

**SUB06080**

**A RESEARCH BASIS SUPPORTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION**

**By**

**Pearl Subban  
Research Scholar  
Monash University  
Melbourne, Australia**

**Abstract**

With contemporary classrooms becoming increasingly diverse, educational authorities, teachers and school administrators are looking to teaching and learning strategies that cater for a variety of learning profiles. As a response, differentiated instruction is a paradigm, which is gaining ground in many educational circles. This model proposes a rethinking of the structure, management and content of the classroom, inviting participants within the learning context to become engaged in the process, so that all students benefit. While the model has been accepted and set to work, there remains room for theoretical support to give it momentum. A recent, comprehensive analysis of the literature in this area will reflect on this model, within the context of increasing academic diversity. This paper therefore attempts to synthesize the research supporting a shift to a new exemplar for modern education, and in so doing shed light on the rationale supporting differentiated instruction.

Key words : differentiated instruction, curriculum, learning, teaching

## **Introduction**

This paper communicates a research-based statement that draws attention to the model of differentiated instruction. The author, as a practicing teacher over several years, offers a perspective on the research underpinning a shift to this model. However, this paper is not merely a review of the literature, but it also reflects a point of view that differentiated instruction is an efficient and effective means of addressing the increasing diversity in Australian schools.

The increasing academic diversity in Australian schools, compels educators and educational authorities to reconsider teaching and learning in the regular classroom. Programs and debates characterize contemporary schools, over students on specialist programs across the academic spectrum, whose needs must be catered for by teachers, both within and without the mainstream classroom. These challenges facing educators often results in considerable disillusionment, fractious struggles and some frustration. Government schools have become veritable medleys of students with a wide assortment of labels requiring individualized attention and modified work programs. In the face of such challenges, teachers must remain committed to ways of providing high quality education for all students.

It is imperative for teachers to embrace this diversity, and cultivate learning environments that support nurturing, thriving and enjoyable classrooms. This change must support all students, the intention being to sustain life-long learning in heterogeneous classrooms.

Differentiated instruction offers a key to unraveling the conundrum of the mixed-ability classroom. This paper begins with the presentation of a grounded learning theory to support the move to differentiated instruction. Following on from this, attention is focused on the factors that intensify a shift in instructional practice. Finally, the differentiated instruction model is presented as a response to addressing learner variance.

### **Context and purpose of the study**

While many acknowledge differentiation to be a compelling and effectual means of restructuring the traditional classroom to include students of diverse abilities, interests and learning profiles, the philosophy is lacking in empirical validation. Currently, a great deal has been forwarded with regard to theory, with a decided gap in the literature regarding the use and effectiveness of the differentiated model in practice. The model does however draw a great deal of support, proof of which can be found in the plethora of testimonials, anecdotes and classroom examples available through a multitude of websites and publications dealing with differentiation. Still to be decided however, is whether teachers have restructured their teaching, being cognizant of this wealth of information presented on differentiation.

This paper attempts to synthesize the research and the rationale underpinning the differentiated instruction model. Previous studies and investigations in this field have investigated factors including student diversity, learning styles, brain research and the multiple intelligences as dynamics propelling the shift to differentiation. While this

paper draws attention to these key features, it also presents for query, the areas that may require further investigation.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning*

Differentiated instruction may be able to take its impetus from the social constructivist learning theory engendered by Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). This theory is viewed by several educationalists, researchers and school administrators as central to instructional enhancement, classroom change and redevelopment (Blanton, 1998; Flem, Moen, & Gudmundsdottir, 2000; Goldfarb, 2000; Kearsley, 1996; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999; Rueda, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 1992; Shambaugh & Magliaro, 2001; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Sociocultural theory, drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1962), and later Wertsch (1991), has significant implications for teaching, schooling and education (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). This theory is based on the premise that the individual learner must be studied within a particular social and cultural context (Blanton, 1998; Flem et al., 2000; MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001; Patsula, 1999; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Such situatedness is necessary for the development of higher order functions, and such functions can only be acquired and cultivated following social interaction (Blanton, 1998; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999; Rueda et al., 1992; Shambaugh & Magliaro, 2001). Social interaction is therefore fundamental to the development of cognition (Kearsley, 1996, 2005; MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001; Patsula, 1999; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999;

Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). Furthermore, as a departure from other theories regarding cognition, Vygotsky's theory views education as an ongoing process, not a product (Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999).

