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Differentiating Instruction in the Inclusive Classroom

STRATEGIES FOR

SUCCESS



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Foreword

During my years as a middle school teacher, my classroom was next door to a colleague who taught students with significant cognitive—and sometimes physical—challenges. My colleague and I created opportunities for our students to work together, and I was repeatedly moved by the evident pleasure the students exhibited when they shared a task or saw one another in the halls or in the cafeteria. I was talking with Joe one day as he was leaving my class. He stopped what he was saying in mid-sentence to greet Philip, a student from our neighbor classroom. Joe slapped Philip on the shoulder and said, “It’s good to see you, friend.” “Me too,” Philip said with a smile that covered his face.

Joe spun back around to resume our conversation and said, “I’m glad we’ve become friends with the kids next door.” “Can you tell me why that’s important to you?” I asked. He paused just briefly, nodded, and said, “I think we need each other. I help him with his numbers. He makes me laugh. And I think we teach each other how to be human.”

Before my colleague and I connected (and later connected our students), I struggled with the “separateness” of my adolescent neighbors. Our proximity, combined with the distance between the school world of my students and the school world of the students next door, felt awkward to me—alienating. We were silent in one another’s presence, as though we couldn’t see one another, or as though we spoke in different tongues. Like Joe, I was glad when we became friends. It was easy when we were together, as though we belonged in the same space.

Those were days before inclusion was in the educational lexicon. My teacher-friend and I saw immediate and expanding benefits to the bridge we built between our classrooms, and between the experiences of our students. It never occurred to us (at least in a way we could verbalize) that the bridge was little more than a nod in the direction we needed to go. We never found the words to say to one another that, in fact, our students did belong in the same space—that there was an unnecessary loneliness in the coming and going between our rooms—that her students were still isolated from much of middle school life—that mine were isolated, too, from people who would have extended their experiences as well.

Since those days, as educational practice has evolved, as I moved to a university setting, and as I have had the chance to visit classrooms in which inclusion is

CHAPTER 1

What Is Differentiated Instruction?

In the 21st-century classroom, teachers face a student body that is culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse, with disparate needs and abilities—even though many parents, teachers, and administrators still believe in the “myth of homogeneity by virtue of chronological age” (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 119). As diversity increases, grouping students by chronological age only despite such factors as readiness or ability continues to be an increasingly questionable practice. Diversities that must be addressed in today’s schools include not only the issues of student readiness, language and culture, and ability/disability, but also student interests and individual learning profiles (Hoover & Patton, 2004). Today’s educational professionals are seeking a means of addressing this diversity in the classroom through an approach to teaching that is responsive to all the learners they serve. Lachat noted, “Diversity in today’s classrooms and schools continues to increase. Classrooms now consist of students who represent many different cultures, languages, and beliefs” (as cited in Hoover, 2009, p. 5). Hoover (2009) went on to add that “Valuing cultural diversity is imperative if diverse learners are to be effectively educated” (Hoover, 2009, p. 5). One way educators are addressing this challenge is through the use of differentiated instruction in the general education classroom (Bender, 2012; Fogarty & Pete, 2011; Gartin, Murdick, Imbeau, & Perner, 2002; Gould & Vaughn, 2000; Gregory, 2003; Hanson, 2015; Hoover, 2009; Hoover & Patton, 2004; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Differentiated instruction was originally defined as the planning of curriculum and instruction using strategies that address student strengths, interests, skills, and readiness in flexible learning environments (Gartin et al., 2002). Tomlinson (2000) suggested that differentiated instruction is “a way of thinking about teaching and learning” (p. 6). Gregory (2003) agreed and noted that “it is a philosophy that enables teachers to plan strategically in order to reach the needs of the diverse learner in classrooms today” (p. 27). Thus, differentiated instruction is an approach to education that holds that:

CHAPTER 2

How Does a Teacher Differentiate Instruction?

In order to effectively differentiate instruction, it is essential to understand the concept of curriculum and how it differs from the concept of instruction. According to Oliva and Gordon (2013), the word *curriculum* “can be conceived in a narrow way (as subjects taught) or in a broad way (as all the experiences of learners, both in school and out, directed by the school)” (p. 4). When educators are faced with developing and implementing instruction for students with varying abilities, this question of how to define the term *curriculum* becomes especially significant. Hoover and Patton (2005) considered curriculum to be “one of the first issues classroom teachers encounter in the overall teaching and learning process” (p. 6). Without having a clear understanding of what constitutes a curriculum and the forms in which it appears, it is often impossible for teachers to adequately design instruction that is effectively differentiated to meet the needs of the students in the classroom as well as to address state or Common Core standards requirements.

