

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT MOTIVATION IN MIXED ABILITY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

As time goes by the world of education encounters new teaching and research methods. Students do not learn the same and teachers do not teach the same as they did a few decades ago. If teachers use the same activities and teaching methods for all students then their message will only reach a part of their target audience. But this is not what teachers aim at. Their goal is to teach most, if not all, students. Here is where the concept of differentiated instruction steps in. It represents a way of perceiving both teaching and learning so that it allows variety to become part of the daily routine of the present-day mixed ability classrooms. Nowadays, students perceive learning differently and therefore teachers have to make sure they provide students with numerous options in classrooms. The purpose of this article is to review the specialised literature which deals with the relationship between student motivation and differentiated instruction within the mixed-ability classrooms.

Keywords: *differentiated instruction, motivation, engagement, mixed-ability classrooms.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's schools are mainly comprised of mixed ability classrooms. Students come to school with various learning styles, academic abilities and multiple intelligences. It has become a huge challenge for teachers to meet all the students' needs. When students are not taught according to their interest or readiness, their levels of boredom and frustration increase, therefore causing a lack of motivation. That being the case, teachers should meet the immediate needs of all learners, so that they improve proficiently. When this happens, and the curriculum is based on interest, teachers increase motivation, productivity, and achievement (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Teachers are very much aware of what is achievable for their students and what is not.

They want all their students to succeed but they are sometimes uncertain regarding the actions they should take in order to help them. Differentiated instruction may represent the answer to solving this difficult task. Unfortunately, it can be poorly implemented, if not completely understood by the teacher. Teachers ask themselves all the time why students with learning potential choose to respond below their capacity. Teachers realise that students need to feel success in order to become successful. They need to be actively drawn into learning in order to enjoy learning.

Engagement and motivation represent key success factors for most students. Therefore, instruction needs to be differentiated in order to benefit each student according to the way he or she learns. By updating teaching methods to fit learning styles, student motivation increases, and performance is improved (Malacapay, 2019). Differentiated instruction in a classroom appears when varying formats are available to provide students "different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively" (Tomlinson, 2001). Understanding how they learn allows students to enrich their motivation to learn (Allcock & Hulme, 2010).

2. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & MOTIVATION

According to Groccia (2018), student engagement represents the degree to which students become interested in learning and in their classes. Successful instruction is indicated

by how connected students appear to be in what they are learning. The ones who are engaged and motivated in their learning tend to appear as though they are concentrating and appear to demonstrate positive emotions and effort.

Student motivation focuses on how students work to complete the tasks given by the teachers and check their own progress; students self-assess to know when they are learning and how much effort they need to use in order to complete the task assigned (McMillan & Hearn, 2008). When speaking of student motivation and engagement, teachers are required to satisfy the needs of all learners (Cimermanová, 2018). When student attention and engagement decrease, it is necessary to implement interventions and various teaching practices to improve them (Halif et al., 2020).

When students have motivation, they have a reason for doing something, such as participating in school and classroom activities. There are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to Ginsberg (2005), extrinsic motivation is more commonly seen in schools today. It refers to the tangible rewards students receive for their efforts and success; therefore, their motivation for achieving the tasks given is based on whether or not they want the reward on offer. For example, when students receive a sticker for doing a good job on an assignment, they receive extrinsic motivation to do more assignments. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation appears when students can internalize what they are learning and the importance it holds for their own reality. An example of intrinsic motivation is when students are given an assignment using basic technology and end up turning in something that uses above and beyond the teachers' instructions just for the sake of figuring out how to do things on the computer.

3. DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION

Differentiated instruction represents a proactive approach which helps teachers face classroom challenges in order to improve learning for all students. Teachers can be proactive because they plan for varied ability levels instead of teaching to the middle and

catching up students along the way (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiated instruction is not a strategy, but a way of life in a classroom that uses a mix of various teaching methods.

Differentiated instruction benefits students with a wide range of levels and learning styles. According to Rettig, McCullough, Santos, and Watson (2003), in order to become successful "students need both a rich learning experience and some solid preparation to meet the required standards. A flexible and highly differentiated instructional program is the only viable approach to meeting the goal of success for all students." There are teachers who disagree with differentiated instruction, because they consider that it refers to individualizing instruction for each student, but that would be impossible in today's classroom. Differentiated instruction is not individualizing the curriculum, but creating patterns of instruction. Successful curriculums that utilize differentiated instruction can incorporate standards and diversity. The use of standards is one factor that helps differentiation to work and also guide the curriculum.

