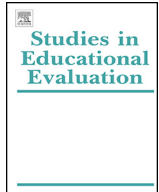




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## Perspectives of teachers on differentiated teaching in multi-cultural South African secondary schools

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### ABSTRACT

South African teachers encounter numerous challenges in the creation of differentiated activities to include diverse learner needs in effective teaching and learning. These challenges include the inability to identify learning barriers and adapt the curriculum, teaching and assessment methods according to the learning styles and readiness levels of learners. The study aimed to explore secondary school teachers' (n = 262) perspectives on the implementation of differentiated instruction in public secondary schools (n = 27), using qualitative and quantitative approaches. The results indicated that teachers cannot always assist their learners when they need them; show them how to solve problems; or allow learners to work on their own. In addition, various limitations, such as inadequate teacher training, large class sizes, workload, undisciplined learners, lack of resources and parental involvement, second language instruction, inadequate support services and socio-economic barriers contribute to the use of teacher-centred methods. The study recommends that intervention programmes in the form of workshops on how to create differentiated activities should be prioritised in the professional development of teachers.

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### 1. Introduction

There is global debate about how teachers should effectively instruct learners with multiple intelligences, languages, levels of academic readiness, values, religions, parent education, socio-economic status, competences and skills (Fox, Vos, & Geldenhuys, 2007). Chataika, Mckenzie, Swart, and Lyner-Cleophas, (2012) argue that one of the challenges obstructing academic progress of South African learners is the lack of teachers' skills in adjusting the curriculum to meet the diverse learning needs of a multicultural learner body.

Williams, Olivier, and Pienaar (2009) emphasise that effective teaching and learning is important for all learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies they require to become economically productive, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies, develop sustainable livelihoods, and enhance their individual well-being.

According to Smit and Humpert (2012) and Tomlinson (2005), differentiated instruction where the teacher employs various instructional practices that are adapted and applied to diverse and individual learner needs in the classroom contribute to effective teaching and learning. However, South African teachers face

several limitations that prevent them from including diverse learner needs in effective teaching and learning. Research by Engelbrecht, Oswald, and Forlin (2006) has shown that teachers lack sufficient knowledge and skills on how to identify learners' barriers and adapt curricula in ways that can meet the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms. Engelbrecht (2006) suggests that teacher-training programmes do not seem to adequately address differentiated instruction, so that teachers do not create differentiated activities. Moreover, Badat and Sayed (2014) state that schools from the lower income and rural areas are poorly resourced and mostly characterised by ineffective teaching and learning despite education policies to address learners' needs in effective education.

The results of ineffective teaching can be seen in the learner dropout figures in South Africa, which increase annually. In 2013, only 562,112 of the 1,261,827 (45%) initial Grade 1 learners who enrolled in 2002 wrote the National Grade 12 examination. This implies that learners who do not achieve academic success leave school before completing Grade 12 (Spaull, 2013). Chataika et al. (2012) postulate that teachers' lack of skills in adjusting the curriculum to meet the diverse learning needs of a multicultural learner body hampers the academic progress of South African learners. Brand, Favazza, and Dalton (2012) concur, emphasising the need to equip teachers with the necessary skills to create and apply differentiated instruction in poorly resourced schools to

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prevent learners dropping out from school. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which secondary teachers utilised differentiated instruction in poorly resourced schools. More specifically, this study sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- How do secondary school teachers adapt their teaching practices to learners' needs?
- What are the perspectives of secondary school teachers on differentiated instruction?

The data could provide an indication of the extent to which differentiated teaching is employed in South African secondary school classrooms in addressing the needs of the growing diversity of learners.

### 1.1. Defining differentiated instruction

Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) define differentiated instruction as a flexible and proactive way of adjusting teaching and learning that will assist learners in achieving maximum growth and development. Differentiated instruction is a teaching and learning approach used to teach learners with different abilities in the same class. The main aim of differentiated instruction is to recognise, identify and support learners in developing to their full potential by accommodating their diverse background knowledge, readiness levels, language preferences, interest and learning styles (Hall, 2002). Lawrence-Brown (2004) elaborates that reasonable goals should be set to learners that address both their weaknesses and strengths in achieving academic success. The teacher plans learning activities according to the interests, learning profile and needs of learners. At the beginning of the lesson, outcomes that all learners need to achieve at the end of the lesson are clearly stated. With the lesson outcomes in mind the teacher can adapt, modify and differentiate: *content* (what learners are supposed to learn), *process* (teaching and learning strategies), *product* (the way in which learners prove they have learned the content), *learning environment* (the physical arrangement of the learning situation, which can include inclusive, small, large, or multi-age settings) and *affect* (socio-emotional factors: learners need to feel safe and invited to participate in the learning situation) (Tomlinson, 2001). These adaptations and modifications could enable all learners to reach the lesson outcomes at their own time and readiness level.

