It is hard to believe that in past precedents a teacher stood out front and taught the entire class the same material in exactly the same way. Everyone was expected to do the same tasks, some passed and some failed and students were labelled based on this. The focus was on teaching, not on learning. One size was supposed to fit all and if you learnt an alternative way; academic success proved hard to master. Time passed and research proved that everyone didn’t learn in the same way after all. The teacher realised that learners have different needs, interests and abilities. Differentiated instruction was thus invented. The teacher prepared different tasks for each group or individual in their class and achieving academic success became a lot easier (Morgan, 2014). Every student is different and has their own individual way in which they learn best, differentiated learning caters for mixed abilities providing the best opportunity for students to learning. Differentiation is all about choice and allowing students to take control of their own learning. Through creating a differentiated classroom environment and applying differentiated assessment teachers are able to accommodate all diverse learning skills.

Differentiation is simply attending to the learning needs of a particular student or small group of students rather than the more typical pattern of teaching the class as though all individuals in it were basically alike. The goal of a differentiated classroom is maximum student growth and individual success (Munro, 2012). Differentiated instruction provides different students with different avenues to learning in terms of processing, constructing, development of ideas, while allowing teachers to developing teaching materials and assessment measures so that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability. A differentiated curriculum is a program of activities that offers a variety of entry points for students who differ in abilities, knowledge and skills (Prior, 2012). In a differentiated curriculum teachers offer different approaches to what students learn, how students learn and
how students demonstrate what they have learned. What students learn refers to the content, this includes both what the teacher plans for students to learn and how the student gains access to the desired knowledge, understanding, and skills. How students learn relates to the process, this is known as an activity or a task that is planned thoroughly for the particular learning ability. Demonstrating what the student has learnt can be referred to the term product. Product demonstrates what the student has come to know, understand, and be able to do as the result of an extended period of study (Scott, 2013).

When applied in the classroom differentiation benefits the students in more ways than one.

A teacher who is differentiating understands their student and is able to responds actively and positively to that need. Applying differentiation to the classroom a teacher will have set high expectations for all students, provide different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products, allow students to choose with the teacher’s guidance, ways to learn and how to demonstrate what they have learned and provide multiple assignments within each unit, tailored for students with differing levels of achievement (Strassman, 2005). It is through these methods that students will highly benefit and improve their learning. Differentiation in the classroom encourages students to be motivated and stay engaged in learning, students enjoy learning and show more interest and motivated which maintain higher energy levels to engage them in the activities. The students need are being met, they are appropriately challenged and feel comfortable learning at their level of ability (Huebner, 2010). Students will experience greater success and feel that the learning is more relevant, they work diligently and the quality of work is improved. Students will feel ownership of the content, process and products, students are given more options about how they could learn the material and demonstrate mastery of the content.
Differentiation not only benefits the students but the teachers as well, they are able to gain new insights and learn a great deal about how their students work and learn allowing them to plan to the individual (Grissom, 2004). Forming mixed ability grouping will help demonstrate differentiated learning benefiting the students and teachers.

Each individual has their own specific strengths and weaknesses, although they vary from student to student the theorist Howard Gardner has categorised them into eight different groups known as multiple intelligences. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences encourages teachers to break from the traditional methods of presenting materials in a manner suited to only logical-mathematical and linguistic learners and to instead present a lesson using methods that will reach all learners. These multiple intelligences include verbal/linguistic which refers to a student who has well developed reading/writing skills and is sensitive to sounds. Logical-Mathematical involves thinking in numbers/abstractly, discerning logical patterns. Visual/spatial intelligence has the student thinking in images and pictures, better at visualization. A student who has bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence will possess great control over body movements and handle objects skilfully. Musical/Rhythmic refers to the student being able to produce and appreciate rhythm, timber and pitch. An Interpersonal intelligence allows the student to detect and respond to other’s moods, motivations and desires. If a student has great self-awareness then they fall under the intrapersonal intelligence. Finally a naturalist intelligence is when a student recognises and categorises plants, animals and other objects in nature. It is through understanding all these intelligences and being able to categorise the students in the class a teachers is able to cater for mixed ability grouping (Smagorinsky, 1995). Mixed ability grouping is for children to benefit by their intellectual and social interaction with other students of their group that have different social behaviour and ability to learn. When the classroom environment is set up to cater for mixed abilities it
allows self-esteem and motivation for students to grow because they feel a lot more comfortable, students develop Mutual respect, support, understanding and tolerance are developed between students, it encourages students to interact with other students creating a wide social mix between classrooms and also creates a sense of community being developed across the school. Differentiation in the classroom is catering for different learning abilities, is through structuring lesson with mixed ability grouping teachers are able to create a classroom environment that caters for all students (Poole, 2008).

