

Teacher Keynote Award Recipient, Marilyn Weichman's speech

When George first approached me about speaking today, I didn't quite understand that this opportunity was in place of the staff keynoter we have enjoyed the past several years on the opening day of school. Over the years, as I've listened to these other colleagues address us, I've thought about how challenging it must be to capture the attention of this group at a time when half their thoughts are still on summer vacation and the other half are focused on getting to their classrooms to prepare for the arrival of students. I've recently pondered whether you might be more receptive on this Monday in October, when summer memories have faded and the year is underway. However, at this point in what has already been a very full and interesting day, I suspect many of you are nearing the end of your attention spans, and wondering what I could possibly say that would add to your understanding of differentiation. I promise to be brief but would like to share with you some of the insights that I have gained during my tenure as a psychologist in this district. I've been here quite some time, long enough to earn four of the five longevity steps on the salary guide and achieve the dubious status of being one of the more "senior" members of this faculty. I was reminded of this fact just a few weeks ago when I realized that one of the new teachers on my Peer Leadership staff is the same age as my oldest daughter and the same age I was when I embarked on this adventure in South Brunswick. While thinking about my remarks for today, I had an even more shocking realization – many of you were not even born when I started my career! But I must say one of the things I've always liked about working in an educational setting is that it affords the opportunity to have friends and colleagues of all ages.

Much has changed in South Brunswick since my arrival in 1973. I can still vividly recall the day I came for my interview. I was living in Brooklyn Heights and working at the New York University Medical Center at that time so I didn't even own a car. My, at the time, fiancé and now husband, Gene, had just abandoned New York for a job in Somerville, so I too was looking to find employment in the suburbs. Jim Kimple, our superintendent at the time, had a reputation for being a dynamic and innovative educator and his fame was widespread. When my mentors and colleagues in New York learned I was looking for a school psych job in New Jersey, they advised me to find out which district Jim was in and apply there. Much to my surprise, South Brunswick was looking to hire not one, but two psychologists! So I borrowed Gene's car and set out on my trek to the country. Those of you who have been around for awhile will recall that back in those days the Board Office was on New Road, in that little building where Ridge Door is, across from the entrance to the Southridge townhouses. Not a very impressive facility, definitely more industrial than professional. As I double checked the address, I reassured myself with the thought that perhaps what the district was saving in overhead on administrative offices was being devoted to teacher salaries! How naïve and idealistic I was! If you remember that facility, you will also recall that the parking lot was literally under water about eight months of the year. So, after parking the car, my first challenge was to figure out how to get to the front door without hip boots. I glanced around for the hidden Candid Camera, wondering if this dilemma was part of the interview process. Fortunately, it was the era of the mini-skirt and I was actually able to wear them back

then. So, at least my hem wasn't dragging in the wet mud as I maneuvered to the entrance. My interview was with Bob Gavin, who back then was both the director of special services and the district psychologist. Yes, there was only one psychologist back then, as compared to our current nine! After our interview, he took me on a tour of the district in his Volkswagen beetle – one of the original Volkswagen beetles. Even though I had grown up in a small New Jersey town, Mountain Lakes in Morris County, I must admit that South Brunswick was a bit of culture shock. There was much open space and numerous farms, some with very modest homes for seasonal, migrant farm workers. I would later find myself visiting those migrant camps on many occasions to meet parents and encourage children to come to school.

Those of you who share early memories of South Brunswick similar to mine might be thinking that this idea of differentiated instruction is not really a new one. After all, you have always individualized for your students. That's what teaching is all about. Those who are younger and newer to teaching undoubtedly come armed with a wealth of theoretical knowledge about your craft. However, you may find yourselves overwhelmed with the varied demands of teaching, including preparing for and administering standardized assessments, compiling measures of adequate yearly progress and dealing with issues of behavior management. When you finally get down to the day to day business of teaching, how do you translate this theoretical knowledge into practice?

