

Using collaborative action research to enhance differentiated instruction

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Differentiated instruction is advocated as a key approach to meet the needs of diverse learners, with research stating that differentiation can meaningfully impact on individual student learning, mastery of course objectives, and individual student success. However, many teachers find it challenging to implement. As such, further professional development in differentiated instruction is foundational to meeting the learning needs of young people from diverse backgrounds (Dulfer, 2019).

This paper reports on a targeted professional development program which was undertaken as a collaborative action research project by teachers in an Australian secondary school. The collaborative action research model used in the research focused on several observing, reflecting, identifying, planning, and acting cycles. Participants worked through these stages in small groups (triads) made up of three teachers and one researcher. After taking part in professional development activities with academics and other teachers in the study, each triad/tetrad conducted another lesson observation and reflection with a focus on their chosen improvement area.

The major research questions for this study were:

- How did teachers understand and enact differentiation in their approaches to teaching in secondary school classrooms?
- Was action research undertaken in collaborative groups a useful professional development model for the improvement of differentiated teaching in secondary schools?

In this study each of the eight participants demonstrated an improved understanding of and ability to cater for the diverse needs of the students in their classroom using differentiated instruction. In the second cycle of observed lessons, teachers increased their use of peer teaching, expanded the range of tasks offered, employed metacognitive questioning and feedback more often, and increased the frequency in which they focused on learning intentions.

Results show many participants adapted their classroom pedagogy to provide further supports for students through differentiated instruction. In this paper, we argue that this study's use of a collaborative action research approach to provide teacher professional development, along with a focus on evidence using a differentiation observation instrument, were important stimuli for reflection and pedagogical experimentation. This targeted approach to professional reflection and exposure to research-based and other colleagues' teaching practices led to enhanced differentiated instruction among participants. These findings contribute to understanding of the processes that lead to teacher development.

References:

Dulfer, N. (2019). Differentiation in the International Baccalaureate Programme. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 18(2): 142-168