

Differentiation Through Choice as an Approach to Enhance Inclusive Practice

Differentiation through choice is a pedagogical approach that can enhance the inclusion of all learners without marking any individual as different. It has shown to be a key component of inclusive pedagogy; however, its use appears to be limited in the Irish context. This paper draws on some results from a doctoral study which supported teacher professional learning for inclusive practice. It offers teachers some practical approaches to developing differentiation through choice, in order to meet the needs of all learners, in particular in the context of the new model of special teaching allocation.

Keywords: differentiation through choice, inclusion, inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

Differentiation has been long identified as an important component of inclusive practice, in particular to ensure positive learning outcomes for learners with special educational needs (SEN) (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh and Reid, 2005). However, research in the Irish context indicates that teachers have limited knowledge of a range of differentiation strategies (Travers et al., 2010; Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw, 2015;). The new model of special teaching allocation places an increased onus on teachers to respond to diverse learning needs through appropriate differentiation (DES, 2017). Yet the pilot study of the new model indicated that teachers needed a high level of support for differentiation (DES, 2016). This article draws on findings from a doctoral study to demonstrate how teachers can develop an inclusive approach to differentiation.

INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy refers to the “knowledge and the skills required by teachers to inform the decisions they make about their practice” (Florian and Spratt, 2013, p. 121). Therefore inclusive pedagogy refers to creating inclusive classrooms where all learners are meaningfully engaged in learning, without stigmatising difference (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). In order to enact inclusive pedagogy, teachers need to adopt three key assumptions (Florian, 2014). Firstly, they must reject notions of fixed ability and believe that each individual’s capacity to learn can be developed. This can be challenging given that the system within which we work is dominated by ‘bell-curve’ thinking that focuses on standardised assessment scores. Secondly, teachers need to believe that problems in learning are not within the individual but are teaching dilemmas to solve. This is also a challenge considering the diversity of learning needs in every classroom. Thirdly, teachers must believe in collaboration and commit to working creatively with others to include all learners (Florian). Collaboration in schools can be challenging, for example limited time has been identified as a perennial barrier (Travers et al., 2010). Nonetheless, it is important that teachers and schools persevere in working to overcome such barriers to inclusion. In terms of what inclusive pedagogy looks like in action, there are many approaches that can support the inclusion of all learners without marking any one as different. Differentiation through choice is one such approach. However, inclusive pedagogy is a much more complex concept than differentiation alone. It relates to responding to individual differences between learners in the classroom while avoiding stigmatisation of difference, through a range of methodologies, These include teaching practices which include *all* learners, focusing teaching and learning on what learners *can* do, formative assessment and rejection of ability grouping, providing opportunities for learners to choose (rather than pre-determine) the level at which they engage with lessons and differentiation achieved through choice of activity for everyone (Florian).

DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH CHOICE

When overt teacher-led differentiation strategies are used, such as differentiated tasks based on the teacher’s perception of the learner’s ability, learner differences can be stigmatised. In contrast, offering the same options to all in the classroom means that no learner is identified as ‘different’ (Florian, 2014). Differentiation through choice can develop trust between teacher and learner, as the learner is provided with an opportunity to take responsibility for his or her own learning. It can also enhance motivation as there is a degree of control designated to the learner




“which contributes to self-determination, self-confidence, and empowerment” (Kaufeldt, 2005, pp. 141-142). Furthermore, offering choice includes the voice of the learner which fosters democracy and has shown to have a positive impact on the development of inclusive schools (DuFour and Korinek, 2010; Flynn, 2014). There are a number of ways to offer choice in the classroom, from simply offering choice of resources to learners in a numeracy lesson, to use of choice boards and learning menus. A choice board (Figure 1) is a grid which displays various learning activities. The learner chooses a preferred activity to demonstrate learning on a particular topic.

Figure 1. Choice Board Example: Responding to a Text (Brennan, 2017)

Draw your prediction in the Crystal Ball	Draw/write your connection to the story	Use a Y Chart to create images of your favourite part of the story
Put the pictures of the story in order	Talk about the main events of the story with your friend	Create a different cover for the book
Design a character from the story using márla	Act out a scene from the story using puppets	Compose a piece of music to accompany the story

Similarly, a learning menu (Figure 2) displays various tasks, some of which the learner is required to complete, while others are presented as options. A learning menu can be used over a number of days or weeks, where learners engage with their chosen tasks for a period of time within lessons.

