

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

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”

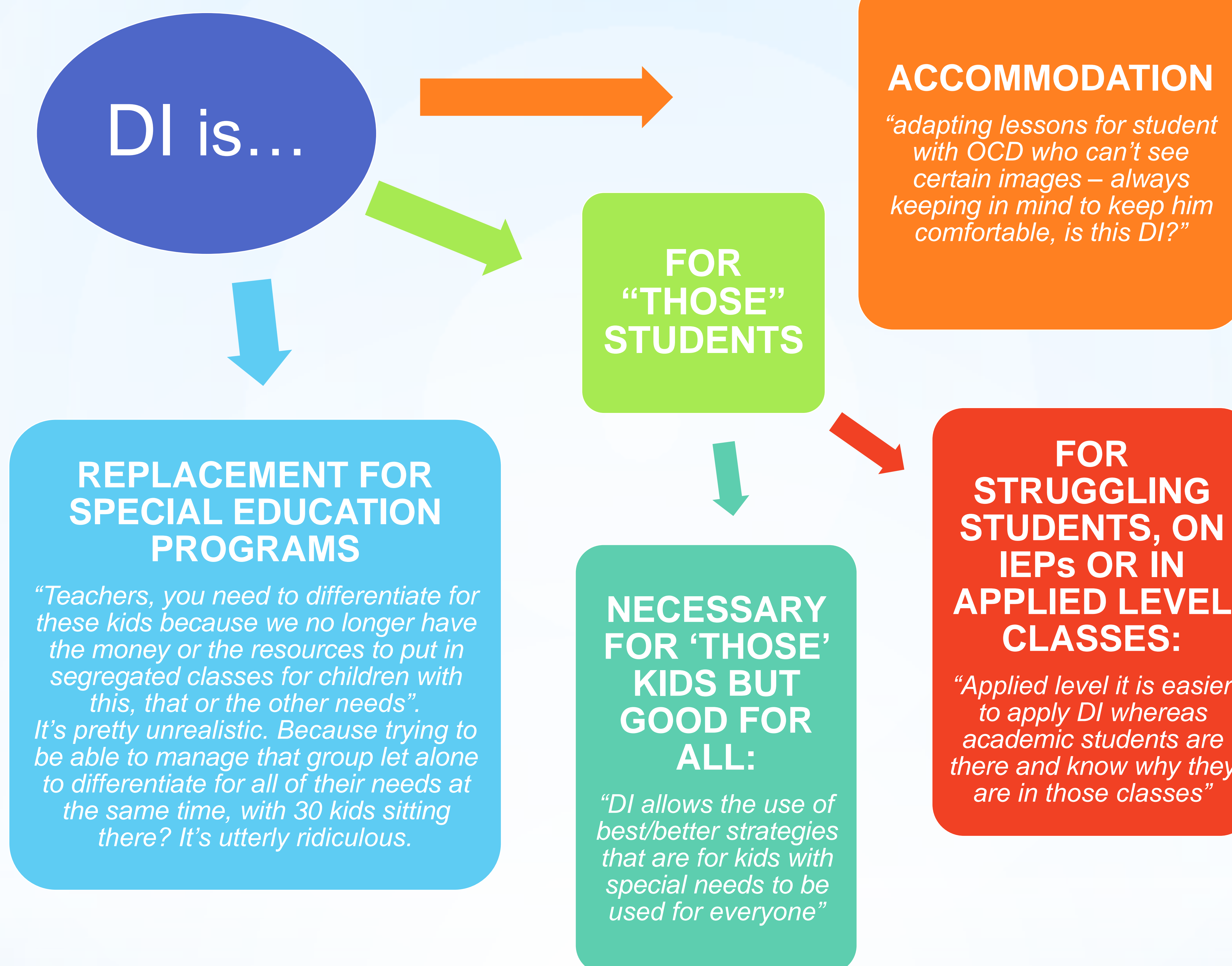
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 3).

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 ($n = 6$) 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 6 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).

Gacia Demirdjian, Professor J. Whitley, Faculty of education



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”.
 - Academic classes are for students who are of average or above average intelligence, who do not require DI.
 - Academic students will have to succeed in the class, whether they are struggling or not, without being given any choices, being placed in reciprocally helpful groups, being assessed in different ways.

- * Previous research in Australia: 37 teachers observed in their classrooms → teachers did not use DI in instruction teacher-aides were differentiating for struggling students by withdrawing them from the class for smaller group instruction (Moni, Jobling, van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Miller, & Koppenhaver, 2007). Differentiated instruction then, was similarly reserved for students with academic difficulties and not included as a universal framework.
- * DI strategies help students with exceptionalities succeed and reach their full potential, and for 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.

ACCOMMODATION

- * **Misconception:** DI means making accommodations,
- * **Fact:** This misinformation proves that DI is likely not being implemented in the classroom; teachers are simply following the accommodations stated on the IEPs of those students who have exceptionalities.
- * **Fact:** This lack of knowledge prevents teachers from providing the most effective teaching they can offer and from reaching every student, according to their preferred learning and assessment styles and needs.
- * **Fact:** DI is considered best teaching practices, according to the Ontario Ministry of Education.

REPLACEMENT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

- * **Belief:** Government is using differentiated instruction as an excuse to shut down special education programs
- * **Belief:** Government is placing more expectations on teachers to use DI and include all students so that they can save money.
- * **Fact:** DI, although beneficial and necessary for students with exceptionalities, can also be valuable for all students who simply have different learning styles or struggle with various processes or subjects without necessarily having a specific diagnosis.
- * **Fact:** Some students in these classes who have significant needs that require more intensive services far beyond those suggested within a DI framework.

Unfortunately, teachers who believe that DI has been presented as an inexpensive alternative to a full slate of programs and services are less likely to adopt a DI framework in their classes and thus may not recognize the potential of the approach.

To prevent misconceptions related to teaching and DI, one must start at the source – with the Bachelor of Education programs offered around the province. These Teacher Education programs must focus on comprehensively educating their teacher candidates – soon to become newly qualified teachers – about the crux of differentiated instruction, its advantages and its proper implementation. Sequentially, school boards must try to reverse these existing perceptions of DI (i.e., that it is only meant for students with different abilities, that it equates to an accommodation, that it is a replacement for special education programs, etc.) by engaging in job-embedded professional learning.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the UROP committee for this amazing opportunity and Professor Jessica Whitley for the incredible support she provided throughout this entire research process.

References

- Moni, K. B., Jobling, A., van Kraayenoord, C. E., Elkins, J., Miller, R. & Koppenhaver, D. (2007). Teachers’ knowledge, attitudes and the implementation of practices around the teaching of writing in inclusive middle years’ classrooms: No quick fix. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 24 (3), 18-36.
- O’Leary, Z. (2010). *The essential guide to doing your research project* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Learning for all: A guide to effective assessment and instruction for all students, kindergarten to grade 12*. Ontario: Queen’s Printer.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008). *Reaching every student through differentiated instruction* [Brochure]. Ontario: Queen’s Printer.
- Tomlinson, C. (2004). *La classe différenciée*. Montreal: Chenelière/McGraw-Hill.
- Whitley, J., Cousins, J. B., Duquette, C. & Elliott, C. J. (2012). *Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Differentiated Instruction Professional Learning Strategy* [Report]. Ontario: Author.