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Ionian University, Greece
Gena Greher,
University of Massachusetts Lowell,
United States

*CORRESPONDENCE

Natassa Economidou Stavrou
✉ economidou.n@unic.ac.cy

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Embracing diversity through differentiated instruction in music education

Natassa Economidou Stavrou*

School of Education, University of Nicosia, Nicosia, Cyprus

The article discusses the importance of differentiated instruction in music teaching and learning, emphasizing its role in fostering inclusivity and meeting the diverse needs of students. Drawing from personal teaching experiences, the author highlights how traditional, uniform teaching methods often neglect students' varied readiness levels, learning profiles, and interests. Differentiated instruction, as conceptualized by Tomlinson, is presented as a proactive and flexible approach that tailors content, processes, products, and learning environments to cater to individual student needs. The article demystifies several myths about differentiation and discusses practical music classroom scenarios, illustrating how differentiation can address real-world challenges faced by music teachers. The conclusion advocates for the implementation of differentiated instruction as a non-negotiable, essential practice in music education, urging teacher educators to prepare future music teachers to engage every student meaningfully. The approach ensures a democratic and supportive music classroom where each student's potential is recognized, nurtured, and celebrated.

KEYWORDS

differentiation in music education, differentiated instruction, access to music education, student-centered music education, every student matters, diversity, music education for all

Introduction

When I first began teaching music pedagogy courses to pre-service generalist teachers, 25 years ago, I experienced an event that profoundly shifted my perspective on teaching and learning. One of the assignments I had given my students was to prepare a simple orchestration of a children's song, following the guidelines I had taught in class—steady beat, rhythm, strong beat, rhythmic and melodic ostinato, and bordun. On the day the assignments were due, a student approached me with something unexpected. Instead of handing in a written assignment like everyone else, he gave me a CD. Surprised, I asked why he hadn't followed the instructions. He calmly explained that he had orchestrated the song "Our Beloved Grandma" for a full symphonic orchestra, and his work could be heard on the CD.

This moment was transformative for me. It forced me to confront a hard truth: I didn't truly know my students or understand their unique abilities. This student, a gifted violinist, had far exceeded the expectations of the given assignment. I realized then that I had been too rigid, assigning the same task to everyone, assuming a one-size-fits-all approach would work. I had been teaching to the middle, not considering the diverse readiness levels

in my university classroom. I also failed to provide challenging and engaging tasks for all the students.

This student didn't just meet the assignment's requirements—he redefined them. His initiative and creativity made me question my practices deeply. He showed me that differentiation isn't just something teachers can implement; it's something students will seek out for themselves when given the opportunity. This incident left an indelible mark on my teaching philosophy, reminding me of the power of flexibility and the importance of truly knowing and challenging each one of my students. And at that time, I had never heard about the term differentiation. It was a need that emerged from practice.

Differentiated instruction- setting the terrain

In the dynamic environment of a music classroom, the diversity of students extends far beyond their shared age. Every child possesses a unique profile that is distinctively their own. It could be argued that their age is the only commonality among students within the same music classroom. In all other aspects, students differ significantly, including talents, nationality, language, readiness, socio-economic background, family circumstances, experiences, gender, learning styles, educational needs, intelligence, areas of deficiency, preferences, personality traits, health status, culture, skills, and the list is endless. And this diversity appears to be now more evident than ever before. Upon entering today's music classroom of 25 children for the first time, it can be challenging to recognize the differences among these students, as they might appear as a homogenous group of 10- or 15-year-olds to whom we are tasked with teaching Music.

As music teachers, we understand that all our students are equally important, and we strive to provide each of them with the opportunity to engage in meaningful musical experiences. However, it is often noted that the reality within classroom settings can sometimes contradict this principle, as teachers tend to teach primarily to the "average" student. This approach expects all students to grasp new knowledge or skills based on the capabilities associated with their age group, according to developmental psychology and the objectives of National Music Curricula or curriculum frameworks. This mosaic of students' profiles presents music teachers with a significant challenge: how can music lessons resonate with every unique individual? Addressing this challenge requires shifting from the traditional one-size-fits-all approach to a more inclusive one. This article advocates for differentiated instruction as a vital approach to recognizing and nurturing each child's unique musical journey, ensuring that music education is accessible and engaging for every student.

