A DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH TO TEACHING READING

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În contextul actual, al intensificării eforturilor de redimensionare a politicii educaționale în sensul asigurării educației pentru toți, al egalizării şanselor de acces şi reuşită ale tuturor educabilelor, indiferent de natura „diferenţelor" dintre ei, se impune abordarea psihopedagogică a diversității în învățare. Şcoala este chemată să organizeze procesul de predare-învăţare-evaluare în așa fel încât să-l pună pe educabil cât mai devreme posibil în posesia unor mijloace proprii de însuşire a cunoştinţelor, de aplicare în practică în mod constant şi creator. Necesitatea tratării diferențiate a celor care învață decurge din cerințele obiective ale societății moderne de a asigura cadrul favorabil dezvoltării multilaterale a personalității umane în scopul afirmării depline a aptitudinilor și talentului fiecăruia și valorificarea maximă a capacităților sale de muncă și creație. Rolul cadrului didactic este în generarea unui climat de încredere în posibilităţile individului încât să combată complexul de inferioritate pe care îl trăiesc mulţi dintre cei care nu pot atinge performanţele ridicate şi, de asemenea, să combată atitudinea de uniformizare a condiţiilor de învăţare şi dezvoltare pentru indivizii capabili de performanţe. Prin urmare tratarea diferențiata trebuie sa capete o accepțiune mai generoasa, ea devenind o calitate a managementului educațional, o abilitate a profesorului în dezvoltarea personalității fiecărui educabil.

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School is meant to enable each student to make continuous progress. Teachers are becoming more and more aware of this matter and the importance of catering to their students' individual needs by proactively planning and adapting their teaching accordingly. Nevertheless, despite the best of intentions, it is not always easy to find ways of adapting one's teaching to every single student's needs in terms of academic, social and emotional needs, as well as prior knowledge and learning strategies. It takes for granted

that differentiation is an effective way of enabling each student to make continuous progress and therefore focuses on its practical implementation on an everyday basis. Differentiated instruction is based on the principles of the constructivist approach which suggests that successful learning can only happen if the learning context is adapted to every student's needs in terms of interests, learning profiles and readiness.

Nevertheless, differentiated instruction is no individualized instruction. It does not offer a personalized option for every single learner. Such individualized instruction would lead teachers to exhaustion and make learning fragmented and irrelevant [6]. Moreover, teachers do not need to differentiate all elements in all possible ways. Differentiated instruction makes sense only when there is a student need and the teacher is convinced that it will increase the likelihood that the student will be better engaged and understand and use an essential skill more thoroughly than if it had not been differentiated. Whole-class instruction can sometimes be more efficient and provides opportunities to build a learning community through common activities and experiences, to introduce new units/topics/skills/concepts, and conduct discussions on important content (6).

According to Roberts and Inman [4], the differentiated classroom must establish a respect for diversity by acknowledging and celebrating differences between individuals, but still maintain high expectations levelled according to the individual learners and finally, generate openness. These three principles are all two-fold: they involve both teacher and student awareness. Not only the teachers observe these three principles but they also make sure that students respect differences, have high expectations for themselves and show openness towards their differences and the concept of differentiation itself. Based upon the principle that it provides every student with ongoing opportunities to make continuous progress, differentiation should not be considered as a teaching strategy to implement once in a while in the traditional classroom when there is extra time to experiment with new strategies. Differentiated instruction is more like an approach or a way of life in the classroom. Instead of directly focusing on what to do in the classroom, it is wisest to think about our conception of learning and teaching first. If teachers think in terms of differentiation, every strategy implemented becomes part of a coherent whole. When talking about differentiated learning and instruction, three questions need to be addressed [5]:

- *"Differentiate What?"* refers to the curriculum element that is differentiated. Teachers can differentiate the content, the process or instructional strategies and the product.

- "*Differentiate How?"* refers to the specific student needs which differentiated instruction addresses. Differentiation can cater to learners' needs in terms of interests, readiness and learning profiles.
- "*Differentiate Why?"* can be summed up as providing students with equal opportunities to make continuous progress by catering to their specific needs. In the traditional classroom, instruction is generally based on the "no child left behind" principle according to which all students should be given similar treatment in order to reach and demonstrate equal standards of proficiency.

Discussions about differentiation typically turn to the subject of fairness and equality because in the differentiated classroom, not all students do the same thing at the same time. As Roberts & Inman [4] point out, fairness does not consist in giving every student the opportunity to do the same thing but in providing each child with ongoing opportunities to make continuous progress by being involved and challenged according to his or her own characteristics and needs. The fear of losing control of student behaviour can lead some teachers to avoid trying out differentiated instruction. Yet numerous experts in differentiation and classroom management assert that fewer cases of misbehaviour occur when students are offered engaging learning opportunities which match their particular needs. They also point out that teachers exert more leadership in their differentiated classroom because they show more tolerance towards movement and noise and are thus more respected by their students.

