

**“THE CHALLENGES OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION: A CASE STUDY AT SEVERAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN PRISTINA, KOSOVO”**

**Prof. Dr. Mejreme Ymeri**

Universum College – [mejreme.ymeri@universum-ks.org](mailto:mejreme.ymeri@universum-ks.org)

**MA. Admir Ibrahim**

Lecturer – [admiribrahimi@outlook.com](mailto:admiribrahimi@outlook.com)

***Abstract:** My idea to address the issue of teaching students with different abilities in a classroom came up when I noticed that many teachers find it difficult to include all students with different abilities in the teaching process, different preferences for particular subjects, and different learning profiles and styles. Research on this topic attempts to resolve the problem of how to make sure teachers always consider the possibility that there will not be any child with similar abilities, learning levels, or needs in each classroom. Furthermore, this research compared the application of differentiated instruction to public and non-public schools in Prishtina. This study will measure the efficacy of differentiated instruction in these schools with recommendations for further development of teachers to be used in all public and non-public schools. In this way, Teachers can help students learn more effectively by making the connection between the curriculum and their students' different interests and abilities, pushing all students to the point where they can work without help and the expectations of these students to be consistent not only with the curriculum but also with their unique profile as students*

***Keywords:** differentiated instruction, learning styles, specific needs, non-public and public schools.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Differentiated instruction is a guiding principle that allows teachers to better handle the difficulty of a classroom with students of varying abilities by considering the various factors when preparing and teaching a lesson. According to this philosophy, teachers should create their own instructional experience to accommodate a variety of learning types and abilities in the classroom. It is a huge challenge for teachers to help all students excel in learning, despite individual differences, and it necessarily requires a lot of innovative thinking, among other things. One of the main issues of school systems and modern cultures remains to be the efficiency of differential instruction. Differentiated training involves new solutions and continual reflective instructional methods, which cannot always be accomplished by using a pre-made lesson plan planned of time for the program. To plan a lesson and choose curriculum instruction based on differentiated instruction, the instructor must make the decision based on the students' expectations and personal characteristics. Teachers should be driven by students' cognitive patterns, as well as their interests, skills, and capacities, but also their cultural backgrounds when selecting differentiated instruction. Through this article, I hope to demonstrate that differentiated instruction is simple to implement if all teachers can identify their students' level of preparation, various intelligence, and even interests to practice suitable teaching methods for each students' individual needs.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **General Review**

Differentiated instruction involves a constructive response to what students know. This means offering them some ways of learning so that they have access to the

opportunities most suitable for them to learn according to their capacity. There are three levels of differentiated instruction that are commonly used: 1) modification of the classroom based on teaching; 2) interventions focused on small groups; and 3) intensive tutor interventions 1: 1 (Zanek & Vaughn, 2011). Teachers can differentiate their teaching when they: 1) understand how their students learn and think; 2) recognize a range of options to differentiate their teaching; 3) can apply differentiated instruction to different topics in the classroom; 4) have the right motivation; and 5) can understand the culture and climate in their classroom in terms of differentiation (Munro, 2010; 2011; 2012).

According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, teachers need to assess students' readiness and their interests and their "profile" of learning (which includes knowing a student's culture and background) to understand his or her needs concerning the specific learning unit or learning goals and use this knowledge in selecting the approach to use to best help the learner learn. For example, while some children may be working on a story and developing a writing project for that story, teachers may allow others to show what they are learning, while others may be drawing or make diagrams. "It just makes the class more open to everyone," says Tomlinson.

VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh (2005) have identified several reasons for the lack of differentiated instruction. According to them, this happens because teachers:

1. Lack of substantive knowledge needed to expand and differentiate some areas of typical curriculum content to reach all students.
2. Lack of classroom management skills to support differentiated instruction.

3. They lack the necessary confidence to implement differentiated instruction, such as the belief that students differ in the way they learn, that students can gain knowledge that is not understood by the teacher.

4. Do not know how to approach talented students coming from different cultural groups (ethnic, social) or those students who are below the appropriate level.

5. Have difficulty finding and using effectively the resources needed to help with teaching.

When it comes to the effectiveness of differentiated instruction, teachers must be careful in selecting the best possible strategies and their application based on students' knowledge and their learning styles. Therefore, the school also plays an important role by giving space to teachers to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their students.

## **2.2 Key elements of differentiated instruction**

Differentiation can be described as classroom practice with particular emphasis on individual students and on course content. In other words, an effectively differentiated class means: (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010)

- Students differ from each other as learners in terms of experience, culture, language, gender, interests, willingness to learn, ways of learning, speed of learning, support systems for learning, awareness as a learner, self-confidence as a learner and being Independent as a learner.

