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Teachers’ beliefs as the differentiated instruction starting point: research basis

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to trace the impact of teachers’ beliefs towards adjusting instruction to students’ variances in readiness, interest, background and learning profile. Ready or not, teachers simply can no longer ignore the imperative status of differentiation in today’s diverse classroom, now compulsory for all children. The findings of this paper are meant to build the foundation for more extensive research studies on how teachers’ beliefs towards differentiated instruction are translated into daily activities, instructional procedures and classroom interactions.

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1. Introduction

Education continues its dynamic evolution in the contemporary society of knowledge. Differentiated approach towards instruction is meant to fill the gap between teaching and learning in order to push students as far as possible on their educational path. According to van den Berg and Ros (1999) teachers’ beliefs describe the multi-faced mosaic of concerns, feelings, preoccupation, thoughts or perceptions, as “a response to new situations and/or changing demands” (p. 880).

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Studies have demonstrated that changing the teachers’ core beliefs, dealing with their concerns about the reform can facilitate the implementation of differentiation (Fullan, 1999; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987). Change seems to occur more easily on the margins of what is widely considered to be the core role of teachers: their instructional practice (Elmore, 1996). Crețu (1998) provides support in theory and practice for differentiating instruction and personalized learning based on the philosophy of change. As the mentioned author states, change is a process, not an event. Change is a process made by individuals, not by institutions. It reveals an individualized experience in depth. Change practice involves more engagement and higher competences than the change process itself (p.14-15).

2. Theoretical foundations.

This review of the research supports the fact that differentiation is a compilation of many educational theories and practices that support the maximization of student learning for all students in the same class (Hall, 2002). Worldwide, a number of scholars have documented vast literature and relevant experiences regarding the need to come closer to the significance of the differentiated approach to teaching and learning. Several studies were focusing on the effects of differentiated instructional strategies on students (positive effects on motivation, a great level of engagement in task solving, an increased level of creativity or collaboration among learners) while some others were preoccupied to identify ways in which differentiated teaching strategies are used in the classroom (Blamire, 2009; Johannessen, 2009; Pedersen et al, 2006; Comber et al, 2002).

According to Stradling & Saunders (1993) differentiation is a pedagogical, rather than an organizational approach. Differentiation shapes an approach to teaching in which teachers proactively modify curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address the diverse needs of individual students and small groups of students to maximize the learning opportunity for each student in a classroom (Bearne, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999). From the same considerations, we sustain the findings of Beijaard and de Vries (1997) and Chapman (2002): teachers’ needs and expectations towards differentiating instruction arise from their beliefs about differentiated classroom practices, beyond regulations, procedures and methodologies.

3. Challenges of differentiated approach to teaching and learning

It is clear from studies conducted over the past decades that teachers encounter difficulties in accommodating students’ individual differences by applying differentiation strategies in practice, and particularly in sustaining their use over time (e.g. Read, 1998; Schumm & Vaughn, 1991; Simpson & Ure, 1994; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Wotruba & Nania, 1990; Westwood, 2001). The major challenges of differentiation include limited preparation time, large class size, teachers’ heavy workload, lack of resources, teachers’ lack of skills in differentiation, and teachers’ lack of motivation to differentiate (Chan, Chang, Westwood & Yuen, 2002; Scott, Vitale & Masten, 1998; Westwood, 2002).

3.1. Romanian educational system demands

Romanian educational system is characterized by a decentralized model of management within which the schools -and so the teachers- had a wide autonomy and freedom to teach. Despite this, the system has progressively shown its limits in several aspects and has generated a lot of doubts about its real efficiency and effectiveness.

One of the greatest challenges facing Romania’s schools today, mostly with a traditional “sit and listen” approach, is to maximize learning for all students in the same classroom. Thus, teachers are expected to be proactive and respond effectively to the endless changing students’ needs while being mindful of each student’s learning process (Tomlinson, 2001).

“Teaching to the norm” has been a common practice in too many schools (Tomlinson, 2004). The blind effects of overloaded and sometimes, contradictory policy demands often resulted in teacher discouragement, professional knowledge ambiguity, significant degrees of work-related stress.
There are studies that point out that the greatest challenge to differentiate instruction is time, followed by classroom management skills, changing teacher expectations, and professional development and lifelong learning personal targets (Corley, 2005). While some teachers feel it is necessary for their students, others do not like extra-work. Supplementary preparation, considered by mostly out of the didactic norm, isn’t worth the time. So they stick to planning for whole-class instruction (Morocco, Riley, Gordon, & Howard, 1996) with considerable effects on student achievement. As Crețu described (1998) there is also a confirmation of the policies of closeness to the students’ needs and of incentive to the differentiation of the programmatic educational offers.

