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HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION THROUGH SCHOLARLY LENSES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept of differentiated education through a systematic review of literature. A total of 66 pertinent studies were identified by using a multi-step process that involved keyword selection, database searches, and article screening. The historical development of differentiated instruction reveals its roots in the 18th century's focus on individual needs and student-centered learning. However, a lack of consensus on a single definition exists, with scholars offering various conceptualizations that emphasize catering to student diversity and maximizing learning growth. This emphasizes the necessity of a precise and uniform definition to direct efficient application. The paper concludes by suggesting further research on how educators translate these definitions into classroom practices and the impact of different differentiation strategies on student learning outcomes.

Keywords: Conceptual Definitions, Differentiated Instruction, Diverse Learners, Evolution, Historical Foundations

INTRODUCTION

Effective education thrives on recognizing and nurturing the unique potential within each student. Differentiated instruction has emerged as a powerful response to this challenge. It acknowledges the rich tapestry of learners within classrooms and actively tailors instruction to maximize their potential. Many experts, including Tomlinson (1999, 2004, 2005) and Valiande and Tarman (2011), highlight the importance of teacher responsiveness to student needs.

However, responsiveness by itself falls short of encapsulating the spirit of individualized education. A number of scholars delve deeper into specific strategies and techniques employed by teachers (Mastropieri et al., 2006; Shareefa, 2020). Tomlinson (2001) highlights the significance of meaningful learning or impactful concepts. This implies that differentiated instruction attempts to give all students entertaining and intellectually challenging content, independent of their existing knowledge or learning pace; it goes beyond just modifying difficulty levels. Similarly, "providing high-quality curriculum" is emphasized by Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012) as a crucial component of

differentiated instruction. This suggests that differentiation is about finding ways to make the curriculum accessible and challenging for all children, not about watering it down for some.

The strategy of differentiated instruction has historical origins, dating back to the 18th century and its emphasis on the value of the person (Yatvin, 2004). At the time, the emerging philosophy was in line with the practical theories of John Dewey, who promoted learning through stimulating activities customized to meet the needs of each student (Chen, 2007). While initially focused on meeting the needs of gifted students, differentiated instruction has broadened its scope to encompass all learners, including those with disabilities. International legislation, such as the United Nations Convention on the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), has solidified the importance of inclusive education, further solidifying differentiated instruction's significance in creating equitable learning environments.

Despite its recent emergence as a popular term (Clapper, 2011), differentiated instruction builds upon established educational principles. However, there is no single, universally accepted definition of the concept. A review of various authors' perspectives reveals both commonalities and variations in how they conceptualize this approach. Beyond responsiveness and curriculum considerations, some definitions emphasize the multifaceted nature of differentiated instruction. Some definitions, like Tomlinson's (1999, 2004, 2005), encompass a broader framework encompassing content, process, and product differentiation. Others, like Bondie and Zusho (2018) focus on specific aspects like instructional adaptations and progress monitoring. Valiande and Tarman (2011) describe it as a multiphase, multifaceted and complex approach in achieving learning for all students in mixed ability classrooms. This complexity underlines the fact that differentiated instruction is not a single technique, but rather a collection of strategies that can be combined and adapted to fit the specific needs of each student and lesson.

The lack of a universally accepted definition of differentiated instruction can be a challenge to educators. A precise and uniform definition would guarantee that teachers have a common understanding of the methodology, promoting successful use in a variety of settings. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the historical foundations of differentiated education, as well as the numerous conceptual definitions put forth by scholars. The study explores the historical trajectory and the state of definitions in an effort to offer a more comprehensive explanation of this effective teaching strategy.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the purpose of the study, prior to the literature search, a set of specific keywords was selected. The terminology was decided based on the intention to identify and extract the most relevant and recent literature on the topic. Accordingly, the keywords selected for the literature search are *differentiated instruction*, *differentiated learning*, *differentiated teaching*, and *differentiating instruction*.

