DIFFERENTIATE AND DEMONSTRATE

10 Research-Based Strategies for Meeting Every Learner's Needs

A Practical Guide for Teachers

Expectations

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A Practical Guide for Teachers — Including When the Majority of Students Are Working Above Curriculum Expectations

Research-Referenced

Every strategy is grounded in peer-reviewed research and established educational frameworks.

Classroom-Ready

Practical approaches you can implement immediately in your teaching practice.

All Learners

Designed to meet the needs of struggling, on-track, and above-expectations students simultaneously.

Progress-Focused

Each strategy generates clear, trackable evidence of growth for every student.

Introduction: Two Goals, One Classroom

Effective teaching rests on two non-negotiable commitments. The first is **differentiation**: adapting instruction so that every student—regardless of readiness, interest, or learning profile—can access, engage with, and be challenged by the curriculum. The second is **progress**: ensuring that every student moves forward in their learning, and that this movement is visible and demonstrable. These two goals are not in tension. They are, in fact, inseparable.

Tomlinson (2014) argues that differentiation without ongoing attention to progress is aimless, and that tracking progress without differentiation produces data that masks the real picture of who is actually learning and who is simply performing. The two must work together.

Yet in practice, many teachers find the combination difficult. When a class contains students who are struggling, students who are on track, and students who are already working above curriculum expectations, the question becomes urgent: **How do I design lessons that genuinely meet everyone's needs, and at the same time produce clear evidence that all students—including those who are already ahead—are making meaningful progress?**

This last group—students already above expectations—presents a particular challenge. Research by Reis, Westberg, and colleagues (1993) found that academically capable students frequently spend substantial time in school repeating work they have already mastered. When this happens, progress stalls. The student appears successful, but they are not growing. And the teacher has no evidence to show that learning has moved forward.

This guide provides ten practical strategies that address both goals simultaneously. Each strategy is designed to help teachers differentiate for the full range of learners in the room—and at the same time generate clear, trackable evidence of progress for every student, with particular attention to how to keep driving forward those who are already exceeding the standard.

The 10 Strategies

1. Teach Up, Then Scaffold Down

What It Is:

Design the core lesson around the highest level of thinking you want to see—then build scaffolds downward so that every student can access it. This reverses the common practice of planning for the middle and stretching upward as an afterthought.

How It Differentiates:

Students who are below expectations receive structured scaffolding (sentence frames, graphic organisers, modelled examples) that gives them access to ambitious thinking. Students on track engage with the full challenge. Students above expectations meet a task that is genuinely demanding from the start—rather than finishing a too-easy task and being given an "extension."

In Practice:

In a persuasive writing lesson, the task for everyone is: **"Construct a counter-argument that anticipates and dismantles the strongest objection to your position."**

- Struggling writers receive a scaffold showing the structure of a counter-argument.
- On-track writers get an example to analyse first.
- Advanced writers get the task unassisted.

Everyone is working on the same high-level skill.

How It Shows Progress:

Because the baseline task is ambitious, every student's output reveals how far their thinking has developed. Struggling students show progress by producing increasingly independent work over time. Advanced students show progress through increasingly sophisticated reasoning. You track growth in depth, not just accuracy.

Reference: Tomlinson, C.A. (2014). The Differentiated Classroom (2nd ed.). ASCD.

2. Depth Escalators: Tasks With No Ceiling

What It Is:

Build layers of increasing complexity directly into every task. Instead of a task that students finish (and then need "more work"), the task itself deepens progressively. There is no endpoint—only escalating depth.

How It Differentiates:

Every student enters the same task but progresses to different layers based on their readiness. Struggling students consolidate foundational understanding. On-track students reach application. Advanced students push into analysis, evaluation, or creation—all within the same task structure.

In Practice:

Science lesson on ecosystems:

01

Identify the producers and consumers in this food web.

02

Predict what happens if one species is removed.

03

Design an intervention that could restore balance.

04

Evaluate whose economic interests your intervention affects.

Students self-escalate as they are ready.

How It Shows Progress:

You can literally see which layer each student reaches. Over a sequence of lessons, you track whether every student—at every level—is reaching deeper layers than before. For advanced students, this is especially powerful: **progress is visible even when they were already above expectations on Layer 1.**

References: Kaplan, S. (2009). Depth & Complexity Framework. USC Rossier School of Education. | Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Mind in Society. Harvard University Press.

