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DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION TO MEET THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF ALL STUDENTS AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE MACEDONIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In a world where schools are held accountable for performance and improvement as measured by high-stakes tests, a uniform teaching-to-the-test methodology is failing to meet the needs of the diverse range of students in today's classrooms. The paper analyses how differentiated instruction can provide inclusive learning environment for all pupils including those with special educational needs. It delves into the benefits of using differentiated instruction across the curriculum, looks at a number of practical and effective strategies and effective activities that can be applied and reflects on the relevance of differentiated instruction to the Macedonian context.

Key words: differentiated instruction, education, inclusion, Macedonia



Schools are like airport hubs; student passengers arrive from many different backgrounds for widely divergent destinations. Their particular takeoffs into adulthood will demand different flight plans.

(Levine, 2002:336)

INTRODUCTION

Teachers everywhere recognize that all students are not the same, and yet, schools often put students through the same programs. Different studies about human brains as well as practice show us that students are not similar; they have different needs and preferences. Just as we would not try and fit all students into the same uniform, we should not plan a lesson and teach in a manner that bores some and confuses others.

In a world where schools are held accountable for performance and improvement as measured by high-stakes tests, a uniform teaching-to-the-test methodology is not only less relevant, it is failing to meet the needs of all students seen in today's classrooms.

Therefore, this paper attempts to analyse how differentiated instruction meets the needs and interests of all pupils including those with special educational needs (SEN). The inquiry then seeks to delve into the benefits of using differentiated instruction across the curriculum, looks at some practical strategies and effective activities that are used and discusses their adaptation and re-conceptualisation in the Macedonian context as well as their implications for teaching.

WHAT IS DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION?

A doctor methodically walks the hospital wards, checking his patient's progress. He enters the intensive care room, examines each patient's chart, monitors the heart and breathing machines, records individual progress and makes adjustments as necessary to the patient's medicine and type of care. He proceeds to the recovery room, chats purposefully with each patient, assesses their progress and makes specialized recommendations for each person's diet and exercise. The doctor moves on to the intake room, where people with miscellaneous health issues await diagnosis and remedy. A doctor who would administer the same prognosis, medication and surgical procedure for each and every patient would be thought of as

ludicrous and irresponsible. A doctor needs to differentiate to accommodate his patient's needs. Should a teacher be any different?

Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the concept that a teacher's approach, methodology, and assessment of students should be as varied and as diverse as the students themselves. The goal of differentiated instruction is to create a classroom environment that will maximize students' individual growth and success (Hall, 2002). As noted by Thousand, Villa, & Nevin (2007) differentiated instruction provides teachers with possibilities of varying "learning activities, content demands, modes of assessment, and the classroom environment to meet the needs and support the growth of each child" (2007:9).

The concept of 'differentiation' has been bantered around in various educational settings. For some, it is mysterious and confusing; for others, it is an idea sparking positive changes in teaching. Simply stated, differentiated instruction refers to the responsibility of teachers to address the needs of their students including those with special educational needs.

According to Convey & Coyle (1993):

The concept of differentiation is open wide to interpretation. It does however seem to be necessary in order to identify and meet the needs of every pupil in the classroom. It is the entitlement of every learner to have his/her individual needs and abilities cared for, and the teacher's responsibility to find effective ways of managing those needs and abilities and match them to appropriate teaching and learning styles.

(1993:7)

WHY SHOULD TEACHERS DIFFERENTIATE?

Teachers, today, face challenging classrooms with a great diversity of students' needs. Students are not streamlined or homogenous in nature. They vary in abilities, interests, learning styles and behaviours. They have different experiences linguistically, emotionally, culturally, socio-economically and by gender (Tomlinson, 2001; Wormeli, 2007).

Seated side by side...are students with identified learning problems; highly advanced learners; students whose first language is not English; students who underachieve for a complex array of reasons; students from broadly diverse cultures, economic backgrounds, or both; students of both

genders; motivated and unmotivated students; students who fit two or three of these categories; students who fall closer to the template of grade-level expectations and norms; and students with widely varying interests and preferred modes of learning.

