

Differentiated Instruction as a Pedagogy of Liberation

by Eric Shyman

Abstract

As pedagogies of liberation are designed for establishing and enhancing freedom and accessibility for all individuals, it is proposed that differentiated instruction for students with disabilities is, by definition, a pedagogy of liberation. Because the field of special education has been and continues to be in a process of distinct legislative and political attention and reform, it is important that such reform be viewed in a more radical and active context to ensure that the exclusionary history of individuals with disabilities is not repeated. Since a considerable percentage of students are either officially classified or regarded as having disabilities, different modes of curriculum presentation and instruction are necessary to enhance such students' accessibility to information without sacrificing the integrity of the curriculum. Failure to do so creates an instructional stratification between students with and without disabilities. Because practices of differentiated instruction will, if applied effectively, empower such students with the same or comparable curricular information as their non-disabled counterparts, equality of information accessibility will be fostered, thus enhancing all students to be a functional part of the community.

Introduction

The general education classroom is increasingly including students with intellectual, processing, memory, modality (visual/hearing), and/or mobility disabilities (Worrell, 2008). Such students often have the abilities to access curriculum to a more comprehensive degree than previously assumed, though they require the presentation of material and instruction in a differentiated or modified format. One way to facilitate such a method of teaching is through a process of teaching called *differentiated instruction*. Differentiated instruction is the process of varying and modifying the methods of instruction, curricular materials, and pedagogical methodology to meet diverse learning needs of students without sacrificing the integrity of the curricular information itself. This type of instruction is imperative for students with disabilities because traditional or "undifferentiated" instruction is often ineffective and can result in students' inaccessibility to the

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curriculum. Such undifferentiated instruction is likely to result in a stratification of knowledge and accessibility of information as they ignore issues beyond mere “learning style,” but actual differences in the modes necessary for an individual to receive, process, store, and retrieve information for later use. Therefore, a differentiated means of instruction is crucial to facilitating such learning, thus giving students with disabilities the opportunity to become potential critical social agents based on the same curricular information that is provided to all others in the classroom but provided with a mode of instruction that is not only conducive to merely accessing the information, but also to their expression, understanding, and use of that information in a greater societal sense. Much research reflects that effective differentiation and curriculum modification delivered in the inclusive classroom is effective at enhancing accessibility of curriculum for individuals with disabilities within school as well as post-school (Fisher & Nancy, 2001; Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, et al., 2010; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000; Shah, Travers, & Arnold, 2005). Research further indicates that inclusive education is effective at facilitating social relationships between individuals with and without exceptionalities, increasing awareness, understanding, and acceptance of it (Shah, 2007).

According to Darder (1995) the fundamental commitment of critical educators is to transform those conditions that perpetuate human injustice and inequity. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon teachers to aid in facilitating each student’s vocation in order to be fully humanized social agents in the world (Freire, 1970). To be effective and efficient social agents, individuals must be able to function under the imperative of social justice, which “...denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others” (Rawls, 1971, p.3). In order to achieve such a society, the foundation must be laid in school, calling for complete equality of accessibility to all curricular information, be it academic, social, or otherwise, for all students. Rescher (1982, as cited in Maise, 2005) asserted that such justice is often thought of as something that extends a society’s legal system, but rather refers to those cases in which an action appears to violate some universal rule of conduct so obviously that all are likely to deem it ‘unjust’. In its narrower sense, however, justice is fairness, as it is primarily action that pays due regard to the proper interests, property, and safety of one’s fellows.

As it is a society’s obligation to ensure social justice for all of its citizens, a vital way to achieve such an ultimate societal goal and affect such an ultimate societal change is through the use of pedagogies of liberation in schools, which protect such individuals from acts of curricular violence and subjugation. According to Freire (1970), “[A]n act of violence is any situation in which some men prevent others from the process of inquiry...any attempt to prevent human freedom is an act of violence. Any system which deliberately tries to discourage critical consciousness is guilty of oppressive violence. Any school which does not foster students’ capacity for critical inquiry is guilty of violent oppression” (p. 74). Therefore, the provision of uninhibited access to any educational curriculum is not only an inherent human right but an obligation of the teacher and the school

system as a means of ensuring the preservation of a “level playing field” for all individuals. Such a practice enables all individuals to approach one’s life and society from an “informed perspective” equal to those without specific disabilities. As further suggested by Freire (1970), the path to liberation is the appropriation of the tool, its pedagogy, and the curricula, as well as the skills engendered by the oppressed themselves.

