

In the course of curriculum or assessment development, why is it necessary to cater for diversity in Hong Kong classrooms? What are some practical ways you can do this?



We have become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic

Jimmy Carter

Introduction

The teaching of students with diverse abilities among and within classes is always a significant and challenging task in teachers' day-to-day work. The diverse abilities may due to the differences in students' cultural background, social economic states, past learning experience, level of motivation, learning style and aptitude about learning and teaching. These lead to different responses to instructional practices and students' different level of engagement and learning efficiency. Seeing that students' learning needs are becoming increasingly diverse, it is significant for teachers to look for ways that can provide a more supportive learning environment that is conducive to and cater for the less able students and students with special educational needs. Nancy Kroonenberg (1995) pointed out the best instructional strategy to cater for learner diversity is to include variety into the classrooms. Teachers need modification of teaching styles and strategies in order to communicate ideas effectively. According to Tomlinson (2000), 'Differentiated Instruction is an approach that assumes there is a diversity of learners in every classroom and that all of those learners can be reached if a variety of methods and activities are used'. Tomlinson suggests that the content, process and product should be modified according to students' readiness, interests and learning profile to cater for their diversities. Other research studies also support Differentiated Instruction approach that students are more engaged and can learn more efficient in school if the curriculum and teaching instruction are responsive to their readiness (Vygotsky, 1986), interests (Csikszentmihaly, 1990), and learning profiles (Sternberg, 1998). This paper presents some practical ways to cater for diversity

in classrooms under Differentiated Instruction approach including the perspectives of content which refers to the learning target and the learning objectives, process which refers to the activities and the teaching strategies and product which refers to the ways students demonstrate what they have learned (Tomlinson2000).

(1) Diagnosis

Before investigate specific plans on how to support the less able students and students with special educational needs, a more in depth diagnosis is needed. In order to identify the specific weakness of students and focus on students who show typical features of special needs ,for example, dyslexia, teachers have to conduct lesson observations and collect evidence on how the student learn from homework, class performance and test. Teachers should keep students learning portfolios (Appendix 1) to record data on the focusing students and to monitor their progress. Moreover, the observation should be conducted by all subjects' teachers of the focusing student in order to have a holistic discussion on the student's learning diversities and devisal of appropriate techniques. Teachers must be sensitive to identify and understand students' needs. Therefore, teachers should be well equipped with the professional knowledge about diverse needs of students.

(2) Content

After the identification of students' needs, the curriculum and the learning objectives should be varied with regard to students' readiness, interests and learning profile. To cater for diverse learning, the curriculum should include core and extended learning content. For example, for the less able students and students with special education needs, the amount of learning items to be covered is mainly core and less challenging. For average and better students, the amount of the learning context is extended and more challenging. Diversified coverage of the learning content allows students to proceed at their own level to improve the learning effectiveness as the gap between old and new knowledge is better streamlined and connected (Tomlinson 2000). Apart from diversified coverage of the learning content, the learning content should take in account of students' interest. The theme and the topics should be carefully chosen that students can relate themselves to. Kroonenberg (1995) suggested that students learn more easily and more efficiently when the lessons are conducted with their strongest perceptual preferences. Lastly, the materials of the learning context should be carefully selected based on students'

readiness. For example, when students find the textbook too challenging, teachers have to present another version with an easier level of words that suit students needs. The tailor made materials enhance the flexibility of teaching and effectiveness in learning.

(3) Process

Both environment and learning activities place important roles to enhance learning efficiency of the less able students and students with special educational needs. First, teachers should carefully arrange the sitting according to students' ability. For instance, students are put into three ability groups which are less able, average and better (Appendix 2). Students who need utmost attention are placed closest to teacher. It is easier for the students to maintain their attention. Ability grouping facilitates teachers' providence of different level of support and assistance in time. This arrangement also facilitates teacher to do something additional to meet the needs of the target group. To enhance less able and special educational needs students' learning, teachers need to use a wider repertoire of teaching strategies. Below are some practical suggestions of teaching strategies.

