

## DIFFERENTIATION AS A MEANS TO INCLUSION

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### KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Differentiated Instruction (DI) needs to be included in the education policy with emphasis on mixed-ability grouping and less streaming in same-ability grouping arrangements.
- Exams-free pedagogy needs to be promoted, especially for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- Training needs to be provided to school professionals to learn how to differentiate based on the different elements of DI such as students' interests and learning styles or the content of the curriculum and students' learning outcomes.

### BACKGROUND

This research on DI for students with SEND is timely and significant in light of the current emphasis within the field of inclusive education (IE) to identify the most effective and promising teaching strategies to cater to diverse learners within mainstream classrooms. DI has gained international attention as an approach associated with responsive teaching for the development of inclusive learning environments. As inclusive learning environments, in this study, we consider those in which the use of teaching methods is based on flexibility and variety, and responds adequately to the students' readiness, interests and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001).

### FOCUS OF STUDY

The aim of this study is twofold: (a) to explore how class teachers, Learning Support Teachers (LSTs), and Allied Educators (AEDs) understand the term 'DI' and the factors associated with its implementation, and (b) to describe the types of modifications that class teachers, AEDs and LSTs implement for students with SEND and to evaluate the usefulness of these modifications.

### KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of the participants consider DI as an approach to match the content of teaching to students' readiness but in their classrooms, they mainly use the resources and activities for all students including those with SEND.
- The most important factor hindering the development of DI was the expectation that all students in the mainstream class should learn the same content in order to be ready to sit for the PSLE.
- The most common type of modifications was those based on the delivery of the activities (e.g., more time, use of different language, prompting), whereas other useful types of modifications (e.g., content) were very rarely used.
- The participants noted that the modifications they currently use are not

adequate to respond to the complex needs of students with SEND but due to the current emphasis on PSLE they are struggling to use other types of DI.

- Some participants considered the restricted use of DI as unfair and asked for more support for students with SEND.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

### Implications for practice

Training is needed to respond to the narrow view that school staff has about DI and to promote the development of a variety of modification based on students' interests and learning profiles or the content of the curriculum and students' learning outcomes. Schools need to provide time in meetings to discuss DI and more in-class support from AEDs, and suitable resources from the Ministry of Education to support them in their attempt to differentiate for all students in their classrooms.

### Implications for policy and research

Policy should promote an exams-free pedagogy for students with SEND in primary schools. Research should focus on the identification of the most appropriate assessment methods for students with SEND in mainstream schools.

## Proposed Follow-up Activities

Researchers, policy makers and school staff need to work together on an action research project to identify the necessary policy changes and to design training programmes together in order to improve the delivery of DI for all students including those with SEND.

## PARTICIPANTS

Five teachers, five AEDs (Learning & Behaviour Support [LBS]), one AED (Teaching & Learning [T&L]), and two LSTs (n = 13) participated in the case study. We also analysed 30 lesson plans from the three schools.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

We collected data through case studies in three primary schools using interviews, observations, focus groups and analysis of lesson plans.

## REFERENCES

Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed ability classrooms* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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