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Human Rights and Equity in Teaching

Mary Koutselini and Sofia Agathangelou
University of Cyprus (Cyprus)

Abstract

This paper describes an action research study on differentiated instruction as a means of equity as praxis in mixed ability classrooms. The emphasis is placed on students' voices which are crucial for understanding the difference between equal opportunities and equity in praxis. Fifteen students of the first grade of a Cypriot Gymnasium and four teachers participated in the three-month participatory intervention, in which a three-phase differentiated instruction in Maths was implemented, along with discussion in focus groups with the participants. The results indicate that differentiation is not only an organizational and instructional strategy, but importantly a social process. Teachers cannot differentiate students' performance if they do not employ simultaneously to differentiated instruction processes for image construction and emancipation, which could balance the social inequalities of students.

Theoretical Background

The concept of social justice

The concept of social justice results from different ideologies and educational philosophy and finds different applications in educational policy. Social justice as equality of opportunities is usually referred to as the opportunities that are given to all for education, without exclusion of study and discriminations and it is identified as a rule with enactments for free education, obligatory education, education for all without taking into consideration factors outside the school, i.e., national origin, gender, socio-economic level. Enacted equality of opportunities is founded on the basic principle of equality as is expressed in statements of human rights. In this form, equality extends beyond the school seeking structural changes in society declaring that without them the school is not in position to improve students' achievement and competences and promote them socially. Beyond the quantitative legislated measures, it invests in qualitative improvements in the education and interaction with their social environment for the emancipation of individual as responsible member of a social team and the society.

The concept of differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction constitutes a means of respecting students' human right of equity in mixed ability classrooms and it is one of the most crucial issues not only in educational theory but also in educational praxis. It is generally accepted that in most of the countries, teaching as praxis still remains predominantly an effort to transmit and transfer knowledge to classrooms that are considered to comprise an undifferentiated, homogeneous population. In this context the problem of undifferentiated teaching and learning becomes crucial provided that a too large a number of students are unable to learn what is being "taught", and that the majority of what is called 'problematic' students concern students with learning problems without the parallel existence of mental retardation. Thus, we are faced with a diachronic problem still begging to be addressed: *teachers "teach" but students do not learn.*

Different educational theories propose different principles and procedures for the investigation of the phenomenon and the concept of differentiated instruction. The results-based curriculum theory considers differentiation as a school- and classroom- based policy, according to which appropriate teaching provisions and material within the classroom can improve students' performance. According to this approach differentiated instruction emphasises change of teaching procedures by taking in account the different learning modalities, interests, pace, skills, knowledge and attitudes, of different students. The deficiency of the results-based educational and curriculum theory is the fact that does not consider the different biographies and view of life of students in mixed ability classrooms.

The theoretical framework of differentiated instruction is based on the premise that no single theory can provide an adequate foundation for educational practice. Thus, differentiated instructional process is considered both as a reflective action that "follows the pedagogic good in a caring situation" (Aoki, 1992, p. 21) and as a socio-cultural construction of useful knowledge. Habermas' work (1972) on emancipation, which helps students understand their personhood as being-in-the world and thus empowers and enhances their understanding of learning processes, cognitive and meta-cognitive

strategies. Differentiated instruction is one of the implications of a meta-modern paradigm of curriculum for teaching and learning (Koutselini, 1997b). Critical pedagogy and contextualized conceptual change supplement the epistemological foundation of a non- technically differentiated classroom. Contextualisation of teaching and learning experiences in the social, cultural and political framework of both, teachers and students, provides a non technical paradigm of differentiated instruction, which contributes to a realisation of equality in education policy (Koutselini, 2008).

Tomlinson's (1995; 1999) work on differentiation in mixed ability classes as well as research and publications of the British National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) are considered to have originated a succession of issues of practical application. Nevertheless, consideration of the person's (teacher's and student's) involvement –and their resistance to pre –defined procedures is crucial for understanding why suggestions for effective differentiated instruction did not have the expected implementation.

In the differentiated classroom, the difference has nothing to do with either weakness or excellence. In the framework of equal opportunities in education, the difference points at the degree to which the educational opportunities are suitable for the development of those specific individuals. Thus, one of the assumptions underlying differentiated instruction is that "at each and every point in development, further progress depends upon the interaction between the current state and the environmental input which is itself constrained by the current state" (Moore, 1996, p. 613). The other important assumption for differentiated learning is that the curriculum and instruction experienced by the students, is the vehicle through which the opportunities created by instruction are transformed to real learning in their social environment, families, labour market, everyday interactions outside the school. In this context, students' voices are crucial for understanding the difference between equal opportunities and equity in praxis.