### *The zone of proximal development*

Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development, a central proposition of this theory, refers to a level of development attained when learners engage in social behaviour (Blanton, 1998; Kearsley, 2005; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999; Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). Riddle and Dabbagh (1999) cite Vygotsky (1978) as defining the zone of proximal development as the distance between the actual development level and the level of potential development. Hence, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) links that which is known to that which is unknown (Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999). In order to develop the ZPD, learners must actively interact socially with a knowledgeable adult or capable peers (Blanton, 1998; Kearsley, 1996; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999). A student can only progress to the ZPD, and consequently independent learning if he/she is first guided by a teacher or expert (Blanton, 1998; Kearsley, 2005; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999; Rueda et al., 1992). Accordingly, responsive instruction acknowledges what the learner already knows, before a new skill is taught or new knowledge introduced (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001). The learner's skill can only be extended and enriched through meaningful adult direction (Blanton, 1998; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999; Rueda et al., 1992). The teacher's role becomes one of purposeful instruction, a mediator of activities and substantial experiences allowing the learner to attain his or zone of proximal development (Blanton,

1998; Rueda et al., 1992). Further to this, Vygotsky perceives language and speech as tools, used by humans to mediate their social environments (Blanton, 1998; Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999).

In keeping with this grounded theory, differentiated instruction proposes a viable alternative to traditional teaching strategies. It offers students the options of moving on to more complex material once they have mastered certain key skills, it offers the teacher a more dynamic, facilitating role, and it creates a purposeful learning environment that maximizes opportunities for meaningful learning.

### **A research rationale supporting the need for a new educational paradigm**

The rationale to consider a new model is directed by several issues, including current student diversity, brain research, theories concerning learning styles and the multiple intelligences. Theories about how students learn, the content they learn and the instructional strategy used by the teacher has been the center of a great deal of discussion in educational circles (Burton, 2000; Guild, 2001; McIlrath & Huitt, 1995). Research has proved the argument that individuals do not learn in the same way (Fischer & Rose, 2001; Green, 1999; Guild, 2001; Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003). Consequently, contemporary education has been influenced by several renowned theorists who have investigated the different methods learners use to conceptualise ideas (Brooks, 2004; Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000). While strengthening the knowledge base in this field, it has assisted educators to re-look at instructional practices, changing curriculum

and assessment techniques (Brooks, 2004; Cohen, McLaughlin, & Talbert, 1993; Davis et al., 2000; Fischer & Rose, 2001; Green, 1999; McIlrath & Huitt, 1995; Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003). While educators understand that not all learners are the same, and that their needs are diverse, few teachers accommodate these differences in their classrooms (Gable, Hendrickson, Tonelson, & Van Acker, 2000; Guild, 2001). Uniformity, rather than attending to diversity, dominates the culture of many contemporary classrooms (Gable et al., 2000; Guild, 2001; Sizer, 1999). In commencing discussion on this issue, it is prudent to point out that every learner benefits from an engaging learning experience, every learner deserves to be treated with respect and every learner should have an opportunity to reach his or her potential (Guild, 2001). The current educational system does not adequately address these needs (Guild, 2001). Traditional methods used by teachers often focus on exposing and remedying deficits, setting up several students for a pattern of failure (Levine, 2003). The discussion following presents the rationale that renders it imperative to consider a new model.

### *Addressing differences*

Contemporary student populations are becoming increasingly academically diverse (Gable et al., 2000; Guild, 2001; Hall, 2002; Hess, 1999; McAdamis, 2001; McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004; Sizer, 1999; Tomlinson, 2004a; Tomlinson, Moon, & Callahan, 1998). The inclusion of students with disabilities, students with language backgrounds other than English, students with imposing emotional difficulties and a noteworthy number of gifted students, reflect this growing diversity (Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003;

Tomlinson, 2001b, 2004a). Learning within the inclusive classroom is further influenced by a student's gender, culture, experiences, aptitudes, interests and particular teaching approaches (Guild, 2001; Stronge, 2004; Tomlinson, 2002, 2004b). Most children accept that in a classroom they are not all alike, that while some possess strengths in sport, others may be academically strong (Tomlinson, 2000a). While it is accepted that the common basis for them all is a need for acceptance, nurturing and respect (Tomlinson, 2004a), attending to differences, assists each student in experiencing a degree of triumph while encouraging them to be all that they can be as individuals (Fischer & Rose, 2001; Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003; Stronge, 2004; Tomlinson, 2000a). It is necessary to take into account the vast differences among students in a classroom, acknowledging each student's strengths while accommodating their limitations (Guild, 2001; Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003; Tomlinson, 2001c, 2002). Contemporary classrooms should accept and build on the basis that learners are all essentially different (Brighton, 2002; Fischer & Rose, 2001; Griggs, 1991; Guild, 2001; Tomlinson, 2002).

### ***The dangers of teaching to the middle***

Teachers need to know how to respond to the burgeoning diversity of contemporary classrooms (Fischer & Rose, 2001; Flem et al., 2000; McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004; Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003; Sizer, 1999; Tomlinson, 2001b, 2004a). The use of the one-size-fits-all curriculum no longer meets the needs of the majority of learners (Forsten, Grant, & Hollas, 2002; McBride, 2004; McCoy & Ketterlin-Geller, 2004; Tomlinson, 2002; Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). The use of single-paced lessons delivered

through a singular instructional approach disregards the different learning styles and interests present in all classrooms (Fischer & Rose, 2001; Forsten et al., 2002; Guild, 2001; Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998).