3.2. Teach to the middle barriers

In Romania, as in many other countries, teaching has always been a way to transfer knowledge in classrooms where students are considered a uniform and homogeneous population (Koutselini & Persianis, 2001). There are significant proofs that the two edges of the achievement spectrum are not being appropriately challenged within heterogeneous classroom, either. Teaching to this “on grade level” student population, in a “one size fits all” approach classroom leaves the learning needs of the challenged and under-challenged groups unmet. Vygotsky (1962) hypothesized that children should be stimulated through a sequence of goals that increase in difficulty. A child who is not challenged in this way fails to reach the highest stages of thinking or reaches them with great delay. According to Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) “teachers attempt to differentiate instruction by giving struggling learners less to do than other students and by giving more advanced students more to do than other learners. It is not helpful to struggling learners to do less of what they do not grasp.” (p. 41) Flexible grouping allows for fluid group configurations that can change over time to accommodate individual student differences in ability, interest, and learning style preference. Additionally, Popenici et al. (2008) have noticed that Pareto principle (also known as the 80–20 rule) is applicable for the Romanian schools, too, as 20% of the students in a classroom get attention of all teachers’ resources. Looking at a typical classroom with 25-30 or more students and the ability levels within it, one can conclude that teachers who adopt the “more” or “less” approach to differentiation teach only a fraction of their students. We know that is not the intent of any teacher; however, without the proper tools, differentiation does not take place.

3.3. Tapping students’ differences spectrum

There is no doubt that today's classrooms are typified by academic diversity more than ever before. (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1999; Meier, 1995). The current school reform movement is a call for teachers to adjust curriculum, materials, and support to ensure that each student has equity of access to high-quality learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 1999; Ducette, Sewell, & Shapiro, 1996; Gamoran & Weinstein, 1995; Schoenfeld, 1999). We strongly agree that in a differentiated classroom equality of opportunity becomes a reality only when students receive instruction suited to their varied readiness levels, interests, and learning preferences, thus enabling them to maximize the opportunity for growth (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Certainly teachers are expected to recognize and understand if a student is a whole-to-part, part to-whole learner; likes to work in silence, groups, independently; through written expression, speaking, and so on. It is important that students also understand their learning strengths so they can make the appropriate choices within the classroom.

Authors like Schumm & Vaughn (1995) suggested that general education teachers reject adapting instruction for individual learner needs because they feel if doing so it calls attention to student differences. Moreover, teachers are unaware of learner needs (Schumm & Vaughn, 1992, 1995). Teachers do not know how to modify the curriculum for students whose proficiencies extend beyond those prescribed by grade-level curricula, standards documents, or both (Callahan, Tomlinson, Moon, Brighten, & Hertberg, 2003; Hertberg, 2003). It appears that teachers are more likely to find adaptations for learner variance to be more desirable than feasible (Schumm & Vaughn, 1991). Teachers feel uncomfortable with the idea of modifying materials, changing instructional practices, making long range plans, or adapting scoring and grading criteria (McIntosh et al.).

Findings also suggest that school climate plays a vital role in how students learn so optimal learning can take place. Children learn best when they are actively involved in learning and physically interact with their environment. A relaxed alert environment, in a natural, nontreathening setting increases and acknowledges each student’s
potential by exposing them to various learning situations that may offer them the opportunity to react and manifest completely using their best qualities, intelligences and learning styles.

3.4. Teachers’ professional knowledge about differentiation

By breaking down the term “differentiation” and understanding the components of what comprises a good lesson design, the misinterpretations ought to be removed so teachers can develop a clear understanding of what responding to all learners needs means. A differentiated teaching approach is seen by teachers as best practice (Wragg, Haynes, Wragg & Chamberlain, 2000). Differentiation is based upon the best practices in teaching; however, there is no empirical validation to support this method. “There is an acknowledged and decided gap in the literature in this area and future research is warranted” (p. 4).

We have to keep in mind that most of the teachers deliver their own way of differentiating instruction. Teachers think they are using differentiation strategies but are not. Mostly teachers are opened or not to differentiating instruction but they are not skilled yet (or enough). Teachers recognize and understand the need to take into consideration the way the students learn best. They vary multi-sensorial resources, use flexible grouping, but miss the most important part: enhancing students learning. A significant number of teachers have doubts about the successful implementation of differentiation because of its requirement for increased classroom management skills. Once again, teachers are not aware enough of the importance of learning centers and stations, orbital studies, tiered activities, learning contracts, independent studies, choice boards, group investigations, problem-based learning, etc and their positive and profound effects on student achievement.