2. Methodology

Based on the basic assumption of the research concerning the crucial role of student experience of curriculum and equity in praxis, participatory investigation of students' understanding of equity and teaching took place. This paper presents the results of a qualitative study aiming to give voice to first grade Gymnasium students' in mixed ability classrooms. The qualitative results presented here derive from a three month long action research study on differentiated instruction in Maths in a mixed ability classroom. The emphasis in this paper is placed on presuppositions, procedures and considerations derived from students' reflections on their experiences and considerations. During these months, 3 meetings and discussion with the students, 10 meetings with the teachers and 3 meetings with the parents took place. Participants of the study were 15 students of the first grade of Gymnasium and 4 teachers. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of differentiation of instruction and critical pedagogy, a three-phase differentiated instruction was proposed and implemented.

3. Results

Proposal for the construction of differentiated instruction
As a result of our study, we propose that the construction of differentiated lessons should be based on three phases: The academic phase, the social phase and the teaching phase. For reflective teaching elements of the three phases could co-exist.

1. Phase 1. The academic phase - Teacher preparation and reflection

Differentiation in action
It is worth noting that in order to avoid a strictly technical paradigm of teaching, action research and reflections during cooperative learning must be engaged and enhanced by discourse and practice.

Trying out and expanding through actual implementation Strading's and Saunders' (1993) proposal on kinds of differentiation, various kinds of differentiation such as the differentiation as to the context of learning, to goal – duty, to outcome, to content, to learning activity, to lesson pacing in class, to feedback, to the degree of difficulty, to learning environment and to the method of teaching and learning can be perceived.

Teachers reflect on the curriculum, material and students's performance and biography trying to answer the question: What do I want students know, do, and feel, as a result of the instruction? Supporting

questions for self reflection can be: What is the basic essential knowledge of my teaching aim today? How this aim is related to students' interests and view of life? What knowledge / skills and strategies / attitudes and dispositions/ ways of thinking are pre-required? What transformational knowledge can possibly emerge? How will the above be realised as objectives and vertically graded activities? How will the activities be horizontally analysed in order to satisfy a variety of ways of thinking and learning styles? Teachers share their thoughts and expectations (aims, objectives and their rationale) with students and challenge them to reflect on them.

The academic differentiation of teaching is founded on the analysis of the undifferentiated lesson of the day/ textbook pages to hierarchies of knowledge (concepts, information, skills – procedures – strategies). These hierarchies contain the basic or essential knowledge of the lesson being taught and those that are prerequisites or previous/ pre-required knowledge, i.e. indispensable as support to the basic ones.

Moreover, as the differentiation is effected not with the sole aim of improving the performance of low achieving pupils with learning difficulties but also with the parallel aim of meeting the needs of pupils who are talented or have knowledge that is more advanced than the curriculum stipulates, we propose that, in addition to the basic and pre-required knowledge, we should introduce transformational knowledge, which goes beyond the requirements of the curriculum and development within the framework of general education.

2. Phase 2. The social phase - a school - family strategic investigation

Students' biographies constitute the basis of all considerations about teaching (Koutselini, 2007). Students' social and family environment, parents' expectations, learning and schooling history underlie students' beliefs and attitudes towards teachers and schools. Thus, time for teachers, parents and students blending provides insights for better understanding of expectations, obstacles and threats in the teaching process.

Formal and informal meetings of students, parents and teachers during events and breaks, debates and group discussions, are included in school strategic planning for differentiated instruction. These meetings aim at providing a shift in how students and their families perceive their status and opportunities in the society and they try to build on the premise that student failure reflects the school failure to provide different opportunities to different students, opportunities that could balance the social inequalities of students.

The academic phase provided answers on how the subject-matter can be handled in a way that gives feedback to students' history of learning. The social phase considers the relationship between the curriculum content and students' life: How this content empowers students and their understanding of selves and society. It is an implementation of a meta- modern (Koutselini, 1997b) critical paradigm of research that advocates the emancipation and empowerment of the participants, researchers and "subjects", in a way that a mutual understanding of their relationship and the relations in the society is gained.