Once the keywords were decided, the literature search began. The researcher used initial keywords to search six major databases: i) *Springer*, ii) *Sciencedirect*, iii) *Sage Journals*, iv) *Emeraldsight*, v) *Taylor and Francis Online*, and vi) *Google Scholar*. During this search, a total of 103 peer reviewed studies were identified which had at least one of the initial keywords in their titles. Subsequently, the researcher refined the search by reviewing the abstracts of these studies, and critically analysing their scope and relevance to the current study. In this regard, the vast body of research on the topic of differentiated instruction was reduced to a total of 52 publications. In addition to this pool of literature, a collection of classical materials published by experts (n=8), as well as related doctoral dissertations derived from ProQuest and various university library databases (n=6) were also added to the collection. Hence, together with these three cohorts of collections, a total of 66 evidence-based studies were selected for inclusion in this literature review. Figure 1 shows PRISMA representing the flow chart used in the selection process.

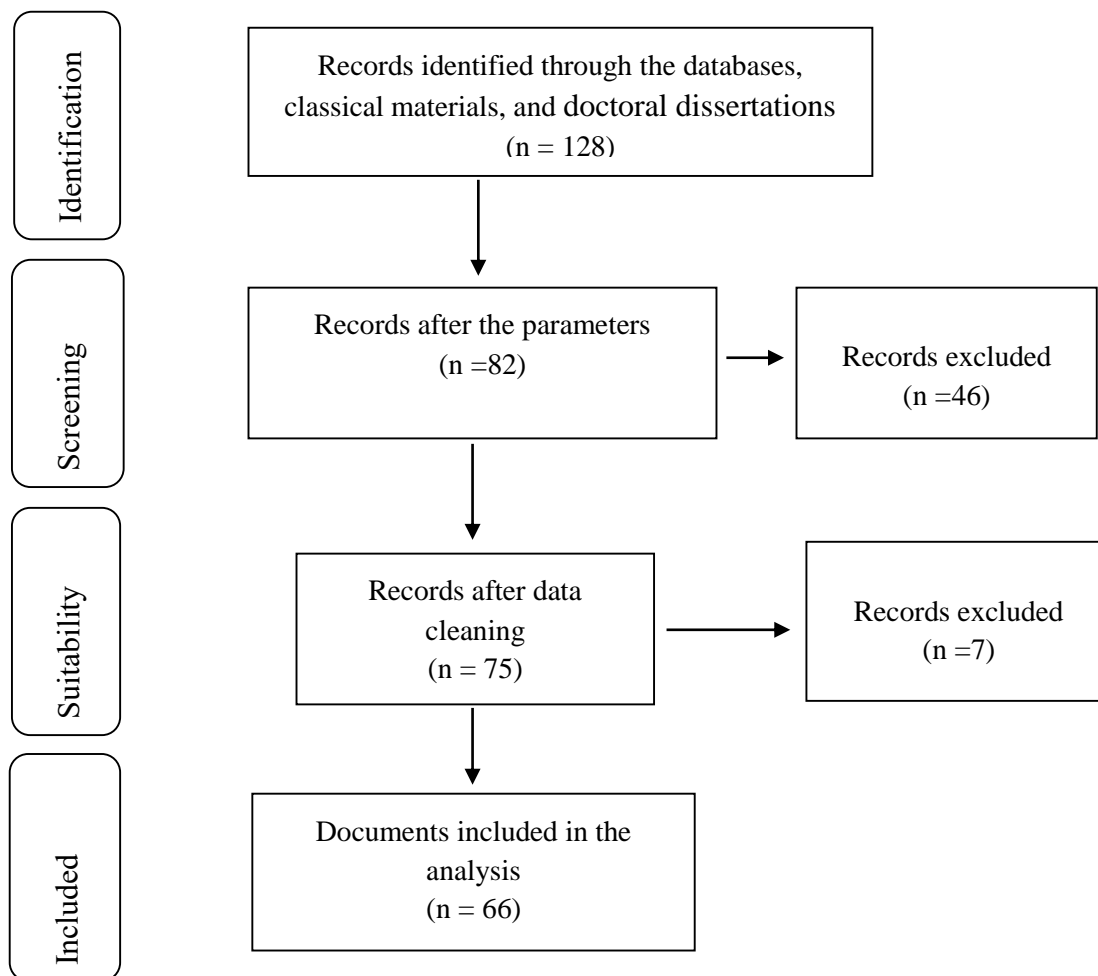


Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram showing the flow of the search in the identification and screening of sources for this research.

(PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Historical Overview of Differentiated Instruction

Due to the individual student focus, and the standards differentiated instruction articulate, it is important to be aware of the historical perspectives behind the philosophy of differentiated instruction. While describing the history and development of the concept, Yatvin (2004) offered a short account of how differentiation strategies came into practice. As elucidated by the author, the origin of differentiated instruction dates back to 18th century when European Romanticism celebrated the importance of the individual person. Later, according to Chen (2007), modern humanism highlighting individuals' needs took many forms in the 20th century; Dewey's pragmatism being one of them. Dewey had the belief that children learn best through involvement in activities which are meaningful and interesting to them (Chen, 2007).

In 1953, Washburne published an article in *Educational Leadership* which takes readers through a short history of reform intended to make education more customised and individualised. The article shows how the change in understanding of learning shapes educators' efforts that are aligned to the needs of diverse students. Such documents reveal that the concept of differentiation evolved from instructional methods advocated for gifted students, and in part as an alternative to separating students of different ability levels into groups or classes (Washburne, 1953).

Later, Ward (1961) wrote a book on educating gifted learners, and his subsequent papers also stressed the need for differentiating the curriculum for the gifted learners. During that time, his emphasis on differentiated education was unique, and has greatly influenced present-day curriculum designs and programming strategies (Fisher, 2003). As outlined by Ward (1961), with a curriculum that provides a variety of learning opportunities, high-ability or gifted students are able to gain deeper insights into subject content through problem solving skills. Thus, he felt the urge to offer a curriculum for gifted students that was different to what other students had, in order to make the gifted ones excel in educational achievement beyond their peers. “Differential Education for the Gifted is the *extraordinary* education of *extraordinary* youth for the anticipated performance of *extraordinary* tasks” (Ward, 1980, p.48). Apparently, this conviction of Ward opened door for research into differentiated instructional principles for use with gifted learners (Watkins, 2013).

Following the footsteps of Ward (1961), about five decades ago, Witty (1971) advanced research on catering for the needs of gifted learners through differentiated learning. In his book Witty (1971) stressed the importance of differentiation, saying that it is crucial for teachers to adopt differentiation in their teaching. If teachers fail to do so, students’ natural desire to learn will be blunted by the continued imposition of undifferentiated learning programmes and a rigid curriculum, as Witty (1971) claimed. According to the author, in order to offer assistance to gifted students, teacher should ascertain the pupil’s reading status and specific plans should then be worked out in accord with each student’s interest and needs. Witty (1971) highlights the need for differentiated instruction, stating that identifying and nurturing the abilities of gifted and creative students can be done through individualisation of instruction; an approach which includes: a) differentiation of method and materials, as well as b) means of evaluating and reporting progress. As seen from these highlights, both Ward (1961) and Witty (1971) offered research and academic insights into: i) the needs of gifted learners and ii) differentiated instructional principles that are congruent to student needs.

Differentiated instruction does not solely focus on the gifted learners in a classroom. In fact, it begins with a solid understanding of the curriculum and engaging instructions for all students in the classroom, including any students with disabilities (Jager, 2016; Shareefa, 2023). With the emergence of international legislation, such as Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), and the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the advocacy for inclusive education has created a far-reaching trend at a global level, especially for students with special needs.

In the USA, the most recent change in the educational landscape, with regard to differentiated instruction, is the ‘Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’ (IDEA) and the ‘No Child Left Behind Act’ (NCLB). These plans help and guide teachers in their efforts to differentiate instruction for those both in: a) the general education category and b) the special education needs category. The ultimate goal of all these worldwide conventions and national legislations is to ensure that children, regardless of their individual differences and needs, have equal access to free and high quality education.

