

The Action Research Literature Review: Differentiated Instruction in the Classroom

Introduction

A classroom void of student engagement presents a significant challenge for the success of the class as well as individual students. Teachers who fail to ensure equity of voice in the classroom will generally experience a loss in participation from students who may feel marginalized by the students controlling the conversation. While classroom conversations are most assuredly an important part of overall classroom experiences, there are other ways in which a teacher can address educational content with students. Carol Tomlison introduced research in 1999 about a concept known today as “Differentiated Instruction” (Eidson, & Tomlison, 2003). This form of teaching focuses on the engagement of students in the classroom and includes varied examples of instruction from individual projects to group work.

Discussion of Key Term

Differentiated instruction is defined as a philosophical approach to instruction in which teachers purposefully plan for students' differences in order to ensure that all students can achieve learning success (Eidson, & Tomlison, 2003). A differentiated classroom is one in which teachers divide their instruction time, class materials and activities to efficiently teach students from varied experiences, circumstances, interests and skill levels.

Summary Analysis

This literature review includes an examination of six articles which focus specifically on differentiated instruction and student engagement. This author will explicate the central ideas of each article/text while tethering each into the central idea of boosting student engagement in the modern classroom. It is important for administrators, instructional coaches and teacher-leaders to understand the abundance of research which exists in order to support

their work with teachers who struggle with student engagement. Without clear and scholarly documentation to drive the conversation, the teacher in question may interpret instructional suggestions as the personal opinions of the observer or evaluator. Having a stock of scholarly educational resources available from which one can pull examples and ideas could be an important factor in teacher acceptance of new ideas.

C.C. Eidson and C.A. Tomlison address the foundations of differentiated instruction in their book - *Differentiation in practice: A resource guide for differentiating curriculum, Grades 5-9*. Based on Tomlison's innovative research on differentiation in 1999, the two authors detail a framework for differentiation. This framework allows teachers to plan in consistent ways while "promoting and supporting responsive instruction" (Eidson & Tomlison, 2003). This source is one with which a teacher who is struggling to maintain students' attention can acquire the context for keeping students engaged. Teachers who desire to reach all children with content successfully must "attend to their varying needs, interests, and readiness levels" (Eidson & Tomlison, 2003). Efficacious instructors meet students where they are, address their individual needs and their individual modes of learning. A teacher can do this most successfully through using differentiated strategies in their classroom.

Drs. R.M. Carini (a Sociologist), G.D. Kuh (a Professor of Education) and S.P. Klein (a research scientist) authored an article entitled *Student Engagement and Student Learning: Testing the Linkages*. In the article they express the idea that student engagement was possibly one of the better predictors of student learning and development (Carini et al., 2006). Continued student engagement helps to develop a student's footing for skills which are necessary for societal success and productivity. Carini et al. explain that students who are involved in educationally productive activities in school will continually increase their capacity for

continued learning and even personal development (Carini et al., 2006). Teachers should be aware that if they desire to impact student lives for the future, they must be able to hold student attention now.

Drs. G.G. Duffy, S. Webb, K. Kear, R. Leiphart, S.A. Parsons and S.D. Miller explore “the roots of thoughtfully adaptive teaching in reflection” in their 2006 study (Duffy et. al, 2006). Their concept of teaching not only includes the idea of using different strategies for instruction but also emphasizes the need for teachers to be “thoughtfully adaptive” in the moment. A teacher who can think quickly on their feet, in the instance that a strategy does not work, can provide the necessary change in a lesson to bring understanding to the struggling learner. It is more important to be able to switch to different activity quickly than to simply have one differentiated activity as the “go to” strategy (even when it does not yield engagement). The authors examine the concept of “reflective practice” in teaching as a tool to refrain from standard teaching practices (Duffy et. al, 2006).

S.A. Parsons and M. Vaughn, as well as K. Perez, give the reader insight into the need for differentiation as well as adaptive instruction. Parsons and Vaughn urge administrators to protect the “autonomy of teachers” (Parsons and Vaughn, 2013). They express that a mandate of homogeneity in classrooms could work against the best interest of students. Teachers should be able to adapt and change their lessons to make them more unique for their students. Teaching in various ways exposes academic content to some students who could not receive it another way. The idea of adapting lessons to the needs of students is important for a teacher finding it difficult to reach each of their respective students. K Perez expresses the idea that differentiation within a classroom should be known as the “new inclusion” because of its power to level the playing field

for students (Perez, 2013). Increased learning should be the target for each child that enters a classroom. Differentiated instruction makes this possible.

References

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