Teacher Perspectives on the Use of Differentiated Instruction in Relation to Students with Different Abilities

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Introduction
Secondary teachers in Canada are currently faced with classes that include diverse groups of learners. Differentiated instruction (DI) is based on the idea that because students differ significantly in their strengths, interests, learning styles, and readiness to learn, it is necessary to adapt instruction and assessment to suit these differing characteristics. This can be achieved by differentiating (Tomlinson, 2004):

- Content (what will be learnt and when)
- Process (different types of tasks & activities)
- Product (various modes of presentation of learning offered to students)
- Environment (context in which the learning will take place)

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013)

“[…DI is] an effective way to support all students by providing opportunities that assist them in taking more responsibility for how they learn and, in turn, what they learn”

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 3)

However previous findings (Whitley, Cousins, Duquette & Elliott, 2012) indicate that some teachers may view DI as applicable for only certain groups of students and hold many misconceptions about the utility of the framework for the majority of their students. These beliefs may greatly limit the potential of DI in Ontario classrooms.

Methodology

* Participants: This research was conducted as secondary analysis of data arising from focus groups. Focus groups consisted of secondary school teachers (n = 46) from 5 different school boards across Ontario – Toronto, Barrie, North Bay/Sudbury, Thunder Bay and Ottawa.

* Data source: The focus groups probed teachers about the definition of DI, the preparation received by teachers about DI and its implementation, their level of preparedness in implementing DI in the classroom, their insight on the effectiveness of DI on student success and learning and whether it has had a classroom impact.

* Analysis: For the present study, the research process that was followed was a general thematic analysis of the qualitative data, which began with a line-by-line exploration of the 8 focus group transcripts and ended with a coding system of themes (O’Leary, 2010). In the search for patterns and interconnectivities, common themes or ideas were grouped together and the outliers, which were not well supported, were removed. A mapping of the themes was completed, with three main themes emerging and 2 subthemes (O’Leary, 2010).

Discussion

The analysis of data yielded 3 main themes, stating that DI is viewed as being:

1. For specific populations, i.e., students with different abilities or exceptionalities
2. An accommodation
3. A replacement for expensive special education programs

SPECIFIC POPULATIONS

This theme can be divided into 2 subcategories:

a) DI is for struggling students, at lower levels
b) DI is meant to aid not only the aforementioned students but all students

* Belief: DI is using good teaching practices and strategies and is not specifically for students with exceptionalities.
* Belief: On the other hand, some teachers made a distinction between applied and academic classes, arguing that those in the latter classes did not require DI, as they “know why they are in those classes”.

DI strategies help students with exceptionalities succeed and reach their full potential, and for the rest of the students who might not need as much assistance, DI teaches them about their strengths and weaknesses and their learning preferences, facilitating and enhancing their learning and instilling in them intrinsic motivation and a desire for learning.

Furthermore, academic classes may also include students with learning disabilities and other exceptionalities who require the use of DI. If teachers have these misconceptions and are selective in their use of DI, all students will potentially experience academic drawbacks.

References