(Tomlinson et al., 2003:119-120)

Secondly, government administrators, parents and the public in general demand an increasing amount of accountability for student achievement. In several countries this responsibility has become an issue of law. Standard education places legal responsibility on teachers to ensure that all students reach their highest level of achievement (Meyer & Strangman, 2002). In one form or another, teachers are required to demonstrate how they are meeting the needs of each of their pupils.

Thirdly, teachers face great expectations to apply new brain research in order to improve teaching instruction. In the last twenty years, enormous strides in scientific brain research have revealed more about how students learn. In 1993, Howard Gardner identified eight types of intelligence. In 1995, Robert Sylwester explained the circuitry in each brain is unique. In 1998, Eric Jensen discerned that new learning experiences are crucial to brain growth. In 2002, Dr. Mel Levine classified eight neurodevelopment areas of the brain (Dodge, 2005). The scientific evidence is overwhelming and clearly demonstrates that learners have individual needs, abilities and preferences. This ever-growing field of research has direct implications on educational pedagogy and to dismiss this notion, would be an act of negligence.

Fourthly, today's students must be equipped with the skills necessary to compete in a globalizing world. Technology is advancing daily, world economies are faltering and national populations are becoming increasingly diverse. Today's students are called to creatively solve complex problems and face global challenges. According to Wormeli (2007:3) "Mental dexterity is the new currency. A country's most important exports include its citizens' abilities to innovate and solve problems. Today's students must learn how to continually manage, critique and increase their knowledge". No longer do traditional, standardized methods of teaching inspire or advance 21st century students.

The extent of students' diversity and accommodation of SEN students in the mainstream schools, the call for accountability, the powerful findings in brain

research and the pressures of our modern world implore teachers to differentiate their teaching methods.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION?

The case for differentiated instruction makes intuitive sense, however research shows that despite the overwhelming evidence, many teachers do not reform their teaching strategies and methods. Tomlinson et al. (2003) conclude that teachers do not differentiate for a variety of reasons: they do not believe it is necessary; they feel it brings detrimental special attention to students; they do not feel it is their job to do so; they are unaware of students' needs or they do not know how to differentiate. As a result, Mehlinger (1995) states that most of the teachers use the same material and methods for teaching and each student's performance is measured using the same standard and approach because teachers believe that this is fair and no child is treated in a special way.

This means that the major implication for teaching practice could be a complete paradigm shift in pedagogical thinking. Gregory & Chapman (2007) explain that for many years the method of 'one size fits all' has been used even though educators were aware that many of the students were bored and unable to learn when exposed to such approach.

Dr. Levine (2002) explains that all kids have different needs and therefore different minds learn differently, and because many schools still use one-size-fits-all education philosophy many students struggle as their learning patterns do not fit the schools they are in.

Considering the literature and research conducted in this area, a foundational step for teachers is to construct an overall learning profile for each student in order to identify their needs more fully and accurately. Like a doctor collecting a patient's medical history, test results, and x-rays, a teacher can collect various information for each student's profile. In surgery, a doctor has a plethora of instruments ready to be used at the operating table. Fortunately, a teacher has hundreds of strategies to choose from when putting differentiation into practise. Of all these approaches, five essential principles can be synthesized to address the diverse needs of students.

First, students need choice. Heacox (2002) explains that by offering choices to students we motivate them and attract their interest in a project.

Second, students need a variety of learning experiences. Students thrive on a diversity of process strategies and numerous options for products, assessments and learning environments. “Novelty excites the brain. A break from the routine, a new way to look at an old problem, a different setting or classroom configuration can stimulate learning” (Wormeli, 2007:107). As examples, teachers can use innovative learning centres, literacy cubes that pose questions on each face, field trips, educational games, simulations or role-play.