Contrary to traditional teacher and textbook-centred learning methods, differentiated learning activities are learner-centred, where the learners are responsible for their own learning. Differentiated activities allow learners to engage in individualised activities that are combined with collaborative discussions among their peers. Learners obtain extra assistance from their peers to solve a problem rather than using the teacher as the problem solver. The teacher's role in a differentiated classroom is to facilitate learning rather than conveying content knowledge.

## 2. Background to the study

The increase of diverse classrooms and inclusion of learners with disabilities in South Africa demand culturally sensitive and adaptive instruction that provides for the development of the whole individual (Anderson, 2007).

The principles and guidelines of differentiated instruction are rooted in years of teaching practices, research and theory. This is profound in the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) theory of Vygotsky (1978). The ZPD indicates that effective teaching and learning take place when learning activities are adjusted to each learner's preference of learning style. Further to this, Vygotsky (1978) emphasises that learners should be instructed using several

outcomes that increase in difficulty and challenge them to reach success beyond their current ability level. To progress to the ZPD and independent learning, a knowledgeable person or teacher who facilitates the individual's learning is necessary (Riddle and Dabbagh, 1999). Expanding on this idea, Lawrence-Brown (2004) and Tobin and McInnes (2008) list the roles of the teacher in the differentiated classroom as follows: diagnose the needs of learners, assist learners in learning, engage with learners through interactive communication, scaffold learning content for learners, supplying them with additional examples and strategies on how to learn effectively, provide quick feedback to learners to redirect them back to the correct track when solving a problem or learning new content.

Differentiated instruction is also based on the social constructivism theory of Vygotsky (1978), and later Wertsch and Tulviste (1992), which emphasises the principle that the individual learner must be instructed within a particular social and cultural context (Subban, 2006). This theory views effective learning as best supported through social collaborative and interactive learning with learners' peers. In combination with this theory, differentiated instruction emphasises the significance of learners collaborating with their peers in completing class activities and teachers using enquiry, feedback, reflection and support as methods in constructive learning (Tomlinson, 2005).

Several studies confirm the advantages of differentiated instruction. In Missouri, McAdamis (2001) reports an improvement of poor-performing learners' test scores when employing differentiated instruction. The study also detected that learners were more enthusiastic and motivated to learn. Johnsen (2003) notes that learners' interest in differentiated activities improved. A study in Iran on female learners using differentiated instruction to teach vocabulary in mixed-ability classes showed a positive impact on the learners' academic performance (Alavinia & Farhady, 2012). Moreover, a study conducted in Kenya by Muthomi and Mbugua (2014) states that differentiated instruction improved secondary school learners' achievement in mathematics significantly.

Despite positive study results on the advantages of differentiated instruction, research in South Africa indicates that a total of 97 percent of teachers never or seldom use a flexible curriculum and extra time to accommodate the diverse learning needs of learners (De Jager, 2013). The reasons derived from the study were that teachers are not trained, able or willing to apply differentiated teaching methods. Bernstein (2015) adds that teachers are poorly managed, insufficiently trained, unable to manage class discipline, and unable to teach effectively in diverse classes.

In supporting adaptive teaching methods, Pennington (2014) is of the opinion that challenges in implementing differentiated instruction can be overcome with the effective use of technology. By using the wide range of software programmes available, learners can overcome their learning barriers by completing differentiated learning activities; cover large amounts of content in limited time; and at the same time establish their comprehension of new content. As each learner works at his or her own pace, the teacher can support those individuals encountering problems. Unfortunately, the lack of resources in South African public schools does not always enable teachers to use technology for adaptive teaching. Earlier studies of Chisholm, Hoadley, Wa Kivulu, Brookes, Prinsloo, and Kgobe (2005) and Williams et al. (2009) point out that teachers are not always willing to create differentiated activities as they experience insufficient resources, are pressured to complete a large amount of content in a limited time, are burdened with a heavy workload which deprives them of sufficient time to prepare differentiated activities, teach large classes and lack sufficient training in adaptive teaching practices. Additionally, Spaul (2013) and Reddy, Prinsloo, Netshitangani, Moletsane, Juan, and Janse van Rensburg (2010) specify the socio-context of South

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