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Teachers' assessment practices for classroom diversity

Abstract:

Classrooms nowadays are exemplified by student diversity. Students may differ in, for example, motivation, learning style, aptitude, cultural background, social economic states, and past learning experience. As students' learning needs are becoming increasingly diverse, a new challenge is to look for ways that address their needs. Assessment is one useful way to help teachers deal with classroom diversity. Teachers can use assessment strategies to identify different learning needs and to improve teaching and learning. This subsequently leads to a consideration of two critical issues with the first one being how teachers can plausibly identify classroom diversity and the second being how useful are the assessment strategies they use to cater for the identified diversity. This paper presents and discusses the findings of an investigation into the assessment strategies that teachers used to identify classroom diversity and the assessment strategies teachers used to deal with the identified diversity. About one hundred Hong Kong teachers were interviewed, revealing that the teachers used a number of assessment strategies to assist them in understanding students' diverse needs and that the teachers seemed to be more interested in identifying those students who needed help academically rather than in their needs in the social and affective domains.

Teachers' assessment practices for classroom diversity

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Introduction

Diversity has drawn a great deal of attention in the education sectors especially in recent years. Ruddell (2005, p. 360), points out that more and more schools contain students representing diverse needs. Diversity can broadly include race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and cultural background. In the classroom, diversity may manifest itself in many other ways. Classrooms nowadays face many challenges on several fronts and dealing with classroom diversity is certainly one of them. Students may differ in motivation, learning style, learning strategies, aptitude, cultural background, social economic states, and past learning experience. Gunzenhauser (1996, p.4) says, on the cognitive plane, students range in intellectual capacity, process capacity, and learning orientation. Along the emotional/behaviour plane, students could differ in the degree of maturity, conformity, self-esteem, and motivation. When extending further to the social plane, the differences might include various social dimensions such as family issues or social engagement preferences. As student learning needs are being recognised, a new challenge is to look for ways that address their needs. This paper argues that assessment is one useful way to help teachers deal with classroom diversity. Teachers could use assessment to size up diversity in the classroom and use assessment strategies to cater for classroom diversity.

Sizing up diversity in the classroom

Every class has its distinctive characteristics of diversity, demonstrated by a different mix of, for example, personalities, interests, learning styles, abilities. All these compositions make each class unlike any other class. Airasian (2005) says that it is essential to "size up" the characteristics of each pupil and the class as a whole so that the teacher will have some basis to group, teach, motivate, manage, and reward students. Airasian warns that "If sizing-up assessment is not done well, a disorganized, disruptive, unresponsive classroom environment results, in which communication and learning are inhibited."

Assessment for sizing-up purpose can be conducted formally or informally, usually with two specific focuses - academic capabilities as well as social and personal qualities. Teachers are in fact reasonably accurate judges of students' academic performance as measured by test scores (Airasian 2005; Alexander 1993; Kellaghan, Madaus, & Airasian 1982). However, according to Airasian (2005), they are less accurate in sizing up students' social and personal qualities such as motivation, interest, self-concept, and social adjustment. The studies conducted by Hawkes (1971) and Jenkins (1972) indicated that the accuracy of teachers' affective and social perceptions of their students was lower than their perceptions of students' cognitive and academic characteristics.

School records are a good source for beginning the sizing-up activities. Not only do school records contain students' background information, they may also have teachers' comments and records of special incidences. Referring to these can give teachers insights into students' abilities, academic performance, attributes, and home situation. One other common way to understand students' performance is through a "hearsay" approach. Teachers collect information through talking to other teachers or someone who knows the students. The danger of the mentioned methods is that teachers could prejudge the students based on their experience or the perceptions of others, which could be invalid or biased. For this reason, some teachers prefer to get to know students by meeting them with no preconception of the students in mind. To get the benefits of both worlds, teachers could meet the students first and then refer back to the school records and/or confirm their understanding with people who know the students by person.

