
Applying Differentiated Instructions in multilevel classes

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Abstract: *The article describes multilevel classroom teachers pay close attention to the materials and resources necessary to support and maintain a collaborative classroom, including a wide variety of authentic materials and texts to foster inquiry and independent learning.*

Keywords: multilevel classroom, student, plan, teacher, instruction

INTRODUCTION

Teachers in a multilevel classroom teach “individually all at once”. All instruction is planned to accommodate a range of learning, teaching, and assessment methods in which students can engage according to their own developmental needs along the continuum of learning. Differentiated instruction allows teachers to meet students’ cognitive and developmental needs, as well as to accommodate their interests and learning styles. Planning for differentiated instruction, using instructional methods that are student center and developmentally and culturally appropriate, is planning for success.

DISCUSSION

Due to the wide range of learners in the multilevel classroom, learning tasks are generally open-ended and have a continuum of expectations. Multilevel classroom teachers

- observe what each learner can do in order to plan for learning and teaching
 - provide a variety of learning tasks representing the multiple intelligences and allowing for student choice
 - plan open-ended tasks that can offer different developmentally and culturally appropriate challenges for a range of students
 - allow for flexibility with timelines
 - teach goal-setting skills for establishing achievable expectations instruct with the Model of Explicit Instruction in mind
 - use student-generated criteria to assess learning
 - plan for oral assessments, or the assistance of a scribe, when students are unable to manage written responses
- Manitoba’s Foundation for Implementation documents offer many suggestions for instruction and assessment in each subject area.

In a multilevel classroom, the teacher’s task is to reference a mid-range grade document in order to place each student on the continuum of learning within the classroom. In science, for example, the learning outcomes themselves suggest differentiation with respect to student independence and assessment expectations:

1. Student independence: Students in different grades may be asked to attain the same learning outcome with varying degrees of independence. Grade 5 students, for example, are asked to formulate a prediction/hypothesis identifying a cause and effect relationship with guidance from the teacher, whereas Grade 6 students are expected to complete this task on their own.

2. Assessment expectations: Students in different grades can perform the same learning task with varying instructions and assessment criteria. Grade 1 students, for example, need to meet one criterion related to function when they construct an object or device, whereas Grade 2 students need to meet two criteria – function and aesthetics. In multilevel classrooms, teachers will observe students working together with different developmentally appropriate expectations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The ways in which teachers organize and manage the multilevel classroom can accommodate differentiation for a wide range of learners. Establishing learning centers and a variety of groupings supports a range of learners and ensures classroom management:

✓ **Learning centres:** Learning centers are essential to the multilevel classroom, as they are to the single-grade classroom. They need to have a variety of hands-on materials and open-ended tasks or investigations to accommodate the wide developmental and cultural range of the students. It is important that learning centers align with targeted curricular outcomes and reflect the multiple intelligences.

✓ **Groupings:** A variety of groupings facilitate differentiation in a multilevel classroom, including flexible and cooperative groups:

1. Flexible groups: The purpose of flexible groups is to meet a particular need or interest of a small group of learners for strategic or explicit instruction, guided practice, or independent inquiry. These groups will change frequently throughout a day or a learning/teaching sequence. Flexible groups may be formed by, across developmental levels, and by student choice.

Suggestions for Forming Flexible Groups

- ❖ Keep a class list on the computer with students' names organized in order of their place on the developmental continuum in an instructional area. Print a copy of the list for each week and use it in planning strategic instruction in flexible groups. These lists can easily be revised when a student makes a developmental leap.
- ❖ For some tasks, mentorship pairings may be desirable. Groups will operate more independently with the leadership of advanced students.
- ❖ Students may select their own partners because of various considerations (e.g., friendship, choice of resources, and choice of problem-solving methods).

2. Cooperative groups: The main purpose of cooperative groups in the multilevel classroom is to develop a collaborative "micro" learning community within the larger classroom community (Johnson and Johnson). It takes time for these heterogeneous groups to develop interdependence. Cooperative groups may stay together for an entire term. Cooperative groups offer valuable opportunities for independent learning, thereby also allowing the teacher more time to work with flexible groups. Because of the wider developmental range in the multilevel classroom, thoughtful role assignment in cooperative groups is essential so that older ones do not overshadow younger students. Assign roles that are based on students' skills (e.g., reader, recorder, reporter, and helper) and rotate them. Alternatively, suggest a "share-the-pen" strategy, with each member taking a turn at recording an idea while the others are coaches, assisting with spelling, and encouraging thinking. Cooperative groups may be formed across developmental levels. Select students who have a range of social and academic abilities that will foster interdependence.

RESULT

Successful multilevel classrooms are a result of differentiated instruction that meets the needs of diverse learners within a learning community. Teachers' understanding of developmental learning, knowledge of curricula, and skills in practicing formative assessment are instrumental in planning for differentiation. It is recommended that at the outset teachers choose to focus on one aspect of differentiation at a time. Developing skills and confidence in ongoing daily assessment is helpful in differentiating for students' success and a good starting point for teachers new to the multilevel classroom. Multilevel classroom teachers realize that it takes time to acquire and apply these best practices.

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