Differentiated instruction is nothing more than offering students the support they need to understand the material you're teaching. To help students comprehend the text book and other nonfiction, you can scaffold the reading process by offering assistance before, during, and after reading. Providing scaffolds means that you sit next to a student and think aloud as you model how to apply a strategy. Scaffolding can also involve offering tips that students can use to support their reading, such as making sure there's a purpose for reading or how to use context clues to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words. While scaffolding, you might start by demonstrating the entire process several times. Next, you can gradually release part of the process to the student and continue practicing with him or her until the student can work independently [7].

Since differentiation often calls for meeting with small groups of students, we'll examine management structures that will help teachers ensure that students are working productively during class time and that you are able to provide each student with the scaffolding he or she needs. These structures include whole-class lessons, small-group work, paired peers, class routines, students' organizational skills, and a framework for reteaching. The key to

success with differentiating is in the amount of time you invest in teaching students to work independently while you support a small group. In content subjects, where large numbers of students struggle with the required textbook and processing new information and vocabulary, scaffolding students' learning is an effective way of moving them forward.

Learning to comprehend text is perhaps the most essential skill that students learn in school. Reading with understanding is a key skill they will use for the remainder of their lives – whether they read for pleasure, for work, or to engage in civic life. Unfortunately, far too many students struggle to read and comprehend, and educators struggle with how to best help these students.

Teachers use differentiation strategies during instruction to aid students in the acquisition of reading comprehension skills which include: gradual release of responsibility, scaffolding, interest groups, varied levels of text, hands-on practice and application.

- When teaching new strategies, or comprehension skills, we can employ the *gradual release of responsibility* method, (I do, we do, you do), to help students slowly learn what is needed, while not feeling overwhelmed.
- Use *scaffolding* strategies by calling upon background knowledge and previously learned concepts. Scaffolding can mean assisting students throughout the whole learning process, or it can mean simply offering tips and ideas to help guide students as they look for context clues, main ideas, text purpose, etc.
- Using the results of interest inventories, you can form *interest reading groups* according to topic, book, theme, etc. These groups focus on certain comprehension skills (drawing conclusions, summarizing, sequencing, etc.), and motivate students with what interests them most.
- When instructing, you can provide a *variety of leveled texts* to support students of diverse lexile ranges. By having texts that span lexile levels, students will be more able to follow along at their own level, and grasp the concepts that are being taught, without feeling left behind or bored.
- Provide your students with plenty of *hands-on practice and application* of the skills, concepts, and ideas being learned. Give students a variety of options (different group, activity, assessment, and presentation of knowledge choices) that appeal to their interests and learning styles.

Teachers are looking for successful, easy-to-implement tools and techniques to integrate differentiated reading instruction. Some of the students travel as a community, and others forge ahead as individuals or small groups. There are multiple routes to reading, and differentiation can lead the way. Differentiation is certainly getting a lot of buzz lately, but there is no magic wand needed to integrate differentiation into your literacy program.

Quite simply, differentiation is adjusting your instruction to meet the unique needs of your diverse learners. Furthermore, according to Tomlinson [6], "Differentiating instruction 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." Differentiation is not a single strategy, but an approach to instruction that incorporates a variety of strategies. When teachers differentiate, they do so in response to a student's readiness, interest, and learning profile. Because of their unique and diverse literacy needs, our students need us to differentiate the product, process, and content of learning.

Differentiation is not: asking every student to read the same text with the same purpose and using the same strategy, giving the same instruction and assignments to the whole class, giving extra assignments to students who finish early, individualized instruction for each student, doing something completely different for each student in your classroom, creating permanent, labeled groups that never change.

Differentiation is: more complex than just providing different students with different learning experiences; based on the students' needs; considering students' readiness levels, interests, and learning styles; a flexible approach to instruction and grouping; providing more than one option to the students as they read their texts; using different reading strategies to match the material to meet the literacy needs of our students, changing the way we teach so that everyone can learn and achieve.

The development of reading skills from early levels is the key tool to success not only in the academic context; but also for personal development. Reading at literal level is the starting point where students get the basic skills to develop comprehension reading skills at a higher level.

The reading sessions aimed to develop students reading skills using differentiated instruction and to assists students to become independent learners of English. Allowing students to choose their own groups to work with was appropriate because it permitted the teacher to assist and assess their reading content easily. The classroom arrangement looked different; all students were reading the same texts; however, the kind of reading tasks were graded according to the students reading ability.

There is much to consider when planning a reading lesson. Teachers must weave the required curricular components into their whole group, small group, and individual lessons. At the same time, the knowledge base of the students must be considered. Teachers must be able to accelerate struggling readers, increase the ability of average readers, and continue to challenge the students who read above grade level in their classroom. This cannot be accomplished by simply following a mandated reading program as it is a huge

undertaking that requires the teacher to possess a deep knowledge of the reading process and student learning. It is only with this deep knowledge that a teacher can make informed decisions about what to teach in the small group lesson. Before and during each lesson teachers must consider the needs of the learners in order to decide which comprehension strategies to stress, how to build and maintain fluency, and which word-level skills and strategies to teach. Ultimately, if students are taught how to successfully comprehend all types of text, they may perform well on standardized measures.