In addition, addressing student differences and interest appears to enhance their motivation to learn while encouraging them to remain committed and stay positive (Stronge, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004b). Ignoring these fundamental differences may result in some students falling behind, losing motivation and failing to succeed (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). Students who may be advanced and motivated may become lost as the teacher strives to finish as much of the curriculum as possible (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). It would further appear that students learn effectively when tasks are moderately challenging, neither too simple nor too complex (Tomlinson, 2004b).

### ***Brain research***

Recent research into the workings of the human brain has significant implications for educators (Greenleaf, 2003; King-Friedrichs, 2001; Levine, 2003; Nunley, 2003; Scherer, 2001; Tuttle, 2000). Brain-based instruction is cognizant of the brain's natural learning system (Greenleaf, 2003). Good instruction within the classroom seeks to utilize the brain adeptly, to process, store and retrieve information (Greenleaf, 2003). Brain research suggests three broad, related concepts that necessitate a differentiated approach (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). Firstly, the learning environment should be safe and non-threatening to encourage learning (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). Children who

experience discomfort through rejection, failure, pressure and intimidation may not feel safe within the learning context (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). Secondly, students must be appropriately challenged, the learner should be comfortable enough to accept the challenge that new learning offers, the content being neither too difficult nor too easy (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). Thirdly, the student must be able to make meaning of the ideas and skills through significant association (King-Friedrichs, 2001; Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). However, this knowledge about the workings of the human brain has yet to impact on classroom practice and teacher preparation programs (Levine, 2003).

### *Learning Styles*

New evidence emerges regularly to support the premise that not all children learn in the same way (Guild, 2001). It is apparent that an awareness of different learning styles is a significant tool to understand differences and assist with student development (Strong, Silver, & Perini, 2001). Models of education based on learning styles have equipped teachers with the ability to plan their lessons and their curriculum, bearing in mind how students learn best (Strong et al., 2001). Being able to identify a student's learning style and teach to accommodate these can assist students to achieve better results academically and improve their attitudes toward learning (Green, 1999). Identifying learning styles enables a teacher to capitalize on a student's strengths and to become familiar with concepts they may find challenging (Green, 1999). Fine (2003) reported a significant gain in the test scores of students on special education programs, after their preferred learning style was incorporated into the instruction. Students' performances were

significantly better when they were instructed through learning style approaches rather than traditional teaching methods (Fine, 2003). Furthermore, the attitudes of these students toward learning improved significantly, as they felt that their individual strengths were being accommodated (Fine, 2003).

### ***Multiple Intelligences***

Howard Gardner's theory of the multiple intelligences is a departure from the view that intelligence is a single, measurable unit (Gardner, 1999). Gardner's theory focuses on eight intelligences, while highlighting the need for problem-solving (Campbell, Campbell, & Dickinson, 1999). An instructional technique or program that is heavily reliant on one of the intelligences, minimizes opportunities for students who may not possess a propensity to learn in this way (Gardner, 1999). These students, who may not achieve in the traditional way, may become lost to both the school and the community at large (Campbell et al., 1999; Gardner, 1999). The multiple intelligences are presented as tools for learning and problem solving (Campbell et al., 1999; Green, 1999). Creating opportunities for all students, by enriching the classroom through multiple techniques and assessment forms, develops students and brings out their strengths (Campbell et al., 1999; Gardner, 1999; Green, 1999).

## **Differentiated instruction : Responding to the needs of different learners**

Tomlinson (2005), a leading expert in this field, defines differentiated instruction as a philosophy of teaching that is based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences in their readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. A chief objective of differentiated instruction is to take full advantage of every student's ability to learn (Tomlinson, 2001a, 2001c, 2004c, 2005). In addition, she points out that differentiating can be performed in a variety of ways, and if teachers are willing to use this philosophy in their classrooms, they will be opting for a more effective practice that responds to the needs of diverse learners (Tomlinson, 2000a, 2005).

Tomlinson (2000) maintains that differentiation is not just an instructional strategy, nor is it a recipe for teaching, rather it is an innovative way of thinking about teaching and learning.

To differentiate instruction is to acknowledge various student backgrounds, readiness levels, languages, interests and learning profiles (Hall, 2002). Differentiated instruction sees the learning experience as social and collaborative, the responsibility of what happens in the classroom is first to the teacher, but also to the learner (Tomlinson, 2004c). Building on this definition, Mulroy and Eddinger (2003) add that differentiated instruction emerged within the context of increasingly diverse student populations. Within the learning environment permitted by the differentiated instruction model, teachers, support staff and professionals collaborate to create an optimal learning experience for students (Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003). Also in this environment, each

student is valued for their unique strengths, while being offered opportunities to demonstrate their skills through a variety of assessment techniques (Mulroy & Eddinger, 2003; Tomlinson, 2001a; Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998; Tuttle, 2000).

