

EASY - REALISTIC
DIFFERENTIATION

IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL
ELA CLASSROOM

10 HOT QUESTIONS ABOUT

Differentiation

THAT PARENTS OR ADMIN MIGHT ASK YOU,
AND HOW TO CONFIDENTLY ANSWER THEM!

WITH LAURA KEBART, M.ED.



You're the teacher of record!

You're the expert.

The following set of *10 real questions* about how you're differentiating for your students is perfect for anything from a teacher interview to those moments when you're being asked about how you're differentiating and not always feeling like you're doing enough (*even though you totally are*).

It's a collection of ideas for how you can articulate what you're doing in a way that satisfies parents' or admins' expectations. You'll feel very confident about how to talk about what you're doing to differentiate.

Need more hands-on ideas with specific examples?

I invite you join me for my FREE online training about implementing easy, realistic differentiation in the middle school ELA classroom! I have a certificate for 1 hour of professional development for you along with a few other goodies when you sign up and show up!

[CLICK HERE](#) to register for the free training.

Or, scan the code with your phone and register that way!



Question #1

How are you differentiating for your students on a consistent basis?

Your Answer

"It's really in how I question them each day and how I scaffold when they struggle or how I extend when they've 'got it.' Stop by my classroom and watch how I use questions to push them past basic comprehension during discussions, and to see how I step back to build foundations for those who struggle when they don't even understand what the question is asking."

Question #2

Why do your students all have the same assignment? Where's the differentiation? (This is coming from a place of myth and of misunderstanding about what differentiation can be).

Your Answer

My high expectations mean that ALL my students get access to the same grade level materials since the standards are the same for everyone. The differentiation happens in what we do WITH the skill I'm teaching. Here, let me show you what I mean... (And then you can show your admin the next step in the assignment since some students will get that next step SO THAT you can work with, reteach, etc. the students are aren't getting it).

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Question #3

How much choice do you provide your students so they can show you what they know on their own terms?

Your Answer

I provide as much choice as often as I can, while still staying true to the standards, throughout each class. Sometimes it's as simple as wording a question in a different way and letting students choose which question makes sense for them to respond to. It's important to know our students and to know what works for them. We have to be able to see progress, so providing choice allows us to remove the "I don't want to" or "I can't" in order to let students find their own way of showing us what they know or what they understand. I work in various ways of speaking, writing, and thinking each day in class, all throughout class, so students know there are multiple ways to learn and to respond about the learning. For example, I might ask a question verbally, while also providing it worded in a slightly different way on the board, and then asking a student to paraphrase what it is they need to respond to. So beyond the typical "choice menus" or types of projects that come at the end of a unit, this is how I differentiate and provide choice every single day.

Question #4

What is differentiation?

Your Answer

It's basically the idea of providing personalized learning for students when what we're doing isn't working. Students come to us with such a wide variety of background knowledge and academic experiences and foundations, that we have to meet them where they are and grow them from that point to help them meet grade level standards. Differentiation is how we do that. Not all students are ready for the same thing at the same time, so differentiation addresses that. Likewise, not all students need to spend the same amount of time mastering a skill, either. Some are more than ready to move on or to move deeper with it. And it's not that students are getting different skills, it's that they're doing slightly different things but all with the same skill. The skill is the same--it's what we do with it that differs.

Question 5

What are you doing right now to differentiate for your students?

Your Answer

I'm allowing students to show me what they know and what they think in various ways so the focus is more on the progression they're making instead of on the act of producing something. I'm also checking in with as many of my students as often as I can throughout each class so I can differentiate on the fly through posing different questions, or through modifying or chunking a learning assignment as needed.

REALISTICALLY DIFFERENTIATE YOUR INSTRUCTION IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL ELA CLASSROOM

Question #6

How do you know when to differentiate and when to let students struggle in order to grow?

Your Answer

This has everything to do with learning about my students as people and paying attention to the level of frustration they exhibit. I want them to struggle a little bit so they can build coping techniques for working through tough moments, so if I'm presenting a strategy to help them cope and it's not working, then I know it's not the strategy—I know it's time for me to do something different with the way I taught the concept. That's when I know to differentiate. For example, if a student is working through a reading passage and answers a question incorrectly, a strategy might be that I ask him to re-read the question to check that he understands what it's really asking him to do. But if that makes no difference, then I know I need to differentiate by asking him some probing questions to get him to the point that he's then able to handle the original question.

Question 7

It's the second week of school and I don't see differentiation in your lesson plans anywhere. When will you start differentiating?

Your Answer

I'm still learning about my students—who they are, where their academic strengths and weaknesses lie—and figuring out where they need extra support or extra extension to move them forward. I would imagine I'll be ready to show elements of differentiation in my lesson plans within a couple more weeks. Since I have six classes of nearly (or over) 30 students in each class, it definitely takes time! When did you feel ready to start showing differentiation in your own lesson plans back when you were in the classroom? I'd love some ideas...

Question #8

How do you know when to differentiate and when to let students struggle in order to grow?

Your Answer

This has everything to do with learning about my students as people and paying attention to the level of frustration they exhibit. I want them to struggle a little bit so they can build coping techniques for working through tough moments, so if I'm presenting a strategy to help them cope and it's not working, then I know it's not the strategy—I know it's time for me to do something different with the way I taught the concept. That's when I know to differentiate. For example, if a student is working through a reading passage and answers a question incorrectly, a strategy might be that I ask him to re-read the question to check that he understands what it's really asking him to do. But if that makes no difference, then I know I need to differentiate by asking him some probing questions to get him to the point that he's then able to handle the original question.

Question 9

How often do you provide differentiated assessments for your students?

Your Answer

My students have so many individual talents and they don't always have ways of using those talents to express their thinking. So assessments can look different for different students. I might have a student who loves music respond to a reading passage by bringing a song clip that he connected to the reading. Or I might have an artistic student sketch an especially descriptive scene from a close reading assignment and then explain what she sketched and why. So some of these alternative forms of assessment happen almost in the moment, in the way I allow my students to express what they know.

Question #10

I can't tell who you're differentiating for. Where's the differentiation in the classroom?

Your Answer

You really can't tell??? Awesome!! That's such a fantastic complement! I've been trying to make decisions about differentiation in a way that doesn't seem obvious and that doesn't call anyone out. I don't want my students to feel like they're getting extra work that others didn't get, or that someone else in the class got something easier than they did. This takes a lot of planning and thinking and really knowing my students as learners, so I'm thrilled that you can't even tell from the outside looking in. If you'd like to know more about individual students, I'm happy to talk about that in a confidential setting if you'd like.

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