

Research Brief

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Differentiated Instruction: A Review of the Literature

Differentiated instruction is recognized to be a compilation of many theories and practices related to effective teaching and its link to student achievement. It requires a departure from traditional methods of teaching and the belief that learners vary according to readiness, ability, motivation, and interest. While numerous testimonials, examples of differentiation in practice, and for-profit tools abound in the literature, little empirical research exists warranting future research on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction as measured by student achievement on assessments. This work provides a review of the literature including: the theoretical background of differentiated instruction; a rationale for the practice of differentiation; an explanation of differentiated instruction including ways to differentiate, elements and goals of the instructional approach, challenges to be overcome, and a snapshot of what differentiation looks like in action; a review of the few empirical studies that exist on differentiated instruction; and tools to evaluate differentiated instruction.

The implementation of differentiated instruction has been driven, in part, by increasingly diverse student populations, the inclusion of special education students, and poor attention to the needs of gifted students in the regular classroom setting. Differentiation is a two-step process that analyzes the degree of challenge in teacher planning and modifies approaches to meet student's abilities and interests. Therefore, it is both driven and monitored by continuous informal and formal assessment as instruction is aimed at a student's needs directly. Three elements guide differentiated instruction: content; process; and products. The focus is not on the adjustment of students, but, rather, the adjustment of teaching and instructional strategies making it about learning, not teaching.

Differentiated instruction is not standardized instruction. Simply giving students more work is not differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction allows students to gain a basic knowledge of skills and, when appropriate and possible, delve deeper into content to gain a more complex understanding of concepts to be learned. It is the matching of work to differing individual capabilities and requires the delivery of the curriculum in a number of different ways. The single most important aspect of differentiation is beginning instruction where students are. Challenges to differentiated instruction include: time; classroom management; changing teacher expectations; professional development; how to make grouping invisible (i.e., so that students do not feel as if they have been placed in fast and slow groups); grading; lack of necessary budgetary resources; and lack of a concrete and operational definition available for parent explanations.

For more information about this study contact Dr. Whitney Sherman, at 804-828-08724, whsherman@vcu.edu or visit our webpage: www.vcu.edu/eduweb/merc for a copy of the full report.