Third, students need flexible grouping. Students in grouped classes had more positive attitudes about learning and stronger self-concept measures (Lou, Abrami, Spense, Poulsen, Chambers, d’Apollonia, 1996, cited in Tomlinson et al., 2003:20). Heacox (2002) further explains three kinds of flexible groups: teacher-determined based on learning needs, teacher-determined based on student ability, and student-determined based on interest or choice. Learning how to work and socialize in a group is also a vital part of the learning process.

Fourth, students need ongoing assessment. In order to monitor the progress of students it is critical to assess consistently.

Fifth, students need the freedom to grow in their own way, in their own time. Tomlinson (2001) recommends varying the pace and time allotted for students to succeed. Instructional looping is a chance for student to be allowed to ‘loop’ out of a lesson and move onto another activity when they have already shown mastery of the skill being taught (Heacox, 2002). Similarly, curriculum compacting advances students to a level more suited for their needs. “By eliminating previously mastered information, compacting provides for acceleration and enrichment while assuring that students learn the required skills” (Drapeau, 2004:115). Furthermore, individual education plans are created with special needs resource teachers for those students who have physical, mental, emotional or behavioural challenges.

Attending to the common requirements of all learners by providing choice, utilizing various learning strategies, employing flexible grouping, performing continuous assessment and paying attention to pacing, will ensure positive steps in successful differentiation.

RELEVANCE TO THE MACEDONIAN CONTEXT

Over the past decade, legislation and policies regarding the different aspects of social inclusion have been created in the Republic of Macedonia. Even though social inclusion has been placed in the governmental agenda there is no specific policy on inclusive education. In 2011 Macedonia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. According to Article 24 of the Convention, persons with disabilities have a right to access to general education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities. Moreover, the Convention obliges the authorities to remove obstacles and ensure the necessary support by employing and training professionals and staff who will be able to provide effective support to students with special educational needs and their inclusion at all levels of education (UN, 2006).

Furthermore, the National Strategy on Achieving Equal Rights for the Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Macedonia (2008) emphasizes that authorities and schools are responsible for providing appropriate materials, specific methods and continuous training and support for teachers. However, there is a large gap between policy and practice. According to the Macedonia 2012 Human Rights Report (2012) most persons with disabilities face discrimination in education and are still unable to exercise their right to education. Especially the lack of special education teachers and psychologists in schools, inadequate academic training and the existing discrimination against children with disabilities, prevent their inclusion in the education system. This is due to the reason that inclusive education in the country is generally understood as education for students with special needs. Unfortunately, this perception is popular among the education professionals as well. Spasovski, O., Ballazhi, S. & Friedman, E., (2010) explain this as a result of project activities organized by national and international organizations during the past years which created this awareness among the public as well as teachers. Furthermore, the authors describe the teacher and training system in the Republic of Macedonia as didactic and authoritarian in practice. Therefore, innovations in teaching approaches is among the crucial things to be considered by the official authorities.

There are many factors that generate changes in teaching practices in the country. Nowadays, there are more students identified with special educational

needs, students who have travelled the world and students who have never been out of their home country, students who are second language learners and students who only speak their first language, who are very comfortable living and learning in a multi-cultural setting as well as students who have no experience outside their own culture. Like all other students, they come with a plethora of backgrounds, interests, dreams, strengths, and needs. It seems unrealistic to think that all those students will succeed in classrooms where their learning differences are not taken into account. What students bring to class is also influenced by cultural, political and ethnic impacts, learning pace, and socioeconomic and family factors.

Hence, in order to teach effectively and efficiently, teachers should consider what they are teaching as well. By actively planning the content and using differentiated instruction in the classroom they can help each student to move forward. A notable difference between differentiated instruction and more traditional approaches is that the differentiated lesson aims for the high level in the class rather than the average level (Brimfield, et al., 2002).

There is no doubt that differentiated instruction is the way forward in education in the Republic of Macedonia. All in all, there are several recommendations for the adaptation and reconceptualization of differentiated instruction in the Republic of Macedonia.