Establishing the Marginality of Children with Disabilities

It is important to distinguish both the denotations and connotations of the terms *special education* and *differentiated instruction*. The term *special education*, while historically relevant, is actually grossly anachronistic, and, in the current climate, detracts significantly from the realization and application of its initial intent. To implicate someone or something as being “special” is inherently exclusive. That is, by being “special” one engenders a quality that another does not, and, in practice, receives something that another does not (otherwise there would be no need for the distinction). Furthermore, to implicate a “special” type of education is to also implicate, by contrast, a “regular” type of education, clearly indicating a two-category system (or, more likely, a two-class system). As such, to maintain one’s “specialness” means to preserve one’s separation from others who are not special. While at first this distinction may have been necessary to increase the field of education’s ability to learn about what such students need and determine practices, pedagogies, sciences, policies, and histories to influence what an effective and genuine “special education practice” may look like, the term is now not only archaic, but pejorative and destructive as it preserves the both the philosophy and the practice of the two-class system (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1993; Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, et al., 2008). Therefore, maintaining such a concept is distinctly antagonistic to the current ideology needed for appropriate and effective practices of differentiated instruction in inclusive environments.

From this perspective, the term *special education* has likely come to deepen an already engrained separation between the “*typically-abled*” and the “*disabled*”- those who are challenged for any number of reasons regardless of etiology. As indicated by documented instances of school practice (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), this distinction has allowed the field of education to continue to leave those students who are “special” in the hands of the specialists, those with specific training to handle “such kids.” This dismissive practice allows the rest of the school (and, perhaps, the rest of the school system) to deal with the “regular” students without obligation to achieve any genuine understanding of those students deemed “special,” as that is the obligation and responsibility of the special education “department.” Therefore, despite the proposed policy of inclusion and “least restrictive environment” included in the educational legislation through the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1977) and the various iterations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1990, 1997,

2004) the students relegated to “special education” are often denied as a part of the educational continuum in any real sense, if only other than a reference point for one end of it; one with little possibility of moving through it in any meaningful way (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1993; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006; McQuat, 2007; Skrtic, 1987; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1988; Will, 1986). Recent research indicates that only 54% of students classified with disabilities spend 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). For those students with disabilities who are educated in inclusive classrooms, emerging research continues to show that differentiated instruction is rarely present in the educational experiences of individuals with disabilities (Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, et al., 2008).

Since students with disabilities are often, rather perfunctorily, grouped together, it may be helpful to begin to regard those students with exceptionalities as a “culture” of sorts. Clearly such students do share some common characteristics (at least in terms of their shared inaccessibility, to some degree, of the general curriculum as well as their various challenges to social and educational accessibility), and are often relegated to a common place, such as a special education classroom or a special education track (Linan-Thompson et al., 2006; McQuat, 2007). While likely not intended to be approached from a liberating standpoint, the tendency of the school system to categorize students with disabilities may, indirectly, provide a strong foundation from which differentiated instruction can be established as a pedagogy of liberation. It will help to establish that, though such students cannot be categorized dichotomously as simply *special* or *regular*, *disabled* or *non-disabled*, as school systems have appeared to attempt to do, they have been effectively regarded as “one” culture, and, therefore, have been effectively marginalized as one culture (Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1988; Will, 1986). They are, essentially, forced into a marginality and discriminated against by a school system that, in large part, appears to favor students without distinct disabilities. As such, students with disabilities are expected to either find their way through a curriculum clearly designed for the “typical learner” or be relegated to a seat in a class for other students “like them,” even if that seat remains in the physical space of the “general education classroom” without the curricular differentiation to promote accessibility (Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, et al., 2008; McQuat, 2007).

Since it appears that schools have not always acted in the best interest of individuals with exceptionalities, new ideas in the philosophy, policy, and practice of education for these individuals must be put forth. In order to begin to facilitate the process of liberation, then the field, as Darder (1991) contends, must earnestly address the cultural politics by both legitimizing and challenging cultural experiences that make up the histories and social realities of various groups that in turn comprise the experiences that give meaning to student lives. As it stands, even with the legislative and political push toward “inclusion,” the school system continues to inaccurately and inadequately represent the best interests of the student with disabilities. As Giroux (1999, as cited by Torres, 2002) states, the critical issue is whose future, story, and interests schools typically represent. From this perspective, critical pedagogy asserts that school practices must be informed by a public philosophy that addresses and facilitates the construction of ideological and institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students become the defining feature of schooling.