This working definition of differentiated instruction reflects Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, the main tenet of which lies in the social, interactional relationship between teacher and student. Tomlinson (2004c) points out that the teacher is the professional in the classroom, an individual who has been suitably trained to mentor and lead her wards, using appropriate techniques, assisting each to reach their potential within the learning context. Teachers are legally and ethically bound to be the expert leading the child to full development (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004c). The learner, in responding to the teacher's prompting, seeks to be independent and self-sufficient, striving for greater awareness of their skills, abilities and ideas, taking increasing responsibility for their lives and their learning (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tomlinson, 2004c). The relationship between student and teacher is clearly reciprocal, the responsibility for development becoming a shared endeavour (Tomlinson, 2004c). In addition, the difficulty of skills taught should be slightly in advance of the child's current level of mastery, linking with the Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

Differentiated instruction presents an effective means to address learner variance (Tomlinson, 2000a, 2001a, 2003), avoids the pitfalls of the one-size-fits-all curriculum (McBride, 2004), incorporates current research into the workings of the human brain (Tomlinson, 2001c; Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998; Tuttle, 2000) while supporting the

multiple intelligences and varying learning styles (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tuttle, 2000) within contemporary classrooms. It provides a crucial platform for all teachers of inclusive classrooms, to create opportunities for success for all students (Tomlinson, 2000a). The differentiated classroom balances learning needs common to all students, with more specific needs tagged to individual learners (Tomlinson, 2001a). Differentiation can liberate students from labels, offering students individual opportunities to perform at their best (Tomlinson, 2003).

Differentiation forces teachers to shift their thinking from completing the curriculum, and compels them to move closer to catering to individual student needs (Tomlinson, 1999, 2000a). It allows the teacher to focus on the same key principles for all students, however the instructional process, the pace and rate toward understanding these concepts varies (McAdamis, 2001; Tuttle, 2000). There are provisions for every child to learn as quickly and as deeply as possible (Tuttle, 2000). Teachers opting for differentiation find that they can use time and resources flexibly and creatively, assisting to create an atmosphere of collaboration in the classroom (Tuttle, 2000). Hess (1999) reports that as an added bonus, differentiation can be an engaging experience for teachers as it involves a different kind of energy compared to direct instruction.

### ***Engaging Students***

A fundamental tenet of the differentiated model, is that teachers must engage students (Tomlinson, 2000a). Research supports the view that curricula should be designed to

engage students, it should have the ability to connect to their lives and positively influence their levels of motivation (Coleman, 2001; Guild, 2001; Hall, 2002; Sizer, 1999; Strong et al., 2001). Teachers are required to know their students, their backgrounds and their cultural links (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001). Knowing students well will allow teachers to figure out their strengths, thereby helping them to move forward (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001). Engaging students actively in the learning process and in the content allows them to see patterns developing, to see the overlap between disciplines, to see learning as a cumulative whole (Coleman, 2001).

### *Catering for Interest, Learning Profile, Readiness*

Differentiated instruction supports the classroom as a community, accommodating differences and sameness (Bosch, 2001; Brimijoin, Marquissee, & Tomlinson, 2003; Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tomlinson, 2003). It allows for the creation of an environment in which all students can succeed and derive benefit (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tomlinson, 2003). Students differ in three important ways – readiness, interests and learning profiles – in a differentiated classroom, the teacher is obliged to attend to these differences in order to maximize the learning potential of each student in that classroom (Tomlinson, 2000b, 2001a).

Student interests vary, these interests can become effective tools to support learning in the differentiated classroom (Tomlinson, 2001a). Tomlinson (2001a) sees student interests as a powerful motivator, which wise teachers could take advantage of within the

differentiated classroom. Teachers should find ways to engage students, by tapping into what interests students, and by involving students in the daily running of the classroom (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001). Activities and discussions that are built around students' concerns and their life experiences allows the curriculum to become more meaningful to students (Bosch, 2001; MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001; McBride, 2004; Tomlinson, 2000b, 2001a). Allowing for student interests within the learning community, ensures that even marginalized students find a place (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Most students, even struggling learners, have aptitudes and passions, providing an opportunity within the classroom for them to explore and express these interests, mitigates against the sense of failure previously experienced by these students (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Differentiated instruction takes cognizance of student variance by allowing the teacher to plan their content and process, supporting diverse learning styles (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tomlinson, 2001a). Opportunities can be created to foster group learning and provide options for individual instruction or independent learning (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Tomlinson, 2001a). Teachers who are perceptive to the learning needs of their students help learners to make productive choices about the ways in which they will learn best (Tomlinson, 2001a). It further empowers the teacher to prioritize tasks to enrich the learning experience of specific students, students on individualized education plans can be directed to tasks which involve mastering essential skills, while students on accelerated programs may be challenged through compacting tasks or independent research projects (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Differentiated instruction makes it possible

for the teacher to include authentic instruction, using project-based learning, bringing relevant and meaningful knowledge into the classroom (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Readiness makes reference to the point of entry of each student (Tomlinson, 2000a), while some students are typically at their grade level, others may be performing at below the level of their peers, while still others are a year or so ahead (Tomlinson, 2001a).