I recall that when I began my career in school psych, I felt that NYU had trained and prepared me very well. I was full of theory and fancied myself quite competent and expert. What I quickly discovered however, was that theoretical knowledge only gets you in the door. The real task is to figure out how to apply that knowledge to help you understand the uniqueness in each student. I learned that when I'm evaluating a student, the test instrument is only a vehicle for spending time with that student and gathering data about his abilities and learning style. It's not about numbers, scores or percentiles. I also learned that there is really no such thing as random behavior. Rather, all behavior is designed to communicate something. Children aren't always able to communicate clearly and directly, but it is our task to figure out their message. We complain when children persist with what we consider to be unacceptable and maladaptive behaviors, but their reputation occurs because we have not yet deciphered and acknowledged the communication. I'm not a teacher, but I suspect that in the classroom, the trick is to pay careful attention to these behaviors and to try to draw on your theoretical base to make sense of what you are observing. Use the theory to help you understand the child, but don't make the mistake of assuming that your favorite learning model or strategy will work with every student. As we all know, and have been reminded of today, one size does not fit all and is an approach which often results in our overlooking the unique needs and abilities of some of our students.

Today we have had the opportunity to explore this notion of differentiation both theoretically and practically. I believe it is important to recognize that, unlike many of the latest fads we have experienced in education, the instruction and assessment strategies for differentiated instruction stem from a well developed and legitimate theoretical foundation. Although research continues to support an underlying, global aspect of

intelligence, cognitive ability is not a one-dimensional construct. Rather, contemporary research has identified numerous abilities which comprise intelligence. It is our understanding of these multiple facets of intelligence that has generated broader models of instruction. So, while it may be true that good teachers have always individualized their instruction, our understanding of the varied ways in which students learn has increased, which has in turn fostered the development of more diverse instruction strategies and techniques.

So, the obvious benefits of this differentiated approach to teaching are that we are now able to more successfully engage more students in more meaningful, productive learning. At the same time, however, we are teaching a valuable lesson about the nature of individual differences. We are acknowledging that, just as we are diverse in so many other ways, we are diverse in the ways we learn. There is no “right way” or “best way.” And a different learning style is not necessarily a disabled learning style. Differentiation demonstrates that we value each individual’s talent or strength. A differentiated classroom sends a powerful message about acceptance and tolerance and celebrates, rather than penalizing, individual differences.

South Brunswick has experienced incredible growth and change during the thirty years I have worked here. However, despite all the changes, I believe that much has stayed the same. Kids are still kids and the developmental tasks of growing up are basically the same as they have always been. Children still need to learn how to separate from family, develop interpersonal skills, establish a sense of self, and begin to dream about who they want to become. The culture around us may have changed, but, by and large, kids still want to feel that they are safe and accepted, that they fit in and belong, that they can learn and be successful, that they can become productive and competent. And this applies to all kids, regardless of their social or behavioral skills, cognitive abilities, or learning style.

While differentiated instruction offers us some valuable new learning tools and strategies, it is important to note that South Brunswick has always done a pretty good job of providing an inclusive, nurturing, personalized environment. Although I have spent most of my career at the high school, my early years also included assignments at Crossroads, Monmouth Junction, Constable and Brunswick Acres, as well as time at Greenbrook and Cambridge collecting data for my dissertation. As I have worked with so many of you across this district, I have found you to be open, accepting, creative and flexible towards all types of students. In fact, I have come to realize that we do a better job educating even our most challenging students than do most of the out-of-district placements that specialize in educating special needs students. That is not to say that there aren’t some students who benefit from such a placement. But in the majority of cases, both the special needs student and his or her general ed peers are enriched by placement within our community.

Teaching is a formidable job and an awesome responsibility. Its serious work, but make sure to enjoy yourself and have fun while you’re doing it. Aside from terrific colleagues, one of the nicest things about working at the high school is that I have been

able to witness the fruits of all your labor as the children you have taught grow into young adults, finally cross the finish line and move out into the world. I've seen hundreds and hundreds of success stories here – students with very unique and varied needs who have been able to find their niche here and realize their potential. I believe you should all be very proud of the work you have done and continue to do.