Establishing Differentiated Instruction as a Pedagogy of Liberation

Pedagogically, therefore, the term *special education* not only detracts from what our true purposes as teachers are but reinforces and maintains an ideology of separation that is now, in the current climate of education and disability studies, being emphatically opposed. Differentiated instruction, however, is a term that more appropriately and inclusively describes the goal of the desired liberating pedagogy of exceptionality. Differentiated instruction offers a much more inclusive ideology, indicating that instructional and curricular delivery is implemented on a differentiated/individualized basis for all individuals who require them, not only those who are pre-identified or classified as such. The differentiated instructor pays less (if any) attention to the individual’s educational classification, but to the whole student, and does not treat symptoms, but rather differentiates and modifies for functional challenges in relation to their role in the environment. Therefore, from the perspective of differentiated instruction, it is unimportant which disability classification is conferred upon the student, but only what actual needs demand meeting in the classroom to enhance and enable the accessibility of all curricula, and determining how such needs will be met.

While there are various ways in which the nature of disability can be conceptualized and analyzed, in order to preserve the current argument's method of systematic inquiry, the concept will be approached using two distinct models in this analysis: the medical/diagnostic model and the interactional model (Biklen, 1992; Keller, 2006). The medical/diagnostic model of disability assumes an organic basis; hence the inseparability of the individual from the disability, rendering the disability a pervasive and pathological condition. From this perspective, in any environment, an individual with a pre-existing disability is, invariably, disabled, irrespective of environmental demand. For an example, a blind man is still deemed disabled in a pitch-black room where even sighted people cannot see, because he is, by nature, blind. Ultimately, this perspective forces the individual to not only assume the ultimate blame for the condition (even if nature itself is truly to be blamed, as the individual cannot separate oneself from nature), thus permitting the assumption that there is little one can do to meliorate the effect of the disability.

Conversely, the interactional model approaches disability from the perspective that disability occurs only as a result of an incompatibility between occurring environmental demand(s) and one's ability to meet such demand(s); not as an organic deficiency. Remaining with the aforementioned example, from the interactional model, a blind man is no more disabled in a pitch-black room than a sighted person in the same room, as no one can see in such an environment. Therefore, this perspective proposes that a disability is only manifested in a situation in which an individual cannot meet the demands of the environment in its current (whether natural or unnatural) state as a result of a particular challenge, rendering accessibility to or negotiation within the environment either significantly difficult or completely inaccessible (Devlieger, Rusch, & Pfeiffer, 2003; Luckasson, Borthwick-Duffy, Buntwinx, et al., 2002). Returning to the above example, if either the blind individual or the sighted individual were demanded to ambulate within a pitch-black room, there would remain no distinction in level of disability, as no one in the room could rely on their sight to facilitate such a demand (a blind man may even hold an advantage in this situation, as this is his normal state of living). From this perspective, then, there will be no more of a distinct disability for the blind man until the lights in the room are again turned on and the demand for ambulation still exists, at which point the sighted people can once again rely on their sight for reference while the blind man cannot.

Comparatively, if the medical/diagnostic model were accurate, the blind man would retain his disability amongst all situations. But, as is demonstrated with the interactional model, this is not the case, and a disability is only such as a result of an incompatibility of environment and demand (Devlieger et al., 2003). Therefore, from the interactional perspective, the environment can indeed be differentiated or modified according to the individual's need in order to ameliorate (if not eliminate) the incompatibility with the demand. In this case, low technological advances such as the cane and high technological advances such as

voice-output global positioning and directional systems as well as voice-output communication devices can be among a myriad such modifications to increase one's independence. Failure to appropriately differentiate or modify inevitably leads to a predetermined imprisonment within one's disability in an unforgiving and inaccessible environment.

This same concept holds true on a classroom curricular level as well, in which there are countless examples of how such a situation could develop and instruction could be appropriately differentiated. For example, a student with a memory disability may receive color-coded cues enabling him or her to match the relevant parts of the story to a later comprehension question and/or discussion, a student with a vocabulary disability may receive texts with technical terms replaced by simplified language, or a student with a more severe intellectual disability will be posed a majority of "lower level" thinking questions (as per Bloom's Taxonomy) (Bloom, 1956). All such accommodations and/or modifications result in increased access to the curriculum facilitated in a general education classroom without the need to segregate such individuals into separate environments. Regardless of the specific form of differentiation or modification, however, it is important to note that modifying the environment or the classroom material is dependent on correctly matching the individual need with the individual challenge or disability. Taking the above example of a blind man, or, in this case, a blind child, providing the child with a linguistically simplified version of the text would be of no curricular benefit. In fact, it oversimplifies the academic demand, lowering the expectation of a child otherwise capable of performing to an unmodified standard, but only in need of a modified presentation. However, providing the child with a larger text version, an audiobook version, or, even simply a Braille version of the same text would enhance such accessibility. However, for a child with a more severe intellectual disability, none of the above modifications would be sufficient alone, but a linguistically simplified version of the text (assuming the main ideas and purposes are still present) would more likely be.¹ Differentiated instruction is not (and has never been) about making the curriculum easier but rather making the curriculum more accessible (at least when implemented effectively and in the spirit of its true purpose).