The materials used in a reading lesson should be based on the instructional reading level of the students in the group as well as the interests of the group members. Once again, this requires the teacher to use a variety of assessments for decision-making. The book selected for the small group lesson should support the development of reading skills and strategies needed by that particular group. Therefore, there cannot be one sequential formula outlining the order of books or stories read for all students. The materials that are used are differentiated to meet the needs of the learners. Teachers should use a variety of genres at the instructional level of each group as well. What about a state or district mandated core reading program? The core program, if chosen wisely, provides some assurance that there will be systematic instruction within and across the grades. Therefore, they may and should select appropriate materials to use when differentiating instruction.

Some teachers require their students to read independently as they work with small groups of students. Independent reading provides opportunities for developing fluency as well as practice with comprehension strategies and decoding skills

At times, students read orally, perhaps with one or two partners, or with an audiotape. In order for this to be effective, teachers must ensure that students read texts at the appropriate reading level. At the same time, there should be some opportunity for student choice since students can often read materials above their instructional reading level if they are interested and excited about a specific topic. There should also be times when students read silently, although Shanahan [2] does caution teachers in their use of sustained silent reading, stating that there is not enough conclusive evidence to support sustained silent reading in place of explicit instruction. What is important is that students receive guided explicit instruction in addition to independent practice through silent reading.

It is not uncommon for teachers to require students to practice reading skills or strategies independently through written responses to reading. Keeping these activities open-ended and creative can increase student engagement. Such activities enrich and extend the instructional strategies presented to students in whole or small group lessons. Students

enjoy having the chance to write a reaction to the selection, perhaps from the perspective of a particular character, or to write three questions that they can ask their fellow students. Teachers ask students to keep journals in which they respond to one or two questions that she poses about a specific selection. These responses often call for a personal connection with the text. Students then bring their journals to the next reading lesson and share what they have written with others.

Improving the quality and quantity of reading instruction provided in whole-class or small group instruction is a critically important step for teaching differently, but it should be addressed after managing the environment and establishing routines for behavior. Once classroom routines are operating efficiently, teachers can realistically focus on differentiating instruction. After teachers observe and collect data, they can develop an instructional purpose for each small group and set attainable goals. Using data to inform practice, teachers assign students to small groups. Then they select resources, materials, and activities that support differentiated small-group instruction and purposeful practice. Changing the content, behaviors, and activities used in a lesson are part of differentiating instruction and practice. Simply having small groups of students move from one activity to another and expecting them to complete the same assignments represents a procedural change involving how instruction is delivered: changing from whole-class lecture format to small-group participation. When the lesson content and expectations for performance are the same for all students, differentiating teaching and practice is not happening. That is simply grouping students for participation. Teachers use whole-class activities for introducing new content or skills, but essential information is presented again for teacher-led, small-group lessons to ensure comprehension. For example, new vocabulary words may be introduced in a whole-class activity and practiced with peer partners. However, vocabulary words that are critical for understanding text will be presented again and taught explicitly in small groups to ensure students can apply the word meanings correctly in a passage and in discussions about what they read.

We consider the implementation of differentiated Instruction had a positive impact on the reading skills. For instance, there was a great expansion on students' vocabulary. The students were able to use more frequent words in their writing activities. At the same time, students' motivation for reading increased while students took an active role in the reading lessons with a lower level of anxiety, which was reduced because they worked under different modalities like individual reading, pair reading, group discussion reading and reading fluency groups. They encountered passages which met their reading ability level. It has been proved that selecting reading materials that meet students' interest have increased their

motivation for reading, students showed active involvement and engagement during the reading activities. Teaching reading skills through the implementation of differentiated instruction involves knowing how the type of assignments work in the classroom. Therefore, it is important that teachers know what their students' reading abilities are, as well as what learners like reading. Differentiating instruction means teaching differently, and making that happen in classrooms often departs from traditional habits and practice, and it frequently presents a management challenge. Establishing routines and procedures for organizing resources (classroom space, time and materials, or activities) and implementing changes will be necessary. Stakeholders, administrators, and teachers must clearly identify and articulate how the change process will occur to establish well-managed classrooms and provide support for teachers, students, and parents. Differentiated professional development may be needed to support teachers as they begin to change how they teach, especially when students are expected to read new and challenging text regardless of subject area or grade level. More guidance may be needed to help teachers when they are selecting or adjusting materials and activities to support small-group lessons, collaborative practice, and independent practice. Differentiating instruction is possible, and changing how we teach and how students practice leads to improved outcomes. Teachers using these suggestions report they experience an immediate decrease in behavioral problems, see an increase in student performance because more assignments are completed correctly, and have more time to focus on teaching–so let the changes begin.

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