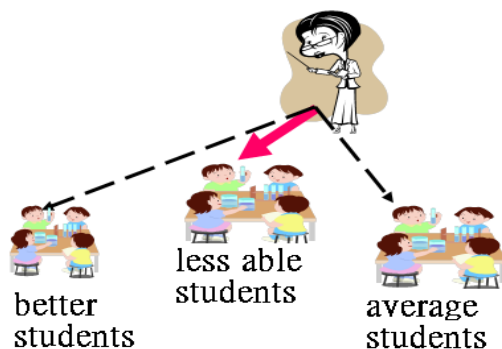
- (i) Using body language instead of verbal instructions may be a good idea because students with special learning needs, for example, Attention Deficit Disorder and Specific Learning Difficulties are more responsive to body language than verbal instructions.
- (ii) Different forms of visual aids can concentrate students' attention to information. For example, using catchy colors ,larger font size helps differentiate and highlight emphasis; using pictures (appendix 3) which have associated meaning to the learning context can draw their attention to the more abstract ideas; using diagrams (appendix 4)with minimum words to highlight important messages is easier for them to follow and understand than plain wordy instruction.
- (iii) Instead of solely using textbook materials, teachers can good use of language arts and authentic materials elements to provide more variety for students with different interests and learning styles. For example, teachers can include and songs, poems, fables and myths, drama, short stories, newspaper and advertisements etc in the formal and informal curricula. Students' engagement and attention in class are enhanced via the more

variety in learning content and activities.

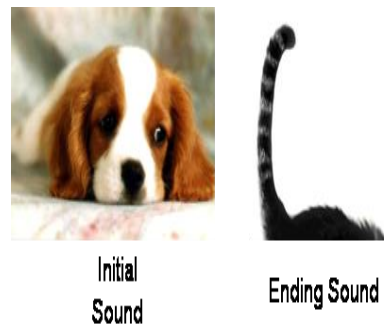
- (iv) Multi-sensory activities which include more than one sensory channel help maximize their learning effectiveness. Kinsella (1994) suggested the best instructional approach, regardless of subject matter or grade level, is a deliberate multisensory approach. For example, It is not easy to have students with Attention Deficit Disorder seated orderly during class. Teachers may design more kinesthetic activities in class. Other researches also support that involving multi sensory provides the greatest input into the brain circuitry and the greatest chance of retention (LDA Learning centre V1 No.2). It is beneficial to all students as the stronger learning styles can be used to support the weaker, and the weaker one can be trained and developed (Dyslexia Review Journal).
- (v) When designing the tasks, there is a need for teachers to consider a boarder range of activities and performance that not only demonstrate the learning context abilities such as language, but also other abilities such as drawing, presentation skills and creativity. As Gardner (1993) pointed out that students are smart and can be smart in different areas like musical, kinesthetic, visual, interpersonal, linguistic and mathematical. Students are more confidence and engaged in the tasks and activities when they can show their competence.

The above teaching strategies suggestions take in account of students' readiness, interests and learning profile. At the same time, the activities are designed to enhance the engagement concentrate students' attention and provide space for teachers' assistance.

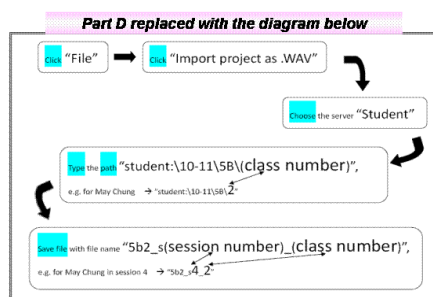
Appendix 2



Appendix 3



Appendix 4



(4) Product

Similarly, the homework should be multi intelligence (Appendix 5) that students can demonstrate other skills that match students' interests and learning preferences than the learning target. It boosts their active learning. Also, there should be diverse mode of assessment. For instance, there can be self- assessment, peer and family assessment (Appendix 6). Peer assessment provides opportunity for students to help and learn from each other in making improvements. Parental support is vital for encouraging students to make improvement.