Although the idea of catering for the needs of all students has been around for a while, differentiated instruction as a ‘buzzword’ has only surfaced in recent years. Nonetheless, as Clapper (2011) claimed, the ideas and components of differentiated instruction can be traced throughout the history of education. The concept has earned a great amount of support and proof with its promising outcomes (Subban, 2006). Therefore, as the significance of the concept is highlighted by present and past experts in the field, it is imperative to evaluate how it is perceived, understood, and implemented by teachers in contemporary classrooms in different educational contexts.

Differentiated Instruction: The Conceptual Definition

A conceptual definition is a definition outlining the basic principles underlying a specific term (Church, 2004). A review of several publications of various authors revealed that there is a slight disparity in how the term is demarcated by different writers. Inevitably, many of the educators lack a common agreement for defining differentiated instruction that uniformly addresses erroneous beliefs about the concept (Maddox, 2015). In addition, it can be found that teachers often construct their own notions of what differentiated instruction is, and how it can be used in their teaching (Waid, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative to establish a consistent definition that guides teachers’ understanding of what the concept of differentiated instruction entails, thus showing directions for proper implementation of its strategies.

It is also necessary to analyse and identify the differences, as well as the common aspects, of how the concept is explained by different experts. Establishing such an understanding may help to minimise some of the opposition that teachers exhibit when using, or being required to use, the strategies in their everyday instruction (Sheehan, 2011).

Accordingly, this literature review revealed 15 different definition statements of various experts regarding 'differentiated instruction'. Table 1 presents a list of these statements. The statements are as they were directly stated by the authors. When the statements are analysed, certain similarities and differences can be acknowledged. For example, almost all the authors highlighted the importance of – a) teachers' pedagogical focus on students' variety of learning needs, and b) maximising growth of student learning. The authors urged teachers to be aware of, and responsive to, their students' learning needs. As indicated from the statements, the stance on catering for learners' diverse needs is much more prevalent in how the concept is explained in the various writings of Tomlinson (1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005). Nonetheless, there were authors who believed that differentiated instruction is inherently 'fuzzy', as the approach involves multiple practices in combination (Deunk, Smale-Jacobse, de Boer, Doolaard & Bosker, 2018).

Table 1. How Differentiated Instruction is Defined by Scholars

No	Author	Year	Definition
1	Tomlinson	1999	“Differentiation is an organized yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning to meet kids where they are and help them to achieve maximum growth as learners” (p.14).
2	Tomlinson	2000	... “differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, that teacher is differentiating instruction” (p.2).
3	Tomlinson	2001	“It also focuses on meaningful learning or powerful ideas for all students” (p.2).
4	Tomlinson	2003	“It is an approach to teaching that advocates active planning for student differences in classrooms” (p.1).
5	Lawrence-Brown	2004	“Differentiated instructional planning recognizes and supports the classroom as a community to which age peers belong, where they can and should be nourished as individual learners” (p.36).
6	Tomlinson	2005	(differentiated instruction) ... “emphasizes attention to variance in students’ readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles”...(p.262).
7	Tomlinson, Brimijoin, and Narvaez	2008	“Differentiated instruction seems promising as a response to the variety of learning needs students bring to school every day” (p.1).
8	Debaryshe, Gorecki, and Mishima-young	2009	“Differentiated instruction is a strategy for meeting the needs of diverse learners... In a differentiated instruction model, all children are taught using the same curriculum and learning standards. However, children may be taught using different materials, learning activities, or levels of teacher scaffolding, and they may be allowed to show their understanding in different modes or formats” (228).
9	Hall	2009	(differentiated instruction) ... “is tailored based on individual differences, engaging students where they are, rather than where they are expected to be, according to a prescribed curriculum” (p.1).
10	Valiande and Tarman	2011	“Differentiated teaching and learning, bases mainly on constructivism, is a multiphase, multifaceted and complex approach in achieving learning for all students in mixed ability classrooms” (p.170).