It is important to say that a constant collaboration between school and other institutions (e.g., Ministry of Labour, Services of Social Provisions, Parent organisations) is most necessary for the implementation of the social phase of differentiation, since the improvement of the standards of life of some students is a necessary presupposition for higher expectations, better self-image and performance.

3. Phase 3: The teaching phase

This phase is about the selection of alternative learning processes that enable teachers to teach at the same time different students in the same classroom. Alternative strategies include:

Hierarchies of activities and preparation of individual and cooperative learning in mixed ability groups - Combination of processes

Allowing adequate time for individual work on activities ordered in hierarchies beginning with the pre-required knowledge, the teacher asks the group to discuss and check the activities of the pre-required knowledge, the cooperative aim being to ensure that all the pupils have attained this pre-required knowledge. Other activities on the pre-required knowledge may include methods of brainstorming or

assessment through concept maps. Assignments on concrete and different tasks within the field of the basic –new knowledge appropriate to students' levels follow the diagnostic assessment. When suitably graded materials suitable for all the different cognitive levels and learning preferences have been given out, one of the cooperative methods can be employed (cooperative performance, jigsaw, sandwich method, etc.).

Students' Voices about teaching and Learning

1st cycle of discussion – Before intervention
Before the intervention, students discussed in focus groups the topic of high and low achievement in Maths. The extracts below present the main ideas of the discussion.

- Andreas: *I don´t like Maths, I am not clever enough. I know that, everybody knows that. My teacher does not press me, because he knows that I cannot do the exercises. He leaves me crib; he wants me only to be quiet.*

- Helen: *There are some "good" students, who can do all the exercises; some of them have private lessons because they want to go to University. We, the others, face difficulties, but ...never mind; maybe we will not continue schooling. My father says that is better for me to go to the technical school...I don´t know.*

- Costas: *When my parents come to school, I have big problems; teachers say that I don´t study enough, and that I must study more. It is not true that I do not try enough; but I cannot make my homework.*

- Emily: *I believe that Maths are not difficult, they need more effort, because we have too much content to learn and a lot of problems and exercises to solve. The low achievers do not study enough, they quit if they find difficulties...I don´t blame teachers, because we, the "good" students, are the evidence that they cover the content.*

- Telis: *Why we do not admit that some students cannot understand Maths, with the same way that some others cannot paint, sing, and so on.*

2nd cycle of discussion
We implemented the academic differentiation. The results indicated big differences in the dispositions and interests of students.
Students' voices:
- *I don't want to try so hard. I don't like Maths. Too much effort for nothing.*
- *Why I must try?*
- *I do not see the usefulness of learning so advanced Mathematical Theories.*
- *This is what we needed.*
- *Now everything is much easier.*

3rd cycle of discussion after implementing the social phase
After the intervention students were asked to consider their experience during the differentiated teaching and learning, and to write individually in a one-two pages text their reflections on the above thoughts. Their writings were full of important pedagogical considerations and insights for self-improvement.

- *Now, I feel that I am part of the classroom; I think that my classmates understood that I am not stupid or lazy; maybe I am somehow slower than others, but if somebody helps me I can do it.*
- *This was only an interval; after the intervention nobody will care for the low achievers; or for the two-three who worked in advanced/or creative exercises: when "the lights are switched off", the routine teaching of the textbook pages comes back.*
- *The most important is that my parents were informed about my progress and they knew about the differentiated homework that helped me fills the gap in my knowledge.*
- *Our teacher was ready to provide differentiated material and to see what each of us needed; why does this not happen in the "regular" classroom? What will happen later with the evaluation and assessment? What about the final exams?*

4. Discussion

Differentiation is not only an organisational and instructional strategy, but importantly a social process. A critical approach to schooling, teaching and learning takes in account all the factors and threats outside the school, which affect what happens within the school and the classroom. Thus, differentiation of teaching and learning is not only a strategy but a philosophy of education based on the premise that student failure reflects the school failure to provide different opportunities to different students, opportunities that could balance the social inequalities of students.

Traditionally the process of differentiation has been based on restructuring and adapting one or more elements of the curriculum (aims and objectives, content, procedures, outcomes and evaluation) on the basis of one or more characteristics of the student (readiness, interests, learning style) and it could be presented both, as organisational and pedagogical differentiation. The organizational differentiation supports the pedagogical one, but it is obvious that they cannot result in better achievement without differentiation of both, the expectations of students' and their value system. Teachers may have a big repertoire of teaching methods on the basis of which they differentiate their instruction but they cannot differentiate students' performance if they do not employ simultaneously processes for image construction and emancipation. Such differentiation and the consequent success lead to higher self-esteem, self-awareness and assumption of personal responsibility for the outcomes by the learners themselves, who are supported to interpret and share teachers' intention for learning.

