

Differentiating Instruction: Challenges in the Secondary Classroom

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Abstract

The task of education in American primary and secondary schools is immense and challenging. When compared to other nations, the American primary and secondary education systems are falling behind. In fact, the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA), a group that assesses high school students from different countries, ranks the literacy of American students sixteenth, and the mathematical ability of the same group ranks even lower. America's future prosperity and position as a global leader depends largely upon the education of her sons and daughters (Levy, Rice, Klein, and Council on Foreign, 2012). Thus, reforming the 21st Century American classroom is a necessity. The current reforms measures are resulting in the adoption of common core standards by each state, and technology continues to provide instantaneous information that is transforming the classroom into the digital age of interactive instruction. Today, teachers are responsible not only for meeting the diverse needs of all students but also for ensuring improved educational outcomes. Accordingly, school personnel are seeking proven ways to strengthen traditional classroom practices.

Things do not change; we change. (Thoreau, 1949, p. 319).

As most readers will attest, a glimpse into the professional life of school personnel reveals a common plight. It reflects the challenges that the growing number of diverse learners poses to teachers across the United States. Over the past 3 decades, a burgeoning number of students with diverse learning needs have been placed in general education classrooms. Before 1975, about one-third of the students in any general education class would have been excluded from public schooling. A decade later, after the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHCA) of 1975, school personnel would have referred those same students for special education services. The students would have been referred and removed from the general education classroom and become the instructional responsibility of a special education teacher in a resource self-contained or special school placement. The original EHCA, now known as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004), stressed the need to educate students with disabilities alongside children who are not disabled (Haager & Klingner, 2005). Accordingly, the students with IEPs in general education classes likely would now receive special education services in the regular classroom. The expectations about whom teachers should teach and how they should perform have changed dramatically.

In the past, when students with disabilities were not achieving up to expected standards, schools would lower the standards (Quenemoen, Lehr, Thurlow, & Massanari, 2001). However, this watered-down approach failed to help students with disabilities and, in fact, hindered their academic performance (Thurlow, 2002). In an attempt to reverse this trend, the U.S. Congress enacted two important pieces of legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) and IDEA (2004). Together, these acts underscore the importance attached to greater accountability and improved educational outcomes for all learners. Notwithstanding these federal mandates, many students with disabilities fail to perform successfully in the general education curriculum. Thurlow, Moen, and Altman (2006) reported that in 2003–2004, only about 30% of students with IEPs performed at the proficient level on state-required reading and math assessments. Today, more than 6 million school-aged students have IEPs, which means more than 4 million (or 70% of) school-aged students lack proficiency in reading and math. One reason that so many students with disabilities struggle in core areas of instruction is that physical access is not synonymous with cognitive access to the general education curriculum.

To fully engage in and progress through the general education classroom, students with disabilities need more than to be physically present in the classroom. They need group-individualized instruction, supplementary aids and services, accommodations, and modifications to which they are entitled (Abell, Bauder, & Simmons, 2005). It is unfortunate that many teachers lack training in ways that ensure students with disabilities cognitive access—an opportunity to actively participate and to profit from instruction linked to the general curriculum.

Significance of Differentiating Instruction

According to the 26th Annual Report to Congress on IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), roughly 96% of general education teachers have students with learning disabilities in their classrooms. Of the teachers, 9 of 10 teachers have at least 3 students with IEPs. However, the challenges that confront present-day teachers are not limited to students with disabilities. Today, students come from increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in which parental expectations and community norms may be at odds with traditional schooling (Lapkoff & Li, 2007). The high poverty rates that often exist in urban school districts increase the probability of a readiness gap among children beginning their schooling (Voltz & Fore, 2006). A major drawback of traditional instruction is that many teachers “teach to the middle” (Haager & Klinger, 2005, p. 19), which means that the needs of a growing number of students will go unmet. Traditional instruction has a particularly deleterious effect on students with disabilities who often display diverse cognitive abilities, evidence multiple and varied instructional needs, and perform academically below their same-age classmates (Friend & Bursick, 1999). These deficits make students with disabilities especially vulnerable to a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction. The net result is that many of these students perform poorly on standardized tests and have high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and high percentages of unemployment (Lipsky, 2005). One solution is what experts refer to as differentiating instruction. Differentiated instruction is the process of “ensuring that what a student learns, how he/she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he/she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning” (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 188). In the following discussion, we explore more fully the concept of differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction: Misconceptions

Interesting to note, are the number of misconceptions regarding differentiated instruction. The most common misconceptions include: (a) students will be ill prepared for standardized tests; (b) if teachers differentiate instruction, they create unfair workloads among students; (c) it is not fair to give students credit for learning if they have not demonstrated the same knowledge as other students; (d) students will not be able to compete in the real world; and (e) there is only one way to differentiate instruction (Wormeli, 2005). There is no empirical support for any of these assertions. In fact, according to Tomlinson (2000a), it is incorrect to assume there is only one way to differentiate instruction. She stresses that differentiated instruction is “not a recipe for teaching” (Tomlinson, 2000b, p. 6) and “it is not an instructional strategy” (p. 6). Her recommendation is that teachers use broad brushstrokes rather than a paint-by numbers approach when trying to differentiate instruction. As Tomlinson (2000b) wrote, too narrow an approach will fail students and teachers because it “confuses technical adequacy with artistry” and “confuses compliance with thoughtful engagement” (p. 11).

