Chapter 9

Differentiated Instruction: A Programming Tool for Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Key national and state policies in Australia are driving an inclusive agenda that is challenging and changing the ways schools provide access to a high-quality education for all students. Given these circumstances, teachers need to build capacity to provide instruction to the whole class in a flexible, responsive, and effective manner. Differentiated instruction (DI) is an approach that enables teachers to be student-centred, address each student's needs and interests, and produce successful academic and social outcomes for all students in mainstream classrooms. This chapter demystifies DI and brings together the existing knowledge and associated pedagogy so that teachers can successfully apply DI strategies in their day-to-day practice. DI is defined so that readers understand that DI is not a single strategy but a programming tool with a variety of empirically-supported strategies across the areas of curriculum planning, assessment and monitoring, instruction, and classroom organisation.

INTRODUCTION

With a steadily growing multi-cultural society, diversity in our 21st century schools is an indisputable fact, and differences in student ability, cultural and religious backgrounds, motivation and interests, and sexual orientation are key characteristics of Australian classrooms. Foreman and Arthur-Kelly (2017) argue that valuing diversity is fundamental to good teaching practice and that teaching to difference is an everyday reality for teachers in mainstream classrooms. It follows that teachers can no longer use the traditional 'one size fits all' instructional approach, which assumes that all students are working at year
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level expectations, and often denies learning opportunities to students who are working above or below year level expectations. On the other hand, differentiated instruction (DI) enables the teacher to provide an enriched curriculum for those performing above year level expectations and additional supports and curriculum adjustments for those performing below year level expectations. Hence, DI can be described as responsive teaching, as it allows the teacher to provide effective instruction to all students, including those with diverse learning abilities and needs by varying the learning experiences for every learner. Diversity in learning ability is not a new concept; yet diverse learners in the classroom are continuing to challenge the ways teachers work with students and with curriculum.

This situation continues to create challenges for educators and in the Australian context raises the following questions, which this Chapter seeks to address:

- In what ways do key Australian policies and curriculum documents support inclusive education and teaching to difference in local schools?
- Why is it important for teachers to understand the connections between differentiated instruction (DI) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?
- How are the curriculum elements of content, process and product incorporated into contemporary models of DI?
- Which theory-to-practice issues have been raised by Australian research into DI implementation within mainstream schools and what solutions have researchers put forward to improve local practice?
- Is there an adequate evidence-base to guide teacher implementation of DI in multi-ability classrooms?

BACKGROUND

As an approach to teaching, DI is not new; it has been used around the globe by teachers since the establishment of one-room and single-teacher schools, and more recently in composite classrooms of two or more grades. Over 65 years ago, Washburne (1953) recognized that catering for “the wide range of differences in abilities, interests, and development presented by children . . . [was] the dilemma of teachers everywhere” (pp. 138-139). While not using the term differentiation in her seminal paper on Adjusting the program to the child, she posed solutions related to student grouping and material design that still have currency in today’s multi-ability classrooms.

The term differentiation can be traced back to Ward (1961) who argued for the need for differential education for gifted students in the United States (US). Over the following 50 years, notions about differentiating the curriculum for gifted and talented students flourished in the literature as advocates generated models of differentiated curriculum appropriate for this student group (Kanevsky, 2011; Passow, 1986). For example, Maker and Nielson (1995) put forward a model for curriculum modification in four areas of learning (content, process, product and environment) in which 28 principles developed earlier by Maker (1982) were represented.

Around the same time, Tomlinson (1995, 1999) introduced the notions of differentiated instruction and differentiated classrooms for teaching in regular US schools. Two pieces of legislation, No Child Left Behind Act (US Department of Education, 2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (US Department of Education, 2004) meant that US classrooms were increasingly
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