Classroom instruction is another factor that influences how differentiated instruction is delivered. Teachers need to vary instruction in order to avoid being predictable. Through differentiated instruction the content, process, and product can be modified (Johnson, 2001). This means that the teacher is connected to a diverse student population, which has a variety of learning needs and changes the curriculum accordingly (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Student learning will be impacted the most if students are taught with a variety of learning strategies using a rich fast pace curriculum.

Implementing this concept of differentiated instruction exposes students to a variety of learning strategies and experiences and this helps them become successful. Teachers need to make sure that students clearly understand their learning process through setting clear objectives and standards before they differentiate instruction. One could say that, differentiated instruction benefits all students by creating a reciprocal relationship between the content, teacher, and student. When this relationship is established, students will feel a higher level of engagement with the curriculum.

Embracing student differences and challenging each student according to his or her level can be difficult. With the help of differentiated instruction, each student will be able to master critical skills while also gaining a challenging education. Differentiated instruction allows for different learning rates and structuring tasks at different complexities. Each child has a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the area where students feel comfortable doing challenging work with support (Morelock & Morrison, 1999). Differentiated instruction uses the ZPD to structure its activities so that every student succeeds. Learning expands when the work is a little too hard but there is support to help students feel successful. Challenging the gifted students can be especially difficult for classroom teachers, but differentiated activities allow for higher-levelled and open-ended questions. Differentiated instruction works best for the all learners when teachers and students partake in a curriculum that is both challenging and also allows students to take responsibility for their own learning well beyond the classroom (Betts, 2004).

By giving students various choices and ways of learning together, they will become engaged and take responsibility in the classroom. Along with increasing engagement, student motivation can also be improved through differentiated instruction by giving students choices. Learners will invest in education if it interests them in terms of content and skill. Differentiated instruction gives students a chance to take a variety of paths that will ultimately lead to the same learning outcome. Giving students power to be involved in the decision-making process allows them to participate in their preferred style of learning and increases on-task behaviour. Therefore, through the option of choice activities, boredom and frustration will be diminished (Anderson, 2007). Students will also be provided with the opportunity of selecting their own projects and be given a variety of questions types on assessments. Learners will put forth greater effort and produce better work when given choices and variety (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005). Hopefully, when given choices, students will take more responsibility for their learning. Many teachers, parents, and students believe that it is the sole responsibility of the teacher to make sure

students learn, but the students also need to be held accountable. By being held responsible for their own learning, students increase their pride and motivation in the school activities.

When speaking about differentiated instruction, there are three concepts that usually come to mind: **content**, **process**, and **product**. Content is the subject matter or specific topic, the “what,” which is being learned. Process is the manner or the “how” the particular content is learned, such as activities, readings, and projects. Product is “how” students demonstrate the content that they have learned. It represents the assessment option given by the teacher (Flemming & Baker, 2002).

Differentiation through Content

According to Bush (2006), this concept refers to determining the difficulty level of a specific skill, topic, and/or reading for individual students or groups in the classroom. For Tomlinson (1999) content represents what students are to learn, as well as the materials and methods by which they will learn. Textbooks should not represent the only source used within a classroom. On the contrary, teachers should use all text genres, either old or new, making content more applicable to students' lives. Teachers can use flexible grouping, audio books or the internet as means of helping students understand a text or concept (Anderson, 2007).

Differentiation through content can take place with the help of the interpretations of how a text is read. Garderen and Whittaker (2006) consider that content can be differentiated in a number of ways: the various reading levels of the text given out to students; in the type of graphic organizer students use to take notes on the text; the examples and illustrations used to help students with different interests understand a concept; and the way a new skill or idea is presented. Learning styles are very important when it comes to differentiated instruction through content. With the help of content differentiation students will have better chances of understanding new ideas, concepts, stories, and skills. This will therefore lead to an increased level of student engagement and motivation.

Differentiation through Process

Differentiation through process is what students do to comprehend and pull meaning

about various concepts or from different texts. Tomlinson (1999) and Bush (2006) define process as the way in which students understand what is being taught, the activities created to make them use the skills being taught and how it is connected to their prior existing knowledge. An example of differentiating the process is when students are put in a variety of reading groups or literacy circles where questions are levelled according to the groups' readiness or language proficiency while staying true to the standard and goals set out for students.