3. Pre-Assess, Compact, and Redirect

What It Is:

Use short, targeted pre-assessments before each unit. Students who demonstrate mastery skip what they already know, and the reclaimed time is redirected into genuinely challenging work. Students who have gaps receive focused instruction on exactly what they need. This is curriculum compacting (Reis & Renzulli, 2005).

How It Differentiates:

Struggling students get more time and focused teaching on the content they need most. On-track students proceed normally. Advanced students are freed from repetitive content and redirected into enrichment, deeper investigation, or application tasks. Research found this approach saved high-ability students 40–50% of their time with no loss of achievement (Reis et al., 1993).

In Practice:

- Before a maths unit on fractions, give a 10-question diagnostic.
  - Students scoring below 60% receive intensive small-group instruction.
  - Students at 60–80% follow the standard sequence.
  - Students above 80% skip the introductory lessons and work on applying fractions to real-world contexts—adjusting recipes, calculating proportional scaling in design, or analysing sports statistics.

How It Shows Progress:

The pre-assessment documents where every student started. The post-assessment (or the replacement task output) documents where they ended. For advanced students, the replacement tasks generate evidence of skills that go beyond the curriculum—**evidence that would not exist if they sat through content they already knew.**

References: Reis, S.M. et al. (1993). Curriculum Compacting Study. NRC/GT, University of Connecticut. | Reis, S.M. & Renzulli, J.S. (2005). Curriculum Compacting. Prufrock Press.

4. Structured Peer Critique: Every Student as Evaluator and Creator

What It Is:

Train students to give and receive disciplined peer feedback using specific protocols. This is not casual "peer marking"—it is a structured intellectual practice that develops evaluative thinking, the ability to identify quality, and the skill of revising one's own work based on critique.

How It Differentiates:

Struggling students benefit from seeing models of stronger work and receiving specific, actionable feedback. On-track students sharpen their ability to articulate what makes work effective. Advanced students are pushed hardest by having to evaluate work at their own level or above—and by revising their own work to an even higher standard.

In Practice:

Use Austin's Butterfly protocol (Berger, 2003): a student presents their work, peers identify one specific strength and one specific area for improvement, and the creator revises. The cycle repeats. You collect draft 1 and draft 3 side by side as evidence of the learning journey.

This structured approach ensures feedback is actionable and revision is purposeful.

How It Shows Progress:

The revision arc is the progress. You have tangible before-and-after evidence for every student. For advanced students, the quality of critique they give to others also improves over time—a second, trackable strand of growth in analytical thinking that is often invisible in traditional assessment.

References: Berger, R. (2003). An Ethic of Excellence. Heinemann. | Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. Review of Educational Research, 77(1), 81–112.

5. Flip the Taxonomy: Open With Analysis, Not Recall

What It Is:

Invert Bloom's taxonomy as a lesson design principle. Instead of building from recall → understanding → application → analysis, open the lesson with an analytical or evaluative challenge and support students to fill knowledge gaps as they work through it.

How It Differentiates:

Every student engages with the same intellectually demanding question. Students who lack background knowledge access a resource pack, a glossary, or teacher support to build knowledge in context. Students who already have the knowledge can begin thinking at a higher level immediately. Nobody spends 20 minutes on recall they do not need.

In Practice:

- History lesson on the Industrial Revolution. Instead of "List three inventions," open with:

  "Was the Industrial Revolution a net positive or negative for ordinary people? Build your case using at least three pieces of evidence."

  A fact sheet and timeline are available for students who need them. The thinking challenge is immediate and universal.

How It Shows Progress:

Progress is visible in the sophistication of reasoning across all levels. A struggling student shows progress by moving from unsupported opinion to evidence-based argument. An advanced student shows progress by developing multi-perspective, nuanced analysis. Over a term, you can track this growth for every learner.

References: Anderson, L.W. & Krathwohl, D.R. (2001). A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing. Longman. | Tomlinson, C.A. & McTighe, J. (2006). Integrating DI & Understanding by Design. ASCD.

6. The Progress Ladder: Visible Learning Trajectories

What It Is:

Create a visible "progress ladder" for each lesson or sequence that shows 4–5 levels of mastery. The levels start below curriculum expectations, pass through the expected standard, and extend well beyond it. Share it with students at the start. Students self-assess where they are and set a target.