Educational reforms worldwide are increasingly recognizing the need for a more democratic approach to schooling, one that respects and responds to the individual needs of learners. Differentiated instruction, as conceptualized by Tomlinson, embodies this new paradigm. It's not just a teaching strategy but a fundamental shift in educational philosophy (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001). Differentiation means meeting each child at their unique starting point and adapting the teaching objectives, methods, content, and assessment to fit the student. This proactive and

systematic approach acknowledges that effective teaching requires flexibility and responsiveness to the diverse ways students learn and interact with music.

Differentiation, and differentiated instruction, are terms that frequently generate confusion, surrounded by a plethora of myths and misconceptions (Cash, 2017; Valianti and Neophytou, 2017).

Myth 1: Differentiation Equals Individualized Instruction. It's often underlined that differentiated instruction should not be confused with individualized instruction; it does not involve crafting 25 distinct music lesson plans for 25 students. Instead, differentiation involves planning various options for musical activities within the same lesson to cater to different learning needs.

Myth 2: It is so much more work to create all these new educational materials. Teachers are not required to design and develop new materials daily but are encouraged to consider modifying and adapting existing materials through differentiation strategies and techniques to meet their students' diverse requirements.

Myth 3: Differentiation Solely Addresses Learning Profiles. While it's recognized that differentiated instruction indeed caters to various learning profiles, it's not confined solely to this aspect. It's an essential practice but not sufficient in isolation. A comprehensive approach to music education requires more than just understanding and addressing students' varied learning profiles, as students are different in so many other ways.

Myth 4: Differentiation Is Only for the Gifted Children or Those with Difficulties. Contrary to popular belief, differentiation is not just for students at the extremes of the academic spectrum; it is, in fact, for all students. Effective preparation for differentiation means engaging all students, aiming to activate their participation in the educational process and the joint music-making in class, not just focusing on those who may have learning difficulties or those who are musically gifted.

Myth 5: Differentiation Means the Same Exploratory Activities for All. Offering the same exploratory activities to all students, regardless of their readiness level, is a misunderstanding of differentiation. True differentiation involves tailoring activities to match students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, to ensure meaningful engagement.

Myth 6: Differentiation Creates Inequality as not all students work and are assessed in the same way. On the contrary, differentiation aims to bridge educational gaps rather than widen them. Treating students with different needs in the same way leads to inequality. Differentiation seeks to provide everyone with access to learning by acknowledging and responding to the diverse needs of each student. If you ask a monkey to swim or a fish to climb a tree because this is the task for all, this is inequality.

Despite widespread advocacy for differentiated instruction, many teachers, in practice, seem to adhere to a one-size-fits-all curriculum, often using specific textbooks for each grade or specified educational material. This approach to music teaching and learning effectively excludes many students from the learning process and does little to promote equality in music education for children. It is hardly democratic to teach every student the same way, expecting uniform participation, understanding, performance, and enthusiasm from each. The diversity and complexity encountered daily in multicultural, mixed-ability classes can be daunting for teachers, presenting significant challenges.

The question of how to meet the diverse needs of students, with their varied learning profiles and different levels of readiness and interest, is particularly challenging for a music teacher who may encounter 300 different children each week, seeing them only once or, at best, twice. This challenge continues to perplex many music teachers who, struggle to find feasible and practical solutions that allow all children, amidst the multifaceted mosaic of today's classrooms, to access learning.

Would a pediatrician prescribe the same treatment for all their young patients experiencing stomach pain? Similarly, would a psychologist employ identical therapy for every patient suffering from depression, or would a physiotherapist conduct the same exercises for all patients with a broken leg? Drawing a parallel to our field in education, would a foreign language teacher use the same materials and methods for a child fluent in the language due to their mother's heritage and the rest of the class, who might be beginners? This analogy underscores a critical mindset that should underpin our teaching strategies: acknowledging the diversity of our students and striving for instruction that caters to this diversity, thereby ensuring access to learning for all. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, teachers meet each child at their level of development and adapt their methods accordingly. The focus is on teaching our students, not merely delivering content. This is something that many teachers do already as, according to Westman, "differentiation is what happens when teachers focus on students' growth" (2018, p. 15).

