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DIFFERENTIATION

Differentiation or differentiated instruction (sometimes referred to as DI) is the adaptations or changes made to instruction in order to meet all learners' needs. This entry describes the reasons for differentiation in early childhood education and how to create differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Rationale for Differentiation

Differentiation is based on the philosophy that all children can learn but each child is unique and learns at his or her own pace. Instruction is not one size fits all, and very young children—even if they are all the same chronological age—can span a range of developmental milestones. It may also be important to note what differentiation is not. It is not a different program of study for each student (this would be an individualized education plan or program [IEP] for a child with a diagnosed special need and is not always possible). Children have varying experiences, ranges of interest, and abilities and come from different family and cultural backgrounds. In inclusive classrooms where typically developing children and children with special needs are educated together, differentiation becomes a staple for classroom teachers, helping them to teach a room full of children all at different levels with varying degrees of need. Because one way of teaching will not meet all children's needs, differentiated instruction allows educators to create one flexible lesson plan to meet all children's needs. Teaching is successful only when children learn or show progress. Success does not mean that all children get the same instruction, but each student gets what he or she needs. Because not all children start in the same place and not all children will progress at the same pace, a varied form of instruction is essential regardless of special need.

This philosophy and best practice in early childhood education require teachers to know children and families well. Knowing where students are, where they are starting, and their interests and cultural frameworks will enable teachers to create differentiated instruction. Baselines, screenings, home visits, and other authentic forms of assessment are used to determine where and how to start instruction. Then teachers use this information to design instruction for their class. Differentiation is not easy and requires a lot of time, planning, and training. It is often difficult to keep instruction, assessment, and curricula developmentally, individually, and culturally appropriate. Because differentiation can be misunderstood, teachers benefit from professional development.

Creating Differentiated Instruction

Differentiation and developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) are grounded in meeting children

where they are and taking into account each child's level, interests, culture, and ability. Differentiated instruction can be adapted in four major ways to meet learners: content, process, product, and environment. Each area of differentiation, when intentionally implemented, can ensure all children have access to teaching and learning.

Content can be differentiated by addressing the overall major goal or outcome desired. Reviewing the objective and scaffolding the prerequisite skills needed to get to this goal will assist students not quite ready to move on. When teachers know students well and understand pedagogy, this type of differentiation can be address based on the child's current baseline or skill level. Once established, the sequence can be followed to adapt content needs and final objectives. Differentiating for content requires frequent assessment and progress monitoring to be sure the overall objective will be met.

The most frequently used example of content differentiation is leveled readers. This allows children to read about the same topic or practice similar literacy skills while interacting with text at their own level. When differentiation is based on process, the teacher considers how the children are going to meet the required objective. Rather than one prescribed way, there may be many pathways to meeting this objective or skill. Consider other ways the child could ultimately arrive at the same goal but use a different way to get there. Frequent and varied attempts, including kinesthetic, verbal, musical, spatial approaches, and so on (consider Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences) are ways to meet the required objectives. Some students may require more time on task, various active ways to respond, picture cards instead of verbal responses, and so on. Students' interests should be considered.

The product can be adjusted to show growth or learning. The final product or final evidence used to show the objective has been met can be adjusted to best fit the need of individual children. Here the child should be allowed to show what he or she learned in the best way possible. The child can express his or her own learning in various ways.

The environment can be adapted to ensure all children have access to materials and activities.

Universal design for learning (UDL) has its roots in architecture, where buildings are designed with ramps, elevators, and curb cuts. These building features allow citizens in wheelchairs access to the building but these features, although designed to assist people with special needs, also benefit mothers with strollers and deliveries made on carts. UDL provides children with special needs access to the classroom and materials but also benefits all children.

Differentiated instruction is not tracking students, forming fixed grouping for instruction, or labeling children. Differentiating instruction requires teachers to create flexible lessons by adjusting the content, process, product, or environment for one lesson. All children learning together can participate in instruction based on the adaptations or changes made by the teacher for this specific group of learners.

Karen Wise Lindeman

See also Developmentally Appropriate Practice; Differentiated Instruction and Assessment; Early Childhood Inclusion; Individualized Family Service Plan and Individualized Education Program

Further Readings

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