Types of Curricula

Curricula can be identified as one of three types: (a) explicit, (b) hidden, or (c) absent (Hoover & Patton, 2005). An *explicit curriculum* is the formal curriculum developed by a school district through its policy development process and provided to the teachers for use in preparing their lessons. This is the curriculum with which teachers are the most familiar; it includes the district’s stated goals and objectives for each subject-matter area.

The *hidden curriculum* is the one that the teachers actually teach. According to Hoover and Patton (2005), the hidden curriculum is developed “as teachers make inferences about the explicit curriculum they are required to teach” (p. 7). Decisions as to the length of time subjects are taught, the structure of the classroom, and the activities incorporated into the lesson are examples of the hidden curriculum.

The final type of curriculum is called the *absent curriculum*. As teachers and schools select the content of the explicit and hidden curriculum, a number of topics are typically omitted from that discussion. These omitted items comprise the absent

CHAPTER 3

How Does a Teacher Develop a Healthy Learning Environment?

Creating a learning environment that fosters respect, encouragement, acceptance, and joy is the goal of every inclusive classroom. A learning environment such as this emphasizes that all students are respected and that all student work is important and valued. The teacher sets the tone of the classroom; the teacher's attitudes, enthusiasm, and expectations influence the feelings and perceptions of students concerning themselves and others. What are the characteristics of a healthy inclusive classroom and how does a teacher design the classroom environment to support learning for all?

Implementing a philosophy of inclusion and differentiation requires that teachers address the learning needs of their students while making significant changes to instruction and the instructional learning environment (i.e., the classroom). This approach to teaching means that when implementing the concept of inclusion and differentiation, teacher roles and responsibilities also must change (Janney & Snell, 2013). A primary responsibility of a teacher in an inclusive classroom who is implementing differentiation is to be intentional about several elements of the learning environment that enhance student and teacher success. Three major components of healthy learning environments are classroom physical arrangements, instructional groupings, and classroom climate. Classroom climate, in particular, has been identified as a strong predictor of student success (Dweck, 2000; Hamre et al., 2012; Hattie, 2009).

Classroom Physical Arrangement

When assessing the physical environment where the community of learners will work and play every day, the teacher should consider different aspects of the classroom, including: access to other students and staff, adequacy of the space for the form of learning that will occur, physical access issues in the room and building that might impact student mobility, availability of distraction-free or

CHAPTER 4

How Does a Teacher Modify Content?

Content modifications are changes to instructional curricula or materials to support student learning. General education teachers have long made a practice of modifying instructional materials for students with disabilities or other students considered at risk for school failure. In many cases, modifications that teachers have used in the past are still appropriate for inclusive classrooms. However, the primary differences between past practices and contemporary inclusive education practices are the regularity and purposes surrounding these modifications.

For example, teachers may be accustomed to reducing the number of vocabulary words, reducing the complexity of the definitions, or providing word lists for a student with a learning disability or intellectual disability. In the past, teachers have made these types of modifications on an as-needed basis—not as a regular component in planning instruction for all students in the class. In order for substantive student learning to be achieved, teachers in inclusive classes regularly review learner needs and then adjust the degree and kind of content modification to support all students. Both curricular and instructional modifications are considered content modifications, and may include text alteration, study guides, learning contracts, and activity stations.

Curricular Modifications and Adaptations

In her seminal work, Tomlinson (1999) stressed that what is taught and learned must have student relevance, enhance self-understanding, be authentic, have immediate usability, and enhance student empowerment in the present as well as the future. In 2014, Tomlinson presented the concept of *quality curriculum*, which she described as curriculum that provides student access to rich, engaging content that allows students to assume the roles of thinker and problem solver (p. 64). To accomplish this, the teacher must design content that clearly identifies what students should know, understand, and do. Tomlinson's suggestions concerning curriculum and content are relevant for all students and are especially important for

CHAPTER 5

How Does a Teacher Change the Learning Process?

The *learning process* is “how students go about making sense of ideas and information” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 4). *Process*, therefore, is the selection of learning activities used to advance student acquisition of content selected by the teacher. Teachers consider how to match individual student learning profiles with learning strategies and teaching activities that will effectively support the learning process. It is the bridge that connects the learner to the curricular content. Simply stated, process is how teachers deliver content to students.