How It Differentiates:

Struggling students see the path to meeting the standard and receive targeted support to climb. On-track students see the next step and are motivated to stretch. Advanced students see levels beyond the curriculum that give them a genuine target—eliminating the "I'm already done" problem.

In Practice:

Fractions lesson:

01

Identify and name simple fractions

02

Simplify fractions

03

Compare fractions with unlike denominators

04

Solve multi-step word problems involving fractions

05

Create your own multi-step problem and explain why it requires specific operations, then identify and correct errors in a peer's solution

How It Shows Progress:

Every student has a documented starting level and ending level in every lesson. A struggling student who moved from Level 1 to Level 2 has clear progress. An advanced student who moved from Level 3 to Level 5 has equally clear progress. **The ladder makes growth visible for everyone—regardless of starting point.**

References: Hattie, J. (2009). Visible Learning. Routledge. | Wiliam, D. (2011). Embedded Formative Assessment. Solution Tree Press.

7. Expert Roles and Guided Inquiry: Everyone Builds Knowledge

What It Is:

Assign differentiated inquiry roles within the same topic. Rather than giving advanced students "more work" or using them as peer tutors (which does not grow their own learning), every student investigates a dimension of the topic suited to their level and brings new knowledge back to the group.

How It Differentiates:

Struggling students investigate a focused, scaffolded question that builds core understanding. On-track students investigate a broader question that extends their knowledge. Advanced students tackle a genuinely new dimension of the topic—something not covered in the curriculum—and present their findings as an "expert briefing." Every student contributes; no student merely helps others.

In Practice:

Unit on climate change:

Scaffolded group

"What are the three main causes of climate change?"

(with a structured reading pack)

On-track group

"How does climate change affect different regions differently?"

Advanced group

"What are the most debated proposed solutions to climate change, and what are the strongest arguments for and against each?"

All groups share their findings, building a richer collective understanding.

How It Shows Progress:

Every student produces work that is new to them. The scaffolded group demonstrates growing command of foundational concepts. The advanced group demonstrates research, synthesis, and evaluative skills that go beyond the curriculum. Each student's output is evidence of progress from their own starting point.

References: Renzulli, J.S. (1977). The Enrichment Triad Model. Creative Learning Press. | Tomlinson, C.A. (2001). How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms (2nd ed.).

8. The "So What?" Protocol: Driving Transfer Across Contexts

What It Is:

After any piece of learning, push every student to answer: **"You now know this. So what? Where else does this matter? Where else does this apply? What would change if it were not true?"** This drives transfer—the ability to apply learning beyond its original context—which the National Research Council identifies as one of the deepest markers of genuine understanding.

How It Differentiates:

The "So What?" question scales naturally. A struggling student might transfer within the same subject (applying addition skills to a simple shopping scenario). An on-track student might transfer across subjects (using ratio skills in a science experiment). An advanced student tackles a complex, unfamiliar context (applying ratios to a hospital pharmacy risk assessment). The question is the same; the depth of transfer varies.

In Practice:

After a unit on percentages:

Scaffolded task

"You see a shirt on sale for 30% off. What do you actually pay?"

On-track task

"A news article says crime rose by 15%. The actual numbers went from 20 to 23 incidents. Is 15% a fair description? Why or why not?"

Advanced task

"A pharmaceutical company claims a drug reduces symptoms by 50%. Evaluate this claim using the raw data provided."

How It Shows Progress:

Transfer tasks reveal whether students truly understand a concept or merely perform procedures. Over time, you track each student's ability to apply learning in increasingly unfamiliar and complex contexts. This is progress that traditional tests cannot capture.

Reference: Bransford, J.D. et al. (2000). How People Learn. National Academies Press.

