

A message to teachers

Stepping onto the stage

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

- Henry David Thoreau

This is the book that I wish I had 10 years ago when I entered the world of teaching as a scared pre-service teacher, hoping to make sure I could bring out the best in all of my students – a book that would guide me to better understand not only what differentiation is, but how to implement it efficiently and effectively. Over the course of my career, I have seen teachers differentiate really well, and I have seen teachers differentiate poorly or not at all – propelling me to complete a PhD in this area, looking at the reasons why teachers choose to differentiate or not. I found that teachers had varied understandings of what differentiation was, but above all, many teachers did not know how to implement it in ways that allowed them to utilise it every day or with confidence.

I have been extremely lucky in that I have been inside many classrooms throughout my career, observing and giving feedback to teachers to improve their skills in differentiation and inclusive education practices. I first started as a teacher aide during my university days, helping students and teachers in differentiating curriculum, moving into various teaching and leadership roles, and most recently, lecturing at Flinders University on inclusion and diversity topics. I have also been lucky enough to work with some fantastic colleagues who are highly skilled differentiators, crafting classrooms that provide equitable learning experiences for all. I have learned a lot from these teachers.

As I started to think about this book, I started wondering about all of the ways teachers have been described in today’s society. We hear these descriptions

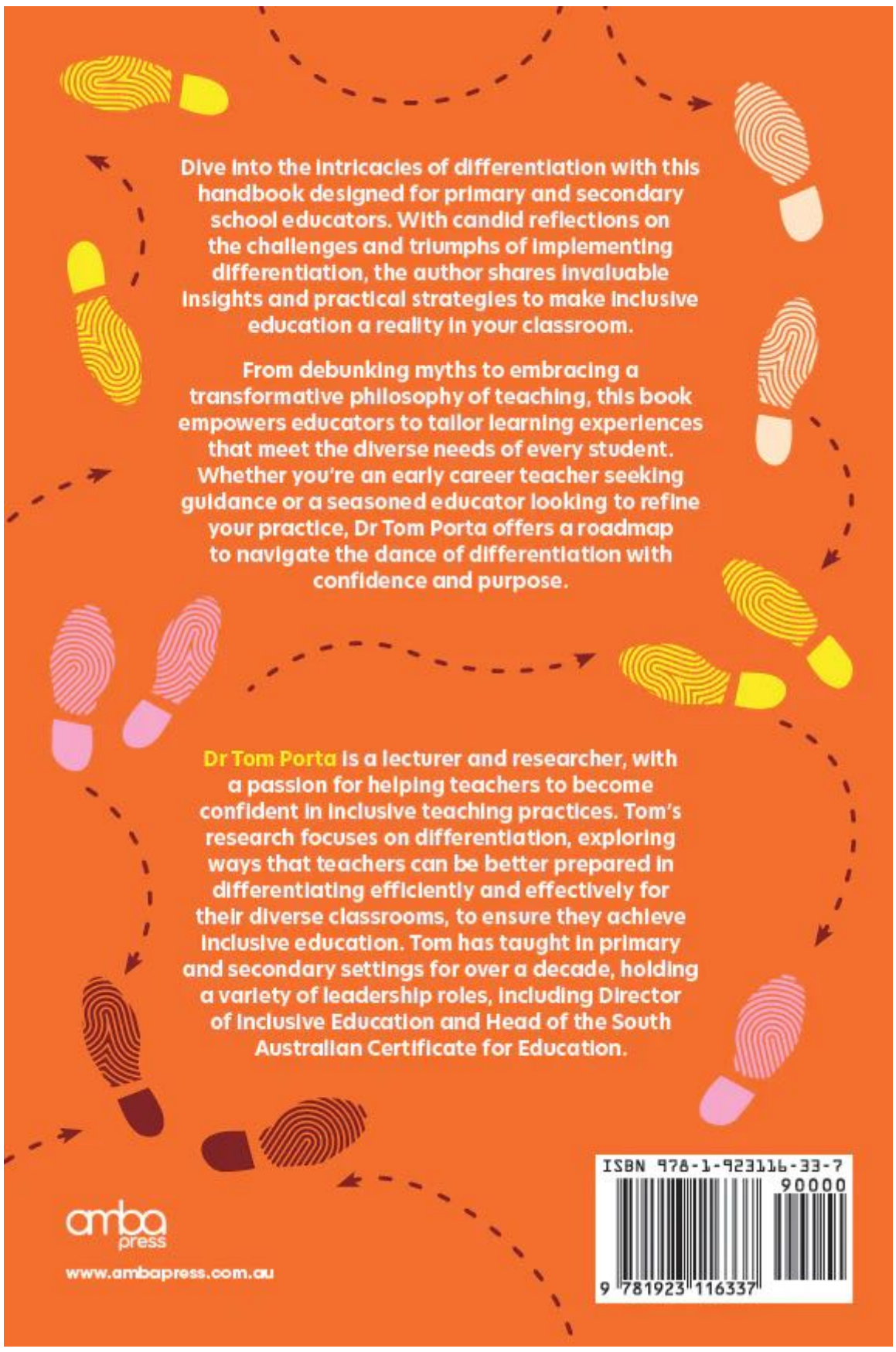
Introduction

*“To dance is to be out of yourself. Larger, more beautiful,
more powerful.” – Agnes de Mille*

Differentiation is one of the most challenging, misunderstood and rewarding approaches to teaching I have taken throughout my whole career. I remember graduating from university having learned about differentiation, thinking, “How can I do this? How will I be able to do this in every lesson of every day to cater to the needs of my students?” I felt overwhelmed.

I can tell you here and now that the first few times I tried to implement differentiation, it did not go well. I felt that I was losing control of my classroom and that my role as the teacher was being diminished because students were moving all over the place, changing groups, having more independence in the classroom, which I felt I should not be giving. Perhaps this was because, as a student and as