Children are especially sensitive to the obvious and subtle behaviours of their teachers in the context of the classroom setting. The classroom environment and setting are powerful elements in the hands of the teacher; they cannot be overlooked. The classroom environment is critical when implementing differentiation into the classroom. A teacher needs to provide an environment that is engaging as well as informative to the students. A differentiated learning environment involves having areas in the classroom where students can work quietly and without distractions as well as places where students can go to collaborate (Bundoc, 2007). Providing materials and resources that reflect variety of different cultures and home settings. Setting out clear guidelines for independent work that matches individual needs, such as writing a success criteria. Developing routines that allow students to get help when teachers are busy with other students and cannot help them immediately. Helping students understand that some learners need to move around to learn, while others do better sitting quietly (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). A teacher must be flexible when implementing differentiation into their classroom; they must be able to move students in and out of groups, based on students’ instructional needs. Flexible grouping allows teachers to work with smaller groups or with individuals, and students are able to work with peers who shared similar interests or abilities. Through this students are provided with a better instructional
match between students and their individual needs. Differentiation involves choice, offering students with lessons that are self-paced, purposeful, content-driven where students can work on independently will allow this. Tasks should be allowed to be done over the course of a unit, grading period, or longer and activities that are meaningful, ongoing, and appropriate to students’ learning needs (Morgan, 2014). Teacher must create this classroom environment to provide the best quality of differentiated instruction where all students are equipped with equal opportunity to learn.

In a differentiated classroom, assessment is an ongoing source of information for the teacher to help plan meaningful learning tasks, establish grouping structures and shape the classroom environment. Assessment supports the learning process by helping teachers identify and begin to distinguish the student strengths and needs (Kamhi, 2009). It is ongoing and responsive, changing over the course of a unit in response to the student’s development. When differentiated learning is applied to classroom students are learning at different rates and in different ways, therefore assessment strategies need to accommodate for the range of diversity whilst still assessing the learning outcomes. It is an ongoing cycle, differentiated instructions leads to differentiated assessment which informs the teacher as to what differentiated instruction needs to be taught next (Wilson, 2009). There are many ways and strategies used to assess a students learning, formative and summative are just two. Formative or assessment for learning is an ongoing assessment that focuses on articulating the learning of individual students, both for the teacher’s and student’s benefit. These strategies are differentiated by nature because they deal with the unique qualities of each student. Summative assessment or assessment of learning is the process of collecting information that will help the teacher assess students achievement at the end of the unit for grading purposes. To differentiate summative assessment teachers must be aware that some students may
choose to vary the way they present the information, such as some may prefer to write, design a poster or present orally (Curtis-Whipple, 2011). Teachers must customise the selection and use of assessment information to reflect each student’s highest level of achievement. When a teacher uses differentiated assessment they are providing students with multiple ways to show their learning which in turn is accelerating their learning journeys.

Differentiated instruction is well organized, well planned and addresses not only different ability levels, but also different needs, interests and strengths of the learners. Differentiation of instruction allows for whole group instruction, heterogeneous small group cooperative work, and individual instruction. It allows the teacher to create student centred learning experiences that focus on varied approaches to content, process, and product. A differentiated environment in the classroom caters for all students and allows them to feel more comfortable in the classroom setting. In addition, it provides for ongoing, embedded, authentic assessment of students' skills, interests and learning style. There is a diversity of learners in every classroom and it is through applying differentiated instruction to this setting that students will excel in their academic studies.
References


Curtis-Whipple, J. (2011). Literacy block: Literacy instruction and differentiation; a qualitative, summative program review. (Order No. 3498283, Northeastern University).