- Differences substantially affect how students learn as well as the nature of the classification they will need at certain times during the learning process.

- Teachers have a responsibility to ensure that all their students learn the most important content.

- Teachers need to make specific plans and constantly update those plans to relate each student to the main content.

- Besides that, teachers need to understand the content they teach, they also must understand the nature of each of their students.

- Teaching with a flexible approach “creates space” for students to show their differences.

- Teachers should constantly ask, “what does this student need at the moment to be able to progress in understanding the content, and what should I do to make this happen?”

One of the most important things of differentiation practices that should be applied in the classroom is the modification of the four elements related to the curriculum, and these are: *content*, *process*, *product* and *impact* which are based on the three categories of needs and differences of students such as: learning preparation, interest and profile.

**2.2.1 Content** - *The knowledge, understanding and skills we want students to learn.*

During differentiation (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) emphasize the methods that students can use to access the main content (e.g. independent reading, pair reading, CDs, photo texts, online research, group work, etc.) rather than changing the content. However, there are cases when several students need to return to the beginning of the content to better understand until the advanced students understand before other students.

**2.2.2 Process** - *How students manage to understand or perceive content.*

True learning - the kind that enables students to receive, apply and transfer content - should happen to the learner and not to them. The word process is often used as a synonym for activities. However, they may not relate to the goals of the content and thus fail in seeking from students to analyze or use basic knowledge, understanding and skill. (Wiggins & Mc Tighe, 1998)

**2.2.3 Product** - *How students demonstrate what they have learned, understood and what they are able to do after a long period of learning.*

The product is not something that students bring out in a single learning unit nor the result of an activity or two. The product, in fact, is the culmination of the assessment that requires students to apply and extend what they have learned over a period. (Erickson, 2006; Tomlinson et al;2009)

**2.2.4 Impact** - *How students' emotions and feelings affect their learning*

Emotions and feelings come from the brain and are based on past experiences and reactions to current experiences. They affect our motivation to learn, our ability to collaborate with others, and our own concept as a learner. When a student has a positive impact on learning and on himself / herself as a learner he / she opens the door to an academic achievement. (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010)

**2.2.5 Preparation** - *The student's current proximity from a specific knowledge, understanding and skills.*

It is very important not to forget that preparation is not synonymous with skill. Ability is what we sometimes believe to be an innate trait. Meanwhile, preparation is a temporary condition that must change regularly because of quality teaching. (Sousa, 2001; Wolfe, 2010)

**2.2.6 Interest** - *It involves the attention, curiosity, and commitment of the student.*

The student's interest is directly related to the motivation he must learn. When the student shows interest, the motivation to learn is higher and learning is achieved more easily. Personal interests relate to the student's strengths, cultural context, personal experiences and needs. (Collins & Amabile, 1999)

**2.2.7 Learning profiles** - *Preference to explore, express or absorb content.*

A student's learning profile is shaped by four elements and the interactions between them:

1. **Learning style** - a contextual approach to learning. Learning styles include working individually or with a partner, whether in a quiet place or listening to music, in a lighted or dark environment, staying in one place or moving. (Dunn & Dunn. 1992, 1993)

2. **Intelligence-based preference** - a neurological preference for learning or thinking. For example, intelligence-based preference includes verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical-rhythmic, spatial, analytical, practical, and creative intelligence. (Gardner, 1985; Sternberg, 1985)

3. **Gender** - approaches to learning that can be genetically or socially shaped for the male or female gender. Although not all men (or women) learn in the same way, there are also gender-based learning characteristics. (Gilligan,1982; Tannen, 1990)

4. **Culture** - approaches to learning that can be shaped by the context in which the individual lives as well as by unique ways that make sense for the lifestyle for people living in that context. For example, how people communicate, interact with

other generations, celebrate, and suffer, and how they show respect are shaped by culture. (Delpit, 1995)

**2.3.1 Learning environment** - *The physical and emotional context in which learning takes place.*

The appearance, organization and structure of the classroom can attract interest in learning through different colors, placement of student works, spaces for individual and group work, easy access to auxiliary materials and arrangement of furniture. In addition to the physical climate, which is very important, even more important is the emotional climate because students learn best when they feel safe, respected, involved, challenged, and supported. (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010)

