Introduction: I Just Can't Do That in MY School/ Classroom/Situation

Teachers and the teaching profession have problems. No one disputes that. Put a group of teachers in a room, and our favorite topic of discussion is undeniable: problems! Let's just get them out of the way right now.

We don't have enough books.

We don't have enough chairs.

We don't have enough power outlets.

The technology doesn't work.

We have no funds for materials.

Our class sizes are too big.

Our absentee rates are too high.

Our students don't come to class prepared.

We cannot get parent involvement.

We get too much parent involvement.

We don't get parental support.

The legislature mandates new programs but forgets to fund them.

Our per pupil expenditure is too low.

The fire drill went off at the wrong time.

There are too many assemblies.

The athletes were pulled from seventh period—again!

I can't get an administrator in my room.

I can't get an administrator out of my room.

There are more native languages than students in my room.

The paperwork is overwhelming.

I have five separate preps this year.

They've locked the supply room.

The copy machine is out of order.

They just told me I'm coaching girls' soccer.

I can't be sick; we have no subs.

Whew. I'll bet you could fill another 10 pages with problems I haven't even mentioned. And they are all very legitimate and valid problems.

Let me state a strong philosophy of mine right up front. I subscribe to the 80-20 rule for problems. When there is a problem, let's spend 20 percent of our time, effort, and energy describing and discussing the problem and 80 percent of our time, effort, and energy discussing and looking for solutions.

So let's start by accepting that yes, there are problems in education and the teaching profession. This book will touch on some. Accept problems as part of the professional calling we all heard. Now let's really put our energy into some solutions. Absolutely anyone can talk about problems, but it takes real skill and creativity to work out solutions.

TEACHERS ARE CREATIVE PEOPLE

The tougher the problem, the more creative we must be. When teachers share with me the various difficult situations they are in, I respond, "Rejoice—you've been given a wonderful opportunity to show your ingenuity and creative genius."

Struggles build character and intelligence. I once consulted for a school at a state correctional institution. The teachers there could have textbooks, ruled 8½ × 11 inch notebook paper, and golf pencils in their room. That's it. Yes, golf pencils, those stubby pencils with no eraser. (Erasers apparently could be chewed into some kind of gummy thing and put in the locks.) They did get chalk and a chalkboard, but the chalk was kept under lock and key.

Could you teach geometry, biology, U.S. history, art, or whatever discipline you excel in, in a creative manner at this school? Could you use lots of hands-on activities and differentiate to this very high-risk population with very low literacy skills?

Your response is probably similar to what mine was: "Wow, we better get creative!"

Opportunity knocks in mysterious ways. Take advantage. Or as my father always said, "You have to play the cards you're dealt."

I've tried in my adult life to stay focused on the positive, focused on the solutions. The tougher it gets, the more I call on my creative juices.

LAUGH AND THE WORLD LAUGHS WITH YOU

One of the easiest ways to start your creative juices flowing is by finding the humor in any situation. Even when enmeshed in some extremely trying circumstances, try to find a reason to laugh, at yourself and the situation. You know the old adage, "If you don't laugh, you'll cry." Well, it may apply to your world some days.

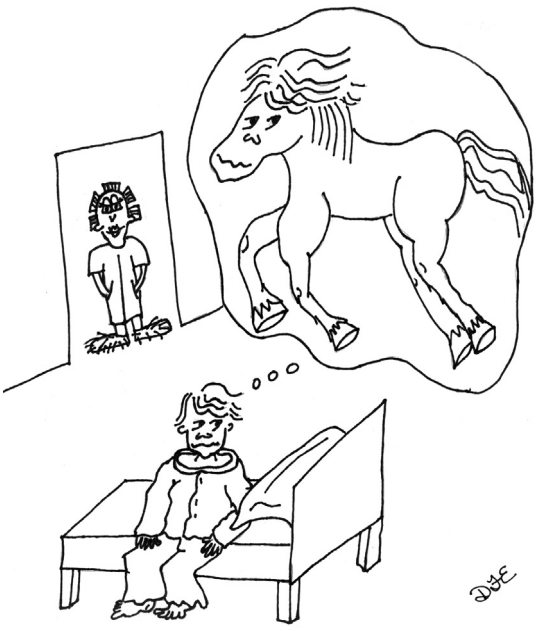
People are often amazed that I can make fun of my adult life and laugh at my situation. But I do—on a very regular basis. I laugh at myself and about my children and my classroom. At first glance many events in my adult life may seem quite tragic. I look at all these events as golden opportunities. And I'm the first to admit that I've had more than my share of golden opportunities. For, you see, I am a regular education teacher but a special-education parent with a penchant for brain research and biology.

I must include in this introduction a bit of personal history so that you can better see my bias and perspective on this topic of inclusion and differentiated instruction. Thus far, you know me as a writer. But in my spare time I am also the mother of four children. I have one of everything. Literally no matter how you view it, I have a little of everything. I have one in college, one in high school, one in middle school, and one in elementary school. I have one African American, one Native American, and two Irish Americans. I have three boys and one girl. I have one with autism, one with traumatic brain injury, and one with dyslexia. I have one Boy Scout, one Girl Scout, one engineer, and one runner. I have one math genius, one sleepwalker, one actor, and one plain ol' crazy kid. I've been surrounded by research projects in regular and special education.

