

IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATIVE AND DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Abstract

The objective of this action-research-training project was to contribute to the professional development of teachers by fostering collaboration and the planning of teaching/learning situations middle school, and to foster the engagement and success of students with learning difficulties. Supported by a collaborative reflective process, middle school teachers implemented differentiated and collaborative lessons which respected learning paces while promoting interactions among students. Fifteen consultation and co-planning meetings were held over two school years. Twelve teachers, an academic advisor, a special education teacher, two researchers and a research assistant participated in these meetings. Video clips of theoretical elements, supported by research knowledge and collective reflective exchanges, helped to support the implementation of teaching/learning situations. The verbatim of the interviews were analyzed thematically and revealed positive impacts on the professional development of the participants. Middle school teachers learned new teaching devices, implemented differentiated instruction, and enhanced collaboration among their students in the classroom. Analyses also show that these differentiated and collaborative approaches contribute to the success of students with learning difficulties in middle school while promoting their academic engagement and motivation.

Keywords: *Differentiated instruction, collaboration, middle school, special education, special needs.*

1. Introduction

The goal of this action-research-training project was to promote the success of secondary school students, with particular attention to those in junior high school. The collaborative planning of teaching-learning situations looked at group lessons involving interactions and collaborative approaches, combined with elements of pedagogical differentiation. The orientations of the Quebec Education Program and the Special Education Policy emphasize that the Work-Oriented Training Pathway must use pedagogical practices that are planned based on their relevance and effectiveness in meeting the diversified needs of students. These differentiated and collaborative approaches could contribute to the success of secondary school students and maintain their academic engagement and motivation.

2. Conceptual framework

Pedagogical differentiation can be defined as "an approach characterized by the choice and intentional implementation of practices that take into account the specificities of the students and the dynamics of the group, aiming to contribute to their academic success" (freely translated from Moldoveanu, Grenier & Steichen, 2016, p. 762). Perrenoud (1997) proposes greater fluidity in the organization and planning of school progression to favour interactive regulation by offering students differentiated learning situations rather than stabilizing groups/levels (Meirieu, 1989). Promoting the success of all students requires taking into account the heterogeneity that characterizes any group of students. Thus, pedagogical differentiation appears essential to meet the challenges that some students face in their school career (MELS, 2006).

Although cooperative learning has a similar meaning to collaborative learning, collaboration is a more spontaneous activity in which participants interact freely, and which is primarily aimed at bringing together and empowering participants who perceive themselves as equals whereas collaboration can be defined as a way of working together by making decisions in a shared way to achieve a common goal (Portelance, Pharand & Borges, 2011, in CTREQ, 2018).

3. Research questions

The research questions for this project were: (1) What are the conditions for implementing differentiated and collaborative teaching-learning situations in junior high school? (2) What forms and objects of differentiation have been implemented in the classroom? (3) What impacts have the participating teachers observed on their students?

4. Method

Teachers and school counsellors from three secondary schools in a school service centre located in Quebec, on the outskirts of Montréal, participated in the project. In all, nine teachers, one academic advisor, one special educator, one academic advisor-turned-researcher, one researcher and one research assistant participated in the meetings for this action research. All teachers and professionals taught students with learning difficulties enrolled in a Work-Oriented Training Pathway.

A total of 15 consultation and planning meetings were held over the course of the two-year project. These meetings were held in person or via an online Teams platform, which was also used to store all documents developed and shared by the participants and the research team. Except for the first and last ones, the meetings proceeded as follows: (1) feedback offered to teachers that piloted teaching-learning situations in their classroom; (2) co-planning of differentiated and collaborative teaching-learning situations (3) selection of the theme/topic for the next meeting. At the beginning and at the end of the school year, a semi-directed group interview was used to collect the participants' experience with differentiated instruction as well as the enablers and obstacles encountered in implementing it.

5. Results

Guided by a collaborative reflective approach (Gareau & Dubois, 2022), the participants and researchers worked on identifying the needs, abilities and interests of each student in order to plan and implement an educational differentiation where each student can evolve according to his or her own learning style and pace, within the group and in interaction with each other, using collaborative pedagogical approaches (Sejnost & Thiese, 2010). The action research loops contributed to a continuous, but sometimes iterative, cycle (Guay & Prud'homme, 2018), involving the sharing or development of tools, the co-development of differentiated and collaborative teaching-learning situations that were then implemented in the participating teachers' classrooms. Several participants reported that they learned a great deal from the sharing of their professional experiences. The collaboration was, of course, enhanced for the students, but also between the teachers who came from three different schools (Gareau & Dubé, 2021). Indeed, the meetings via the TEAMS platform allowed for the establishment of a collaborative network that exceeded the expectations of both the researchers and the participants. Collaboration among students was facilitated by planning and implementing it from the beginning of the school year. Some teachers incorporated collaborative activities into their weekly planning, where students were encouraged to interact, discuss and, most importantly, develop skills to collaborate with each other, while respecting and listening to each other. The teachers emphasized that this learning will be invaluable to them in their internships and, eventually, in the job they will be called upon to do in the near future.

6. Discussion

What distinguishes this project from the coaching usually offered to teachers is the systemic vision of the coaching offered and its frequency. In addition, it further puts the academic advisor into action within the co-development group. This allows for a better coaching in a collective reflective practice shared by the different actors and better supports the development of tools. It also ensures a richer collection of data, with a view to developing a more complete and more precise portrait of the abilities and needs, while promoting the professional development (of the competencies) of the teachers who were involved in the project.

It proves important to increase opportunities that foster collaboration and cooperation among students (Prud'homme et al., 2016). Although some teachers may be reluctant because of the behaviour management this may entail (Bergeron et al., 2021), the participating teachers have seen positive impacts on classroom climate. In the current study, instructional flexibility was the most common form of differentiation offered in the classroom, as opposed to a study that interviewed high school teachers who mostly modified tasks or implemented accommodations for students with learning disabilities (Bergeron et al., 2021). Indeed, the teachers who participated in our project offered many choices to their students to complete a task or project in class. As for the objects of differentiation, structures and processes were

most frequently identified in the interviews. In planning differentiated and collaborative teaching-learning situations, students were challenged to work in dyads, teams, and subgroups. The processes were also varied by offering several tools, various pedagogical approaches, and ways of completing the task that allowed for student choice.

There are several reasons for these interesting outcomes. The small number of participants allowed everyone to find a place to express themselves while allowing others to question and feedback on what was said and shared. This encouraged the emergence of findings, theories, and awareness that might not have emerged otherwise and that contributed to their professional development (Gareau, 2018).

7. Conclusion

Collaboration among teachers to plan teaching-learning situations that in turn fostered collaboration among students was tested in this action-research-training project. This resulted in increased engagement and success for the students, who had learning difficulties and were enrolled in a Work-Oriented Training Pathway. Further studies will be needed to explore the potential of collaborative and differentiated teaching-learning situations in junior high school to better engage students and ultimately foster their educational success. Differentiating the tools presented to students, particularly through the use of digital technology to interact with the text in order to better understand it, to write a variety of texts following an iterative writing process, or to carry out learning in collaboration with peers are avenues to be explored in future research (Dubé et al., 2019).

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