**2.3.2 Curriculum** - *A well-organized plan to engage students with relevant knowledge, understanding and skills.*

The curriculum is not a list of standards. The curriculum is not even a textbook. These are simply the ingredients or resources needed to develop a curriculum. A quality curriculum begins with the teacher understanding of the nature of the discipline that the curriculum will present. The curriculum contains a clear idea of the goals we set to achieve a certain standard of knowledge that students should have and the skills they should acquire because of learning (over a year or over a unit. It includes mechanisms for summative assessment, careful planning of learning units and ensures the success of students with basic knowledge, understanding and skills. (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)

**2.3.3 Evaluation** - *Data collection and analysis process that determines the degree to which students have achieved an essential result and provides information for decision-making about instruction planning.*

There are three forms of evaluation:

1. **Diagnostic assessment (pre-assessment):** Designed to determine the relative status of the student before starting a new learning unit.
2. **Formative assessment (which takes place all the time):** Designed to track student progress; and
3. **Summative assessment:** Designed to measure student achievement after completing a unit or at another key point of a unit or year of study. (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010)

#### **2.3.4 Instructions** - *The process of teaching, education, and involvement of the students with the content*

Instructions are what many people think of when they think of the teaching. It is the mechanism that gives what the curriculum offers or in other words, connects the content with the student. They also metaphorically put the teacher in the role of "bridge", thus helping students to relate the knowledge and skills they have to the essential outcomes they need to continue their development as learners and as human beings. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau in their book "Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom" with the model of differentiation should:

- Relate to knowledge, understanding and essential skills.
- Be designed taking into consideration the students' differences in learning, culture, language, and gender.
- Be flexible in terms of time, materials, support systems, student groups, ways of giving guidance and teaching and learning strategies.
- Provide different ways of achieving essential learning outcomes.
- Help students develop self-efficacy and independence as learners.

- Help students develop skills in collaborative learning.
- Provide in-class routines that balance the student's needs for guidance and freedom.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, TECHNIQUES, AND INSTRUMENT**

#### **3.2 Research Methodology**

The survey will be based on quantitative and qualitative methods of research. The following methods were used during this research: **Theoretical analysis method** - after consulting the pedagogical literature and the various studies done by different authors this research will suggest the application of the most successful differentiated instruction strategies. **Comparative method** - will compare the results obtained after observation in public and non-public schools. **Descriptive method** - after analyzing this issue and after observing classrooms in public and non-public schools will describe the data from the whole research. **Systematic observation method** - this research will systematically observe student behaviors during class hours in the schools included in the study.

#### **3.3. Research techniques and instruments:**

Surveying, interviewing and observation techniques will be used to achieve the most effective results of this research, and the research instruments will be questionnaires for students, teachers, and parents.

#### **3.4. Research setting and participants:**

Most of this research is based on the aspect of my personal experiences but also the experiences of other professors working in different schools in Kosovo, specifically in Prishtina. There were also numerous interviews and questionnaires which were

conducted with professors from 4 different primary schools in Prishtina, where out of those 4 schools, 2 were public schools and 2 were non-public schools. A total of 124 participants, of which 24 were teachers separated from 12 non-public schools and 12 public schools, as well as 100 students separated from 50 non-public schools and 50 public schools.

#### **4. FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY**

During my research in two primary public and two non-public schools in Prishtina, I have come to different conclusions regarding the issue of using differentiated instruction in their schools. Below you can find the results obtained from the interviews and questionnaires that I conducted during these months. This research included a total of 24 teachers, 50 students of public schools, and 50 students of non-public schools in Prishtina.

1. *Are you aware of the different methods of differentiated instruction?* - Out of 24 teachers who were interviewed, 15 (62.5%) teachers said they knew what the methods for differentiated instructions were.

2. *Differentiated instruction is taking place in the general education classrooms in your school with fidelity?* – Only 7 out of 24 teachers said that differentiated instruction takes place to their schools.

3. *Is implementation of differentiated instruction a problem in your school?* - 16 (66.7%) teachers said that the implementation of differentiated instruction is a problem of medium level but not at a high or alarming level, while 6 teachers or 25% of them said that they have almost no problem in their implementation.

4. *Are there enough resources in your school to properly implement differentiated instruction?* - 12.5% of them stated that they have sufficient resources in their schools of how to use differentiated instruction and there isn't any problem using them.

5. *Have you been given adequate training on how to do differentiated teaching?* - 54.2% of them said that teacher training for differentiated instruction is average but not satisfactory, and 20.8% of teachers said they received adequate training to prepare for differentiated instruction.

6. *Are the students benefiting from the differentiated instruction? (Are they liking it, or participating more during the lesson?)* - It has resulted that 8.3% of teachers have said that their students don't like it, they are also not participating more during the lessons and that they are not benefiting from differentiated instruction, while 41.7% said NOT MUCH, 45.8% said that students are benefiting, liking it and their participation has increased from the moment of using the differentiated instruction, and 4.2% answered that the students may benefit depending on the situation created in the classroom and that it may not always be the same or profitable for the students.