Figure 2. Learning Menu Example (Brennan, 2017)

Learning Menu: The Titanic	
	<p>Main Dish (<i>Complete all</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mind map to summarise key points on the Titanic 2. Create a profile of a passenger who could have been on board 3. Complete the fact sheet
	<p>Side Dish (<i>Select 2</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write a short paragraph about what would have happened if the Titanic made it to New York 2. Design a movie strip of what would have happened if the Titanic made it to New York 3. Create a 5 minute role – play with a classmate for a chosen imagined scenario on board
	<p>Dessert (<i>Optional</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write a newspaper article reporting the accident (use the template provided) 2. Create a piece of art 3. Create a rap /poem /song

When designing choice boards or learning menus, various tasks can be presented that suit various learner interests, learning preferences and different stages of readiness (Tomlinson, 2014). When introducing choice, initially learners should only be offered two options. The number of options can then be increased over time. In addition, learners must be familiar with all of the activities offered. As with any new approach in the classroom, time must be spent on supporting learners how to use choice boards or learning menus, for example through explicit teacher modelling on how to make choices. Learners will need time to adjust to choosing tasks that suit their learning preferences and tasks that suit their levels of readiness.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative case study which allowed for detailed description of participant experience in the natural setting (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). This research design was chosen as the study involved interaction between the researcher and the participants in their school context. The sample comprised eight mainstream teachers, who taught in a range of classes from Junior Infants to Fourth Class, the principal and deputy principal, within one mainstream primary school. The participants were invited to take part in a professional learning

community (PLC) which involves a group of professionals who meet regularly to share and critique a particular aspect of practice for improvement (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace and Thomas, 2006). The focus of the PLC in this study was to support teachers to develop inclusive practice over a six-month period. The PLC met once a month for approximately ninety minutes, during which the participants were supported to develop their learning around including learners through differentiation through choice. Participants agreed on actions for each month relating to new practices in the classroom. A resource booklet was provided with templates and ideas relating to differentiation through choice, for example learning menus and choice boards.

Data gathering included field notes from the PLC meetings in a researcher reflexive journal, participant reflective learning logs, observation of practice in the participants' classrooms and participant interviews. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clark, 2006). A theme refers to an important aspect of the data that relates to the research question and illustrates a type of response that follows a pattern within the data. Detailed analysis of the identified themes and sufficient evidence of the presence of such themes enabled the development of a coherent account of the story generated by the data (Braun and Clarke).

FINDINGS

The research findings indicated that all of the class teacher participants (n=8) implemented differentiation through choice in their classrooms to various degrees, with mostly positive outcomes for teaching and learning. Kieran, who taught Senior Infants, indicated a key moment of learning for him relating to differentiation through choice and inclusion. During a lesson which I observed, he used choice centres (similar to using choice boards). Rather than options being displayed on a choice board, the various activities are explained by the teacher. Kieran offered the learners five stations within the classroom, each with supporting materials to respond to their favourite part of a story that had been read aloud. The options included; drawing, writing, use of plasticine, use of a dictaphone, or role-play to re-create their favourite scene. In his interview, Kieran reported that one learner, who had a SEN, particularly surprised him in his display of learning:

It was then I realised that he was listening the whole time, he gets the story, the characters and all that kind of stuff because he made that scene (from plasticine) and he was able to explain everything for me, whereas if I had asked

him to draw a picture he would have scribbled something and I would have thought well I don't know what that is and he wouldn't have been as excited about it (Interview).

As an observer, I could also clearly see evidence of this learning in the learner's description of his favourite scene from the story that he created using plasticine. By offering choice, Kieran had not placed limits on what the learner could achieve which resulted in the learner reaching his potential. Kieran elaborated on the impact of offering choice to this learner:

What has happened then since then is that we realised that it's his confidence that is killing him so we [Kieran and the special education teacher (SET)] tried to find ways that will get him motivated about his work and that was through choice (Interview).

The learner surprised Kieran because he was struggling with reading and writing which were the usual modes used when responding to a story. However, when offered choice, the learner chose his preferred mode of expression and it motivated him to respond to the story in a meaningful way.