9. Student-Designed Success Criteria: Owning the Standard

What It Is:

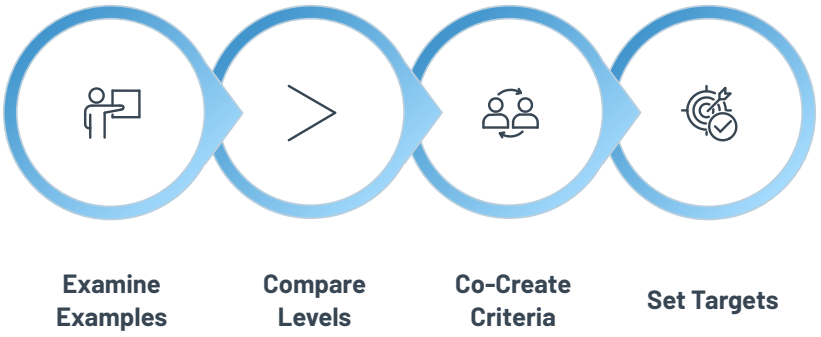
Instead of the teacher alone defining what success looks like, involve students in co-designing success criteria—including criteria that go beyond the minimum curriculum standard. Research shows that when students take ownership of quality, they set higher expectations for themselves than teachers typically would (Wiliam, 2011).

How It Differentiates:

Struggling students benefit from seeing and discussing concrete examples of quality—it makes the standard tangible and achievable. On-track students develop metacognitive awareness of what separates "good" from "excellent." Advanced students are challenged to define their own personal "exceptional" target, which pushes them far beyond what a teacher-set criterion would demand.

In Practice:

Show students three examples of the same piece of work: one that meets the standard, one that exceeds it, and one that is exceptional. Have them identify what makes each level different. Together, build criteria for each level. Each student then writes their personal target before beginning the task, and self-assesses against it at the end.



This process transforms students from passive recipients to active architects of their own learning standards.

How It Shows Progress:

You have student-generated evidence of ambition (their chosen criteria) and achievement (their self-assessment). Over time, the criteria students set for themselves become more sophisticated—for struggling students, this means raising their sights; for advanced students, it means deepening their understanding of quality. **Both are trackable progress in metacognitive skill.**

References: Wiliam, D. (2011). Embedded Formative Assessment. Solution Tree Press. | Tomlinson, C.A. & Moon, T.R. (2013). Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom. ASCD.

10. The Progress Portfolio: Cumulative Evidence of Growth for All

What It Is:

A "Progress Portfolio" where every student collects curated evidence of their own growth over time. Unlike a showcase portfolio of best work, this deliberately includes early drafts, revisions, reflections, and before-and-after comparisons. The portfolio tells the story of each student's learning journey.

How It Differentiates:

Every student's portfolio is unique to them. A struggling student's portfolio might show movement from basic recall to supported analysis. An on-track student's might show growing independence. An advanced student's might show increasingly sophisticated thinking, creative application, or the development of new questions. Each portfolio respects where the student started and celebrates how far they have come.

In Practice:

- Each half-term, every student selects three pieces of work: beginning, middle, and end of the period. For each piece, they write a short reflection:

  "What can I do now that I could not do before? What changed in my thinking?"

  The teacher adds brief annotations linking each student's growth to specific learning objectives. In progress reviews and parent conferences, the portfolio provides rich, qualitative evidence of advancement.

How It Shows Progress:

This is the most powerful tool for demonstrating progress across all levels. For struggling students, it shows the journey toward the standard. For advanced students, it shows the journey beyond it. It shifts evidence from "did they pass the test?" to "how has their thinking grown?"—a question that is meaningful for every learner in the room.

References: Tomlinson, C.A. (2014). The Bridge Between Today's Lesson and Tomorrow's. Educational Leadership, 71(6), 10–14. | Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and Classroom Learning. Assessment in Education, 5(1), 7–74.

Bringing It All Together

These ten strategies are a toolkit, not a checklist. Select two or three that align with your current context and embed them deeply before adding more. What unites them all is a dual commitment: to genuine differentiation that respects every learner, and to visible progress that can be tracked, documented, and communicated.

Strategy Summary: Differentiation and Progress at a Glance

1. Teach Up	Access via scaffolding	Full challenge	Demanding from the start
2. Depth Escalators	Consolidate foundations	Reach application	Push into evaluation
3. Pre-Assess & Compact	Focused instruction	Standard sequence	Skip to enrichment
4. Peer Critique	Models of quality	Sharpen evaluation	Critique at highest level
5. Flip Taxonomy	Resources to build knowledge	Immediate analysis	Multi-perspective nuance
6. Progress Ladders	See path to standard	See the next step	Levels beyond curriculum
7. Expert Roles	Scaffolded inquiry	Broader investigation	New knowledge building
8. "So What?"	Transfer within subject	Transfer across subjects	Complex unfamiliar contexts
9. Student Criteria	Tangible quality models	Define "excellent"	Define "exceptional"
10. Portfolios	Journey to standard	Journey of independence	Journey beyond standard

The underlying principle is drawn from Tomlinson's foundational insight: differentiation is not about giving different students different work. It is about ensuring that every student—wherever they start—is working at the edge of their capability, where real learning happens. And when learning happens at the edge, progress is not just possible—**it is inevitable, visible, and demonstrable.**

Key Principles for Implementation

Start Small

Select two or three strategies that align with your current context and embed them deeply before adding more.

