Chapter 6: Differentiation as a Teaching Strategy

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REFERENCE
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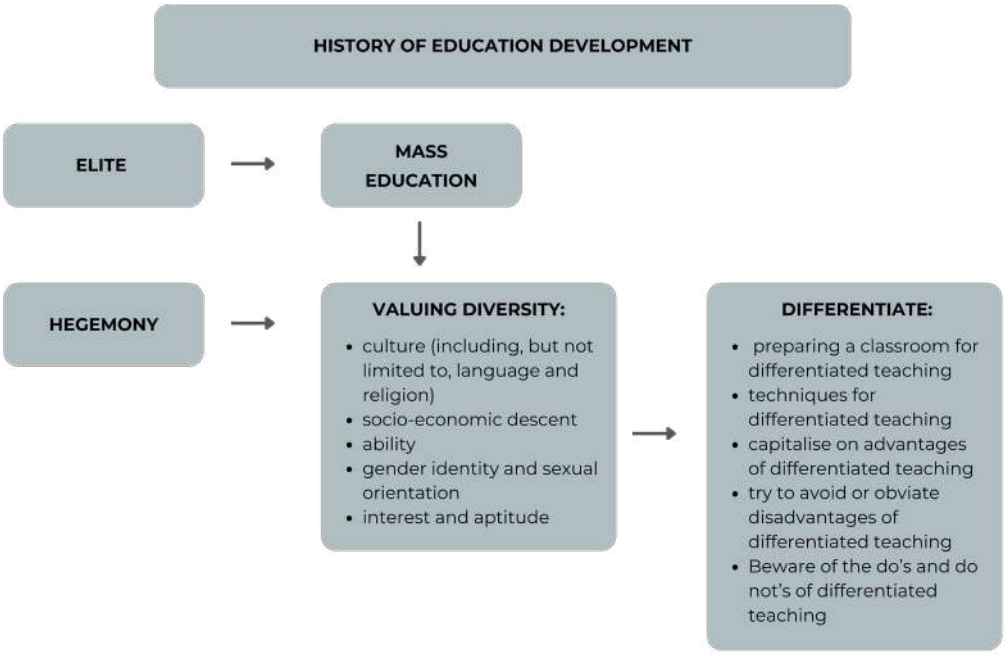
6.1. Concept Map



6.2. Learning outcomes

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

- Understand why the contemporary societal context requires differentiated teaching and why a "one size fits all" teaching style no longer suffices
- Know the main dimensions of differentiated teaching, i.e. along which dimensions should the teacher differentiate
- Understand the principles which should determine the teacher's differentiated teaching
- Be able to plan a lesson in your subject in which you employ the principles of differentiated teaching.

6.3. Key concepts

Differentiation: the action of distinguishing between different people. In a classroom situation, that means distinguishing between various learners.
Diversity in classroom variety among learners in the classroom; a large number of learners of varying socio-economic descent, gender and sexual orientation, cultural background, ability, and interest and aptitude.

6.4. Reflective questions

1. Imagine a classroom in a typical South African school. Think about how diverse the learners of that classroom can possibly be, i.e., along which dimensions of diversity will a teacher have to design his/her teaching strategy?
2. Then think about the subject or the phase you are teaching. How would you devise your teaching strategy for your subject or the phase you are teaching in order to accommodate each of these dimensions of diversity of learners?

6.5. Introduction

In the context of 21st-century classrooms, teachers increasingly encounter diversity among their students. Moreover, contemporary society values diversity, and teachers are expected to accommodate it positively. This is achieved through differentiation strategies. This chapter focuses on differentiation as a key pedagogical strategy of the 21st century. It begins by outlining two significant trends in the historical evolution of education: the shift from elite to mass education and the transition from schools as instruments of hegemony to schools as spaces where diversity is valued. These two trends have created an imperative for differentiation.

6.6. Differentiation Teaching in classrooms

In this new world of mass education and a society that values diversity, teachers face a student body that is diverse across a number of dimensions. The first dimension is cultural diversity. The cultural diversity among students that teachers encounter in many countries has been accentuated by the desegregation school movement, which has, over the past seventy years, been a central tenet of education reform in many countries, including the United States of America, Malaysia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa.

A second dimension is socio-economic background. In student composition, this dimension has been emphasised in recent decades by the comprehensive school movement in Western Europe, which has ended the historically hierarchical school systems in that part of the world. Gender diversity is another dimension that has also been highlighted in recent years by a co-education movement in many school systems that have historically been gender-segregated. Furthermore, society has recently begun to recognise diversity in sexual orientation. There is also diversity in terms of ability, which includes students who are physically, psychologically, and cognitively challenged — underscored in recent decades by the movement towards mainstreaming in education. Finally, there is diversity in terms of aptitude, interests, and the choices that should be allowed.