Research on the Learning Process

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (formerly, Elementary and Secondary Education Act; as of fall 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act) and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act both require that teachers select and use research-based strategies. In order to identify effective teaching strategies, research has focused on three main areas: learning modalities, multiple intelligences theory, and brain research. *Learning modalities* (also called *learning styles*) are the form in which learners prefer to receive information. Although the majority of learners are able to encode information in any of the three most often used learning modalities (i.e., visual, auditory, kinesthetic), they usually have a specific preference when offered the choice. *Visual learners* react to graphic organizers, maps, charts, and written words. *Auditory learners* respond to lectures, reading content aloud, songs, conversing, talking through a task, and group discussions. *Kinesthetic learners* are hands-on students and prefer tangible, concrete ways to explore new learning (Fogarty & Pete, 2011).

In 1983, Howard Gardner proposed a theory that each individual exhibits a personal profile of “intelligences” of different areas of strength, as opposed to the unitary view of intelligence being espoused at the time (Gardner, 1991, 1993). He identified and defined seven *multiple intelligences* (see Table 5.1). Teachers have found it useful to design process activities to engage students with the content

CHAPTER 6

How Does a Teacher Modify the Product?

Student progress reporting and monitoring are essential facets of teacher responsibility for all students and perhaps especially for students with disabilities. For students with disabilities, their individualized education programs (IEPs) include progress information on benchmarks or short-term objectives leading to successful completion of the IEP annual goals. In order for the teacher to assess whether student learning has occurred, some form of product or observable outcome of that learning must follow. Tomlinson (1999) defined *products* as “vehicles through which students demonstrate and extend what they have learned” (p. 11). In other words, the product is the planned culmination or result of the learning activity, lesson, or interaction that the teacher presents. The product represents a tangible assessment showing that the student has acquired the knowledge, understanding, and skills that were the focus of the lesson.

The issue for teachers is that the typical product format or the assessment system used in general education classrooms may not be effective in accurately assessing the knowledge level of students with diverse learning needs, including those with disabilities and others considered at risk. Just as some students may require modifications in the learning environment, content, and process, they and others may also need modifications in the ways they are able to demonstrate their success in learning the content.

Types of Products

When designing a lesson with its subsequent assessment of whether the student has learned the skills or is proficient in the content being studied, two forms of products can be considered: concrete products and abstract products (see Renzulli, Leppien, & Hays’s 2000 Multiple Menu Model). *Concrete products* are physical constructions (e.g., written essays, videos, dramatizations, experiments) created by students for the evaluation of the learning and interaction with the content and process that have occurred in the classroom. Renzulli et al. (2000) grouped concrete products into seven categories (see Table 6.1): artistic products, performance products, spoken

CHAPTER 7

What Does Differentiated Instruction in an Inclusive Classroom Look Like?

Today, most teachers have heard of differentiated instruction—although many fear that it will take too much time, or they are simply overwhelmed and do not know where to start. Foster (2015) suggested that a teacher can make one simple change to the daily lesson plan by targeting two students who have not yet benefited from the daily instruction. This can be accomplished by identifying the students’ differences and interests and, then, planning differentiated instruction based on concepts presented in this book. Foster felt that if this were done weekly, the teacher would evolve and employ a differentiated approach to all instruction. If followed for a year, imagine the repertoire of instructional modifications that teachers could create in their classrooms (Foster, 2015)!

To help put it all together, we provide examples of two inclusive general education classrooms whose teachers implemented differentiated instruction practices. Perhaps their journeys will offer answers to typical questions that arise when considering how to use the differentiated instruction approach to teaching.

Educator: Amanda, Second-Grade Teacher

Amanda is an elementary school classroom teacher who has been teaching for 3 years. Presently, she is working on her Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in the area of gifted and talented education. She has a classroom of 25 second-graders in a school located in a “bedroom” community near a large Midwestern city. The school district recently adopted a philosophy of inclusion, with the general education classroom as the primary placement for all students with exceptional needs.

Amanda’s class includes 11 boys and 14 girls ranging in age from 6 to 9 years old. Of these 25 students, there are five for whom English is not the primary language, two who have been officially identified as gifted and talented, four who receive special education services, and one who has a Section 504 accommodation