7. *Do teachers in Kosovo have the necessary knowledge to apply differentiated teaching?* - The teachers participating in my research stated that teachers in Kosovo do not have as much knowledge regarding application of differentiated instruction. 70.8% of them answered that teachers have average knowledge and that this is not even enough for a teacher to be totally ready to apply this method in the classroom accurately.

8. *What are the main factors that in our country the education system continuous to have a major stagnation in the implementation of differentiated*

*instruction?*- Some of the main factors that in our country cause the education system to have a major stagnation in the implementation of differentiated instruction according to participating teachers are:

Note: *These are some of the answers given by the teachers in writing to the questionnaire prepared by me. Responses which contain the symbol (\*) mean that those responses have been mentioned multiple times by teachers as a factor in causing the use of differentiated instruction.*

- Lack of experience for differentiated teaching. Teachers are not trained in using the differentiated instruction. \*
- Quality training and poor infrastructure in schools. \*
- Not following the developments of materials and literature enough.
- Lack of technological tools for all students. \*
- Lack of adequate staff.
- Curriculum and education system - which do not conform to the methods; non-latest edition books used in schools and poor technological conditions in schools. \*
- Lack of teacher training, but even when the training is done, it is done to inadequate teachers.
- Lack of proper planning by the teacher.
- Teachers consider using of differentiated instruction as extra work.
- Weak education system

**1.1 table The contrast between the use of differentiated instruction in some primary public schools and non-public schools in Prishtina.**

<b>Questionnaire for students</b>	<b>Public schools' students</b>	<b>Non-public schools' students</b>
<i>1. Do you know what differentiated instruction is?</i>	64% of students said they know what differentiated instruction is	68% of students said they know what differentiated instruction is
<i>2. Do you think that the teachers of your school use differentiated instruction to teach you?</i>	16% of students said that professors use differentiated instruction to teach them in the classroom	52% of students said that professors use differentiated instruction to teach them in the classroom
<i>3. Do you think that all the students in the class are able to understand the entire lesson at the end of the class?</i>	54% of the students said that not all students can understand the lesson at the end of the class	58% of the students said that not all students can understand the lesson at the end of the class
<i>4. Do your teachers use differentiated teaching methods in your classroom so that all students can understand it?</i>	28% of students stated that their teachers use differentiated instruction in the classroom	52% of students stated that their teachers use differentiated instruction in the classroom
<i>5. Regardless of the content, my teacher always pre-tests us to determine what we already know prior to</i>	90% of students said that their teacher always asks the students to test them and determine the prior knowledge they already know before the teacher	58% of students said that their teacher always asks the students to test them and determine the prior knowledge they already know before the teacher

<i>introduce any new subject area.</i>	introduces a new topic in class	introduces a new topic in class
<i>6. My teacher lets us demonstrate what we know and can do in different ways.</i>	68% of the students said that their teachers allow them to express themselves in their personal ways	90% of the students said that their teachers allow them to express themselves in their personal ways
<i>7. I always feel challenged in my classroom.</i>	58% of the students agreed that they feel challenged in their classes	60% of the students agreed that they feel challenged in their classes
<i>8. Are you satisfied with the way teaching is conducted in your classroom?</i>	26% of them stated that they are satisfied with the way teaching is conducted in their classroom	72% of them stated that they are satisfied with the way teaching is conducted in their classroom

## **5. CHALLENGES OF ONLINE TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC COVID-19**

Undoubtedly, during this research, we cannot leave without mentioning the challenges of the Covid19 pandemic in the primary education system. From the beginning when the whole world began to be quarantined, schools were closed as well. After a few weeks, the consequences began to appear among students who did not attend school, and our state, Kosovo, took steps that were related to online learning. Here began to see some other consequences which were not even very pronounced earlier as this was the first time in the history of primary school teaching that online teaching was held and was completely unknown to students of this age. Many students