1. First and utmost is that the Government of the Republic of Macedonia should ensure that the policies are put into practice.
2. A specific policy about inclusion should be developed.
3. More financial resources should be allocated to education.
4. Teachers should be encouraged to participate in various seminars and teacher training programmes in order to be up to date with innovations in teaching approaches.
5. Schools should ensure that teachers receive appropriate professional development and are able to reflect on their practice.
6. Cooperation with NGOs should be established.

THE CHALLENGES

How does one gain support from teachers, parents, administrators and governments for implementing differentiated instruction? This is a crucial point to consider because in order to meet diverse students' needs effectively, one must have a supportive environment. Due to the lack of research and statistical data in this area, a case study by Brian (1996) on the implementation of differentiated instruction, which was conducted in twenty primary schools in Northern Ireland, is taken as an example. Brian's findings indicated that serious hindrances to effective differentiated instruction were due to a high number of pupils in one class; to physically small-sized classrooms; a lack of storage materials and a lack of appropriate range of materials and assessment tools. However, the first and foremost concern was the insufficient amount of time to plan.

Almost all the curriculum support staff (91%) said that teachers were having difficulty in drawing up schemes of work to take account of a wide range of ability, and 64% felt that they were not adhering closely to these. All 20 case-study teachers agreed that there was a serious shortage of time to plan, review and evaluate schemes of work, and to locate, prepare and often adapt a variety of resources.

(McCarvey, 1996:6)

Even though the study took place eight years ago, these concerns are typical and common of teachers working tirelessly to meet the needs of their diverse learners in the Republic of Macedonia. It is imperative that schools be supportive of teachers when determining class size, room size, providing planning time and allocating funds. Accordingly, teachers can use their own creativity to develop ideas in order to cover the needs of all students. Governments also need to be cooperative. All too often, governments demand a type of standardized testing, which they then translate into public statistics, purporting school progress. Differentiation calls for authentic assessments, the nature of which does not easily convert into governmental figures. Without this vital and necessary scaffolding in place, the fear is that differentiated instruction may only become a mere passing fad or simply an aspiring ideal.

Another concern is the issue of ability grouping and students' self-perceptions. Additional question that arises is the assessment abilities of individual teachers.

Much of the on-going assessments, required to differentiate, are subjective in nature. Raudenbush (1984) found that teacher expectations of students significantly affected student progress. "Once a teacher has developed low expectations for a student, it is very difficult for the teacher to change his or her behaviour toward the student" (Raudenbush, 1984, cited in Marzano, 2007:164). Can teachers always accurately assess their students?

Another kind of misdiagnosis is the danger of typecasting students. For example, a student might be inadvertently locked into verbal linguist activities because the teacher assessment indicated this as a student area of strength. Heacox (2002) states that "students learn and produce with greater ease when they're using an area of strength" (2002:70). Although Heacox supports challenging students in weaker areas, one may wonder whether in practice balanced activities are actually encouraged. Teachers need to take care that all students have an opportunity to work both in the areas of their strengths and weaknesses in order to be well balanced learners and to fulfil the true purpose of differentiated instruction.

Researchers agree that differentiation is a growing field and more research is required. Therefore, teachers in diverse school populations, such as the Republic of Macedonia, need to be thoughtful in choosing differentiated activities. Tomlinson et al. state:

Culture likely shapes both learning style and intelligence or thinking preferences in such areas as need for doing versus talking, how status is conferred and accepted, need for affiliation versus achievement, need for emotional closeness in learning environments, communication style, perceptions about time, task orientation and so on.