A sizable body of research has accumulated in support of differentiated instruction. For example, in a qualitative study of teachers and students who took part in a 3-week enhanced curriculum unit in math, Tieso (2001) reported that the students evidenced several positive affective outcomes: level of engagement, motivation, and excitement about learning. In the area of reading, Baumgartner, Lipowski, and Rush (2003) used differentiated approaches that included flexible grouping, student choice of various tasks, increased self-selected reading time, and access to various reading materials. They found improvements in students’ instructional reading levels and number of comprehension strategies used, mastery of phonemic and decoding skills, and attitudes toward reading. Tieso (2005) looked at the effects of curricular differentiation with between- and within-class grouping on student achievement. Using curriculum-based assessment as a pre- and posttest measure to evaluate student performance, she inferred that students with diverse abilities who received the intervention experienced significantly higher mathematics achievement than students who did not receive differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction: Model

The current model for differentiated instruction is composed of a theoretical framework, four guiding principles, and seven essential beliefs. The theoretical framework that supports differentiated instruction is rooted in cognitive psychology and based largely on research on student achievement (McTighe & Brown, 2005).

Supporting the framework are four guiding principles that relate to differentiating classroom practices: (a) a focus on essential ideas and skills in each content area, (b) responsiveness to individual student differences, (c) integration of assessment and instruction, and (d) an ongoing adjustment of content, process, and products to meet individual students' levels of prior knowledge, critical thinking, and expression styles (Tieso, 2003; Tomlinson, 1999). Lending further credence to the model are seven basic beliefs (Tomlinson, 2000b): (a) same-age students differ markedly in their life circumstances, past experiences, and readiness to learn; (b) such differences have a significant impact on the content and pace of instruction; (c) student learning is heightened when they receive support from the teacher that challenges them to work slightly above what they can do independently; (d) student learning is enhanced when what they are learning in school is connected to their real-life experiences; (e) student learning is strengthened by authentic learning opportunities; (f) student learning is boosted when they feel they are respected and valued within the context of the school and community; and (g) the overarching goal of schooling is to recognize and promote the abilities of each student. On the basis of these assumptions, it is possible to think about differentiating instruction in three ways: Teachers can consider adjusting the content, process, or product of teaching and learning (Lewis & Batts, 2005; Nordlund, 2003). According to McLeskey and Waldron (2000), teachers can vary their expectations for task completion within a single lesson or across a unit of instruction. Many teachers make use of a variety of graphic organizers, reading materials at different levels of complexity, direct instruction in small groups, previewing, and scaffolding strategies (e.g., Tomlinson, 2001). All students benefit from a variety of instructional methods and supports and an appropriate balance between the challenge of instruction and the opportunity for success (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Many educators believe that differentiation is a new concept; however, Anderson (2007) suggests that differentiation has been part of the American fabric since the days of one-room schoolhouses where one teacher was responsible for teaching students of all grades and abilities. Differentiation is an approach to teaching in which teachers proactively modify curriculum, teaching methods, resources, learning activities and student products to address the needs of individual students and small groups of students to maximize the learning opportunity for each student in the classroom" (Kronenberg & Strahan, 2010). The whole process is based on differences among learners. These student differences include interests, background knowledge, and ability. The goal of differentiated instruction is to make classrooms more responsive to the needs, talents, and interests of students.

If differentiated instruction works, why is it not in wider practice? The answer is not surprising. Most general educators feel ill prepared to teach students with diverse learning needs (e.g., Schumm & Vaughn, 1991, 1995). Although teachers express a desire to meet the needs of all of their students, often excessive workload responsibilities, demands for substantial content coverage, and negative classroom behavior make the challenge seem insurmountable. If students with disabilities are expected to reach higher general curriculum standards, they should be provided the opportunity to learn in classrooms where they can both access the general curriculum, and acquire the benefits of high expectations (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Conclusion

Differentiating instruction is not a passing fad; it is a revolution—a fundamentally different way to teach students with diverse learning and behavioral needs. Although putting differentiated instruction into practice poses a tremendous challenge, the time and effort are well spent.

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