I'll also mention here that, just for fun, in my backyard I also have 28 chickens. Actually 27 hens and one rooster, named Ed. My daughter named the rooster "King Edward" as a youngster, then "Mean Ol' Ed" when Ed got older. (If you've ever raised chickens, you know how mean the roosters get when they grow up.) Ed had a stroke last summer and lost the use of one of his legs, so now he's a one-legged rooster we call "Special Ed."

I promise I'm not making any of this up. So you see, you can't scare me—I've seen it all.

My research projects began more than 20 years ago. Unable to have children, we adopted a son. After six years of waiting, our son arrived as a beautiful, 14-day-old baby, who turned out to have autism. The trials and tribulations of raising my son could fill a book (and one day will, I hope). I'll save the details of life with Keegan for another book, but I will mention here that I learned a few things from raising a son with autism. Did you know they don't generalize well? They take things literally. So when your son wakes up with a scratchy throat one morning, do not say to him, "Keegan, I think you're a little hoarse this morning," because if you do, you'll get a response like "you mean I'm not a little boy anymore!?"



After a few more years and miracles, we were able to adopt a daughter. Our beautiful new baby girl appeared to be finishing her first year as "completely normal"—much to our delight. Her first birthday was celebrated in a neighboring city with extended family. On the icy drive home on the interstate, a drunk driver hit us head-on. The bulk of the car came in on our daughter, and our beautiful little girl lost areas of her frontal lobes.

Before I had children, my brain research focused on serial killers. My master's project compared premeditated murderers with affective murderers. At the time, THAT seemed interesting to me. Needless to say, the focus of my brain research changed with motherhood.

Now rearing two special education children, my research on the brain took two new directions. While at the time I did not fully appreciate the value of the situation, what a wonderful opportunity I have had to look at and work with autism and other pervasive development disorders as well as traumatic brain injury and brain plasticity.

My grandmother would tell me, "Kathie, the good Lord doesn't give us more than we can handle. But I'm praying for you. I pray to Him every day to leave you alone!"

After 15 years of marriage and several years of raising two children with special needs, a new surprise—a pregnancy and the birth of our son Keller. Our first "regular education" child arrived in school only to hit his own snag by the end of first grade. A family history of dyslexia raised its ugly head for our brilliant son. (By the way, one nice thing about adopted

children is that you don't curse them with family genetic faults.) And so an IEP meeting was scheduled for child number three as well. By now a pro at IEP meetings, I came prepared with my own IEP already written up, with copies for everyone in the room.

Our fourth miracle arrived on the scene in the meantime. (We needed one for the gifted-and-talented pool, didn't we?) Actually, he has not come up with a disability yet, but he's only in the second grade, so we'll give him another year or two before we start to panic.

Unbelievable? That's what I have said many times. An opportunity for learning and for creativity? You bet. For a regular education teacher with a penchant for brain research, this has been the opportunity of a lifetime (mine).

And so I write and share what I've learned from the wonderful opportunities I've been given. I write both as a special education parent and as a regular education high school teacher who has always worked with the lowest of socioeconomic students in both urban and suburban communities.

The most important thing I've learned is that sometimes you just have to laugh at yourself and your situation. You have to.

One of the other things I've learned as a teacher, parent, and brain researcher is that no two children match. Every single brain in our room is unique and special and deserves to be treated that way. No single teaching method is going to be successful with all children, because no two children are the same. So we never need to ask *why* we should differentiate instruction but rather *how* can we differentiate instruction.

And just as no two students match, no two teachers match either. Therefore one particular model will not work with all teachers. We need to look for a variety of teaching methodologies and generate ideas with enough latitude that teachers can fit them to their teaching style and their comfort level. My hope is that this book will help generate some ideas in your own creative mind that will be useful to you in your particular classroom with your particular population.

SO WHAT IS DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION?

Differentiated instruction is simply providing instruction in a variety of ways to meet the needs of a variety of learners. While the term may be fairly new in education, the idea is not. As long as adults have been working with children, we've known that they learn in different fashions. More than half a century ago, educators were writing of the need for differentiation.

The term has come to the surface in a significant manner in the last couple of decades because of several major changes. First, recent research on the brain and how it learns has reinforced the idea that students do in fact learn in a variety of ways (Howard, 1994; Restak, 1995; Sylwester, 1995,

2003; Sousa, 2001; Nunley, 2002, 2003a). The elaborate pruning process we see in the brain during childhood makes it nearly statistically impossible for any two brains to match. The plasticity of the brain—the tremendous flexibility in what functions get put where and how many neurons get dedicated to particular tasks—gives physical proof of the need for a variety of teaching strategies.

Second, the past half century has seen the portion of U.S. teens enrolled in high school jump from 69 percent to 95 percent. This increase has forced the issue of differentiation. Our most significant educational change has been our shift from a selection process, whereby students of one predominant culture, ability, and learning style could attend, to a system of complete open enrollment.

Finally, differentiation has been taken on as a political agenda. Hard numbers have shown the public that traditional teaching methods are not working when applied to large numbers of the public's children. And that public is demanding change. The American dream is attached to the American school, and our society is now insisting that we accommodate everyone.

Fortunately most teachers embrace these ideas and fully support the view that all students should be successful. What trips up the process is that most high school teachers feel unprepared for their role in a differentiated classroom. And yet most teachers will find that, when they apply some simple tips and suggestions, differentiation in a high school classroom isn't just easy; it's actually a very enjoyable event. Join me as we look at some of the more common obstacles and objections among our colleagues and some very simple-to-implement solutions that make teaching—and learning—in a differentiated classroom a most exciting experience.