Chet's RRR

In 9th grade at High Tech High, there is no tracking for any of the classes. In theory this is great - if you're a student and you're put in a remedial class, you're being told in essence, that you are sub par, a below average student, and therefore a below average person. Similarly, if you're put in an honors class, you are being told that you are smarter, more talented, and therefore better than your peers. Without tracking, and with all students in the same class the message that is sent is that everyone is equal, all on the same playing field. In reality however, this isn't true. Students come from all backgrounds, with different strengths and areas of growth. Students come to class with different kinds and levels of intelligence. There are students who can create beautiful drawings that express their emotions in detail, but have trouble reading a paragraph from a 4th grade book. There are other students who read New York Times articles for fun, but can barely get out a word when asked to speak publicly. With students coming from all different backgrounds and with various kinds and levels of intelligence, we arrive at our research theme: How do we differentiate a lesson to make class engaging and accessible for all students?

For this assignment, our group read two articles. The first article is titled, "*Connecting Universal Design for Learning With Culturally Responsive Teaching*" by Laura Kieran and Christine Anderson (year of publication). In this article, Kieran and Anderson provide insight into the attributes of a lesson that is both culturally responsive and provides tools from UDL. In the second article, titled "Maximizing Student Success with Differentiated Learning" by Hani Morgan (year of publication), Morgan argues that differentiated instruction done well comes from teachers who are willing to personalize learning based on student interests as well as provide access to technology in the classroom to engage students in a way they are familiar with being engaged. Although both of these articles shed light and important facets of a differentiated classroom, I believe that they are both missing a critical piece - individualized learning. I believe that in order to successfully differentiate teaching and learning in the classroom, the teacher must have personal relationships with all students in class, and individualize both learning and grading for each specific student, redefining what success looks like on an individual level. By including grading in differentiation, an extrinsic motivation is placed on the student to do their best work knowing that - *good enough* or *this is too hard, so I'm not gonna even try -* won't cut it. Though having students do their work solely based on intrinsic motivation is a great goal for any teacher, I believe that combining intrinsic motivation with extrinsic motivators is the best way to get students to participate in learning at the highest level.

In the first article, Kieran and Anderson (year of publication) explain that in order to create a classroom where every student can succeed, the teacher must broaden the scope of how a student can express their ideas. They explain that teachers must provide multiple means of representation, multiple means action and expression, and multiple means of engagement. They write, "Barriers to learning should be viewed from within the curriculum, instruction, and assessment methods rather than as deficits within the student" (p. #). In essence, teachers must be aware of where students are at and what obstacles may arise when going into planning a lesson in order to prepare content that is both engaging and accessible. I believe that should be taken further. I struggle with this question often- how do I not teach to the middle? How do I create a lesson, or a unit that is both accessible and engaging to students of all levels, abilities and learning styles, where the students with the most needs can meaningfully engage while students with higher aptitude in certain areas don't get bored? What if the answer lies less in trying to create a one size fits all model, and instead bases not only the lesson but the grading system on how much progress is made in a given unit? From the onset this seems impossible. Creating 60 individualized lessons for 60 students on top of all of the other responsibilities of a teacher seems ludacris. However, if the measure of success was defined by how much improvement a student made by the end of a unit compared to defining success on how well they were able to meet the made up expectation of the teacher based on where he/she believes all students need to be, individual progress

could be more clearly defined and therefore better understood. For example, if a class is given an assignment to write a story about an important photo in their life, and a rubric is given as to what the expectations are for that assignment to meet or exceed expectations, shouldn't a students' work be compared to their previous work instead of a general one size fits all expectation? If Dru is an amazing writer and writes a somewhat lackluster piece that still meets the criteria for the assignment, whereas Tanya puts in her heart and soul, and compared to her last piece of writing sees a huge difference, however doesn't quite meet the criteria, should she be penalized and Dru be rewarded? Should the criteria of the rubric be changed? Should standards be lowered? Highered? How can one rubric fit every students' needs?

In the second article, Morgan (year of publication) discusses physiological brain research that supports the use of differentiated instruction. "When students are in a learning situation their brain releases noradrenaline– a hormone affecting learning. If learners become frustrated because the content is too difficult, they release too much noradrenaline, which leads to withdrawal or inappropriate conduct. Instruction below the level of student readiness is also detrimental; when pupils are instructed in this manner, fewer chemicals are released, a practice leading many above average learners to a less stimulating classroom environment" (p. #). When students are appropriately challenged, enough so that there is frustration in the work, but not so much that it's undoable, students have a chance to push themselves to grow and succeed. The problem is that this level, this point of frustration in the work, is different for every student.

In a Leave No Child Behind America, where standardized testing reigns supreme, the idea that students need only to grow as individuals and not meet a specific standard seems untenable. However, at High Tech High, where we are given more freedom in the classroom to evaluate students how we see fit, does a one size fits all approach make sense? It doesn't. If Dru can finish an assignment in 10 minutes and be bored for the rest of class, while Talya spends the entire class time pushing herself only to not make the grade, what does that say about our system? Advice I get from other teachers is to have Dru help Talya, and though this is great, Dru has been helping Talyas his entire time at HTH, and Talya likewise has been helped by Drus. I don't want to have to tell Dru he needs to help Talya, I want him to push himself harder in the work, even though he's technically already exceeded expectations. I also want to reward Talya for putting in the effort she puts in. It's the process, not the product. As Kieran and Anderson write, "When teachers value the process of learning and not just final grades, students' motivation for learning and risk-taking in learning increases. Teachers who praise effort, metacognition, task completion, and students' questions will deepen students' learning and foster the belief in the brain's plasticity" (Kieran and Anderson, 2019, p. #).

So what does this look like in practice? I'm not entirely sure, but I have some ideas. Students submit work at the beginning of the year in different categories, showing different skill sets, and create goals for themselves. Teachers meet with students one on one during class time to go over these goals and create working individual plans for student growth that can then be a framework for assessment later on in the year. Is intrinsic motivation and building the kinds of activities that students want to do well in on for their own sake important? Yes, 100%. Is it enough? I don't believe it is. By bringing personalized learning and personalized standards into the grading system, we as teachers have the chance to up the game as to what is possible in school. In this way we can create a classroom that not only is differentiated in the teaching but also in the expectations of the students.

Annotated Bibliography

Kieran, Laura, and Christine Anderson. "Connecting Universal Design for Learning With Culturally Responsive Teaching." *Education and Urban Society*, no. 9, SAGE Publications, July 2018, pp. 1202–16. *Crossref*, doi:10.1177/0013124518785012.

Morgan, Hani. "Maximizing Student Success with Differentiated." *The Clearing House,* Routledge , 2014, doi:10.1080/00098655.2013.832130.