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## Implementing differentiated education: why diversity must be appreciated

### Abstract

This reflection paper illustrates the relevance of differentiated education in our current times, which brings to light students' learning differences and innovative tailored-teaching approaches, leaving behind the traditional so called one-size-fits-all teaching method. The author will start by defining what differentiation is about. She will proceed by explaining the advantages of implementing differentiated education in our classrooms at all ages and subjects as well as describing potential activities to promote flexible-customized lessons based on students' needs and varied academic performance levels. The author will end describing a set of strategies to target students' senses, encourage problem-solving skills, support cooperative learning, and adapt assignments so learners feel capable of succeeding in an academic setting.

### Keywords

Customized lessons, Differentiated Education, Higher order thinking skills, one-size-fits-all approach, and Tiered assignments.

## Implementación de la educación diferenciada: ¿por qué la diversidad debe ser reconocida?<sup>1</sup>

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### Resumen

Este artículo de reflexión ilustra la importancia de la educación diferenciada en nuestros tiempos la cual reconoce las diferencias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes y los modelos de enseñanza personalizados e innovadores, dejando atrás el método tradicional de enseñanza en el que todos deben encajar. La autora empezará por definir que es la diferenciación; luego, ella procederá a explicar las ventajas de implementar la educación diferenciada en nuestras aulas de clase para todas las edades y asignaturas; adicionalmente, describirá actividades potenciales para promover clases individualizadas y flexibles basadas en las necesidades de los estudiantes y variados niveles de desempeño académico. La autora terminará describiendo un grupo de estrategias que focalizan los sentidos, motivan las habilidades para resolver problemas, apoyan el aprendizaje colaborativo, y adaptan las tareas de tal forma que los estudiantes se sientan capaces de tener éxito en sus labores académicas.

### Palabras clave

Clases personalizadas, educación diferenciada, procesos de pensamiento de alto nivel, método de enseñanza en el que todos deben encajar, tareas multinivel.

1. Reflection article originated from the participation in the workshop: *Teaching Diverse Learners in the Regular Classroom: Techniques for Differentiating Instruction* organized by Charleston Southern University, Graduate School of Education, Georgetown, SC, USA, Spring 2015.
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## Introduction

It is certainly not new that learners of the twenty first century are totally different from students of older generations. It is so evident that the one-size-fits-all teaching approach has grown to be outdated since students are not seen as a factory product anymore. Current educators recognize the uniqueness of each learner and, in fact, acknowledge them as true achievers, leaders and entrepreneurs, designers of their own fate and captains of their own learning journey. Taking into consideration this promise of exceptionality among each and every child we teach at all levels and all subjects, it is vital to embrace what has proven to be a fairly revolutionized teaching approach called "Differentiated Education". This paper is aimed at defining what differentiation is, justifying all the advantages on putting into practice this new teaching viewpoint, and finally, presenting a few applications on how Differentiated Education can actually be applied in classrooms on a daily basis without causing so much trauma on what some teachers may see as a huge challenge and eventually, a thread to a successful educational system.

## Definition

First of all, it is necessary to understand what differentiation means. According to Huebner (2010), *differentiation* is a process to maximize students' potential by meeting them where they are academically speaking. What this implies is that each individual is certainly not at the same level as the rest of the students in a class; learners have their own motivation, goals and interests to start any endeavor, each and every one finds their own pace, strategies and strengths to keep up the process, and in the long run, they all face different mishaps and come up to various outcomes or results that

make each learning experience unique. While some people will luckily end up having successful and rewarding learning experiences in certain areas of knowledge and developing certain skills, others will surely complain about how hard learning is and how frustrating it can be to try many times and fail to understand or master a specific ability. This shows that although teachers can think they are having a positive impact on all students using the same teaching style or methodology, students are actually being influenced by that determined teaching experience in so many different ways that we cannot predict at the end of the day how positive or negative our teaching decisions will be. This does not necessarily mean that educators are not trying hard to make the best of each lesson on each of their students; what this actually implies is that teachers are not trying hard enough on approaching children differently, customizing their lesson activities to embrace differentiation and targeting their real potential.