Observation is a powerful means to help teachers in the sizing-up activities, in particular the social and personal qualities of students. Angelo & Cross (1993) say that through close observation of students in the process of learning, classroom teachers can learn much about how students learn (p.3). Kuhs, Johnson, Agruso & Mnrad (2001, p.8-9) point out that classroom observation provides the teacher with important information that can be used to:

- Record development progress for each students
- Evaluate each students' strengths and limitations
- Analyse specific problems
- Plan appropriate curriculum and instruction based on each student's needs
- Compile student records for study teams, conferences, and ongoing feedback to parents

- Improve teacher practices

Observation can be conducted through formal or informal means, for example, through meeting the students and/or observing students' behaviours in class. To make it particularly useful for the sizing-up assessment, observation should have a specific focus or a number of specific focuses. Focuses could be as detailed as, for example, student willingness to ask questions, student attention, initiates conversation with peers or shares material willingly, as in a checklist. Teachers can use rating scales and anecdotal records as well to help with a systematic observation procedures. In addition to the above mentioned commonly used strategies, teachers could use any other methods to help them with understanding the diversity of a particular class.

Assessment strategies to cater for classroom diversity

Students are unique in nature. Valencia (1997) says that 'Including a variety of types of assessments will ensure that students are provided with ample opportunities to demonstrate their abilities and that teachers have the information they need to construct a complete, balanced assessment of each student.' For example, DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho (2005, p.58-59) used a 'synthesis of knowledge' project to transcend the traditional evaluation of course content (i.e. paper and pencil test). They found that the project allowed students to utilize their individual learning styles which they came to realize were strengths. Cho & Forde (2002, p.10) suggest that assessment should incorporate performance-based methods. They carry on to say that assessment must be qualitative as well as quantitative and that assessment methods must respond to students' different learning style preferences. In addition to conventional assessment methods, they recommend the use of portfolios, group and individual projects, interviews and oral presentations, experiential and applied student work, and journals and other reflective formats.

There are certainly other forms of assessment strategies which could be used for providing individualized learning experiences. Carless (1999) suggests to use supplementary work-cards, graded worksheets, and individualized questioning. Brimijoin, Marquissee & Tomlinson (2003, p.71-72) give an example of how a teacher used assessment to help her differentiate instructions to cater for the different needs of her students. To make sure that the students were appropriately challenged, she used paper-and-pencil or performance-based formative assessments, including objective tests, or quizzes, essays, and open-ended problems, varying the type according to the content being studied. She used questioning and observation to

differentiate instruction and ensure that her instruction was a good match for the varied needs of her students. She adjusted questions or performance tasks to be more structured for those who were struggling with a concept and more abstract for those who had mastered the concept. Rather than seeing assessment as an end-of-lesson or end-of-unit phenomenon, the teacher incorporated it at the beginning, at the end, and everywhere in between.

The assessment strategies reported above are by no means exhaustive. To cater for diverse needs, assessment should be made more flexible. Consideration should be given to the diverse range of, for example, abilities, social identities and experiences of their students. Making use of a wide range of assessment strategies can certainly allow a truer reflection of students' abilities.

The Study

As with many other education contexts, Hong Kong classrooms are getting more diverse in nature. Kennedy (2005, p.208) "Diversity is now a reality in Hong Kong generally and in many schools." This paper reports on an investigation into the assessment strategies that teachers used to identify classroom diversity and the assessment strategies teachers used to deal with the identified diversity. About one hundred Hong Kong teachers from three secondary and six primary schools were interviewed. In the interviews, teachers were asked to talk about the strategies they used to assess students and how they used the assessment strategies to cater for the diverse needs of their students.

To identify students' needs, the teachers in the interviews mentioned thirteen kinds of assessment strategies. The most mentioned ones included observation (N=13, 13.8%), homework (N=13, 13.8%), test and exam (N=13, 13.8%) and questioning (N=7, 7.4%). These are followed by question and answer, class work, dictation, presentation, class activities, group discussion, marks, quizzes, school meetings.