did not know how to connect and use the equipment and programs that have been used by schools for online teaching, additionally, another factor that has happened to us is that Kosovo is still a new state and the percentage of unemployment and poverty is still high. There have been cases where students have not owned more than one laptop or home computer, and with more than 2-3 children at home having to attend online classes at the same time, they have not been able to attend online classes with the same laptop at the same time. These challenges continued for several months, and later the Kosovo government decided that students should return to school physically but on a part-time basis and in small groups. We can't conclude that this was a particularly successful approach, but it was vastly preferable to the online version, in which students were unable to collaborate in groups, complete assignments in class together, make eye contact with one another, or socialize. The use of differentiated guidelines in online learning during the pandemic has been almost unimplemented by teachers. During this research I had done, the key points were the challenges of using differentiated instruction in primary schools in the classroom, and the results have turned out not so satisfactory in terms of using differentiated instruction in school. This means that online learning has not even been an option for teachers because they have encountered many other challenges that were more technical and then psychological, social, and professional, where they could not present their material as they planned to do in physical classes. Covid-19, on the other hand, has had a wide range of effects in all facets of life, including economically, socially, physically, and in the educational system, which will be felt for some time after the pandemic virus has passed. The good news is that teachers and schools have organized to ensure that students are not inactive and uninterested in studying, but rather actively engaged in it.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

As I conducted the research, I was able to draw some conclusions that I, as a teacher, had not been clear enough about when it came to the implementation of differentiated instruction in our schools, mainly in primary schools. The data indicates that nowadays functions are increasingly using differentiated instruction, given the need to achieve the realization of the curriculum in each student equally. The main hypotheses of this research were to achieve an effective learning and to realize its maximum, as well as to be successful in the formation of students. The hypotheses mentioned at the beginning of this research were that a well-formed curriculum will bring a successful method to adapt to the diversity of students in the classroom and also with well-trained and prepared teachers to achieve a successful teaching in classes with mixed ability students and where differentiated instruction should obviously be used. None of the latter has been positive according to the results of my research. Lack of infrastructure, adequate training for the teachers, poor school facilities, lack of use of technology, large number of students in schools, are some of the main factors that make the implementation of differentiated instruction in Kosovo very challenging and difficult. Most teachers in public schools have acknowledged the fact that they do not implement differentiated instruction in the classroom, not because they do not want to, but because it is very difficult to implement it with the conditions offered in their schools and with such a large number of students in the classroom. Always starting from the reality but also from my great desire as a teacher to see education better and better in Kosovo, all of us should give their own contribute for each generation to come more and more equipped with better knowledge and skills. Despite all the challenges we face, the important thing is that the willingness and hard work is never lacking from

devoted teachers to make the impossible possible in realizing their goals in educating and training our youth. I hope that differentiated instruction won't be considered as an extra mechanism in our education system, but it will be considered as a part of teaching and as part of every primary school teachers where its implementation will be treated as a common feature in the classroom. Differentiated instruction provides the opportunity to all students to be treated equally and to be able to achieve their individual goals in their future.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Anderson, K. M. (2007). *Differentiating instruction to include all students*. Preventing School Failure, 51(3), 49–54.
- Anderson, T.R. and Schoenborn, K.J. (2008) *Bridging the Educational Research-Teaching Practice Gap: Conceptual understanding, Part 1: The multifaceted nature of expert knowledge*, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education 36 (4), 309-315.
2. Bransford, J., & Stein, B. (1984). *The IDEAL problem solver*. New York: W. H. Freeman. Bransford, J., Sherwood, R., Vie, N., & Reiser, J. (1986). *The IDEAL problem solver*. New York: W. H. Freeman.
3. Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004). Teaching thinking and problem solving: *Research Foundations*. *American Psychologist*, 41, 1078–1089.
4. Ellis, E., Gable, R. A., Gregg, M., & Rock, M. L. (2008). A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students (Volumes I and II). Iowa City, IA: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

5. Ericsson, K. A., & Lehmann, A. C. (1996). REACH: A framework for differentiating classroom instruction. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(2), 31–47.
6. Ericsson, K. A., Nandagopa, K., & Roring R. W. (2005). Expert and exceptional performance: Evidence of maximal adaptation to task constraints. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 47, 273–305.
7. Ericsson, K. A., Patel, V. L., & Kintsch, W. (2000). Giftedness viewed from the expert-performance perspective. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 28(3–4), 287–311.
8. Ericsson, K. A., Patel, V., & Kintsch, W. (2000). How experts' adaptations to representative task demands account for the expertise effect in memory recall: Comment on Vicente and Wang (1998). *Psychological review*, 107(3), 578-592. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.107.3.578>
9. *Psychological Review*, 107, 578–592. Ericsson, K. A., Roring R. W., & Nandagopa, K. (2007).
10. REACH A framework for differentiating classroom instruction. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(2), 31–47. Ericsson, K. A., & Lehmann, A. C. (1996).
11. References Anderson, K. M. (2007). Differentiating instruction to include all students.
12. Teaching thinking and problem solving: Research Foundations. *American Psychologist*, 41, 1078–1089. Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004).