In order for the real needs of students to be diagnosed, it is also necessary to go beyond the traditional diagnostic tests and supplement them with various activities, which will enable teachers to diagnose students' believes about the value of education and schooling, students' ability to exercise skills, student's preferred mode of learning as well as their attitudes – eagerness and concentration in carrying out specific tasks.

In a nutshell, differentiation is the procedure of adapting the learning goals, duties, activities, resources and learning support to the individual needs, learning style, pace, and personal story of each and every student.

The pedagogical context of differentiation and the presuppositions of its implementation

The first pedagogical presupposition for differentiated instruction refers to the necessity for changes in teachers thought and practices. The problem of 'teaching without learning' is not unknown to teachers, but they continue to care more about covering the content rather than about the learning of their students (Koutselini & Persianis, 2000).

To explain this, it is crucial to understand that teacher values and beliefs are socially and historically constructed (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Goodson, 1992). Thus, teachers education and training must not be restricted to content and pedagogy, but must be grounded on understanding of and reflection on the reality outside school, cultural, social, economic, and political. This dimension of teachers' believes has two aspects, the contemporary, which refers to what happens in the society where teachers live and the traditional, that means what the society carries on as tradition (Koutselini, 1997a). As Sadler (1990, p. 60) put it every national system of education is a live body, the result of forgotten struggles and difficulties, which are strongly bound with the state's history. In this context, educational systems with long history on content centred curricula support teachers' adherence to content oriented teaching, and catechistic talk.

Furthermore teacher collaborative contribution, active involvement and reflection on action are considered crucial for curriculum reform and educational change (i.e., Fullan, 1982; Hargreaves, 1994; 1995). The shift from instrumental, linear, algorithmic approaches to curriculum development by experts in technocratic procedures, to a heuristic, reflective, cyclic endeavour of all participants indicates the shift from modernity to meta-modernity (Koutselini, 1997b), a shift that sought – beyond the post-modern critique – to personalize schooling and learning processes.

Too rigid and formal a curriculum de-professionalizes teachers, who are technically controlled, and depersonalises students, who are considered as educational products (Apple, 1979; 1993), usually market oriented. As Michael Apple put it in "Education and Power" (1995) pre-packaged sets of curricular materials and strictly specified activities of students are means of "technical control" (p. 128) upon teachers, means that depersonalize teachers' lives and work. This kind of control is always facilitated by

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the need of teachers for something "practical" to use with their students, attitude that limits the potentiality of resistance to control.

The last but not least important presupposition refers to students. Learning is not an imposed task that must be completed. Rather it is a context bound development of students that means a learning situation that takes in account the biography of each student as it is linked to social environment. Much research has been conducted on teachers' biographies and beliefs, but not enough to students' stories and implicit theories. We consider students' thinking crucial for any learning situation, and especially to processes that presuppose students´ actual involvement, like differentiated learning.

Understanding the formation of identities presupposes understanding of the dynamic relationship between formal, informal, and hidden curriculum, a relationship that leads to the notion that what happens outside schools affects whatever we try to do in schools. Informal curriculum replicates the (un)intentional messages that the societal and/or school structure promotes, while the formal curriculum limits its function and results in the memorization of theoretical principles, i.e., students should understand that all persons in the contemporary society have equal rights: What happens in praxis? How we give students the message that school achievement helps them to improve their status in the society? Does it really happen? Did we, as societies, persuade parents that a better life results from schooling or from early employability, from education or from easy money earning? Do societies invest on education and public schools?

Conclusion

Differentiation of teaching and learning is the today's challenge for teachers to act as curriculum developers in micro-level. However, teachers cannot differentiate students' performance if they do not employ simultaneously to differentiated instruction processes for image construction and emancipation, which could balance the social inequalities of students.

Furthermore as Frye (1997, 319) put it: "However, when changes in theory of mind give children the opportunity to see the intent of teaching and, what, specifically, the other is indicating they should learn, then the problem of cognitive change becomes much less mysterious". Identifying and/or sharing goals are semantic features of teaching and learning.

The swing from teaching-delivering to learning-constructing is theoretically an easy process. In reality, however, it is a continuous process of searching and getting awareness of self and others in the specific cultural context.

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