In addition to this definition of differentiation, there have been a number of educators who have grown interested in the idea of tailoring lessons to get closer to each student's performance level and actual educational needs. Among those it is relevant to mention Tomlinson & Imbeau (2010) who have developed a deeper understanding of differentiated education as a new teaching approach that is attached to the curriculum, environment, class management as well as assessment tools used to customize students' learning opportunities. In their book *Leading and Managing: A Differentiated Classroom*, both authors state how differences are desirable and how important it is to make content accessible to everyone so that the ultimate goal of education, life-long learning, is achieved. They assure that by providing learners a wide range of



possibilities and resources to deal with the curriculum, students are actually given the chance to choose what best works for them. Furthermore, they recognize the importance of making the space, furniture and materials in classrooms reachable in different ways so all students feel at ease when communicating with others or working on their own. Similarly, a high value is given to variety regarding the types of activities and assessment to be used in each and every lesson since these empower students to follow directions promptly, negotiate roles for team work, learn cooperatively, accept mistakes as desirable elements of successful learning, respect others and solve problems when needed, receive feedback positively, and reflect upon their own learning process.

As differentiation acknowledges learning differences as well as teaching flexibility, Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) go further to illustrate what a differentiated classroom should look like by describing two metaphors. The first one compares the teacher-student relationship to a doctor-patient situation, in which the physician must analyze all the symptoms and medical background of that specific person in order to find out what is wrong, prescribe the best tests to make sure his own assumptions are accurate and finally, recommend certain medications, procedures and remedies to make his patient feel better soon. Likewise, teachers are entitled to get to know their students' academic and personal background first so that they can identify their strengths and weaknesses, make the best teaching choices based on their learning styles, particular interests and goals, and ultimately suggest a lesson plan that will hopefully be beneficial for all students to help them master a specific content or skill. As doctors will never prescribe the same medication to all his patients, educators should not

teach all his students in the same way, making clear that each individual is absolutely different from the rest. The second metaphor mentioned refers to learning experiences as unique "clothing sizes" which typically vary depending on how petite, small, medium-size, large or extra-large a person is. Therefore, if one clothing size will never fit the same on everybody, why should one single teaching methodology do the trick equally on all students?

### Justification

Based on the above premises, it is clear that differentiation is urgently needed in every classroom no matter the age of the students or the subject matter to be taught. There exist six different tenets that justify this innovative teaching approach: The first one is *dignity* because when individuality is seen as a virtue and we are able to value differences, the dignity of each student stands out; the second is *positive impact* since there are lots of benefits to all learners who have the fortune of being treated as unique; the third is *reality* due to the fact that differentiated education mirrors what our current societies need, that is an open-minded attitude and respect towards the people who are different from what we are; the fourth is concerned with *empowerment* as differentiation tackles all kinds of skills and fosters the development of what students really look forward in their present and future careers and personal endeavors; the fifth is connected to *excellence* because while teachers try to meet students where they are academically speaking, it is easier to avoid frustration and failure while scaffolding their learning process step by step; and last but not least, the sixth refers to *real-learning* since essential things to be understood are smoothly studied and actually learned.

Although differentiation had not been recognized as a cornerstone approach in education before, during the last ten years it has become more popular due to a paradigm shift in which learning is seen as a more personalized, flexible process and not as a mass production, mechanical procedure. Dweck (2006) explains that in our society most of our students are being raised to get magnificent scores in high-stakes testing and therefore, they grow up fearing mistakes and feeling frustrated when they don't achieve an A; this is what she calls *Fixed Mindsets* that basically run from difficulty and effort and are unable to leave their comfort zones. On the contrary, Dweck (2006) invites educators to encourage our kids to develop *Growth Mindsets* by means of teaching them to cope with challenge and understand that abilities can be developed if they work harder and try as many times as necessary to succeed. The idea of "not ready yet" in differentiated education implies that everybody is capable of achieving what they set their minds for and that they are in a process of reaching their goals, even though others may have already got it. Teachers must understand that each and every child has the human right to be given the opportunity to grow, become more confident and in the long run, be smarter because what really matters is not how "intelligent" people say you are, but how perseverant and brave you grow to meet your aims.