continued

11	Smit and Humpert	2012	Differentiated instruction is “an approach that enables teachers to plan strategically to meet the needs of every student” (p.1153).
12	Santangelo and Tomlinson	2012	Differentiation includes teachers “respecting each student as an individual, assuming responsibility for the success of each student, building a positive classroom community, providing high-quality curriculum, using continual and varied assessment to inform instruction, demonstrating flexibility with classroom routines and resources, sharing responsibility for teaching and learning, ensuring that all students have equally important and engaging tasks, and creating varied avenues to learning” (p.312).
13	Roy, Guay, and Valois	2013	“We define differentiated instruction as an approach by which teaching is varied and adapted to match students’ abilities using systematic procedures for academic progress monitoring and data-based decision-making” (p.1187).
14	Small	2017	“To differentiate instruction efficiently, teachers need manageable strategies that meet the needs of most of their students at the same time. Through use of just two core strategies, teachers can effectively differentiate instruction to suit most students” (p.6).
15	Bondie and Zusho	2018	... “it is the way the teacher provides students with experiences that are not too hard or too easy, or how a teacher assigns a project where students pursue their interests” (p. xvi).

Amongst the above set of definitions, some significant differences were identified from the explanations supplied by Bondie and Zusho (2018). For example, unlike Tomlinson’s (1995b) Comprehensive Model of Differentiated Instruction (CMDI), Bondie and Zusho (2018) recommended that differentiated instruction involves two major components: (1) instructional adaptations and (2) academic progress monitoring. While criticising Tomlinson’s (2005a) well-known definition, Bondie and Zusho (2018) argued that since there are plentiful ways of how teachers can respond and adjust content, process, and product, it is difficult to identify what differentiated instruction really looks like in teachers’ everyday lessons. Hence, these two authors distinguished their definition from the one offered by Tomlinson in three different aspects: (1) focusing on differences in ability, (2) instructional adaptations (rather than concentrating on content, process, and product), and (3) monitoring academic progress. The authors believed that their definition would be more appropriate than Tomlinson’s as it suggests distinct variables teachers can adapt in order to meet their students’ needs.

Despite the above dispositions between the models, it was identified that all the authors acknowledge teachers’ instruction as delivering the uniform curriculum and learning standards with varying levels of scaffolding adequate to diverse learners. In short, the essence of all the definitions is that differentiated instruction is a teaching method in which teachers honour learner diversity, and provide avenues that encourage meaningful learning. Hence, based on all the above aspects, it can be believed that the most appropriate definition for the concept of differentiated instruction would be ‘*an approach that provides all students with opportunities for learning, while embracing their individual differences and needs*’. This statement is closely related to the way Tomlinson articulated her explanation of differentiated instruction in most of her publications (see 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005).

Conclusions and Implications

Delving into the past and present of differentiated instruction, this study examines its historical foundations and the rich tapestry of conceptual definitions offered by scholars. The historical overview has shed light on the evolution of differentiated instruction, highlighting its roots in the emphasis on individual needs and student-centred learning environments. From the early focus on individualized education in the 18th century to the contemporary advocacy for inclusive education, the concept has continuously adapted to cater to diverse learners.

However, the lack of a universally accepted definition for differentiated instruction presents challenges. As the reviewed definitions demonstrate, there are variations in how scholars conceptualize this approach. Therefore, establishing a clear and consistent definition is crucial. It would ensure educators have a shared understanding of the approach, fostering effective implementation across diverse contexts.

This study's exploration of the historical context and various conceptual definitions serves as a springboard for further research. The suggested unified definition could be operationalized in future studies using a variety of empirical techniques. Studies could create self-assessment instruments or standardized observational rubrics based on the definition's fundamental principles, building on the example of comparing implementation fidelity. The degree to which educational activities conform to the unified definition as opposed to other conceptualizations could be statistically assessed by researchers using these techniques. Beyond fidelity, studies could use mixed methods designs to investigate the definition's usefulness in practice. For example, these could include quantitative assessments of student outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, social-emotional development) in classrooms where the unified definition informs pedagogical approaches, as well as qualitative interviews with educators to learn how they interpret and apply the definition in various contexts. Furthermore, intervention studies could design, and test professional development programs specifically based on the unified definition, assessing their effectiveness in transforming teacher beliefs and practices over time. This kind of operationalization would offer solid proof of the definition's lucidity, relevance, and influence on teaching methods.

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