



Student teachers' practice and experience with differentiated instruction for students with higher learning potential

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The article presents 322 student teachers' practice with differentiated instruction.
- Student teachers highlight challenges in creating safe learning environments.
- They highlight challenges in identifying differences among high-potential students.
- The main challenge is enacting differentiated instruction for these students.
- Teacher education needs to offer more opportunities to practice differentiation.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a qualitative study concerning student teachers' understanding of differentiation for high-achieving secondary school students with higher learning potential. Predominantly using focus group interviews of Norwegian student teachers ($N = 322$), this study identified their understanding of the use and value of differentiation, drawing from their teaching practice and experience. This study supports the notion that student teachers lack confidence in enacting differentiation, despite being aware of its importance, when working with these students. We contend that teacher education needs to pay more attention to helping student teachers effectively differentiate to meet the needs of high-achieving students with higher learning potential.

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1. Introduction

Differentiation in education is a powerful concept, and we agree with critics who say that implementation is challenging. This study concerns student teachers and their understanding of differentiation for secondary school students with higher learning potential. Although most teachers, if asked, would indicate that they are committed to meeting students' individual needs, many teachers lack the knowledge to put this commitment into practice, and Tomlinson (2014) emphasized that some educators “even consider

differentiated instruction a fundamental expectation for teachers in today's classrooms” (p. 2). However, when differentiation strategies are applied, often the only changes are content-level adjustments (e.g., more drill and practice for low-achieving students and more advanced content for high-achievers).

Although differentiation is essential for all learners, studies have shown that schools have inadequate knowledge about students with higher learning potential, and that instruction is differentiated only to a small extent to meet these students' needs and abilities (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [NMER], 2016). This situation may be explained by the fact that these students receive little attention in teacher education (Brevik & Gunnulfsen, 2016), and one could argue, more broadly in education in general.

Internationally, researchers have used more than 100 terms for these students that combine the words *giftedness*, *abilities*, *talent*,

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and *intelligence* (Bailey, Pearce, Winstanley, Smith, & Sutherland, 2008; Freeman, Raffan, & Warwick, 2010). It is problematic when researchers in the field of teacher education use different terms to describe the same phenomenon, and when they examine different phenomena, using the same concepts and terms (Jenset, 2017). We try to avoid the word “gifted”—or the G-word—especially when it is used as an entity (noun or object e.g., “he or she is gifted”), preferring to talk and write about *students with higher learning potential* and using the G-word as an adjective (e.g., he or she is a gifted [superior, advanced, innovative, exceptional, persuasive, compelling] writer for his or her age or compared with others her age; see also Renzulli, 2012). Although students with higher learning potential might include “gifted” students, underachieving able students, or students with dual or multiple exceptionalities (Wallace et al., 2009), they are not the focus in this study. The term *students with higher learning potential* constitutes a complex group of individuals with different needs comprising students who achieve at high levels and those who have potential to do so, a group estimated to constitute 10%–15% of the school population (Gagné, 2005; Idsøe, 2014; Renzulli, 2005; Theilgaard & Raaschou, 2013).

Based on this definition, *students with higher learning potential* include a broad range of students. Research has shown that these students form a complex, heterogeneous group of individuals with differing instruction and development needs, some with potential in one subject and others in several subjects or areas (NMER, 2016; Renzulli, 2012). Thus, it is easier to recognize students in this group who are identified based on cognitive tests than students with higher learning potential who might not be identified through such tests (Renzulli, 2012).

As differentiation for this student group is understudied in teacher education, and as our study aimed at exploring the views of student teachers who by definition have limited experience and practice with these students, we chose to delimit our focus. By focusing on the high achievers in this group, we aimed for more reliable responses from the student teachers. We define high-achieving students with higher learning potential as advanced students who achieve above-average grades, perform well in various assessment situations, and have higher learning potential. Although high-achieving students may perform at a high level, they might also have unfulfilled learning potential (Renzulli, 2012). Although low-achieving students might also have higher learning potential, they are not included in this study.

Based on the discussion above, and as differentiation is critically important in education, the present study aimed to identify student teachers’ understanding of the use and value of differentiation for high-achieving students with higher learning potential.

2. Literature review

In 1997, Tomlinson et al. (1997) reported that student teachers from six universities in the United States found it difficult to implement differentiated teaching practice for low- and high-achieving students, even after receiving instruction and supervised training on campus. Sixteen years later, Cochran-Smith (2003) argued that the knowledge acquired during teacher education (TE) scarcely influences teachers’ instructional practices. Specifically, when facing challenges in the classroom newly educated U.S. teachers often struggle to apply the knowledge from research-based TE programs (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). Differentiated instruction is no exception (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). Seminal studies from the United States have highlighted the importance of teaching student teachers about effective differentiation (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Grossman, 2005), especially as exercising differentiation in practice for low- and high-achieving students is challenging (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012;

Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 1997). Some studies have shown that consistent, enthusiastic differentiated teaching practice benefits a wide range of students (Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008).

Studies have revealed that student teachers do not receive adequate training on what differentiated teaching practice means (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Grossman, 2005). Scholars argue that in addition to providing student teachers with theories about differentiation, teacher educators should offer practical training on campus under their guidance and help student teachers relate their knowledge to their teaching practices. This view seems to be supported in recent research on TE programs in Chile, Cuba, Finland, Norway, and the United States, which has shown that the strongest and most effective TE programs integrate theory and practice (Hammerness & Klette, 2015; Jenset, Klette, & Hammerness, 2017).

Thus, TE programs across the world should aid their student teachers to use differentiation in ways that increase and reflect student performance (Hodgson, Rønning, & Tomlinson, 2012; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). This view is relevant, as research has indicated that novice and experienced teachers alike feel a need to cater primarily to the needs of low-achieving students who do not benefit from regular classroom instruction (NMER, 2016; Tomlinson, 2014).

Although differentiation is a goal, it is implemented inconsistently in the classroom (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000). For example, in the United States, Banks et al. (2005) emphasized the teacher’s importance in the design and implementation of differentiated instruction: “All teachers must be prepared to take into account the different experiences and academic needs of a wide range of students as they plan and teach” (p. 233). In another U.S. study, Hardre and Sullivan (2008, p. 2072) found that among 75 teachers in 19 secondary schools, the majority lacked strategies and knowledge to motivate students at different academic levels. It seems that many teachers do not have knowledge of how to implement differentiation and do not acknowledge the need for it.

For example, although teachers may use grades and test scores to get information about their students, such criteria might not identify some high-potential students because their strengths lie in areas not reflected by such measurements (Renzulli, 2012). In a study of national testing policies in Norwegian lower secondary schools, Gunnulfson and Møller (2016) found that teachers use available test results primarily to confirm what the teachers already know about low-achieving students. The teachers do not use results to facilitate differentiated teaching for high-achieving students based on their identified strengths or learning and development needs.

Norwegian studies have problematized the lack of differentiation in upper secondary classrooms as well. When students start upper secondary school, they can choose between general (academic) tracks, intended for students who want to continue in higher education, and vocational tracks, intended for students who want to learn a vocation and start working after secondary school. In a class in the general (academic) track, Blikstad-Balas (2012) studied students’ laptop use during classroom instruction. She found that although some of the high-achieving students took school-related notes in every lesson, others spent their time on unrelated activities, such as reading online newspapers and playing games. During the observed lessons, the students did not receive differentiated instruction or comments on what they were doing. In a similar vein, Brevik (2017) found that students in the general (academic) track receive less differentiated instruction than students in the vocational track. Although the teachers in vocational classes challenged their students academically, based on their needs, the students in general classes were given tasks they quickly

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