The assessment or examination should design with differentiation with both easy and difficult parts as an option for students with diverse abilities. To be specific, the core learning target is included in the core part of the assessment that all students have to attempt. The extended part contains both easier and more difficult part for different levels of students. With more differentiation in assessment, teachers can cater for the diverse needs of better, average and less able students. Weaker students find the assessment manageable and can obtain a sense of achievement while the more able students still find the questions challenging. Students with special education needs may have more assistance and support from teachers. For instance, the time given is longer and word size is larger.

Apart from differentiation of assessment, the criteria for assessing different students' performance needs to varied. The criteria and standard of the less able students and students with special education needs should be compromised between the student and the person in charge such as different subjects' teachers. The criteria should be specific such as able to answer half of the comprehension questions correctly. Setting the expectation and criteria manageable and attainable boosts students' confidence and engagement to improve their learning.

Appendix 5



Appendix 6

B. Try to read the following words to your schoolmates / prefect / parents and ask them to give you marks and circle the words that are NOT clearly pronounced! ☺

The Best Thing In The World

Once upon a time, there were four brothers who lived in a far away land. Their father was an old king. One day he said, "I will not live long now. Today you must start out into the world. In a year, bring back the best thing you have found. The one who can pick the best thing shall be the new king."

	1 – 5 (5 – best; 1 – needs improvement)
Fluency	4
Volume	5

Checked by: _____ (Signature)

Name: _____
(schoolmate / prefect / father / mother) *Circle as appropriate

Conclusion

Seeing that students' learning needs are becoming increasingly diverse, it is significant for teachers to look for ways that can provide a more supportive learning environment that is conducive to and cater for the less able students and students with special educational needs. To respond the great variance among students among and within class, it is necessary for teachers to modify the content, process and product after doing an in-depth diagnosis. It is important and necessary to heighten awareness of the diversity among students and increase sensitivity to the differences. The more sensitive to the differences and the more comprehensive planning for the diverse, the better learning efficiency that students with diverse needs can obtain. All variations have to base on students different readiness, learning motivation, interests and learning profiles in order to maximize the assistance and support to the diversity of students.

Appendix 1:

Samples of SEN Register and Individual Education Plan

(1) SEN Register (for school reference)

Sample

(Academic and Non-academic Performance & Follow-up)

No	Name of Student	Sex	Class	SEN Type		Internal Examination Result (Note 2)						Mode of Support (Please ✓)						Others (including non-academic achievement)	Review /Follow-up (Please ✓)	
						1st Term			2nd Term			Remedial Programme	Study Skills Training	Social Skills Training	Speech Therapy	Peer Tutoring	Parent Volunteer		Continued Support	Withdrawal
				(Note 1)	Others (Please indicate)	Chin	Eng	Math	Chin	Eng	Math									
1																				
2																				
3																				
4																				
5																				
6																				

Note 1 : Please indicate by using the numbers below (can indicate more than one)

1. SpLD 2. ID 3. ASD 4. AD/HD 5. PD 6. VI 7. HI 8. SLI

Note 2 : Please indicate by using the letters below

A. Good Performance B. Significant Improvement C. Slight Improvement D. No Improvement

**(2) Individual Education Plan
(2008/09 School Year)**

Sample

Name of Student :
Age :
Class :
SEN Type :
Strengths :
Weaknesses :
Date of Discussion :
Date of Implementation :
Members involved in planning :

Area of Learning	Learning Objectives	Measures		Success criteria	Progress
		In School	By parents/other support measures		
Academic					
Classroom behaviour					
Social Adjustment & Communication					
Behavioural & Emotional Management					
Self-esteem					

Date of Review :

Staff in attendance (with posts) :

<u>Student Progress</u> : (with reference to the expected targets and success criteria)	
<u>Parents' Opinion</u> :	<u>Student's Opinion</u> :
<u>Opinion of professionals/specialists</u> :	<u>Other information</u> :
<u>Conclusion and Recommendations</u> :	

*Evaluation:

Not Achieved					Partly Achieved					Fully Achieved	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		

* Please circle the appropriate number.

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