a pre-service teacher, I had observed many teachers teaching to the middle of the class, standing at the front and teaching in front of the whiteboard, while students sat in uniform rows and never moved from their spots. Interaction was minimal. This was not what I wanted from my classroom. It was not all doom and gloom, though, because I observed some outstanding teachers who differentiated incredibly well, and I could see the benefits this had on their students – this propelled me to want to be a better differentiator.

I realised that, to develop my skills in differentiation, I had to let go of some of the teaching practices that I had seen and were perhaps engrained into me. In particular, I had to let go of teaching at the front of the classroom, lecturing to students from the whiteboard, hoping all my students understood my instruction. This was what I had observed too much during my university practicums. I had to let myself make mistakes but really be willing to give different differentiation practices a go. I recognised, along the way, that differentiation was more than just a set of strategies – that I needed to change my whole philosophy of teaching, recognising that I wanted all my students, no matter their knowledge and skills, to be included in my



Dive into the intricacies of differentiation with this handbook designed for primary and secondary school educators. With candid reflections on the challenges and triumphs of implementing differentiation, the author shares invaluable insights and practical strategies to make inclusive education a reality in your classroom.

From debunking myths to embracing a transformative philosophy of teaching, this book empowers educators to tailor learning experiences that meet the diverse needs of every student. Whether you're an early career teacher seeking guidance or a seasoned educator looking to refine your practice, Dr Tom Porta offers a roadmap to navigate the dance of differentiation with confidence and purpose.

Dr Tom Porta is a lecturer and researcher, with a passion for helping teachers to become confident in inclusive teaching practices. Tom's research focuses on differentiation, exploring ways that teachers can be better prepared in differentiating efficiently and effectively for their diverse classrooms, to ensure they achieve inclusive education. Tom has taught in primary and secondary settings for over a decade, holding a variety of leadership roles, including Director of Inclusive Education and Head of the South Australian Certificate for Education.

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ISBN 978-1-923116-33-7



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