

Differentiated Assessment Strategies: An Assessment Practice for Diverse Learners in the Inclusive Classroom

ABSTRACT

In today's classroom, teachers are confronted with a wide range of learners representing various educational needs concerning student interest, learning style, strengths or weaknesses, etc. However, the traditional one-size-fits-all assessment method is not effective in assessing the learning progress of all learners in the inclusive classroom, irrespective of their diverse needs. Therefore, differentiated assessment strategy is a very effective assessment method to address this issue. This article discusses about differentiated assessment is a practical assessment method for diverse learners in the inclusive classroom. Differentiated assessment gathered information by implementing different assessment strategies to provide better opportunities for learners to express their learning and track their learning progress. Differentiated assessment strategies are also efficaciously helpful for teachers to determine the learner's readiness, strength, interest, and abilities. In addition, in this assessment method, teachers use different assessment strategies like providing choices to express in multiple ways, ipsative assessment, using portfolio, peer assessment, problem-based assessment, etc. to help learners to self-evaluate their learning progress. Furthermore, differentiated assessment allows teachers to modify the curriculum, and adapt and accommodate the instructional plan according to the learners' interests, learning styles and needs. Differentiated assessment embrace diverse assessment formats, flexible timing, adaptive technology, tiered assignments, and constructive feedback. Therefore, differentiated assessment methods ensure that evaluation methods are fair, meaningful, and supportive for all diverse learners and promote inclusivity and equity.

Keywords: Differentiated assessment, diverse learners, inclusive classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment plays a crucial role in the teaching-learning process. It helps to gauge students' understanding of concepts, provide feedback on their progress, help to identify areas for improvement and foster academic growth and achievement. Some studies reveal that teachers' assessment practices make a strong bond between the teachers' assessment practice and students' progress (Moon, 2010; McMillan, 2013). However, the traditional assessment method is rigid and heavily relies on uniform exams for all students. It does not address the individual needs, interests, and weaknesses of all students. In recent times, the classroom has been inclusive, and students from diverse backgrounds are present. Therefore, one kind of assessment tool doesn't fit for all (Chapman & King, 2005). Teachers must consider assessment strategies that are fair for all learners. Therefore, there is a need for an hour shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to differentiated assessment strategies. This is one of the effective assessment strategies where teachers can use multiple ways of assessment strategies to address the challenges of diverse individual needs, interests, and weaknesses of all students. Like the way a carpenter uses different tools for different procedures and operations, the same approach proceeds by the teachers and effectively gauges the diverse talents and potential of all students. Designing differentiated assessment includes various assessment methods and activities for diverse learners so that learners effectively demonstrate what they have learned. Differentiated assessment reveals learners' unique knowledge, weaknesses, strengths, creativity, prior experiences, motivation, abilities, learning styles, behaviour, and attitudes. Consistently, it also helps teachers to modify their instructional plans effectively, and offering choices to the learners brings positive change toward differentiating assessment in the classroom (Chapman & King, 2005). Furthermore, the information regarding the students' learning profiles helps teachers to diagnose the difficulty of the learners and plan according to their needs and strengths.

2. DIFFERENTIATED ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

Differentiation philosophy is one approach to meeting diverse learners' various academic needs. This philosophy in today's classroom becomes even more essential and necessary to meet diverse learners' needs (Majuddin et al., 2022). Differentiated assessments offer choices to learners on how they want to be assessed and how to develop their abilities based on their unique learning styles, needs, and strengths (Varsavsky & Rayer, 2013; Moon et al., 2020). Additionally, differentiated assessment offers flexibility in learning progress by removing the need for pupils to follow a strict deadline (Moon et al., 2020). Teachers should consider the individual learning styles in a classroom to promote flexibility,

modification, and support for accelerating the learning of diverse learners. Therefore, differentiated assessment is an effective assessment practice where teachers can accommodate and modify assessments according to the individual needs, abilities, and learning styles in diverse classrooms (Jung & Guskey, 2010). Instead of employing a one-size-fits-all assessment method, the differentiated assessment method aims to tailor assessment techniques to better align with each student's unique strengths and needs. It promotes equitable opportunities for all learners to demonstrate their learning through multiple ways of action and expression. Therefore, the differentiated assessment approach promotes student-centric assessment over teacher-centric assessment.