Principles of differentiated instruction in the music classroom setting

Differentiated instruction is based on core principles and beliefs that guide teachers in creating inclusive, responsive, and effective teaching environments. Differentiated instruction requires proactive planning based on student diversity. Music teachers plan their teaching to accommodate students' varied needs, addressing the great array of musical experiences, talents, preferences, and interests they bring to the music classroom. Continuous assessment of students' readiness, interests, and progress is crucial for tailoring instruction to meet their current needs. In addition, the teacher should be familiar with the students' music experiences outside school. According to Raponi's Learning Differentiation Music Education Curriculum Theory (LDMET), recognizing each student's unique musical journey and valuing their contributions is essential to creating a thriving classroom ensemble. By embracing this approach, teachers can foster a learning community that celebrates individual growth while working toward collective musical excellence (Raponi, 2023). This idea also aligns with the Community of Musical Practice (CoMP) concept, which fosters an environment where shared learning experiences and flexible roles enable students to engage based on their interests and abilities. Through a CoMP approach, music teachers can build a collaborative community where all students contribute meaningfully, further supporting differentiated learning principles (Kenny, 2016).

In differentiated instruction in Music, all students are involved in interesting, meaningful, respectful, worthwhile,

and appropriately challenging tasks (Hillier, 2011; Economidou Stavrou, 2015). Music teachers employ diverse methods and approaches to honor students' differences in readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Collaborative work is organized through flexible grouping, allowing students to see themselves and their peers in various contexts. Groups can be mixed-ability groups or groups could be created based on student's interests, readiness levels, or friendships. Differentiation aims to extend the learning boundaries for every student, ensuring that musical activities are challenging enough to promote growth. As Friesen (2010) aptly puts it, differentiation fosters raising the floor and lifting the ceiling (Friesen, 2010), offering opportunities for all students to grow and more musically advanced students to thrive.

A study on music enrichment activities for gifted students found that differentiated instruction in activities like "Music in Film" significantly increased student motivation and engagement, especially in the domains of empowerment, interest, and caring (Ismail et al., 2021). This reinforces the need to create learning experiences that are responsive to each student's strengths and needs. Learning is also most effective when it captivates the student's interest and connects to their experiences. The teacher's role extends beyond knowledge transmission to empowering students to become autonomous learners. Adopting differentiated instruction requires a fundamental shift toward more student-centered teaching practices where the student's voice is listened to.

These principles serve as the foundation for differentiated instruction in music teaching and learning, guiding music teachers in their commitment to meeting the diverse needs of their students, and ensuring that each child receives a meaningful and relevant music education.

Discussing scenarios in music teaching and learning in schools

How can we genuinely claim that Music in schools is accessible to all students if our actions do not reflect this belief (Economidou Stavrou, 2015)? Assuming that children of a certain age are similar, and thus capable of identical achievements, understanding, and feelings, overlooks their individuality. Recognizing each student's uniqueness necessitates an instructional approach that begins with their current understanding, adapts to their needs, and allows them to participate at their own pace, rather than conforming to a standardized model (Tomlinson, 1999; Koutselini, 2006; Economidou Stavrou, 2015).

Therefore, the question arises: Is differentiated instruction and learning a pedagogical approach that music teachers may choose to implement when needed in their teaching? Contrary to what might be expected, my answer is "NO." Differentiated instruction is not an option; it is an imperative duty. Without tailoring our teaching strategies to meet the unique needs of each child, how can we facilitate their progress, development, and understanding? Adaptation allows students to access learning in ways that resonate with their abilities to understand, perceive, connect, and apply knowledge. Only through such differentiated approaches can we sincerely advocate the principle that music education is for everyone, aligning our practices with our beliefs.

The scenarios presented below, illustrate common situations encountered in music classrooms across different educational levels, situations that I also met in various instances through my research and supervision roles over the years. I am convinced that these examples may mirror experiences familiar to many music teachers and are often considered standard practice in music education.

