



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

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to understand how differentiated assessment strategies are an effective method for diverse learners in inclusive classrooms (implementation and academic adaptability, benefits to diverse learners, challenges, and solutions). Studies published between 2010 to 2024 were searched through databases such as Google Scholar, Wiley, Taylor, and Francis. Differentiated assessment strategies gather information and 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. 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,

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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. However, the study revealed some challenges, such as inadequate resources and infrastructure, inadequate teachers' training, time consumption, complexity in planning and execution, and resistance to adopting a new approach. This study recommended some solutions to overcome these challenges, such as providing teachers training, adequate resources and infrastructure, and collaboration between stakeholders like educators and administrators.

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). Assessment is crucial for proving learning occurs, regardless of students' background or abilities. It helps instructors improve their pedagogical qualities and enhance their teaching practices. Assessment also provides a better understanding of learners' abilities through continuous interaction between assessment and instruction (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). However, the traditional assessment method is rigid and heavily relies on a uniform approach to exams for all students. It does not address the individual needs, interests, and weaknesses of all students. Recently, the classroom has been inclusive, and students from diverse backgrounds are present. Therefore, one kind of assessment tool does not fit for all (Chapman & King, 2005). Differentiated assessment is an alternative assessment method that focuses on applying knowledge and skills to real-life situations, considering individual student features (Caliskan & Kasikci, 2010). This approach addresses mixed-ability and diverse needs, allowing students to choose their assessment style and demonstrate their learning (Tomlinson, 2001). Previous studies indicated that teachers somehow cater to the needs of the learners through differentiated instruction, but they still follow the one-size-fits-all approach to assessment (Stefanakis & Meier, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to avoid the one-size-fits-all approach to differentiated assessment strategies. This is one of the wrong practices which could not cater to the diverse needs of the

learners. Differentiated assessment is one of the effective assessment strategies where teachers can use multiple ways of assessment strategies to gather information on students' progress (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). 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 not only fosters divergent and creative thinking in students but also offers valuable information regarding students' progress (Brown et al., 2013). Teachers must strategically plan to meet diverse learners' needs by applying the principle of differentiation in teaching and learning (Gregory & Chapman, 2012; Tomlinson, 2015; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Teachers play a crucial role in addressing these diversities among learners, including characteristics, background, learning abilities, styles, preferences, needs, adult support, experience, and interests (Kaur et al., 2018; Moon et al., 2020). However, differentiated assessment seeks to address diverse learners' needs, providing flexibility in the levels of knowledge acquisition, skills development, and types of assessment items undertaken by students (Varsavsky & Rayner, 2012). Recent studies emphasize the need for information and technology-based innovation in teaching and learning methods (Anggraeni, 2018; Lawrence et al., 2019). Although, it also helps teachers to modify their instructional plans effectively, and offering choices to the learners brings positive change toward differentiated 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, 2012; 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.

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).

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.

Stage 3: Differentiated summative assessment- Summative assessment is the final step in the year, evaluating students' knowledge, comprehension, and ability. 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).

2.1 Research Objectives

To identify the effectiveness of differentiated assessment in inclusive classrooms in terms of:

- a) Implementation and academic adaptability
- b) Benefits to diverse learners
- c) Challenges and its solution

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a review method to understand how differentiated assessment strategies are an

effective method for diverse learners in inclusive classrooms. Studies published between 2010 to 2024 were searched through databases such as Google Scholar, Wiley, Taylor, and Francis. A brief description of the literature search and screening strategies is given below:

3.1 Literature Search and Screening Strategy

The literature search was done to understand how differentiated assessment strategies are an effective method for diverse learners in inclusive education. The search strings used for this purpose were “differentiated assessment strategies,” “diverse learners,” “children with disabilities,” and “inclusive classroom”. The search was performed through Google Scholar databases, Wiley, Taylor and Francis. After that, the investigator went through the research articles, and after the screening, articles were selected that answered the research objectives.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In this study, the studies included were all published peer-reviewed articles and books. The studies included all those articles which were relevant to the objectives of this study. The studies excluded the thesis.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Implementation and Academic Adaptability of Differentiated Assessment

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. Teachers effectively differentiated based on students' readiness, interest, and learning profile, with 75% of teachers creating opportunities for everyone to demonstrate their understanding in ongoing assessments (Kaur et al., 2018). However, differentiated assessments are effective in various subjects, particularly as formative assignments. It requires reflection, planning, and dedication from teachers, and all stakeholders.

During the assessment, teachers keep in mind the strategies for sharing the intended learning goal of the lesson before, during, and after the 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). However, teachers employ differentiation in instruction but lack information on differentiated assessment practices, resulting in a lack of studies exploring its effectiveness (Othman et al., 2013; Varsavsky & Rayner, 2012). Further, Khambari and Norowi (2022) highlighted in the study that Malaysian education dominantly follows the standardized test as the assessment practice and criticized by the other studies (Wilson & Narasuman, 2020; Chin et al., 2019). However, other studies noted that offering 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 submitting through hard drive or mail encourages diverse learners to self-grading and track their progress (Chapman & King, 2012; Ali, 2015).