Readiness levels vary greatly in current contexts, by devising support and material to support all learners, differentiated instruction develops an atmosphere for success for all learners (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Teachers should be able to discern the evolving readiness levels of students in their care and accommodate these by providing tasks that are neither too easy, nor too challenging (Tomlinson, 2001a, 2003).

### **Research studies supporting the use of differentiated instruction**

Several recent studies have shown positive outcomes from the use of differentiated instruction. Johnsen (2003) conducted a study using undergraduate teachers differentiating instruction to suit different ability levels. Student teachers in this context were encouraged to differentiate content and process, using learning centers, different reading materials and different strategies (Johnsen, 2003). The study revealed that the use of differentiated techniques proved to be engaging, stimulated student interest and providing a gratifying experience for the undergraduate teachers (Johnsen, 2003). While the undergraduate teachers appeared to benefit from a rewarding experience, Johnsen (2003) does point out that students with exceptional needs continued to receive individual

specialist support through other services. This begs the question : will differentiation completely meet the complex needs of all heterogeneous learners in the regular classroom, if all other support services are withdrawn?

A case study of one middle school's experience with differentiated instruction by Tomlinson (1995) revealed initial teacher opposition toward modifying instruction to suit learner variance. Added to this, administrative barriers including teacher dissention about being instructed to implement differentiated strategies by district officials, impacted on the teacher's sense of self efficacy (Tomlinson, 1995). Other barriers included teachers perceiving differentiated instruction as a fad that would pass, concerns over time allocated to prepare for differentiated lesson, unease over student assessments and preparation for testing, disquiet regarding classroom management and perceived teacher insecurity over a change in their role (Tomlinson, 1995). Observations of those teachers who adopted the use of differentiated techniques demonstrated that age was not a factor determining acceptance of the new exemplar, however the teacher's attitude towards change proved a more decisive factor, with teachers who embraced change showing a greater inclination to adopt differentiation (Tomlinson, 1995). Teachers who experienced early successes with differentiation were more likely to persist. (Tomlinson, 1995). Tomlinson (1995) concluded that there was a need to investigate teacher resistance to new models catering for academic diversity, as well as considering teachers' perception of classroom management in the light of these changes. Classroom management appears to arise as a disquieting factor when changes are implemented – this phenomenon requires greater research since proponents of the differentiated instruction

model believe that classroom management issues will decrease if teachers implement the model efficiently, yet there remains disquiet about a loss of control among teachers.

In a study investigating the use of differentiated instruction on student scores on standardized tests, teachers' perceptions of their ability to meet the needs of diverse students and parents' expectation of student performance, Hodge (1997) found that students who were prepared for tests using differentiated techniques showed a gain in their math scores, but there were no comparable gains in reading scores. Further, teachers' perceptions of being able to meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms do not appear to be influenced by the use of traditional or differentiated instructional techniques (Hodge, 1997). With literacy levels being of great concern to education authorities, it may be worth investigating whether student gains following the use of differentiated instruction are limited to learning areas like Maths, while areas such as literacy require more traditional methods.

Tomlinson, Moon and Callahan (1998) investigated the nature of instructional practice among middle school populations, considering the degree to which teachers respond appropriately to academic diversity, using differentiation. This study revealed that very few teachers take student interests, learning profile or cultural differences into account when they plan lessons (Tomlinson et al., 1998). It was apparent that modifications to the tasks set were unusual and limited, with few teachers opting for differentiation of any form (Tomlinson et al., 1998). Some of the teachers who used varied instructional strategies facilitated more flexible classrooms, which allowed them to accommodate

student needs more appropriately (Tomlinson et al., 1998). Most teachers expressed frustration about attempting to deal with learner variance, with many choosing the one-size-fits-all approach to teaching (Tomlinson et al., 1998). The results yielded from this study bodes poorly for both struggling and advanced learners, and highlights the need to rethink the current model of schooling (Tomlinson et al., 1998). These findings suggest an urgent need for another model that deliberately focuses on assisting teachers in their attempts to cater for burgeoning student diversity.