Scenario 1:

Christina is a student in the first year of junior high. Unfortunately, in the elementary school she attended, they did not learn to play melodic musical instruments, even though this is something expected from the Music Curriculum. In their music class, they either sang or listened to music because the school did not have a music room, and their teacher had to carry the keyboard and some percussion instruments each time to conduct the lesson. On the other hand, Jeniffer, who came from another elementary school, was taught methodically to play the xylophone and recorder and learned to read music notation. Most of their classmates are somewhere between, meaning they can play a few notes on the recorder, some recognize the notes on the staff, and some mark them below to remember them. In the class, 2 children play the piano, and a girl plays the viola in her afternoon music school orchestra. The music teacher, Mrs. Samantha, gives the notation of the song “Every Breath I Take,” by Sting, and asks the children to play it on the recorder, an instrument that all the children are taught in class. However, she allows those who think they cannot play it to take sticks or another instrument and beat the rhythm or emphasis. Christina, together with some other children in the class, does not bother to try on the recorder and goes, bored, to the box with the percussion to take an instrument from there. Some of her fellow students try to play the piece on the recorder but struggle and at the end, they give up and pick up a percussion instrument. Finally, some children try to play the song, with or without success. Mrs. Samantha reads the notes aloud with rhythm to help the children recognize them. Then they try to play it all together.

Did the teacher act correctly in the scenario above? Did she give all children the opportunity to participate in something interesting, in something worthwhile? What was her goal? Was it achieved by all the children? Could it have been achieved by all the children if the planning had been done differently; what could the teacher have done for all the children to participate in the musical performance activity on a melodic instrument? How could she meet the students at the different starting points they were at so they wouldn't have to end up with a percussion instrument and feel inadequate?

Scenario 2:

Mr. Jonathan is a teacher at a Music School, teaching one-to-one guitar lessons but at the same time, he is responsible for the guitar ensemble with all his students, a total of 4 students, of different levels, learning profiles, and experiences. One of his students is relatively a beginner at the instrument, the second has been taking lessons for 4 years but struggles to play sheet music, the third student is very advanced and for the last 2 years, he has been playing in his town's guitar orchestra. The fourth student has been taking lessons for 3 years but plays only from sheet music and struggles to produce melodies by ear. Mr. Jonathan gives them the score of a very famous Greek composer and asks them to try it, starting from the first page, each on their own first, for 10 min.

Is the activity, as planned, suitable for all the four students? Is it valuable, and interesting? Does it meet all students' needs,

experiences, learning profiles? If not, how could it have been differentiated? Did the teacher give access to learning to all students?

Scenario 3:

Ms. Patricia teaches Music at an elementary school. In today's lesson, she wants to teach her 4th-grade students a passage from Haydn's “Surprise Symphony” to introduce the concepts of dynamics, *p* and *f*, but also to review quarter and eighth notes. She has prepared a worksheet, gives it to the children, and asks them to fill in the blanks while listening to the music. The worksheet focuses on the changes in dynamics, which is evident in the piece, together with the rhythmical elements of the main theme, and asks the children to answer the related questions.

What do you think of the above design for the listening activity? Is there anything that concerns you in the description above? Is there an opportunity for the children to get to know and understand the piece through multiple pathways? Or have the decisions on how the children should listen to this specific piece been pre-decided by the teacher, and they just follow the pre-determined path, without room for alternative proposals or surprises? Could Ms. Patricia enrich the activity to engage children with more types of intelligence before focusing on the musical concepts she wanted to focus on? Could she have asked them to respond to music in more ways?

The analysis and reflection on these scenarios serve as a call to action for us, as music teachers to embrace differentiated instruction as a foundational aspect of our teaching philosophy. It challenges the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach and advocates for a more inclusive, responsive, and student-centered pedagogy in music education.

Investigating possibilities and challenges in differentiating instruction in music teaching and learning

Differentiated instruction encourages us to attempt to intervene and modify important pillars of the educational process, such as the content, the process, the product, or the learning environment, according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson and Imbeau, 2010; Westman, 2018). Practically, differentiation in music education manifests in various ways and differentiated instruction often involves more than 1 pillar, and it is difficult to separate them (Economidou Stavrou, 2015).

Content

We can modify the content so that our students engage with material that corresponds to their readiness and interests. Content refers to *what* we teach or want students to learn, such as musical concepts, skills, or attitudes. According to Tomlinson (1999), content differentiation occurs in two ways: by adapting what students learn and do and how they access that material. For example, when teaching a song's melody for xylophones

or recorders, all students don't need to play the same melody. Instead of giving only capable students the melody and assigning percussion to the rest, which widens the skill gap, a better approach would be to differentiate the content using tiered activities (Tomlinson, 1999). Some students play the main melody, while others perform simpler accompanying melodies that match their readiness and maintain engagement. The more advanced students may improvise on a variation of the main melody or perform solo (Salvador, 2011; Economidou Stavrou, 2015). In another example, after teaching the music concept of ostinato through a variety of activities, instead of dictating one activity, we could set up different learning centers where students choose tasks that suit their interests and readiness, such as composing rhythmic or melodic ostinatos, creating a choreography, beatboxing, or using graphic scores. This approach enables students to explore the concept in a way that aligns with their learning profiles and preferences.