Differentiated instruction must begin with the best instruction and can take seven to ten years to institutionalize. (Hess, 1999). Most of the teachers consider professional experience ending as the first didactic degree is obtained, not being aware of the effects of their field of profession-teaching children for the unknown future. Consequently, they underestimate the imperative need to be further developed in order to build the right strategy that should be implemented in a differentiated classroom.

There are at least two ways of thinking. The focal point of that theory that several studies have revealed is that “teachers’ work today remains fairly similar to that of 100 years ago” (Kirtman, 2002, p. 2). On the contrary, Hargreaves (1994) claims that “for better or worse, teaching is not what it was” (p. 117). Our opinion is that teaching aims to decrease the gap between old-fashioned way and the innovative approach based on active and interactive strategies.

Pâcurari et al. (200) successfully initiated teaching training modules based on Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Model (2006) by developing specific guidelines for implementing the targeted approaches to differentiation so that the teacher has a comfortable plan for managing basic differentiated classroom routines. Other Romanian researchers such as Ciolan(2008), Oprea (2009), Sarivan (2009) have described ways of creating “respectful” tasks in order to differentiate teaching according to one student trait (readiness, interest, or learning profile) and by using instructional strategies to meet key learning goals and to build student engagement and understanding. This shift from traditional model of teaching to a student-centered approach requires purposeful planning for flexible grouping based on balanced teacher-choice and student-choice options for whole-group vs. small-group or individual work in order to build a more effective and responsive classroom.

It is an evolutionary process that should be implemented cumulatively (Hess, 1999) through targeted, in-depth professional development that consists of much more than one-shot-deal workshops. Pettig (2000) emphasizes “the courage to significantly change our classroom practices.” (pp.18). In the same way think it depends on school policy, County School Inspectorate policy and also Ministry of Education Policy and there has to be coherence between them all. The influence of ideas on the policy processes is the one that underlines the weight and importance of institutions. They can determine which of the generated ideas can be put in the process and that can be diffused, adopted and implemented as policies. Until that happens, the teacher in the classroom has the power to turn from Impossible to I’m possible.
4. Conclusion and implications

Teachers’ misinterpretations need to be removed so they can develop a clear understanding of the key functions in a differentiated classroom. Even if the national educational policies affiliated to EU recommendations invoke the need for the gradual, but constant development of the teachers’ skills, abilities, and competencies, in reality many teachers are unwilling or unable to teach adaptively, developing lessons based on students’ readiness, interests, and learning profile. In most cases, given the actual conditions of Romanian Educational System, teachers think of the consolations of their profession, emphasizing the impediments they confront. A significant number of teachers have doubts about the successful implementation of differentiation because of the classroom size, lack of resources, lack of time, ever-rising demands, not to mention low payment.

As Merrill stated (2002), most effective learning environments start with a meaningful problem that provides the focus on four phases of instruction: activation of existing knowledge (including skills), demonstration of new knowledge, application of new knowledge, and integration of new knowledge into the learner’s world.

The results of all consulted studies indicate the positive impact of the differentiated approach to teaching and learning in the diverse classroom, and, nevertheless, requires an emergent need for the improvement of teachers’ knowledge and skills. The teachers can treat these facts with resignation and resistance or they can turn them into moments of self-knowledge, deeper understanding of students’ diversity as connected to human nature development.

This study highlights the necessity of mapping teachers’ educational needs in the field of differentiated instruction and demands an appropriate approach by adapting teacher training programs in order to train teachers’ self-efficiency in differentiated educational practices. Furthermore, it is very important to develop teachers’ positive attitudes towards differentiation and to promote the culture of diversity by developing a coherent understanding of the implications of knowledge for diverse learners concerning the practice of teaching. Differentiated instruction is meant to fill the gap between teaching and learning. It is our sincere belief, however, that a teacher whose educational obligations and practices reflect masterly of these principles will do better than average assessment job of student achievement, designing durable and adequate strategies and tools to support a differentiated approach to teaching and learning.

In conclusion, the theoretical references and the mentioned researches represent the path that we will follow as a starting point for future research. The next step of our research is to explore the teacher’s perceptions and lived experiences of carrying out the differentiated instruction with the negative and positive aspects of the approach and reasons teachers may or may not embrace differentiated instruction. The present study-in progress is a part of a larger-scale research including a series of focus-groups, classroom observations, content analysis regarding the challenges teachers typically experience and how they can be overcome in order to gain understanding of the impact of the differentiated approach to teaching and learning in primary school. The major challenge is to get differentiation visible. The more this aspect is underlined the more the teachers will get attracted by its positive effects on their teaching routines and student achievement.

References