Differentiated instruction may mirror tracking as some teachers attempt to provide for the academic diversity of contemporary classrooms. This was evident in a study by Blozowich (2001) who found that teachers used a variety of techniques but continued to prepare lessons as they would for a tracked classroom. This researcher concluded that teachers implementing differentiated instruction require continuous and consistent professional development, coupled with intensive dialogue and consultation about how these techniques are being implemented in the classroom (Blozowich, 2001). Robison (2004) calls for further research into the utilization of differentiated instruction techniques, as teachers view the issue of increased planning time with unease. Teachers also require support structures and collaborative teamwork to assist them as they prepare lessons incorporating differentiated instruction (Robison, 2004). Both tracking and time constraints require further investigation as potential barriers to the implementation of differentiated instruction.

McAdamis (2001) reported significant improvement in the test scores of low-scoring students in the Rockwood School District (Missouri), following the use of differentiated instruction. Apart from this tangible impact of the differentiated model, teachers in this study indicated that their students were more motivated and enthusiastic about learning. This study further reflected the whole-school change which differentiated instruction necessitates – efforts included professional development, mentoring and intensive planning (McAdamis, 2001). Teachers were initially resistant to the change, however strategies like peer coaching, action research, study groups and workshops offered on-going support and feedback (McAdamis, 2001). Teachers were eventually convinced of the benefits of differentiation and were keen to try other differentiated lessons in the year following (McAdamis, 2001). It is worth pointing out that training sessions, mentoring and professional development in this study were implemented over a five year period, and required a concerted response from all stakeholders including school principals, teachers, district trainers and school authorities (McAdamis, 2001). This study confirms the need for whole-school and whole-district change – without these essential support structures and the cooperation of all participants, it is unlikely that any differentiated program will endure. Further to this, it is clear that the results of a differentiated program can only be seen over a few years, with the initial stages being utilized to overcome teacher resistance and encourage a sustained effort.

An investigation of differentiated instruction strategies utilized by teachers in a study conducted by Affholder (2003) concluded that teachers who used these strategies more intensively showed improved individual perception and adopted greater responsibility for

student growth. In addition, this study revealed that teachers employing higher levels of differentiated techniques experienced increased feelings of self-efficacy and demonstrated greater willingness to try new instructional approaches (Affholder, 2003). It would further appear that differentiated instruction was favoured by more experienced teachers who were familiar with the curriculum they taught and who had received extensive training prior to implementing these methods in the classroom (Affholder, 2003). In the light of these findings, it may be reasonable to investigate why differentiation proved more popular with experienced teachers rather than their younger counterparts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Three intersecting principles gleaned from the literature review serve as the basis for this project. Firstly, from Vygotsky's grounded learning theory, which holds that reciprocal social interaction and the collaborative relationship between teacher and student, accommodates learning in a developmental and historical sense. Secondly, that the learning context is a social context which encourages the development of cognitive functions and communication skills. Social interaction between the learner and a knowledgeable adult enhances the possibility of intellectual activity. The third principle, drawn from research into the workings of the human brain and recent revelations regarding the multiple intelligences and learning styles, acknowledges that the potential for learning is enlarged if learners are engaged, associate new learning with existing

information and are allowed to consolidate this information in a manner suited to an individual learning style.

Progressing from this theoretical basis, this paper further takes cognizance of the tenets supporting the move to differentiate instruction, including contemporary student diversity, the dangers of teaching to the middle, research into the workings of the human brain, investigations into individual learning styles and the theories of multiple intelligences. Previous studies into the use of differentiated techniques in the classroom have considered student engagement (Johnsen, 2003; McAdamis, 2001), the experiences and reactions of teachers to heterogeneous classrooms (Johnsen, 2003; Tomlinson, 1995), administrative prerequisites (Tomlinson, 1995), the impact of differentiated techniques on test scores (Hodge, 1997) and the degree to which tasks are augmented or modified for gifted and struggling learners (Tomlinson et al., 1998). Aspects that continue to require investigation include the impact of differentiated instruction on teacher efficacy, the teacher's response to adopting a new model, the differences between differentiation and tracking, the impact of teaching experience on the teacher's ability to differentiate instruction, how time and resources are utilized during differentiation and, the challenges and strengths that teachers' perceive during the implementation of differentiated techniques.

Differentiated instruction does offer a viable alternative to addressing the diversity in the mixed ability classroom. It offers teachers and administrators an opportunity of

translating and incorporating the plethora of research in this field, into workable practice in the classroom.