Process

The learning process can also be adapted by offering a variety of methods for students to engage with music (Standerfer, 2011; Economidou Stavrou, 2015; Hadjickou and Creech, 2023). Differentiating the process involves the activities that help students understand and master the content, which in music often includes listening, performing, singing, improvising, and composing. For instance, in a listening activity, we often provide worksheets that ask students to identify musical elements such as form, instruments, or dynamics. However, this approach limits students' ability to engage with music in their way, as it focuses on the teacher's perspective. According to Kerchner (2014), music listening is a multisensory experience, unique to each individual. Students may have different ways of listening and expressing what they hear. Some may naturally move to the music, while others may draw in response to it, expressing their understanding visually. These same students might struggle to verbally describe the music, while others excel in using musical vocabulary.

Product

Differentiating the product concerns the output or the way students demonstrate their understanding and mastery of the content (Westman, 2018). This could be achieved by assigning tasks with varying levels of complexity or offering students different ways to showcase their learning. In the music class, typical products might include performances, compositions, or written reflections. For example, after teaching students about musical form, one group might be asked to create a simple rhythmic ABA structure, while a more advanced group might compose a musical piece using a more complex form like Rondo. The key here is to ensure that the product matches the student's readiness and interest while providing them with a challenge. Another way to differentiate the product is by allowing students to choose how they present their learning. This could mean performing a piece, creating a multimedia presentation, composing their music, or even teaching a concept to their peers. Furthermore, ongoing, formative

assessment helps us understand each student's evolving needs and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly (Economidou Stavrou, 2015). The final product or assessment should allow students to demonstrate their understanding and skills in ways that align with their strengths, interests, and learning profiles.

Environment

A differentiated classroom offers a variety of choices and numerous opportunities for active musical learning, ensuring all children are engaged. It fosters an environment that invites and challenges students to participate in meaningful musical experiences while catering to their diverse interests and learning styles. The learning environment includes where and with whom students learn (Westman, 2018). Music activities may occur inside or outside the classroom, individually, in pairs, or in groups—whether mixed-ability, homogeneous, friend-based, or preference-based (Economidou Stavrou, 2015). Children thrive in student-centered environments that promote independence, and risk-taking, and provide a range of stimuli and materials. Such environments also connect the music children create at school with their personal musical experiences outside of school.

However, implementing differentiated instruction is not without its challenges. It demands a high level of commitment, creativity, and flexibility from music teachers. As music teachers, we must be willing to learn about our students, experiment with different teaching methods, and reflect on what works best in their unique classroom context. Despite the challenges, the benefits of differentiated instruction are substantial as it encourages a more inclusive approach, where every student's potential can be recognized and nurtured, and fosters a learning environment where students are more engaged and motivated in their musical journey.

Conclusion

Differentiated instruction in music teaching and learning is a transformative approach that aligns with students' diverse needs, abilities, and interests. Luckily, I learned this early enough in my career through a need that emerged from practice. It's a commitment, that as music teachers and music teacher educators, we need to take, to ensure that every student's voice is heard, valued, and nurtured. It is also a framework for planning a meaningful engagement for all our students (Grant and Leher, 2011).

Music teacher education is faced now, more than ever, with the emergent need to support and empower future music teachers in this direction. And it is our duty as music teachers' educators, to equip them with the knowledge, skills, strategies, empathy, caring, and flexibility to address their students' needs. Help teachers acknowledge that the motto "every student matters" compels them to reject treating their students as an undifferentiated mass. Differentiation is not an optional luxury, but a fundamental necessity and plays a crucial role in building engaging and democratic music classrooms where every student truly matters; and where every student is offered "a positive, secure, challenging, and supportive learning environment" (Tomlinson and Murphy, 2015, p.1).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

NE: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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