

*EDUC 310*  
*Principles of Teaching*  
*Inquiry Project*

**Differentiated Instruction**

Section 102

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## ***Introduction***

My question of inquiry is to address “How can teachers effectively apply differentiated instruction in an inclusive classroom of students with diverse needs?” Since “one size doesn’t fit all”, there is an essential need for teachers to practise differentiated instruction so that all students can be involved in the process and be successful learners in their own ways.

According to the definition of differentiated instruction by Tomlinson, it means “shaking up what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn (Beetcher et al., 512).” The goal is to enable students to become active agents in learning, while teachers act as facilitators in the process. In this learner-centered approach, students learn flexibly about subjects to gain mastery of knowledge with different identification of skills and processes.

The reason why I chose this topic is that I have been trying to distinguish whether my special education experience would be a benefit or a disadvantage in terms of helping my classroom students to grow. Working with diverse needs in a classroom is a challenge; however, I realize that my pedagogical technique has lacked the practical basis because often times I teach by instinct over theories. This inquiry project would allow me to delve deeper into the theories of differentiated instruction so that I can better support students and their parents to enhance learning in both settings of home and school.

## ***Differentiated Instruction: Benefits and Challenges***

Apart from traditional directed instruction, teachers use a variety of newer teaching strategies such as inquiry-based, problem-based and project-based learning. Differentiated instruction gives students an opportunity to create meaningful experiences at their level of learning. Because students have choices in using different venues to process and express their understandings, learning becomes meaningful for them (Beetcher et al., 512).

There are many benefits with regards to practicing differentiated instruction. First, it captures students’ engagement and interests in mind. Students become self-motivated as they learn what sparks them and guides them in self-discovery. They develop a healthy concept of whole self because their work is not primarily driven by external rewards or peer pressure. Second, it encourages students to select a topic and work on a project to gain mastery of skills. They may get very high marks and be very good test-takers; however, they may often experience challenges to apply what they learn in real life without a clear understanding. Third, it enables students to develop skills to self-monitor and cooperate with others. Teachers use a variety of teaching materials,

questioning, assessment and tiered assignments to help students in their learning (Edwards, 585). When teachers practise differentiated instruction, students gain opportunities to maximally stretch their abilities to in decision-making, planning, organizing, location of resources, problem-solving and presentation as independent learners.

On the contrary, there are a couple of disadvantages to the practice of this theoretical framework. First, students who are less confident academically may develop a lower self-esteem, especially if they are “differentiated” as learners with lower skills. The effects of categorization or ‘labeling’ may act towards making students feel discouraged, because they think that they are not good in certain subjects and thus develop into self-fulfilling prophecy over the long run. Second, students may see that differentiated instruction as an unfair practice, because some of them do ‘more’ work than others or get ‘less’ marks than others when students do not get the same assignments. Third, the biggest challenge is that teachers have to be properly trained so that they can practise differentiated instruction within a reasonable time frame. Beginning teachers often experience frustration because they lack the resources and support as they also struggle with time in a classroom. These critical issues challenge me as a beginning educator on how to manage and foster diversity in my practicum classroom. How can I better connect with every student and manage the learning dynamics of a diverse group? By doing this inquiry project, I would hope to find more ways to narrow the gap between my knowledge and experiences.

### ***How can teachers effectively implement differentiated instruction?***

As a teacher, managing a strategic plan is the key to successful differentiated instruction. It would be fundamental for effective teachers to know their learners and respond accordingly by differentiated instruction. From my research, I have learned that teachers can tier lessons in terms of readiness, learning preferences (eg. intelligence and style) and interests of students.

First, teachers can tier the lesson by assessing students’ readiness to a subject. Due to different background experiences, students’ abilities can vary drastically in terms of knowledge and understanding of a topic – according to the Bloom’s Taxonomy – as the first step of learning. If teachers can clearly teach all students beyond the basics to apply and analyze, then students can take different paths to synthesize and evaluate. When teachers tackle in any subjects, it would be essential for them to ‘fill in any gaps’ in students’ thinking guided by the taxonomy so that students can fully benefit from the rewards of learning experience towards mastery. Teachers can also make use of grouping strategies, such as multi-abilities grouping in reading and same-level abilities in numeracy, so that students can benefit from a rich social-constructivist environment of learning. Therefore, when teachers can provide support and guidance in the process of

students' learning, students can achieve their personal and academic goals developing self-efficacy in learning.

