

Brian Martel

How extensively and in what ways should classroom, the curriculum, and teaching be adapted and differentiated to address diverse needs due to students' cognitive differences, culture, language, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and challenging conditions? How would you collaborate with parents, family, community, school administrators, and other teachers to help every student reach their full potential?

What a great question. The classroom, the curriculum, and teaching need to be adapted as extensively as the previous question is long. Rury asks another question directly relevant to this, "Has schooling helped to change the prevailing social structure, or did it reinforce existing patterns of inequality?" (2002, p. 91). Education has come a long way from the homes of the colonial settlers to the methods and techniques of instruction that span the globe. It has also remained very much the same with reference to the forces that dictate and manipulate its progression and the effect it has on those forces. For instance, as much as religion influenced the colonials' literacy, the Intelligent Design theory has brought controversy to the scientific theory of evolution in education. Industry still influences our schools' academic curriculum with grants and scholarships and job market forecasts. The Progressive ideals still permeate the primary wing where I teach kindergarten and pre-school. The standardized testing of Post-War America follows us into the 21st century with No Child Left Behind. The social, cultural, and human capital ideas are still very much alive in education. What teacher wouldn't see educating the children of today to overcome the obstacles of the past not only as an incredibly difficult task, but one where differentiation is incredibly necessary? For example, many readers (and the writer) will benefit from the headings delineating each topic of this response. It took an insignificant amount of time write and format the headings and I would assume that no reader will be harmed by the extra dozen italicized words in the document. That being stated, using headings is an example of an effective

differentiation. To draw an analogy from back when I was a kid, my mother used to tell my brothers and I, “If you didn’t spend more time trying to get out of helping me do chores than it would take you to do them, we would have more time to do the things you want to do.” In other words, adapting the classroom, curriculum, and teaching will help education overcome society’s negative influences and evolve out of its shortcomings.

Cognitive differences

This seems to present the most obvious need for differentiation when you look at education as a whole. If cognitive differences were not accounted for there would be no need for assessment or curriculum planning. Kindergarteners would be sitting beside high school sophomores studying the nuances of sub-atomic particles. That’s extreme, but even within the Early Literacy Intervention (ELI) groups formed from DIBELS assessments in the same kindergarten class, there are cognitive differences. Among these differences are those directly applicable to the ELI grouping such as letter recognition and concepts of print, as well as others more indirectly related; i.e., mathematical and social skills.

Cognitive differences presented a major challenge when developing the flash games for my website (See Appendix A), and led to the addition of “help” buttons, and later in games like Greater-Less Than-or Equal to, differing levels of play that would scaffold the game tasks for the children. We also introduced the games as a whole class activity and set aside time for group exploration of the games as noted in my research (See Appendix E).

Culture

Culture is not a theme one might expect to gather such a buzz at the 90 some odd percent white, upper-middle class school district I teach in. But for well over a decade, a full week each year is permanently established as “Cultural Arts Week.” Please note that this is not the only week dedicated to exploring culture just the most monumental commitment for our school. Months of planning, organizing, and creating curriculum particular to the country our school “visits” develop into a week of immersion in another culture for the entire school. We’ve been to India, South Korea, South Africa, China, and many others. I was pleasantly surprised after completing a CultureQuest to India with my peers (See Appendix F) that I could share my portion on Karnatak and Hindustani music with my colleagues. Part of our experience in the other culture is comparing our school to theirs. As Li (2006) points out of Hong Kong schools, many cultures take a very different approach to the child-centered ways of American schooling. It is important when assimilating students from other cultures to understand what schooling has been for them as you help them make the transition.