## References:

- Affholder, L. P. (2003). *Differentiated instruction in inclusive elementary classrooms - published thesis EdD*. University of Kansas, Kansas.
- Blanton, M. L. (1998). *Prospective teachers emerging pedagogical content knowledge during the professional semester*. [Doctoral Dissertation]. North Carolina State University. Retrieved, from the World Wide Web:  
[www.ncsu.edu/crmse/research\\_papers/blanton.diss.doc](http://www.ncsu.edu/crmse/research_papers/blanton.diss.doc)
- Blozowich, D. G. (2001). Differentiated instruction in heterogeneously grouped sixth grade classrooms., *Published thesis - EdD*. Immaculata College.
- Bosch, N. (2001). *Differentiated Curriculum*. Retrieved 11 November, 2003, from the World Wide Web: [www.adifferentplace.org/differentiated.htm](http://www.adifferentplace.org/differentiated.htm)
- Brighton, C. M. (2002). Straddling the fence : Implementing best practices in an age of accountability. *Gifted Child Today*, 25(3), 30-33.
- Brimijoin, K., Marquissee, E., & Tomlinson, C. A. (2003). Using data to differentiate instruction. *Educational Leadership*, 60(5), 70-73.
- Brooks, J. G. (2004). To see beyond the lesson. *Educational Leadership*, 62(1), 8-12.
- Burton, J. (2000). The configuration of meaning : Learner-centred art education revisited. *Studies in Art Education*, 41(4), 330-345.
- Campbell, L., Campbell, C., & Dickinson, D. (1999). *Teaching and learning through the multiple intelligences* (Second ed.). Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cohen, D. K., McLaughlin, M. W., & Talbert, J. E. (Eds.). (1993). *Teaching for Understanding*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Coleman, M. R. (2001). Curriculum differentiation : Sophistication. *Gifted Child Today*, 24(2), 24-26.
- Davis, B., Sumara, D., & Luce-Kapler, R. (2000). *Engaging minds : Learning and teaching in a complex world*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Fine, D. (2003). A sense of learning style. *Principal Leadership*, 4(2), 55-60.
- Fischer, K. W., & Rose, L. T. (2001). Webs of skill : How students learn. *Educational Leadership*, 59(3), 6-123.
- Flem, A., Moen, T., & Gudmundsdottir, S. (2000). *Towards inclusive schools : a study of how a teacher facilitated differentiated instruction*. Paper presented at the ECER Conference, Edinburgh.
- Forsten, C., Grant, J., & Hollas, B. (2002). *Differentiated instruction. Different strategies for different learners*. Peterborough: Crystal Springs Books.
- Gable, R. A., Hendrickson, J. M., Tonelson, S. W., & Van Acker, R. (2000). Changing disciplinary and instructional practices in the middle school to address IDEA. *The Clearing House*, 73(4), 205-208.

- Gardner, H. (1999). *The disciplined mind : What all students should understand*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Goldfarb, M. E. (2000). *The educational theory of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896-1934)*. New Foundations. Retrieved 20 August, 2005, from the World Wide Web: [www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Vygotsky.html](http://www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Vygotsky.html)
- Green, F. R. (1999). Brain and learning research : Implications for meeting the needs of diverse learners. *Education*, 119(4), 682-688.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (2003). Motion and emotion. *Principal Leadership*, 3(9), 14-19.
- Griggs, S. A. (1991). Learning Styles Counselling. *ERIC Digest*, ED341890.
- Guild, P. B. (2001). *Diversity, learning style and culture*. New Horizons for Learning. Retrieved 15 May 2005, from the World Wide Web: [www.newhorizons.org/strategies/styles.guild.htm](http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/styles.guild.htm)
- Hall, T. (2002). *Differentiated instruction. Effective classroom practices report*. National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum, CAST, U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. Retrieved, from the World Wide Web: [www.cast.org/ncac/classroompractice/cpractice02.doc](http://www.cast.org/ncac/classroompractice/cpractice02.doc)
- Hess, M. A. (1999, 26 March 1999). *Teaching in mixed ability classrooms*. Wisconsin Education Association Council. Retrieved 31 October, 2003, from the World Wide Web: [www.weac.org/kids/1998-99/march99/differ.htm](http://www.weac.org/kids/1998-99/march99/differ.htm)
- Hodge, P. H. (1997). An analysis of the impact of a prescribed staff development program in differentiated instruction on student achievement and the attitudes of teachers and parents toward that instruction., *Published thesis - EdD*. University of Alabama.
- Johnsen, S. (2003). Adapting instruction with heterogenous groups. *Gifted Child Today*, 26(3), 5-6.
- Kearsley, G. (1996). *Social development theory*. Open Learning Technology Cooperation. Retrieved 9 September, 2005, from the World Wide Web: [www.educationau.edu.au/archives/CP/041.htm](http://www.educationau.edu.au/archives/CP/041.htm)
- Kearsley, G. (2005). *Social development theory*. Theory into Practice Database. Retrieved 27 August, 2005, from the World Wide Web: <http://tip.psychology.org/vygotsky.html>
- King-Friedrichs, J. (2001). Brain friendly techniques for improving memory. *Educational Leadership*, 59(3), 76-79.
- Lawrence-Brown, D. (2004). Differentiated instruction : Inclusive strategies for standards based learning that benefit the whole class. *American Secondary Education*, 32(3), 34-62.
- Levine, M. (2003). Celebrating diverse minds. *Educational Leadership*, 61(2), 12-18.
- MacGillivray, L., & Rueda, R. (2001). *Listening to inner city teachers of English language learners : Differentiating literacy instruction*. [website]. Education Research and Development Centres Program. Retrieved 12 April, 2005, from the World Wide Web: [www.ciera.org/library/archive/2001-05/0105McRued.htm](http://www.ciera.org/library/archive/2001-05/0105McRued.htm)
- McAdamis, S. (2001). Teachers tailor their instruction to meet a variety of student needs. *Journal of Staff Development*, 22(2), 1-5.