Second, teachers can tier the lesson by tapping into the strengths of students to engage their learning focus. Depending upon the preferred learning modes or styles, students can demonstrate the mastery of skills by using their preferred area of multiple intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist intelligences. For example, if a student excels in musical intelligence, his or her teacher can use music to integrate into language arts and music so that the student can be engaged and find the learning process meaningful to him or her. As a result, differentiated instruction allows students to feel empowered and be inspired in the way that they learn.

Third, teacher can give students choices in a tiered lesson. Students can pick an area where they feel connected to and start learning in a positive light. This works well with special needs, or sometimes EAL learners, because they may experience difficulties following instruction and thus develop low self-efficacy in learning. From my personal and teaching experiences, I learned that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) benefit greatly from choices because they feel more positive about learning by having a better sense of control and more personally connected to what they learn. Thus, differentiated instruction is something that I can see would help teachers to create a positive learning experience in a classroom with special needs.

An effective teacher must adopt the variety of ways to inspire their students within a flexible framework of differentiated instruction. In essence, I think that it offers the best choice of learning in diverse populations because it helps to build up students' confidence, create meaningful experiences and allow them to express their acquired and new skills at all levels that they are capable to achieve. I agree with Landrum and McDuffie (2010) and Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009) that positive learning experiences with differentiated instruction are powerful motivators for students to stimulate their learning in a diverse classroom. Although time and classroom resources are often challenges that teachers must face, beginning teachers can overcome them by committing themselves towards addressing students' readiness, multi-intelligences and task choices so that others can gradually see the difference that they make through this style of classroom learning. I feel that it is challenging for teachers in the public school system to excel in differentiated instruction, because there is always a consistent tension between public and private education that I think that only teachers and parents can essentially bridge the gap by working together. Having an open mind to differentiated instruction, teachers can essentially open the doors with these tools to help students in a flexible and creative manner. They can also create meaning through the processes of students' learning at different levels of thinking that students are capable to achieve. As Confucius says, "By nature all men are alike, but by education widely different."

## ***Questions for Immediate Future Practice***

### *1. How can differentiated instruction work in my practicum classroom?*

As a teacher candidate, I have struggled to reach and help all students in the classroom – whether it is in the settings of classroom, small group or individual instruction. In the past, students usually get individual instruction when they are punished. For instance, they get to work during recess or after school one-on-one with the teacher. I hope to reach out to all students and give them the personal and academic attention that they need in differentiated instruction. Resources, such as differentiated lesson plan worksheets and online resource guides, will be helpful in the planning of my lessons during the extended practicum.

### *2. How can teachers select a good range of books for read-alouds, reading strategy mini-lessons, and flexible guided reading groups?*

In reading and writing, there seems to be no other way except putting students with similar abilities together working with my school advisor. On the other hand, in math and social studies, students can be put in multi-ability groups to learn so that they are encouraged to discover knowledge, understanding and application together using special coding with colourful highlighters and primary sources (eg. actual photographs, documents, and videos). Teachers develop differentiated lessons for the guided reading based on elements of the genre, cognitive thinking strategies or word recognition skills. (Beecher and Sweeny, 519-520)

### *3. How can a teacher positively reward students on a one-on-one basis? If the teacher does not have enough support or resources from the school or the parents, how can they tap into the community and not get burned out?*

Within the confines of a school classroom, teachers struggle with time and resources to help with the growth of students. By tapping into the resources of other teachers, they can share more ideas about helping students the same problem. Therefore, a community of teachers is an important strategy to help with bringing the spirit of learning together. On the administrative level, it would be crucial for teachers to be “provided with training, modeling, coaching and planning time to integrate the new ideas and skills into their lessons,” thus teachers can help to “create a school mission and a strategic plan to make enrichment and differentiation effective (Beetch and Sweeny, 503).’ Most importantly, students’ interests and choices are the priority so that they are actively engaged in their learning experiences (Beetch and Sweeny, 503) so that their learning goes beyond classroom time.

These are inquiry questions about which I hope to gain more insights during the extended practicum. As a teacher candidate, I realize that knowledge and experience always go

hand-in-hand together in the process of inquiry, which explains that teaching is a life-long learning experience. By adopting the way as a researcher-practitioner, I look forward to bringing my inquiry research into teaching so that I can better support the learning of students in my practicum classroom.

## ***Bibliography***

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