

Oksana Shparyk, PhD

*Institute of Pedagogy of NAES of Ukraine,
the city of Kyiv*

IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION STRATEGIES IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

To help each individual student reach his fullest potential, teachers should try differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction (DI) is an approach to teaching and learning for students with different abilities in the same classroom [1]. Teachers who differentiate instruction recognize that students differ in many ways, including prior knowledge and experiences, readiness, language, culture, learning preferences, and interests. Through differentiated instruction, students will get to the same place, but take different paths. The goal of differentiated instruction strategies is to ensure that all students are engaged in the learning process by providing tasks that match each individual's needs.

Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile (refers to a student's preferred method of learning new information or skills and to environmental factors that influence a student's learning): *content* – what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information; *process* – activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content; *products* – projects that ask the student to demonstrate what he or she has learned in a unit; *learning environment* – the way the classroom works and feels [1].

C. Forsten, J. Grant and B. Hollas have identified the “building blocks” of successful differentiated instruction:

1. **Knowing the Learner:** Teachers need to know as much as possible about their students to teach them well, including learning styles and pace, multiple intelligences, personal qualities such as personality, temperament and motivation, personal interests, potential disabilities, health, family circumstances, and language preference.

2. **Traits of a Quality Teacher:** The teacher believes all students can learn, has the desire and capacity to differentiate curriculum and instruction, understands diversity and thinks about students developmentally, is a risk taker, is open to change and well-versed in best practices, is comfortable challenging the status quo, knows what doesn't work, is able to withstand staff dissension that may arise.

3. **Quality Curriculum:** Curriculum needs to be interesting to students and relevant to their lives, appropriately challenging and complex, thought provoking, focused on concepts and principles and not just facts; focused on quality, not quantity; stress depth of learning, not just coverage.

4. **Classroom Learning Environment:** The ideal learning environment includes a balanced student population, appropriate grade and program placement, priority seating based on student needs, has a reasonable class size, practices positive discipline, arranges furniture to promote group work, uses flexible grouping, and has adequate teaching supplies.

5. **Flexible Teaching and Learning Time Resources:** Includes team teaching, block scheduling, tutoring and remediation within school, before and after-school programs, homework clubs, multiage/looping classrooms etc.

6. **Instructional Delivery and Best Practices:** Includes flexible grouping, cooperative learning, learning stations and centers, web quests, tiered assignments, individual contracts, literature circles etc.

7. **Assessment, Evaluation and Grading:** Includes portfolios, observations, skills checklists, oral and written reports, demonstrations, performances, work samples, models, taped responses, drawings, graphs and posters, quizzes and tests, and standardized tests [2].

In secondary education in the United States teachers differentiate instruction through a variety of different ways: flexible grouping, learning centers, independent study, adjusting questions, choice activities. Here we will take a look at each of them:

Flexible Grouping. This method allows students to work in groups with peers who are dissimilar to them. Teachers use flexible grouping because it provides students with the opportunity to work with others that have similar learning styles, readiness, or interests. Teachers must continually conduct assessments throughout the school year and move students among the groups as they master skills.

Learning Centers. Learning centers are stations that contain a variety of materials where students can explore topics or practice skills on their own. Teachers can design centers with different levels of complexity or for different subject areas.

Independent Study. An Independent study is designed for students that have mastered content. It is best when based on a student's personal interest, and it tends to be more effective when the student chooses the topic. In order for an independent study to be successful, the teacher needs to be sure the student or students are proficient in the skills that are required to complete the study. To help students choose a topic of study, it is wise to conduct an interest survey before they begin.

Tiered Assignments. Tiered assignments are a series of related tasks varying in complexity. The activities relate to the students' readiness level and key skills that they need to acquire. Both formal and informal assessments must be given to determine the level of understanding a student has on the subject matter. Activities can be designed for small groups or individuals.

Adjusting Questions. An easy tool teachers can use to help students meet with success is to adjust discussion questions according to the students' readiness or ability level. Teachers adjust their questions and level of complexity based on what fits that particular child.

Choice Activities. When students are given a choice of what they want to learn, it can be a great motivator. Teachers can give options based on student interest or learning style. They can also be given choices as to what will be learned or how they will learn the information. Options can include activities, learning centers, independent study, small groups, or others. Choice activities are well-known for improving student's motivation based on their own needs [3].

Most education experts consider that DI takes effort, time and is a career long pursuit. Successful differentiated instruction teachers should give themselves three or more years to really feel savvy with it. Teachers can differentiate instruction successfully if they are experts in multiple facets of their jobs. To only know one's subject doesn't cut it with today's diverse populations, and to know only what the basal textbook says about our topics doesn't work either. As highly accomplished professional educators, we have to be

multi-talented, highly trained thinkers, not just pseudo postal workers delivering someone else's mail (i.e. state-mandated curriculum) and documenting those students who can't make use of it [4].

References

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