4.2 Benefits of Differentiated Assessment in Inclusive Classrooms

Differentiated assessment strategies are very flexible assessment practices, and students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process (Koshy, 2013). Differentiated assessment enhances teaching by tailoring instruction according to diverse student needs, allowing instructors to create a portfolio of assessments that caters to a broad spectrum (Koshy, 2013). It values the choices of 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. Besides such benefits, Koshy (2013) reported in his study that students significantly improve their performance and score high in compare to the previous score of assessment practices implying differentiation. Furthermore, students become motivated and feel confident as they self-evaluate their progress in such process. 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. Differentiated assessment fosters a positive and conducive learning environment, which somehow supports differentiation physically and emotionally (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2011). Teachers can expedite differentiation while assessing by manipulating the learning environment, showing empathy, facilitating cognition, and providing motivation. So, students feel valued and supported when assessment strategies acknowledge and accommodate their strengths and weaknesses (Kaur et al., 2019). Differentiated assessment acknowledges and addresses the diverse needs of all students. It gives a fair opportunity to every learner to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills (Arrafii & Suadiyatno, 2024). Therefore, learning occurs in the social setting, which facilitates a ground for collaborative and individual tasks to grasp new knowledge and offers individual accountability of self-evaluation and grading (Moon, 2010). However, collaboration among the different teacher training institutions and eminent teachers can also make difference to do best practices on differentiated assessment (Arrafii & Suadiyatno, 2024). Moreover, teachers can foster transformative learning environments by utilizing innovative pedagogical practices, utilizing technology for personalized learning, and fostering a supportive, collaborative learning environment.

4.3 Challenges and Solutions

Differentiated assessment strategies offer several benefits for the students. However, some studies revealed that various challenges are present in implementing differentiated assessment strategies. Inadequate resources and infrastructure are one of the major issues in implementing differentiated assessment strategies in the classroom. Institutions have inadequate resources like instructional material,

technology, software, and support staff, which hinders the implementation of these innovative strategies in the classroom (Arrafii & Suadiyatno, 2024). In addition, to effectively implement these innovative strategies in the classroom, there is a need for adequate teacher training. However, studies revealed that due to a lack of opportunities for professional development, teachers are not well-trained to plan, carry out, and effectively implement innovative assessment strategies (Arrafii & Suadiyatno, 2024). Implementing differentiated assessment strategies in the classroom may be time-consuming for administrators or teachers. In large classrooms, diverse learners are there, and teachers need to prepare multiple versions of the test, provide feedback, and monitor everyone's progress, which can be overwhelming for teachers who have multiple duties or responsibilities (Mapepa & Magano, 2018). Some studies showed that implementing differentiated assessment strategies in the classroom is complex in planning and execution. It is difficult for teachers to prepare or adapt curriculum elements to meet the diverse needs of students, especially in the domains of assessment where teachers align these elements with student's needs and characteristics (Gaitas & Martins, 2017). Resistance to adopting a new approach is one of the constrain or challenges to effectively implementing differentiated assessment strategies. Some studies revealed that educators are deeply ingrained or influenced by traditional evaluation methods or one-size-fits-all methods, which create resistance to adopting new assessment methods (Jager, 2013). Teachers' self-efficacy and constructivist beliefs are necessary for effectively implementing differentiated assessment strategies. Teachers with low self-efficacy are not likely to implement these innovative assessment strategies in the classroom (Suprayogi et al., 2017).

All the above challenges can be mitigated and require a multi-faced approach. One of the major requirements is to provide teachers training that enhances their knowledge, skill, and professional development, which helps to implement differentiated assessment strategies effectively (Gaitas & Martins, 2017). Providing adequate resources and infrastructure is crucial to implement these innovative strategies successfully. Collaboration between stakeholders like educators and administrators can facilitate the adoption of new changes and ensure a supportive environment to implement these

changes successfully (Arrafii & Suadiyatno, 2024). Therefore, with all these strategies, we can overcome the challenges of implementing differentiated assessment strategies successfully in the classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

Assessment should never be seen as separate from instruction because it is an integral element of the teaching-learning process (Noman & Kaur, 2020). 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 to 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 adopt their instructions appropriately to provide flexibility to learn 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 study explores teachers' beliefs towards the implementation of differentiated assessment in the classroom. 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.

The study explores teachers' beliefs towards implementing differentiated assessment in the classroom. The study finds out that there are some challenges presents before implementing differentiated assessment, which are pedagogical practices, instructional approaches, and institutional adaptation (Ali, 2015). The study suggests some strategies for implementing differentiated assessments that are fair for diverse classrooms. Moreover, teacher training, size of the class, assessment and providing feedback to students on time, regularly monitoring progress from the previous one, considering the smaller size of the class, group tasks, avoiding centralized exam system, flexible with time, support, and resources to accomplish their task (Ali, 2015). However, teachers offer extra time to diverse learners in the exams to encourage learners to accomplish their tasks without feeling the burden of time limitation, resulting in teachers' difficulty staying more in the classroom while assessing diverse learners. Therefore, the teacher may discuss the assessment procedure with the administration and reframe the examination pattern and time schedule according to the diverse needs of the learners. While using the differentiated assessment approach, teachers should manage the time schedule for diverse learners. They may allow extra time or support before the scheduled time. Therefore, learners could finish their tasks.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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