

A Reflection on Differentiated Instruction

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Differentiated instruction (DI) is a pedagogical approach to learning that values student diversity and individuality. It encourages educators to respond to this diversity by providing programming and instruction that begins where the student is at and takes into account their varying educational needs and interests. “At its most basic level, differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom.” (Tomlinson,p.1). This requires a break from past teaching practices which focused on knowledge-based curriculum, and focused planning at the ‘typically developing’ learner. Differentiated instruction encourages teachers to develop a skills-based and problem-solving approach that helps all students, including those with exceptionalities, to master the required knowledge and skills of the curriculum at their level and in a way that suits their learning style and individual needs. It requires teachers to “transform their practices from a program-based pedagogy to a student-based pedagogy. Teachers (should) attempt to adapt pedagogical interventions to the needs of each student, acknowledging that each student differs in interests, learning profile and level of functioning.” (Education for All, p.14)

The concept of differentiated instruction (DI) has important implications for planning and programming for the classroom teacher. First, since it “begin(s) where the students are, not the front of the curriculum guide” (Bennett, p.28) it means that they need to plan with diversity in mind, not just the ‘typical’ or ‘average’ student. For teachers, I think this makes a lot of sense. By assessing what the students strengths and needs, are they give themselves a logical starting point for planning. Teachers can avoid the pitfalls of planning in bulk fashion at the beginning of

a school year, and develop programming that is more flexible, adaptable and fluid so that it changes with the changing needs of students. This is a much more inclusive approach for **all** students, including those with exceptionalities. It means that teachers are required to plan with the needs of exceptional students in mind at the beginning of the planning process, not merely as an after-thought in the form of a modification to an already existing programme. It also helps to ensure that they don't plan things that are redundant, and thereby waste important time on skills that have already been mastered. Similarly, it guards against planning over the heads of students so that they don't go beyond their ability level, resulting in frustration.

Second, differentiated instruction will impact how children attain **the content** needed and the purpose for which they are seeking content. Content is one of the areas in which a teacher can differentiate instruction. We can vary how children acquire content, where they acquire it from and the levels of difficulty of content available. This is something commonly done in the past with students in order to accommodate different reading levels and learning styles. In addition to this, however, Tomlinson suggests differentiating by providing material of varying reading levels, presenting ideas through auditory and visual materials, and using group work to share ideas and skills (Tomlinson, p.2). What's a little different for me is the fact that differentiated instruction is skills and problem based, rather than strictly information based. I think this gives purpose to finding content. It means that children will be engaged in seeking out information that is meaningful, interesting and relevant to them. The hunt for information becomes purposeful because it seeks to solve a problem or clarify an idea. I think this not only responds to diverse needs, but also provides variety, challenge and interest in a program.

Finally, differentiating instruction will have an important impact on the pedagogical approaches I will take. One approach for every student, all the time is no longer the way to go in

education. Not when we know that students come to us with different cultural and family backgrounds, different levels of ability, different interests, and (research proves) very different learning styles. Differentiated instruction addresses these variances. It encourages teachers to reconsider **how the process** of learning is conducted, and the **way the product** of learning is presented (Tomlinson, p.2). DI encourages teachers to use a tiered process approach. Tiered activities are designed so that all students are working on the same skills, but at their own level and with different degrees of support. In addition to this it encourages tiered products, whereby the way in which students present their required learning can vary depending on ability and learning style. A common past practice has been to vary the process or the product within a unit of study, but not allow much flexibility or choice in this. It was done as a way of adding interest, not necessarily as a means of meeting student needs. Once one understands the research underpinnings of differentiated instruction it validates the need for a learning process that is more flexible and student-based.

During past years in the classroom, teachers photocopied novel studies for students in advance without having yet met them. This was how it was back then. We now realize drawbacks to this teaching style and see what needs to change. The critical importance of figuring out the functioning levels, learning styles, and needs of **all** students and making this the most critical part of the planning process. Differentiated Instruction will help teachers customize planning for individuals, and add choice and interest to the curriculum.

Bibliography

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