- McBride, B. (2004). Data-driven instructional methods : "One-strategy-fits-all" doesn't work in real classrooms. *T.H.E Journal*, 31(11), 38-40.
- McCoy, J. D., & Ketterlin-Geller, L. R. (2004). Rethinking instructional delivery for diverse student populations. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 40(2), 88-95.
- McIlrath, D. A., & Huitt, W., G. (1995). *The teaching-learning process : A discussion of models*. [website]. Valdosta State University. Retrieved 15 July, 2005, from the World Wide Web: <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/papers/modeltch.html>
- Mulroy, H., & Eddinger, K. (2003). *Differentiation and literacy*. Paper presented at the Institute on Inclusive Education, Rochester.
- Nunley, K. F. (2003). Giving credit where credit is due. *Principal Leadership*, 3(9), 26-30.
- Patsula, P. J. (1999). *Applying learning theories to online instructional design*. Athabasca University, Seoul. Retrieved 9 September, 2005, from the World Wide Web: [www.patsula.com/usefo/webbasedlearning/tutorial1/](http://www.patsula.com/usefo/webbasedlearning/tutorial1/)
- Riddle, E. M., & Dabbagh, N. (1999). *Lev Vygotsky's social development theory*. Retrieved 18 August, 2005, from the World Wide Web: <http://chd.gse.gmu.edu/immersion/knowledgebase/theorists/constructivism/vygotsky.htm>
- Robison, E. M. (2004). Teacher decision-making in utilising differentiated instruction., *Published thesis - PhD*. Marywood University.
- Rueda, R., Goldenberg, C., & Gallimore, R. (1992). *Rating instructional conversations : A guide*. National Centre for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning. Retrieved 12 September 2005, from the World Wide Web: [www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/ncrcdssl/epr4.htm](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/ncrcdssl/epr4.htm)
- Scherba de Valenzuela, J. (2002). *Sociocultural theory*. Retrieved 9 September, 2005, from the World Wide Web: [www.unm.edu/~devalenz/handouts/sociocult.html](http://www.unm.edu/~devalenz/handouts/sociocult.html)
- Scherer, M. (2001). The brain and learning. *Educational Leadership*, 59(3), 5.
- Shambaugh, N., & Magliaro, S. (2001). A reflexive model for teaching instructional design. *ETR&D*, 49(2), 69-92.
- Sizer, T. R. (1999). No two are quite alike. *Educational Leadership*, 57(1), 6-11.
- Strong, R. W., Silver, H. F., & Perini, M. J. (2001). Making students as important as standards. *Educational Leadership*, 59(3), 56-61.
- Stronge, J. (2004). *Teacher effectiveness and student achievement : What do good teachers do?* Paper presented at the American Association of School Administrators Annual Conference and Exposition, San Francisco, California.
- Tharp, R. G., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life : Teaching, learning and schooling in social context*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1995). Deciding to differentiate instruction in the middle school : One school's journey. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 39(2), 77-114.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). Mapping a route toward differentiated instruction. *Educational Leadership*, 57(1), 12-16.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2000a). *The Differentiated Classroom : Responding to the Needs of all Learners*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- Tomlinson, C. A. (2000b). Reconciliable differences. *Educational Leadership*, 58(1), 6-11.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001a). Differentiated instruction in the regular classroom. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 14(1), 3-6.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001b). Grading for success. *Educational Leadership*, 58(6), 12-15.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001c). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms* (Second ed.). Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2002). Different learners different lessons. *Instructor*, 112(2), 21-25.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2003). Deciding to teach them all. *Educational Leadership*, 61(2), 6-11.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2004a). Differentiation in diverse settings. *School Administrator*, 61(7), 28-33.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2004b). Research evidence for differentiation. *School Administrator*, 61(7), 30.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2004c). Sharing responsibility for differentiating instruction. *Roeper Review*, 26(4), 188-200.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2005). Grading and differentiation : Paradox or good practice? *Theory into Practice*, 44(3), 262-269.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Kalbfleisch, M. L. (1998). Teach me, teach my brain : a call for differentiated classrooms. *Educational Leadership*, 56(3), 52-55.
- Tomlinson, C. A., Moon, T. R., & Callahan, C. M. (1998). How well are we addressing academic diversity in the middle school? *Middle School Journal*, 29(3), 3-11.
- Tuttle, J. (2000). *Differentiated classrooms* (Report). Woodbury: Cedar Mountain Academy.