Niamh, who was teaching fourth class, created a learning menu (Figure 2) that provided the learners with options for displaying their learning relating to a class novel based on the Titanic. The learners completed the learning menu tasks over a fortnight during lessons in which the SET provided in-class support. Niamh and the SET circulated to support learners while they engaged in their activities. Niamh reported that differentiation by choice had helped her to create a more inclusive classroom:

Just in the last month there is such difference in the classroom environment and in the way they're working. What I've learned as well is really to give them a choice for everything. Just even by giving them choice in what order they want to complete their homework and there aren't as many moans or sighs. They're delighted that they have ownership over their work and control, they're more motivated and the work after using these strategies is of a better quality (Interview).

Niamh reflected that she had previously decided on learner ability in her head and how she realised that she was putting limits on the learners as a result; "Sometimes you think well x's strength is this because you decide in your own head and maybe that is wrong" (Interview).

Emily, who was teaching Third Class, shared her experience of using a choice board (Figure 1) with her class. She reported that one particular learner was reluctant to engage in lessons and appeared to be under achieving due to disinterest and a lack of motivation. This learner chose to compose a rap based on the class novel while another learner chose to compose a piece of music to accompany the rap which was performed for the class. Emily shared the rap with her colleagues in the PLC group as well as work samples from other learners in the class. This provided a stimulus for discussing how choice allowed learners to have control and agency in their learning. This influenced Emily's approach to differentiating her planning and teaching to meet the diverse learning needs in her classroom: "I think it just made me look at that and how I could include more people by giving them that choice or giving everybody the same choices" (Interview).

Like Niamh, Emily found that offering choice provided opportunities for learners to have autonomy over their learning, which subsequently improved motivation. Emily previously explained her prior knowledge of differentiation as the learner: "Doing an easier version or less questions or a worksheet of his own" (Interview).

This reflects the most common approach taken to differentiation (Rose et al., 2015). However, assigning tasks deemed 'easier' can result in learners with SEN following a limited curriculum which may negatively impact their achievement (Tomlinson, 2014) and also mark learners as different from their peers which can negatively impact self-esteem (Florian, 2014). The research findings demonstrate that the teachers' approaches to differentiation had been broadened as a result of their development of choice in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS

Differentiation through choice had mostly positive results for learners at the research site as reported by class teacher participants (n=7) and observed in practice by the researcher. This in turn impacted positively on teacher attitudes and beliefs towards inclusive practice which is key to the development of inclusive schools (Forlin, Sharma and Loreman, 2014). Changes in beliefs and attitudes pertained to the participants moving from the view of inclusion as concerning only learners with SEN, to a broader concept of inclusion that considers all learners. Yet the participants also noted some challenges. Diane, who was teaching Junior Infants displayed a positive stance towards the new practice: "I think it just distinguished for me between differentiation and inclusive differentiation" (Interview).

However, she expressed concern relating to the suitability of choice for all learners. “The boy with Autism, if he has a choice, he can nearly get too fixated on certain things and we’re trying to get him out of his comfort zone so I’m not sure how much it suited him” (Interview).

Diane was trying to move this learner away from becoming fixated on particular activities within the Aistear¹ setting and elsewhere. She felt that choice would be valuable for this learner at a later stage, after some further work on encouraging him to engage in a wider variety of activities. Niall, who taught First Class, faced a similar problem in his own classroom. However, in order to overcome this issue, he had changed the rules regarding choice to prevent a learner with Autism from repeatedly choosing the same option. The learners in his class could only pick the same option twice in the week and this ensured they did not ‘fixate’ on certain activities. This finding demonstrates the importance of teachers being judicious in terms of the range of options that are presented and how choice is used to meet the diversity of learning needs in the class.

Like Diane and Niall, many of the teachers (n=7) in the study reported at least one individual learner who struggled with choice in their classes. Arguably, the learners who had difficulties in engaging in choice needed more time and focused teaching to develop their capabilities for making choices. However, the findings demonstrate that the complexity of needs that confronted teachers could not be addressed by one approach such as differentiation through choice. This highlights the need for teachers to draw on a range of pedagogical approaches that can be adapted to meet diverse needs (Davis and Florian, 2004; Norwich and Lewis, 2007)

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that differentiation through choice can be effective to include all learners in a meaningful way, without marking any one as different. While there are challenges to implementing any new approach, this research shows that offering choice can engage and motivate learners in purposeful and inclusive learning environments. Differentiation through choice is an important pedagogical approach that can be used in all classrooms in many different ways. Therefore, it is particularly relevant in the context of the new model of allocation which aims to develop “truly inclusive schools” (DES, 2017, p. 5).

¹ Aistear is an early childhood curriculum framework which is designed to support the learning and development of children from birth to six years (NCCA, 2009)

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