2.1. Stage 1: Pre-assessment

The first step includes planning for instruction, including pre-assessment, before teaching any particular lesson that reveals the learner's pre-requisite knowledge, misunderstanding, and gaps to modify the instructional plan (Kaur et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2020). Teachers should clearly identify learners' prerequisites and prior school experiences to ensure a symmetrical teaching, learning, assessment, and differentiation process. They should assess learners' prior knowledge through various methods, including systematic conversations, exit cards, and journal entries (Tomlinson et al., 2015). Pre-assessment is crucial for teachers to address learners' needs and interests, making content more relevant and promoting efficient learning approaches (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

2.2 Stage 2: Differentiated Instructional Planning and Formative Assessment

Differentiated instructional planning: Differentiated instructional strategies and differentiated assessments are essential for accommodating diverse classroom needs and learning styles, ensuring diverse learners are engaged with visual and auditory stimuli (CBSE, 2020). This includes online resources, videos, PowerPoint presentations, music, role play, cooperative learning, tactile materials, and assistive technologies (Harris Stefanakis, 2010; Koshy, 2013).
Differentiated formative assessment:

Formative assessment evaluates learners' progress toward learning goals, influencing instructional plans and identifying specific needs (CAST, 2020). It helps diverse learners become more effective and engaged in the teaching-learning process (Brookhart & Lazarus, 2017). Teachers should consider individual needs and use accommodation, modification, and scaffolding to reach mainstream education standards (CAST, 2020). It will help diverse learners to build a "network of knowledge" by combining facts (Dolan & Hall, 2001). According to Thompson et al. (2004) stated a number of features of a well-designed assessment that includes all learners in the inclusive classroom:

- a) Well-developed constructs

- b) Avoid biased items
- c) Adaptable to modifications
- d) Easy-to-follow, unambiguous, and intuitive guidelines and procedures
- e) Maximum comprehension and readability

2.3 Stage 3: Differentiated summative assessment

Summative assessment is the final step in the school year, evaluating students' knowledge, comprehension, and ability (Airasian, 1997). It differs from pre-assessment and formative assessment in its goal of measuring mastery and providing a benchmark for progress. Teachers should offer varied opportunities to showcase their learners' knowledge, skills, and experiences (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Differentiated summative assessments can address diverse learners' needs, interests, readiness, and learning profiles. Assessment strategies can include written tests, presentations, projects, audio-video demonstrations, and application tasks (Tomlinson et al., 2015).

3. DIFFERENT WAYS TO IMPLEMENT DIFFERENTIATED ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES IN DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

In an inclusive classroom, teachers can anticipate diversity among the learners' needs and learning styles, so teachers make learners engaged, prepared, and attentive for action and expression (CAST, 2020). Flexibility in the assessment practice plays an important role among diverse learners, which enhances access, time, and space to ensure each learner can demonstrate their learning and reduce unnecessary distractions.

During the assessment, teachers keep in mind the strategies for sharing the intended learning goal of the lesson before, during and after teaching-learning process (Brookhart & Lazarus, 2017). Based on the targeted learning goals, teachers share the criteria "how they would assess in different contexts of learning," and as feedback, learners get evidence about their learning status to decide where they are and what they need to do or improve further. Such strategies must be enacted by the teachers in the diverse classroom setting and help learners to self-reflect on their own performance and stick to the targeted learning goals. In between the teaching-learning process, learners with disabilities may need more support and scaffolding throughout strategies to ensure they perceive the importance of targeted learning goals (Brookhart & Lazarus, 2017). So, some possible strategies for implementing differentiated assessments that are fair for diverse classroom students are:

- Asking questions to students within the teaching and learning process. The mode of questioning may be oral or written, with large text sizes for visual learners, and it should be preferred in the learner's language. The mode of answer would be in multiple formats,

such as written, pictorial, or oral. Promote flexibility with time, support and resources to accomplish their task.

- Design tiered activities that help slow and struggling learners to reach the standard to understand the concept, skills, depth and complexity of the content throughout the various levels of learning.
- Scaffolding struggling learners and assisting their learning through the extra classes.
- Flexible grouping helps learners to overcome their shyness and introvert nature. With this, teachers put 3-4 learners in a temporary group to work together to develop the targeted skill or complete the activities.
- Flexible assignments and tasks based on the learners' learning interests.
- Challenging advanced learners with more learning activities.
- Peer assessment should be used by teachers after surprise tests. Learners exchange their answer sheets with their peers and assess by themselves.
- Offer choices to learners for preparing Video presentations, oral presentations, Project-based assessments, portfolios, and problem-based assessments instead of written assignments for those interested in such activities and submit through hard drive or mail (Chapman & King, 2012; Ali, 2015).
- The teacher encourages diverse learners to self-grading and track their progress.

