A Literature Review of Carol Ann Tomlinson’s “Learning Profiles and Achievement”
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Review by Erik Person

Few people would argue the philosophy behind Differentiated Instruction. What’s not to like? The idea of giving kids what they need to learn and recognizing that not all kids are the same sure sounds like doing what is best for kids. But that is where the wheels fall off. If all teachers only did what they believe is best for kids, or what the research shows is best for kids, then what would education look like in this country? It would probably look a lot like it does now, a lot of dedicated people doing different things and not agreeing on what is best. Carol Ann Tomlinson is the chair of the educational leadership department at the University of Virginia and is the guru of Differentiated Instruction. She has written books on differentiating content, process, and product, as well as how to differentiate by readiness, interest, and learning profile. One of the problems with Differentiated Instruction is that it is a little bit complicated. A teacher must understand what to differentiate, as well as how to differentiate. It can be a little bit daunting. Tomlinson’s article in The School Administrator tackles some of the debate around learning profiles and asks how important learning profiles are in student learning. While the piece is written with a little bit of a slant towards administrators and how to lead staff members through this debate, it would be valuable to both teachers and administrators.

The opening paragraphs of the article take the reader through a hypothetical conversation between five teachers, and, predictably, they do not agree. One teacher advocates teaching to learning styles, while another thinks that intelligence preferences are the real deal. Yet another teacher thinks that the first two are off base because if a student’s skill level or readiness does not allow the student to grasp the concept at hand, then it does not matter how it is taught. The fourth teacher, and we all know this one, says she is too busy to present content in different ways. There is just too much to cover to get kids ready for the tests. The fifth teacher is new, and he just wishes someone would tell him what to do. The opening conversation does ask the reader to identify with one of the modes of thinking before delving into the deeper question of how learning profiles impact student achievement.

One of the most helpful parts of the article is where Tomlinson explains the difference between learning style, learning profile, and intelligence preference. She then goes on to explain the difference between the two prevailing theories on intelligence preference, Gardner’s eight or nine intelligences and Sternberg’s analytical, practical, and creative intelligences. Without giving away the meat of the article, I can say that Tomlinson gives the reader some valuable insight, as well as offering a little hope to those who are overwhelmed at the prospect of differentiation. Tomlinson also reminds educators that learning profiles are only part of Differentiated Instruction, so that perspective gives a helpful caveat to
the whole debate. It is refreshing to read something in which an education guru takes a critical look at her own theories and their place in the overall landscape of education in today’s world. Check out the full article on p. 28 of the February 2009 edition of *The School Administrator*. It is a pretty quick read that is worth the time, especially if you have tried to tackle Differentiated Instruction in your school.