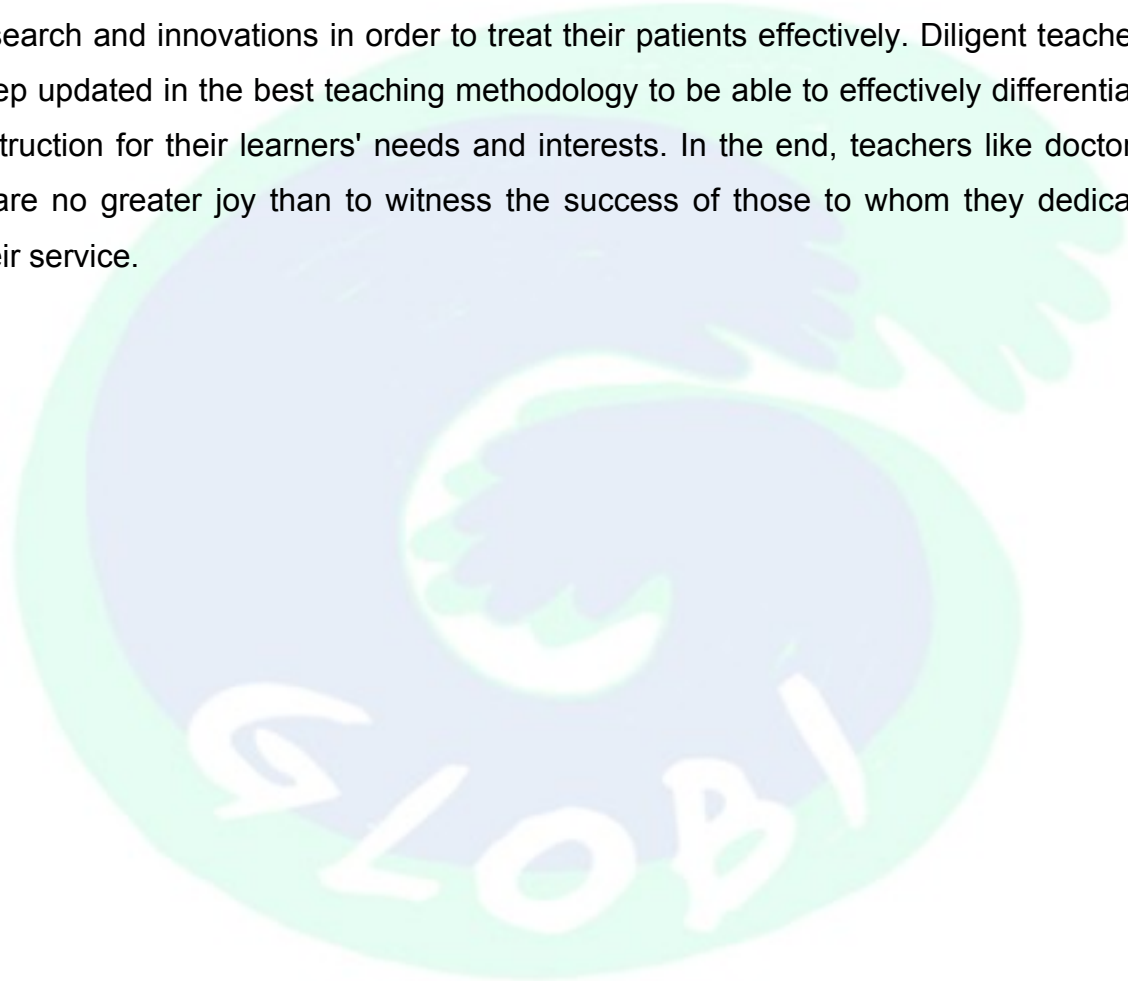
(2003:9)

Most of the planning models suggest employing a diverse range of strategies and activities. The underlying premise seems to be that if teachers just apply every colour of the rainbow, surely every pupil will find their favourite shade or hue; however is this really the best approach for all learners? Can we be certain that using every colour does not just result in one gigantic mess? Perhaps more research will find that some strategies are more effective for specific types of learning styles than others.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paradigm shift is clear: differentiated instruction is the direction that schools and teachers in Macedonia must adopt for today's classrooms. There are several models for differentiating the content, process, product, environment and assessment according to the students' readiness, interests, and individual learning profiles. However, as with all major changes, there is resistance to meet and obstacles to overcome.

Dutiful physicians in the medical profession keep abreast of the latest research and innovations in order to treat their patients effectively. Diligent teachers keep updated in the best teaching methodology to be able to effectively differentiate instruction for their learners' needs and interests. In the end, teachers like doctors, share no greater joy than to witness the success of those to whom they dedicate their service.



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