Module 1 Reflection:

Bridging the Divide in Differentiated Instruction

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The debate between James Delisle (2015) and Carol Ann Tomlinson (2015) regarding differentiated instruction (DI) represents one of the central tensions in educational leadership: the conflict between the ideal of equitable, personalized learning and the practical reality of teacher capacity. Delisle argues that differentiation is a "farce" because it places impossible demands on teachers in heterogeneous classrooms, while Tomlinson contends it is a non-negotiable ethical imperative to ensure every student grows.

As an aspiring administrator, I believe viewing these positions as mutually exclusive is a mistake. Instead, both perspectives offer critical data points for leadership. Delisle identifies the symptoms of a broken system—lack of support and "conventional" isolation—while Tomlinson identifies the necessary cure: a growth-oriented, equitable pedagogy. To implement differentiation effectively, a principal must accept Delisle's warnings about teacher burnout while aggressively pursuing Tomlinson's vision through systemic support, specifically aligned with the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's (ODEW) Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

The Validity of the Critique: Organizational Barriers

Delisle (2015) accurately identifies that asking a single teacher to differentiate for a vast spectrum of abilities without support is a "recipe for academic disaster." This concern is supported by sociological research on school organization. Domina et al. (2019) found that "tracking" is not a monolith but a complex set of organizational choices; simply "detracking" (creating the heterogeneous environments Delisle criticizes) without sensitivity to skill variance can negatively impact student achievement. Furthermore, Gulosino and Miron (2020) found that as educational management organizations (EMOs) "scale up" to manage large networks of 10 or more

schools, they are statistically more likely to adopt "traditional" and teacher-centered curricula—such as "back to basics" models—to achieve economies of scale (p. 291). This supports Delisle's implicit argument: the natural gravity of large school systems pulls toward standardization, making authentic differentiation difficult without intentional counter-measures. (Delisle, 2015).

The Necessity of the Vision: Affect and Equity

However, abandoning differentiation in favor of rigid homogeneous grouping, as Delisle suggests, is not a viable solution for a leader committed to equity. Tomlinson (2015) argues that such grouping often creates a "pedagogy of poverty" for lower-track students. Instead, she advocates for a "teach up" approach, where teachers plan instruction for the most advanced learners first and then scaffold that rigorous curriculum so that all students can access it. This ensures that struggling learners are lifted into complex thinking rather than relegated to remedial drills.

This perspective is reinforced by psychological research on student motivation. Arens and Hasselhorn (2015) found that elementary students distinguish between competence (skill) and affect (enjoyment), and that "affect self-perceptions were found to be more strongly associated with school effort than competence self-perceptions" (pp. 412-413). If schools fail to differentiate by interest and passion—focusing only on low-level skill drills—they risk disengaging the very mechanism that drives student effort. Therefore, Tomlinson's strategy of providing "plus-one learning"—ensuring every student moves forward from their starting point—is not just ethically sound but psychologically necessary to maintain the engagement required for growth .

Implications for Leadership and MTSS

The solution lies in Glickman et al.'s (2017) concept of "SuperVision"—using leadership as the "glue" that unifies individual teacher needs with school goals (p. 9). As a principal, I plan to bridge the gap between Delisle and Tomlinson by fostering a "collegial" rather than "conventional" school environment (Glickman et al., 2017, p. 6). In a conventional school, teachers are isolated, making DI an impossible burden (Delisle's scenario). In a collegial school, DI is a shared responsibility.

This approach aligns directly with the ODEW's focus on MTSS, which relies on high-quality Tier 1 instruction for *all* students (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.). Differentiation is the engine of Tier 1. To ensure it works, I will implement the following strategies:

1. **Acknowledge the Burden:** I will validate Delisle's point by acknowledging that DI is difficult and cannot be done in isolation.

2. **Provide "Plus-One" Support:** Just as students need "plus-one learning" (Tomlinson, 2015), teachers need scaffolding. I will use the "supervisory glue" to facilitate collaborative planning time, allowing teachers to share the load of creating differentiated materials (Glickman et al., 2017).

3. **Focus on Affect:** Leveraging Arens and Hasselhorn's (2015) findings, I will encourage teachers to differentiate by *interest* (affect) as much as readiness, using frameworks like Project-Based Learning to make rigorous work engaging.

In conclusion, differentiation "works" only when leadership works. Delisle is right that we cannot legislate differentiation into existence in unsupported classrooms, but Tomlinson is right that we cannot ethically abandon it. The role of the principal is to build the collaborative infrastructure that makes Tomlinson's vision possible without realizing Delisle's fears.

References

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