support at the state level, combined with committed leadership at the school level, is critical for long-term success. It's been a pleasure to see the growth in the five years I have been coming to ISQ schools and I look forward to future possibilities for continuing to support teachers on this important journey.

**Kathleen Kryza is an international education consultant and author, based in the United States, specialising in differentiated instruction teaching and coaching.**

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