Ethnicity

As I mentioned our school is predominantly white. The next largest population is minority adoptees, many from foreign countries, and many of whom are fortunate enough to have adoptive parents that take an outspoken pride in the ethnicity of their children. In fact, many of countries explored during Cultural Arts Weeks have been chosen by the Cultural Arts committee and the PTO, who provide most of the funding for Cultural Arts Week, based on the minority population in the school. Brown, Tanner-Smith, Lesane-Brown, and Ezell (2007) suggest that children do not limit themselves to ethnic information from their families when determining how they fit in the world. As a

teacher, I make sure that our classroom is safe and open for respectful discussion of similarities and differences in cultures. In my experience, kindergarteners are very curious about how and why their peers do things differently. They wonder why a man in a red suit comes down Jane's chimney and Jacob's family has eight nights of candle lighting. The possibilities when exploring ethnicity can be a Constructivist's dream.

Language

It seems to me that learning how to say, "Hello" in different languages is a rite of passage in kindergarten. But when I see this question I think of Simoens' (2009) account of an eight year old Latina girl who had to teach herself Spanish to speak with her relatives. Communication is a key component in education, in life period. I have had the pleasure to teach a little boy who spoke French and broken English, and a pair of non-verbal little girls, as well as a number of children with speech issues so severe that it sounded like they were speaking a language other than English. Adapting the curriculum to fit their needs was the easy part. Teaching them and their peers how to communicate was the hurdle. The classroom needed to be established as a safe place for all the children to attempt communication. All the children needed to learn how to listen and "speak" in ways that were not natural to them. And everyone needed to temper themselves with patience and understanding.

Gender

The more I look at education, the more I buy into that it's swinging about on a pendulum. As Wiens (2005) findings suggest, that pendulum is swinging in favor of female students. The author states that, "if we can learn anything from the movement to empower girls in the 1980s and 1990s, it is that media and the general culture have a

profound impact on the aspirations and achievement of our youth” (Wiens, 2005, p. 23). I fear that pendulum swings back to an equivalent male student movement instead of a gender neutral movement. In my classroom, we acknowledge that males and females have the same brains and can succeed equally in whatever endeavor they choose. They are people who, to take liberties with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s ideals, should be judged by the content of their character not their masculinity or femininity (King, 1963). Yes, our room has posters of famous females, including a champion motorcycle drag racer, but we recognize that she is a champion drag racer with the virtues of hard work and determination, and she happens to be a female. I guess that’s follow through from what is referred to as my “rare” position as a “male kindergarten teacher”. There are no different expectations that because I am a male I should teach the children any different a curriculum than my female peers. I do not differentiate instruction based on gender stereotypes, but on the needs of the kindergarteners in my class, who you would be hard pressed to distinguish from one another without seeing them.

Socioeconomic Status

Coming from field experiences, student-teaching, and long-term substituting at schools from lower socioeconomic neighborhoods to the upper-middle class one I have taught at for the better part of six years has been mind blowing. I remember my experiences from the lower socioeconomic schools like trying to convince kindergarteners that orange is a color and a fruit while they share bags of fruit snacks. Now, children will bring in dried papaya for snack and discuss how their favorite color is teal. In my experience, it seems that many children from different socioeconomic backgrounds come into kindergarten with different life experiences. Learning about the

lives of my kindergarteners is an integral part in determining how I will plan my approach to instruction.

Challenging Conditions

In kindergarten, just about any child can have a challenging condition, unfortunately many times, that is all you have to go on. “At kindergarten age especially, clinicians are confronted with sub-clinical mental health problems” (Stadelmann, Perren, Von Wyl, and Von Klitzing, 2007, p. 1003). As a teacher you must become an expert in examining and solving problems. It seems that at any given time, I am keeping notes on the who, what, when, where, why, and how’s of a child’s challenging condition. Once a pattern is established, an adaptation can be developed, put into place, and then its usefulness assessed. If it works great, if not the process continues. Documentation is the key, not only because it helps me assess the adaptation’s effectiveness, but because down the line challenging conditions have a way of being identified as a part of a bigger picture.