Process can also involve students being given variety and choice in activities, assignments, pace of working, and the order in which classwork is completed (Gardner & Whittaker, 2006). Anderson (2007) states that differentiation through process also occurs when various assignments are organised to be done individually or in specific groups, as well as when students receive individualized homework projects based on their readiness and interest.

Process is also differentiated through multiple intelligences. This concept belonging to the American developmental psychologist Howard Gardner presents the numerous ways in which different people learn new information best. These multiple intelligences are the following: linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, kinaesthetic, musical, naturalist, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner states that each student has a specific way of learning best. When teachers use these intelligences to help shape the assignments and activities that students perform, there is a higher likelihood that more students will begin to understand and learn content and skills.

Differentiation through Product

According to Bush (2006), product is defined as representing varied and ongoing assessments that are evidence and representative of what students have been taught. Tomlinson (1999) perceives product as the vehicle with the help of which students show what they have learned and expand on that learning. Teachers can give choices and variety in informal and formal assessments, always using the results to continue guiding students through skills. Using a variety of assessments while tapping into the different interests and strengths of the students allows

teachers to acquire a better understanding of where their students are in the learning process. When students can accurately produce new concepts in different ways, their understanding of those skills deepens.

One example of differentiating through product appears in writing tasks. Student writing and the attainment of knowledge through that process demonstrates differentiation for readiness level and interest. This process allows students to take more ownership and become engaged in their writing, leading to a more well-written and detailed piece of writing.

Further aspects on differentiation

Regardless of how differentiation takes place in the classroom, it is essential that it is aimed at improving student learning. Petting (2000) emphasizes that differentiation takes time and does not represent a practice that can be learned immediately. When differentiating a classroom, a teacher needs to start one step at a time. Petting advises teachers to not differentiate everything at once, but allow time to adjust to differentiation in small doses. Tomlinson (2007) agrees with this and says that teachers who wish to differentiate need to start with one activity at a time. She stresses the importance of carrying out that activity at the end of a class period, and then teachers and students will not have to recover from an experience that didn't go as planned. As teachers begin to differentiate their classrooms, they will learn what works with their students and what does not. It may take a while to integrate differentiation through content, process, product, affect, and environment into a classroom, but according to Petting (2000) teachers should persevere as it will finally pay off both for them and for their students.

Instruction

When thinking about the different ways students learn, differentiation, in all the facets of teaching, seems to be the most logical way of running a classroom. As Weaver (2002), and Villano (2005) state, differentiating the classroom involves more than just changing up the assignments. It embodies showing and telling, using different strategies and approaches to the reading and writing that take place, and different

strategies to get students mentally engaged in what is being taught. Not only are the differentiated activities important to student involvement, but keeping these activities and readings focused around a specific skill or standard is crucial as well (Mora, 2005). When the central focus and goal is clear and students are given a variety of options to choose from, student engagement takes place. This is the essence of what differentiated instruction represents.

Teachers need to be continually re-evaluating what is happening in the classroom, what is working, what is not and why. With an increased knowledge base in the classroom, the needs of the students change (Tomlinson, 2001). When units or concepts change, the knowledge base also changes. Therefore, the teacher has to change the differentiation methods and strategies that he uses if he wishes students to continue learning. Looking at differentiation as something that transforms on a daily basis depending on what students already know, what their background is, and what their motivational level is, represents a very important part of having a differentiated classroom.

Differentiating a classroom can represent a discouraging activity if thought about outside the idea of learning styles, modalities, and intelligences. If teachers aim at approaching all types of students – proficient and non-proficient, language learners and learning disabled, over-achievers and under-achievers – they need to make sure that the content, process, and product fall into several of the learning styles and intelligences in the classroom (Johnson, 2001). Teachers should use a variety of learning styles, modalities, and intelligences throughout their teaching in order to make sure that all students are being reached at the various levels of a lesson or unit. This gives choice to what is being learned, makes the classroom more interesting and challenging, and allows students to experience learning and success in units or activities.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Effectively differentiating instruction in terms of content (what students learn), process (how students learn and practice), and product (how that learning is being demonstrated) in order to

benefit all students is not an easy task for teachers (Tomlinson, 1999). It is a way of approaching the teaching practice in order to ensure that all students, no matter what their differences may be, are engaged, motivated, and able to learn new skills and concepts. Classrooms are made up of a variety of diverse learners and teachers need to be ready to teach to proficiency the same content and standards to their particular group of students.

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