Teachers seemed to be more interested in identifying those students who needed help academically (N=61, 64.9%). The teachers mentioned using a number of assessment strategies for these students, including dictation, experiment, group discussion, homework, question and answer, quizzes, skill performance, tests & exams, and worksheets. They also mentioned a number of teaching strategies to go with these strategies, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment strategies for academically weak students

Assessment strategies	No. of teachers mentioned using the strategies
Dictation	
Lenient marking	5 (5.3%)
Shorter passage to dictate	2 (2.1%)
Drilling students	2 (2.1%)
Requiring same content as others	2 (2.1%)
Adjusting the dictation format	1 (1.1%)
Having lenient requirement	1 (1.1%)
Offering help	1 (1.1%)
Experiment	
Offering help	1 (1.1%)
paying more attention to students	1 (1.1%)
Group discussion	
Offering help	1 (1.1%)
Homework	
Offering help	2 (2.1%)
Having lenient requirement	1 (1.1%)
Providing less homework	1 (1.1%)
Q & A	
Asking simpler questions	1 (1.1%)
Quiz	
Adjusting to fit their level	2 (2.1%)
Having tailor-made quiz	2 (2.1%)
Offering help	2 (2.1%)
Drilling students	1 (1.1%)
Skill performance	
Having lenient standard	1 (1.1%)
Test and exam	
Requiring same content as others	8 (8.5%)
Reading aloud the question	4 (4.3%)
Drilling students	2 (2.1%)
Requiring re-test	2 (2.1%)
Designing simpler exam paper	1 (1.1%)
Having lenient marking	1 (1.1%)
Having lenient requirement	1 (1.1%)
Having tailor-made paper	1 (1.1%)
Offering help	1 (1.1%)
Providing tips	1 (1.1%)
Worksheet	
Providing simpler worksheet	2 (2.1%)
Having difficulty in various degrees	1 (1.1%)
In general	
Offering help	27 (28.7%)
Organizing enhancement class	13 (13.8%)
No specific treatment	7 (7.4%)
Arousing their attention in class	6 (6.4%)
Providing encouragement	6 (6.4%)
Lowering the expectation	4 (4.3%)
Paying more attention to students	4 (4.3%)
Having lenient marking	3 (3.2%)
Informing parents	3 (3.2%)
Providing extra work	3 (3.2%)
Providing simpler assessment	3 (3.2%)
Adjusting the assessment standard	2 (2.1%)
Drilling students	2 (2.1%)
Building up confidence	1 (1.1%)
Requiring detention	1 (1.1%)
Slowing down teaching pace	1 (1.1%)

In addition, 10 teachers reported using some assessment strategies for the academically strong students. These teachers gave these students more challenging work to do such as more difficult worksheets or tasks. There were a few mentionings of the affective, behavioural, cultural, and gender needs of the students. Three teachers said that, for the shy, quiet, or stressed-out students, they would give them encouragement and would take a more directive role to help them out. There were 3 comments on students' behavioural problems. The teachers said that they would order detention and get these students to do extra work. For those who were culturally disadvantaged, the 2 teachers reported that they would adjust the level of challenge of the test paper for them. Gender did not seem to be an issue in the teachers' mind. Amongst the interviewees, only one teacher thought that gender could be an issue of classroom diversity. No suggestion, however, was made to cater for the different needs between boys and girls.

Conclusion

It was revealed that teachers overwhelmingly referred to academically weak students when asked about how they addressed the diverse needs of students. No doubt, it is important to address students' different needs on the cognitive dimension because these students may need more help to meet the academic challenges. There are however other needs which also warrant attention. Students could differ tremendously in the affective and social dimensions, which may directly or indirectly impact on students' academic performances. More thoughts should be given to how to identify the needs regarding all three dimensions in particularly those related to students' social and personal qualities. More thoughts should also be given to how assessment strategies can be used more flexibly to address the diversity identified.

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