Collaboration

There’s an African proverb that says, “It takes a village to raise a child”. Being that schools are full of children, I’d say that collaboration is a requisite characteristic of educators. I have worked extensively with my peers creating the India Culture Quest project (see Appendix F) in EDU 553, and the construction of my flash games (see Appendix A). I would further like to state that the teaching assistants and families with whom I have had the pleasure to work with have been instrumental in the successful education of the kindergarteners in my class. I find that if you put effort forth, others become motivated to do the same. And all children benefit from the help of the “village”.

References

- Brown, T. N, Tanner-Smith, E. E., Lesane-Brown, C. L., & Ezell. M. E. (2007). Child, parent, and situational correlates of familial ethnic/race socialization. *Journal of marriage & Family*, 69(1), 14-25.
- Li, Y. L. (2006). Classroom organization: understanding the context in which children are expected to learn. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(1), 37-44.
- King, M. L. (1963, August 28). *I Have a Dream*. Speech presented at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D. C.
- Rury, J. L. (2005). *Education and social change: Themes in the History of American Schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Simoens, M. (2009) Breaking language barriers in central iowa. *Des Moines Business Record*, 27(2), 14.
- Stadelmann, S., Perren, S., Von Wyl, A., & Von Klitzing, K. (2007). Associations between family relationships and symptoms/strengths at kindergarten age: what is the role of children's parental representation? *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 48(10), 996-1004.
- Wiens, K. (2005). The new gender gap: what went wrong? *Journal of Education*, 186(3), 11-27.

Appendix A

Website: Mr. Martizzle presents: Kindergarten in Room 1o8

<http://www.pomfret.ctschool.net/Classrooms/Martel.B/indexroom1o8.htm>

What it is:

This is the main page of the website I have been developing for my kindergarten class. It contains several links to our curriculum, but more importantly to this context it contains links to nearly a dozen flash games I have programmed that learners can use independently. The flash games include content for children to explore letters, numeracy, polygons, sorting, and fine motor skills.

What it demonstrates:

With respects to bridging Constructivist theory to practice, this artifact demonstrates my ability to create minimally guided instruction for learners to explore.

How it benefits students at the PK-14 level:

Though these games are designed primarily for kindergarteners, many of my colleagues, some teaching students as high as 8th grade, use these games to teach lessons and reinforce or offer skills practice to their students. The beauty of having these games on the internet is that colleagues from other schools and parents tell me that they are using the games as well.

Standards:

There are 11 games that address a number of standards relevant to the CT Kindergarten Frameworks, National Council for Teachers of Mathematics standards, and the ISTE National Education Technology Standards for Students (NET-S).

Appendix E

EDU 696: The Effects of a Pair of Upper and Lower Case Flash Games on Academic Achievement among Kindergarteners and Preschoolers in Letter Recognition and Alphabetical Order.

What it is:

This artifact is a paper that examines research I conducted on two flash games I developed and implemented in my classroom. In addition it contains links to the games, pre and post-test data, and parent survey data.

What it demonstrates:

This artifact demonstrates my ability to develop engaging educational technology academically relevant to my students, which will help them succeed independently. This paper also demonstrates my understanding of scientific research's relationship in supporting my educational decisions.

How it benefits student PK-14:

These games are designed primarily for kindergarteners and preschoolers, however some first grade teachers have used these games to reinforce and offer skills practice to their students. Having access to these games on the internet extends the umbrella of the students they will benefit to homes and schools with internet connections.

Standards:

Referenced in artifact.

Appendix F

EDU 553 Collaborative Project: Explore India: Life and Culture, Classical Music of Northern and Southern India

What it is:

This artifact is my portion of a Culture Quest unit to India.

What it demonstrates:

This artifact demonstrates my ability to collaborate with peers to create curriculum. I believe this piece is especially valuable because it demonstrates my ability to work with others outside of my comfort zone (This unit was designed for grades 6-8 while I am certified and experienced only to grade 3).

How it benefits students PK-14:

This artifact benefits all students that can hear music from PK-14 with minor modifications and expectations. As students develop, their observations, insights, and musical creations should become more complex.

Standards:

Referenced in artifact.