4. DIFFERENTIATED ASSESSMENT: A TEACHER'S ROLE TO SUPPORT DIVERSE LEARNERS IN THE CLASSROOM

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process, and effective assessment practices have established a link between teachers' assessment practices and students' academic achievement (Moon, 2010; McMillan, 2013). However, the teachers must have relevant skills and knowledge regarding conducting effective assessments in diverse classroom settings (Kaur et al., 2018). However, it can be seen that teachers lag behind the design, development and implementation of differentiated assessments in an effective way (Popham, 2009). According to Tomlinson and Moon (2013), differentiation is a teacher's proactive reaction to a student's needs. Therefore, to understand differentiation effectively, teachers need to conduct assessments at the right time before, during and after teaching at any particular unit and immediately provide feedback to diverse learners to understand their progress (Kaur et al., 2018). Furthermore, it provides a direction for the teachers to modify the instructional plan as well as assessment procedure that best suits the diverse learner's needs and interests. A teacher in between such process is rethinking his or her grading and reporting practices. Likewise, the one-size-fits-all approach didn't work in assessing diverse

learners. Similarly, it doesn't consider individual learners' interests and readiness. Teachers should reframe their reporting and grading practices to include learners' choices, different supports for individual learners when needed, opportunities for students to improve their performance on significant assessment tasks, and some freedom in the timing of key assessment tasks (Alberto, 2010).

To implement differentiated assessment methods in the classroom, first teacher should understand each student's needs, strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles. According to this, teachers should employ various assessment strategies such as oral presentations, written exams, group projects, assignments, hands-on activities, etc., and allow students to demonstrate their understanding and mastery of content. In this way, teachers should monitor students' learning progress, give feedback to students, and adjust assessments accordingly. Therefore, it is an ongoing or continuous process.

5. BENEFITS OF DIFFERENTIATED ASSESSMENT IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Motivation and Engagement: Differentiated assessment strategies are a very flexible assessment practice. It gives the choices students in how they are assessed, which helps to increase students' interest, making the learning process more enjoyable and meaningful, and ultimately, it helps to increase students' motivation and engagement in the learning process.

Personalized Learning: Every learner is unique in the classroom. Therefore, a customized approach is required to assess their potential and learning progress. By using differentiated assessment strategies, teachers can assess students' learning progress, their strengths and weaknesses, and they can modify their teaching instruction accordingly. Therefore, differentiated assessment strategies support and promote personalized learning.

Building a Positive Learning Environment: Differentiated assessment fosters a positive and conducive learning environment. Students feel valued and supported when assessment strategies acknowledge and accommodate their strengths and weaknesses.

Fostering Inclusivity and Equity: Differentiated assessment acknowledging and addressing the diverse needs of all the students. It gives a fair opportunity to every learner to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills. Therefore, differentiated assessment ensures inclusivity and equity in the classroom.

Improve 21st-Century Skills: In today's world, students need more skills than academic knowledge to succeed in their lives. Differentiated assessments offer a variety of tasks, such

as analyzing complex texts, analyzing and synthesizing information, solving real-world problems etc., that require students to apply higher-order thinking skills, which develop critical, problem-solving skills of each student. In addition, it encourages students choices how they want to demonstrate their learning (such as written reports, oral presentations, projects, etc.) according to their strengths and preferences. Therefore, students can effectively communicate their ideas, thoughts, and opinions, which fosters students' communication skills. Therefore, this approach helps to develop or improve 21st-century skills, such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving etc. and prepares diverse students for success in their lives.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Assessment should never be seen as separate from instruction because it is an integral element of the teaching-learning process. It is important to identify the learner's progress. The differentiated assessment is vital for the diverse learners' needs in the inclusive classroom. With the support of differentiated assessment strategies, students and teachers develop a bond and are free from fear of demonstration and expression. There is a dynamic association between differentiated instruction and differentiated assessment. This bidirectional relationship between the two informs each other to work conveniently for the teachers and the diverse learners. Differentiated assessment helps to reframe differentiated instructional strategies to cater the needs of the learners. It provides choices and opportunities to diverse learners to allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through multiple ways of action and expression. Considering the necessary modification, adaptation and support based on the learner's needs, strengths and weaknesses. It helps teachers to differentiate their instructions appropriately to provide flexibility to learn and understand, and accordingly, learners will be able to demonstrate what they have learned. Differentiated assessment allows teachers to evaluate learners' progress continuously and assign grades based on the learner's performance on the task.

The success of the student needs instant feedback to reach the intended goals and is the result of the successful implementation of differentiated instructions as well as differentiated assessment. However, the learning objectives remain constant for all assessments (Kaur et al., 2018). In this way, teachers employ differentiated assessments in the classroom to meet the learning styles, needs and exceptionalities of diverse learners (Jung & Guskey, 2010). Utilizing differentiated assessments requires reflection, planning, preparation, feedback from students, and generally considerably more time and effort from the instructor. This strategy gives equal opportunities to all learners to demonstrate their learning. Therefore, by

implementing this approach, teachers can foster inclusivity and equity in the diverse classroom.

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