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of differentiated instruction is to decrease the tendency (and need) to "educate" children with disabilities in the specialized classroom, and incorporate such individuals into the general education classroom with highly skilled differentiated instructors, possessive of the pedagogical skills to differentiate, the ideological understandings of why such differentiation is not

1 Despite a conceptual difference between a "handicap" (e.g. deafness/blindness) without additional intellectual disabilities and an individual with development or intellectual disabilities, the concept remains the same. That is, by differentiating or modifying instructional and environmental practices according to specific need, individuals with disabilities can gain greater access to curricula. Therefore, the need to distinguish between *handicap* and *disability* is no longer necessary or relevant.

only beneficial, but imperative, and the expertise in the particular content areas being taught. To do so will increase these students' exposure to the very environment to which he or she is, by right, accessible in such a way as to move beyond simple "exposure" to the mainstream, but toward opportunities to actually engage in the curriculum to whatever degree possible, socially or academically. Such effective differentiation and inclusion will also distinctly increase the awareness of their classmates that such participation is not only possible, but natural and imperative (Shah et al., 2005).

Considerations of Differentiated Instruction

While philosophically the call of differentiated instruction is sound and resonates with the tenets of social justice, there are some significant practical concerns that must be addressed in order for such a system to be practicable in a real school environment. This section will contend with such issues and propose cautionary solutions.

First, it is imperative to understand the considerable difference in the types and outplay of disability. While for some individuals their disability may be marginal and mild in terms of how one may access the full benefit of the general education environment, for others there are remarkable difficulties in such an experience. It is important to emphasize that differentiated instruction, while presented under a uniform name is in no way a uniform practice, and must not, under any circumstances, be reduced to a mere theory or philosophy. That is, though the practice has been given a name, the centrality of individualized implementation must remain indelible as differentiated instruction packaged as a single formula could not, by any means, address the diverse needs of all exceptional learners. Perhaps a more apt term would be "differentiated instructions" as the purpose is to meet the precise needs of each individual by whatever means is necessary. Therefore, it is not necessary that differentiated instruction be delivered, at all times, in the general education classroom to be fully liberating, but must always keep in mind what the *most* liberating environment for the child is at the moment, and continuously work toward the maximum exposure possible in the general education classroom. The *most* liberating can here be defined as the environment in which all resources are available and all needs may be met to provide the fullest accessibility to all stimuli and demands present (similar to the intended definition of the *least restrictive environment*). While, in the end, the ultimate goal of any child's education is to be delivered in the mainstream general education classroom (IDEA, 2004), it may take a formidable amount of preparation in another environment to facilitate this in any worthy or humane fashion.

Therefore, the necessity is not only for a skilled teacher but for an appropriate and conducive environment and facilitative means and resources. It is not, and will never be, enough to simply place a child in a general education classroom or even in a general education school in the name of "inclusion" without provid-

ing for each need that child requires in order to maintain the accessibility of the classroom. Furthermore, a curriculum that is perfunctorily differentiated without being differentiated specifically to an individual's needs in no way meets the definition of differentiated instruction and should never, under any circumstances, be disguised as such.

Finally, simply teaching *fairly* within the classroom does not constitute teaching for social justice if the fairness does not transcend the schools- as Neil Postman reminds us, the public school is not intended to serve the public, but rather to create the public (Postman, 1995, p.18). As such, these students must be brought up in an environment that moves beyond just tolerating differentiation, but mandating its practice in all areas of life and society.

Such differentiated instruction is the only real means of meeting the cause of social justice for individuals with disabilities, and facilitating a pedagogy of liberation not just for the students with disabilities themselves, but also for their classmates who now have an opportunity to share a learning space with individuals that may not have been there before (Shah et al., 2005). As Hoy and McCarthy (1994) explicate, pedagogues of liberation must become actively engaged in promoting social change within the educational system and the culture itself. They seek to promote change by becoming an actual part of the self-consciousness of oppressed social groups, as those students with disabilities have clearly become. Teachers must therefore be willing to foster a pedagogical relationship based on genuine liberation through access to knowledge and curriculum, not compulsory and thoughtless adaptation aimed not at true enhancement of accessibility, but as mindless policy obedience that has become far more interested in process than product. In the end, differentiated instruction is about transforming oppressive pedagogies that dismiss differentiation as easing of education, and incorporating effective differentiation to enable the empowerment of those with different learning modalities, all of whom can, and should, be functional and equal members of the mainstream society without the dangers of being oppressed or subverted based on exceptional modalities.

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