The pedagogic response to the diversity teachers encounter in their classrooms is differentiation. Differentiation can be defined as the action of distinguishing between different individuals. In a classroom context, it means that, in terms of teaching style, curriculum, examples, and assessment, the teacher should distinguish between different students. This is done to ensure that the learning material is comprehensible and meaningful for everyone. Issues such as Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital come to mind here (see Claussen & Osborne, 2013). Reflecting on an extensive literature survey on differentiation in education, Eikeland and Ohna (2022) draw attention to the fact that differentiation can occur between groups of students as well as between individuals. This distinction is significant, and each has its place in the classroom. However, particularly when using the former, teachers should be mindful not to promote discrimination and stereotyping, and should also be vigilant so as not to appear condescending, denigrating, or patronising, or, above all, to constitute a form of (re)segregation or internal segregation within a school. Differentiation should not reinforce inequalities or marginalisation in education or in society, nor should it stigmatise certain students; rather, ideally, differentiation should contribute towards greater equality, enriched learning for all, and the promotion of the aims of intercultural education.

6.7. Advantages and disadvantages of Differentiation Teaching

The advantages of differentiating teaching include fostering inclusive education, promoting equality, and creating maximum opportunities for each learner, in line with the principles of Capabilities Theory (see Wolhuter, Espinoza & McGinn, 2024). However, the disadvantages include its higher cost and increased demands compared to a uniform approach to teaching. Nevertheless, given the benefits, it is imperative for teachers to make a concerted effort to differentiate their teaching practices as much as possible.

6.8. Preparing a differentiation classroom

When preparing a differentiated classroom, you need to know your learners well. Without violating anyone's right to privacy, collect information on the diversity among your learners regarding socio-economic background, gender and sexual orientation, cultural background, ability, and interests and aptitude. This knowledge should inform your specification of learning objectives, the physical arrangement of the classroom, the teaching methods used, the learning methods employed, the aids to be used, and the assessment.

6.9. Techniques in effective differentiation classrooms

The four classic techniques for an effective differentiation classroom are content, process, product, and environment. Content refers to "what" you are going to teach, while process refers to "how" you are going to teach it. Product pertains to what students will be asked to do to demonstrate their learning, often in an assessment. Environment involves creating conditions that enable learners to learn. These may vary from seating arrangements and time management to learning aids.

6.10. Dos and don'ts in differentiation teaching

Dos
- give every learner maximum opportunities to realise potential and live out wishes and choices, using the Capabilities Theory as a yardstick (see Unterhalter, 2020).

When differentiating, don't:
- make any child feel inferior or being discriminated against
- be condescending
- be patronising

6.11. A case study in differentiated teaching

I am a teacher at the beginning of the year, teaching Geography to a Grade 11 class in a high school in the greater Cape Town metro area. I have the following aspects of diversity among the students, which I need to take into account in my lessons:

Culture: As an indication of the cultural diversity I face, I have learners who speak six different home languages among themselves: Afrikaans, English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Greek, Swahili, and Shona. A second aspect of cultural diversity is religious conviction. Among the thirty learners in my class, twenty identify as Christian, representing a number of denominations, including Roman Catholic, Dutch Reformed, Greek Orthodox, Methodist, Anglican, and the Zionist Christian Church. Additionally, there are two Muslims, three learners who adhere to traditional or indigenous African religions, one Jewish student, one learner who identifies as agnostic, one who identifies as an atheist, one who is spiritual but not religious, and one who is uncertain about their belief in God. Ability: My class includes one deaf learner, one visually impaired learner, and two learners with epilepsy.

Socio-economic background: The student body in my class covers the entire socio-economic spectrum, from children from informal settlements to those with unemployed parents, working-class children, lower-middle-class children, children from comfortable middle-class families, and learners from upper-middle-class families.

6.12. Conlcusion

As explained in this chapter, the increased diversity of students that teachers encounter in classrooms requires differentiation as an appropriate pedagogical response. This differentiation should occur along multiple dimensions, including students' socio-economic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, abilities, gender and sexual orientation or identity, as well as individual aptitudes and interests. Differentiation is no easy task for teachers, demanding all their creativity, innovation, professional knowledge, and leadership qualities. However, when implemented effectively, differentiation can make a critical difference in the outcomes and quality of education systems, including those in the Global South.

6.13. Reflective answers

1. Imagine a classroom in a typical South African school. Consider the various dimensions of diversity that the learners in that classroom may represent. In which ways will a teacher need to design his or her teaching strategy to accommodate this diversity?
    - There will be diversity in terms of culture (including, but not limited to, language and religion), socio-economic background, gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as interests and aptitude.
    - Preparing a classroom for differentiated teaching
    - Techniques for differentiated teaching
    - beware the do's and do not's of differentiated teaching
    - capitalise on the advantages of differentiated teaching and attempt to avoid the disadvantages of differentiated teaching

2. Then think about the subject or the phase you are teaching. How would you devise your teaching strategy for your subject or the phase you are teaching in order to accommodate each of these dimensions of learner diversity?

This answer will depend on your subject. In teaching History, for example, you should strive to find role models and interpretations that inspire each of the categories of learners you have. Then,

- Preparing a classroom for differentiated teaching
- Techniques for differentiated teaching
- beware the do's and do not's of differentiated teaching
- capitalise on the advantages of differentiated teaching and attempt to avoid the disadvantages of differentiated teaching

6.14. References

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