Respect Every Learner

Genuine differentiation honors where each student starts and challenges them to grow from that point.

Make Progress Visible

Track, document, and communicate growth in ways that are meaningful for every learner in the room.

Work at the Edge

Ensure every student is working at the edge of their capability, where real learning happens.

What unites all ten strategies is a dual commitment: to genuine differentiation that respects every learner, and to visible progress that can be tracked, documented, and communicated. These are not competing priorities—they are two sides of the same coin.

When you design lessons that meet students where they are and push them forward from that point, you create classrooms where:

- Struggling students see a clear path to success and receive the support they need to get there
- On-track students are consistently challenged to deepen their understanding
- Advanced students encounter genuinely demanding work that extends beyond curriculum expectations
- Every student has evidence of their own growth, regardless of their starting point

This is not just good pedagogy—it is equitable pedagogy. It ensures that every learner, at every level, experiences the satisfaction of genuine intellectual challenge and the pride of documented progress.

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Differentiate & Demonstrate: 10 Research-Based Strategies for Visible Progress

FOUNDATIONS OF PROGRESS

The Danger of "Stalled" Progress

Research (Reis & Westberg, 1939) shows high-ability students often repect mastered work, leading to success without growth.

Differentiation vs. Progress

DIFFERENTIATION (How)
Adapting instruction to learners.

PROGRESS (Evidence)
Demonstrating visible movement in learning.

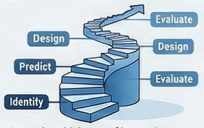
> **QUOTE:** "Differentiation is about ensuring every student is working at the edge of their capability, where real learning and inevitable progress happen." – **Carol Ann Tomiinson**

THE 10 STRATEGIES FOR DIFFERENTIATION

1. Teach Up, Then Scaffold Down

Plan for the highest level of thinking firat, then build scafteids (e.g., sentence frames, organizers) downward for access.

2. Depth Escelators (Tasks With No Coiling)



Design tasks with leyers of increasing complexity so students self-escalate as they are ready.

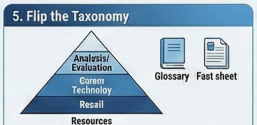
3. Pre-Assess, Compact, and Redirect

Use diagnostics to identify students who mastered content; they skip repetitive work for enrichment or deep application.

4. Structured Peer Critique

Use protocols like "Austin's Butterfly" to turn students into evaluators; the "revision are" shows tangible progress.

5. Flip the Taxonomy



Open lessons with analysis or evaluation challenges; provide resources for those who need to build knowledge in context.

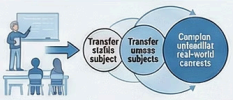
6. The Progress Ladder

Share 4–5 levels of mastery at the start; students self-assess their starting point and target the next level.

7. Expert Roles and Guided Inquiry

Assign differentiated roles within a topic so every student investigates a dimension suited to their level and contributes unique knowledge.

8. The "So What?" Protocol



Push students to transfer learning by asking where it applies elsewhere; transfer depth ranges from same subject to complex contexts.

9. Student-Designed Success Criteria

Involve students in co-designing the standard; high-ability students are pushed to define their own "exceptional" targets beyond the curriculum.

10. The Progress Portfolio

Collect drafts, reflections, and "before-and-after" comparisons to tall a qualitative story of growth that traditional tests often miss.

STRATEGY IMPACT BY LEARNER PROFILE

	1. Teach Up	2. Depth Escalaters	3. Pre-Access	4. Peer Cntique	5. Hip Tacnomy	6. Progress Ladders	7. Expert Roles	8. 'So What?'	9. Success Criteria	10. Portfolios
Struggling Learners	Access sts scelfolding	Consolidate foondations	Focused instruction	Models of quality	Knowledge-funcling resources	Peth to standard	Scaffolded inquiry	Transfer arfeite subject	Template quality models	Journey to standard
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