Article Review 1: Differentiation in the Music Classroom

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Abstract

“Differentiation in the Music Classroom” was published in the June 2011 edition of the *Music Educators Journal*. The author, Stephanie Standerfer, defines what differentiation is and the benefits there are by incorporating it in music classrooms. Standerfer generalizes the connection between thorough planning and the potential of individual and overall student achievement through differentiation. She provides examples demonstrating how to incorporate differentiation in a variety of music classrooms.

Keywords: music education, curriculum, differentiation, lesson plans, philosophy

Article Review 1: Differentiation in the Music Classroom

Standerfer begins by explaining what differentiation is. With its origination emerging from research by professor Carol Ann Tomlinson at University of Virginia and her philosophy that learning should be structured to meet the students and their individual needs rather than expecting the students to be molded to the curriculum, “differentiation is the recognition of and commitment to plan for student differences” (Standerfer, p. 43). A classroom that incorporates a variety of tools and activities to acquire, process, and develop learning is a differentiated classroom.

According to Standerfer, differentiation is not instruction for each individual student, thus it does not require multiple lesson plans. Differentiation is when teachers group students within a classroom according to shared levels of knowledge and understanding. Organizing students into groups makes it easier to meet the needs of all students, create appropriate learning challenges, and increase student growth and overall success.

Differentiation was conceived through ideas of curriculum that are not music related. Because of this, Standerfer mentions there are certain assumptions we can have if and when our administrators ask us to implement differentiation into our teaching. The assumptions she listed include that our administrators believe we are both musicians and teachers, that there is a plan for content and assessment, that each piece of music we choose has a specific purpose in reinforcing skills we want students to learn, and that the goal for all we teach is to advance musical understanding for all students. She makes note that in order to apply differentiation in music instruction we must first have a philosophy of music education that will support these ideas.

Standerfer shares the benefit of differentiated instruction. The benefit is the opportunity for students at all levels of knowledge and understanding to experience challenges that are appropriate for them. In order for this to happen teachers must recognize that students process new information differently and that their interests can vary greatly. She provides examples of how teachers already differentiate in their music classrooms without realizing it. Students auditioning for chair placement within an instrumental ensemble is an example of differentiation.

There are three elements of instruction that can be differentiated. These elements are content, process and product. Content is what students are to learn and the means by which they will learn it. Process involves the activities created to allow practice and application of what is learned. Product is when students demonstrate what they learned. Standerfer explores each of these elements further by providing examples of how to differentiate them within any level, age, or type of music classroom. She says that there are three ways to differentiate content, process and product. The three ways are the students’ readiness levels, learning profiles, and personal interests.

Standerfer explains each of the levels briefly before giving examples of each. The readiness level examines how the levels of ability vary from student to student. Much of what is examined in the readiness level includes reading of text and notation, movement, improvising, and playing of musical instruments. Learning profiles explore the preferences of students for processing information given to them. She mentions that teachers can observe learning profiles through means of how students can audiate, visualize and react. Interests include any hobbies or goals that may lead to increased motivation and curiosity in learning, connecting what the students are interested in to music.

Differentiation begins with assessment. According to Standerfer, student readiness levels, profiles and interests must be determined through a process of preassessment. This will aid in placing the students into groups. It is important to note that not all classes are the same, so it is not accurate to assume that each 3rd grade class will have the same results in their assessments and can be grouped the same. When determining readiness levels, she suggests using discussion for younger students, whereas older students would benefit from taking a written test and/or performing. There are also learning preference surveys that determine profiles. Standerfer mentions Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences as well as learning inventories by Diane Healow. Determining the interests of students is as simple as asking them about what they like and enjoy doing.

The next step in implementing differentiation is using the results of the preassessments to form methods and assessments to match the students’ needs. Standerfer lists three questions to consider:

1. What are the characteristics of students in this class regarding readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles?
2. Which elements of this lesson are important for each student: content, processes, or products?
3. What elements of this lesson are most flexible: content, process, or product (Standerfer, p. 47)?

She explains that differentiation happens when student needs and lessons to meet those needs are aligned. She stresses that creativity is necessary in order to design student experiences that are meaningful and successful in fostering deeper musical understanding. She adds that there is not a one size fits all activity. Most activities need some modification to fit the needs of the students. In order to determine differentiation of content, processes, and products, careful planning must take place and teachers must consider readiness levels, profiles and interests of the students.

Standerfer closes by saying differentiation is student centered. Teaching becomes focused on the needs of each student rather than expecting all students to conform to the curriculum. Teachers need to make modifications so student needs are met and the level of learning is deepened. Differentiation includes a philosophy that encourages instruction to be determined by student needs.

This article is well written and highly informative. The author provides us with a brief origination of the subject and follows a clear and easy to follow outline in her presentation of the information. She gives us a simple definition of the term, differentiation, and states reasons why the implementation of differentiation would be beneficial to meeting the needs of students in any kind of music classroom. She also takes a moment to describe what differentiation is not – it is not instruction for each individual and does not require several lessons for each objective being taught.

The author provides several practical examples of how differentiation could work in the music classroom. These examples show applications for K-12 general music, choral and instrumental music classrooms. They also clearly demonstrate the process of differentiation – starting with a process of preassessment, the elements of instruction (content, process, product), and how those levels can be differentiated (readiness levels, learning profiles, and interests). In addition to examples of practical application, the author provides a few resources that will work well for determining learning profiles.

There were two discrepancies I found with this article. The first discrepancy was in the list of assumptions administrators may have when they ask music teachers to differentiate in their classrooms. I disagree that administrators make the connection that music teachers are musicians and teachers. I would like to think that administrators assume we have a plan for what is being taught even though many do not seem to understand what needs to take place within a music classroom. I disagree with the assumption, also, that administrators believe the goal for each piece of music we teach is to further any musical understanding in our students. It seems to me that music learning is seen for performance purposes only.

The second discrepancy I noticed is in the author’s mentioning of plural ‘benefits’ of differentiated instruction. I am uncertain how to distinguish more than one benefit in this article. I can make assumptions about what benefits there are, but the author clearly lists one benefit – that learners who struggle, learners who are advanced and learners in the middle benefit from appropriate level of challenges. My understanding of the article is that everything leads to the benefit of greater understanding for all students when students are placed at the center of learning. The author clearly explains everything in the article but I am left wondering what she identifies all the benefits of differentiation to be.

I recommend this article to all music educators. It is easy to read and there are some very practical examples of what differentiation is and how to incorporate it in our classrooms. I believe differentiation is a very important consideration in our philosophy of music education as well as our ongoing development of music curriculum in our schools.

References

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