

Demystifying Differentiation in Middle School: Tools, Strategies, & Activities to Use Now. Eidson, C., Iseminger, B., & Taibbi, C.

For middle school teachers who are just getting started with differentiation, this book and its accompanying CD are an excellent resource. It has good, solid, basic information about differentiation explained in a clear, accessible way. Furthermore, tools and strategies for differentiating instruction are well summarized, without any excess verbiage. In addition, specific examples of lessons for middle-school students of all ability levels are provided for language arts, math, science, and social studies. A concluding chapter on assessment, although brief, includes some very practical pointers for teachers who can be very overwhelmed with the ideas of assessing students' performance when the entire class is not all involved in identical learning experiences.

The CD is a highly useful adjunct to this book. All tiered assignments, R.A.F.T.s, (an acronym for Role, Audience, Format, and Topic), Think-Tac-Toes, and Complex Instruction activities in the book are found on the CD. The files are in Microsoft WORD and can be customized and saved on your computer or storage device. You cannot save them on the CD, which is a good thing, since you won't accidentally overwrite the files on there.

In terms of providing appropriate instruction for gifted middle school students, the tiered activities in each of the "big four" subject areas provide clear and very effective guidance for teaching those at "Tier 3", the highest level. This is a major strength of this book and CD and would be immediately useful to teachers. One "red flag" that jumps out to anyone looking it over from the perspective of concern for gifted middle schoolers is in the section on "Complex Instruction" which the authors describe as "an effective and sensible answer to the question of how to group students in mixed-readiness groups while ensuring a meaningful learning experience for all involved" (Eidson, Iseminger, & Taibbi, 2007, p. 25). A long-standing problem with the much-touted middle school philosophy has been an overemphasis on heterogeneous grouping. Any even subtly-implied endorsement of this practice needs to be viewed with caution.

This is definitely a book for middle-school teachers and could be very valuable for those who have gifted students in their classrooms, whether formally identified or not. However, principals and curriculum directors may find it useful to review the contents of this book, as well as parents who are interested in seeing how differentiated instruction can be implemented at the middle school level.

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