Differentiated education makes it clear that every student is a totally new world that needs to be understood and treated differently. The way information is processed and stored in our brains varies from each individual to the other in such a great manner that Jensen (1998) has described six different types of sensory memory depending on the kind of learning input we are exposed to. While some may have an extraordinary

ability to retain facts (*semantic* memory), others may show more aptitude for recalling events in the past (*episodic* memory) or developing certain skills that had not been rehearsed for a long time (*procedural* memory). What is more, the author suggests another type of memory that helps us establish interpersonal relationships easily with others when remembering common behavior that is expected to be used in social interactions such as shaking hands when we are introduced to someone new or hugging a person we love that had been away for long (*reflexive* memory). To conclude, Jensen (1998) mentions the ability to recall situations that make us feel alert or in danger (*conditioned* memory) as well as the ability to bring back feelings or emotional states from specific past moments in our lives (*emotional* memory). All this diversification leads us to reflect upon the way our brain works that indeed varies from each other and therefore, encourages to value differences as something desirable and absolutely normal in our human nature. If educators start wondering about their students' learning strengths and weaknesses and acknowledge challenge as a synonym for growth and development, they will soon welcome differentiation to their classrooms in a very positive way.

### Application

The biggest questions here are... How can teachers embrace differentiation in their lessons without feeling they are doing extra work or wasting their time on various strategies that may not end up being quite a success? How can teachers welcome differentiation when there are so many old-school educators who still hold on tightly to the one-size-fits-all methodology? How can teachers implement differentiation in their classrooms by means of inclusive activities, materials and assessment?

Among the strategies suggested for differentiated education, we can mention the ones that inspire our senses. It is believed that our brain best learns when it is highly stimulated by two different kinds of experiences: the first one is related to making decisions when a problem is presented and needs to be solved; the second one refers to surprising our sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch senses by various types of learning input that can range from audiovisual resources to excursions, day trips and classes in which learn-by-doing is the key (Jensen, 1998). In a study carried out by Rossi and Nimmons (1991), it was discovered that 80% of the information that our brain retains goes through our eyes, giving a lot of relevance to the visual materials used in our classrooms. By the same token, both authors assure that our brain gets tired too so that teachers need to plan on a 10-minute break every hour of class so they can actually get their students' attention and maximize their teaching time.

In order to take the differentiation theory into practice, it is good to review the types of grouping techniques that we are using with our learners. Tieso (2005) conducted a study with 645 students during three weeks, in which the high achievers as a whole class were only taught using their regular textbook, while the low achievers were introduced a great variety of differentiated techniques in smaller groups. At the end of the three weeks, the low achievers surprisingly got better results in their exams, proving that revising content and skills on a regular basis as well as flexible grouping strategies trigger understanding and success. In differentiated education, it is relevant to acknowledge the importance of cooperative learning when pairing up or grouping students, trying hard to mix a high achiever who can provide additional

guidance, tips for studying, motivation and ultimately, become a role model to follow, with a low achiever who can actually benefit from having a personal tutor during a specific assignment.

Another way to apply differentiation in our classrooms is by a strategy called *Tiered Assignments*, in which the activity that is assigned to a particular student matches his level of performance and empowers him to succeed since he feels capable of doing it. Heacox (2002) describes seven different types of tiered assignments that vary in level of challenge, complexity, resources, outcome, process and product expected. Teachers are encouraged to adapt their assignments so while some students are performing higher order thinking skills such as creating, evaluating and analyzing knowledge, activities commonly called HOTS by Bloom et al (1956); others may be applying, understanding or remembering information, processes that may require lower order thinking skills, labeled LOTS for short. In the light of the above premises, all teachers are invited to shape their way of teaching in order to make learning possible in each individual, designing the best scenario for them to get the best out of their skills no matter how good or bad they feel they are at certain areas. At the end of the day in differentiation, there are no "good" or "bad" students; they are all just at different stages of their own path towards learning.

## Conclusion

All in all, it is absolutely evident that modern educators need to migrate from the one-size-fits-all teaching approach to the flexible, difference-friendly philosophy in which we all recognize the uniqueness and variety among our learners, who are capable of achieving

any goals if prompted with the right learning conditions to develop skills and eventually, succeed. Although a few may still continue in the mistaken belief that differentiated education is an unnecessary burden that can be avoided if we keep seeing students as equal universes, there is a growing movement that strongly believes in differentiation as a way to show we all care for our students when we customize learning opportunities according to their needs. I truly hope this article makes all educators reflect upon their teaching practices so that they can better prescribe what best works of each of their learners, empower them for actual life-long learning, and indeed embrace the exceptionality of human nature, their dignity and capacity to overcome difficulties and grow at their own rhythm.

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