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Towards an Ethos of Culturally Responsive Differentiation

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Introduction

Sometimes educators seem to expect learners to leave their language, culture, and lived experiences at the classroom door. Can true educational equity exist when students with diverse identities, backgrounds, and learning needs are taught as if they were the same? In Jamaica's classrooms, where diversity is increasingly becoming the norm, culturally responsive differentiation emerges not merely as an instructional strategy, but as an educational necessity.

Differentiation is frequently understood as the ideal when teaching diverse learners. However, effective differentiation typically requires small class sizes, sufficient resources, and a vast amount of planning time, conditions that are seldom reflected in many Jamaican classrooms. Consequently, there is a need to rethink differentiation through a culturally responsive lens. Culturally responsive differentiation is a flexible learner-centered approach that moves beyond the traditional one-size-fits-all model. It intentionally incorporates learners' cultural backgrounds, their lived experiences, language and learning preferences into the teaching and learning process. Because learners come from different contexts, they bring unique perspectives and experiences to the classroom. Therefore, an ethos of culturally responsive differentiation is essential for creating equitable learning opportunities that acknowledge, value, and support the diverse needs of all students.

Diversity in Student Population

Jamaican classrooms are vibrant spaces characterized by diversity. Students enter the classroom with varying abilities, learning preferences, socio-economic background, cultural experiences and language abilities. Throughout my years as an educator in both the private and the public educational systems, I have witnessed first-hand how these differences shape teaching & learning experiences. In many privately owned institutions, the student-teacher ratio is approximately twenty (20) students to one teacher. In contrast, the public educational system often exceeds the recommended student-teacher ratio of thirty-five (35) students to one teacher, despite policy aspirations to reduce class sizes (Davis, 2017). The reality is that many teachers are expected to meet the needs of increasingly diverse learners under far from ideal conditions.

One experience remains etched in my memory. I remember having sixty-three (63) students in a grade five class in a rural school. Yes, you heard that correctly, sixty-three! Each learner came with a unique story, distinct values, different home experiences, and varied academic strengths. They also brought something equally important, their language. Was it an easy task to address the unique needs of each individual learner? Absolutely not! The classroom was a rich tapestry of different ways of speaking the dialect, cultural practices, and ways of knowing. These differences were not obstacles to learning; rather, they were resources that could be harnessed to support it.

Reminiscing on the very first interactions with this group, I quickly realised that their first language, their mother tongue - the patois, would play a central role in their learning journey. However, I did not view the students' use of Jamaican creole as "bad English" that needed to be corrected or avoided. Instead, I recognized it as their first language and a valuable bridge to acquiring Jamaican Standard English. If learning was to be meaningful, students needed to feel that their voices, identities, and linguistic heritage were valued within the classroom. I listened, responded, and often incorporated elements of their dialect into our discussions. Students realized that they did not have to abandon their identity to participate in learning. The

transformation was remarkable. Students became more comfortable in expressing themselves freely using the language with which they were most comfortable. Students were encouraged to speak up and express themselves freely and were reminded that they belonged in the learning environment. Additionally, they were reassured that I was their biggest cheerleader. This immediately created a sense of belonging and trust. They used their dialect, and I used it too. Rather than silencing them, I used it as a scaffold to model Jamaican Standard English. Through conversations, collaborative activities, and carefully structured group work, students gradually learned to navigate between both languages. In this way, the dialect became a bridge rather than a barrier.

The transformation was remarkable. Students became more confident communicators, classroom discussions became richer, and engagement increased significantly. By validating their linguistic and cultural identities while simultaneously modelling academic language, I was able to create an environment where students felt respected, capable, and empowered to learn. This experience reinforced my belief that culturally responsive differentiation is not simply about adapting instructional strategies. It is about recognizing and valuing the diverse assets that learners bring to the classroom and using those assets as foundations for meaningful learning. In the Jamaican context, this means embracing learners' lived experiences as strengths rather than deficits. An ethos of culturally responsive differentiation, therefore, seeks not only to improve academic outcomes but also to affirm students' identities while providing equitable opportunities for success.

A New Way Forward

Culturally responsive differentiation challenges traditional approaches to schooling by recognising that learners do not all learn at the same own pace or in the same way. Rather than expecting students to conform to a single method of instruction, it creates opportunities for learning experiences that are responsive to their individual strengths, cultural identities, and prior knowledge. New concepts are not introduced in isolation; rather, it builds on what students already know, making learning more meaningful, relevant, and accessible.

However, the successful implementation of culturally responsive differentiation cannot be separated from the realities of educational inequity. Disparities exist regarding how resources are distributed across Jamaican schools. Simply put, some public schools are more privileged than others. Many benefit from strong alumni support, state-of-the-art laboratories, modern computer laboratories, reliable internet access, and expansive sporting amenities. These resources provide students with a wealth of opportunities for academic, social, and personal development, allowing them to experience a more holistic education.

On the other hand, some public schools, especially those in rural areas, continue to grapple with significant resource constraints. Some lack basic amenities that many educators would consider essential for effective teaching and learning. These challenges range from include inadequate furniture, outdated library resources internet and insufficient instructional materials. Such disparities inevitably affect the quality of learning experiences available to students and further widen existing educational inequalities.

In fact, I have experienced this in my career. During a lesson, I wanted my students to have a vicarious learning experience through a video presentation. However, the only technology available was a single cell phone. Yes! One cell phone for sixty-three students. Determined not to allow resource limitations to hinder learning, I ensured that I had sufficient data and rotated the device among groups so that every student had an opportunity to engage with the video presentation. This was nothing short of a miracle. While this may seem insignificant in more resource-rich settings, it was transformative for my students. I still remember the excitement on their faces, the animated discussions that followed, and those unmistakable "light bulb" moments that signal genuine understanding. Students eagerly contributed to the discourse, making connections between the content and their own experiences. In that moment, learning transcended the limitations of the environment.

Experiences such as these underscore the importance of culturally responsive differentiation as both a pedagogical framework and an equity-driven practice. Adapting an ethos of culturally responsive differentiation as a pedagogy, although it can be time-consuming and demanding, it enables educators to creatively leverage available resources while drawing upon students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and strengths. More importantly, it demonstrates that meaningful learning can occur even in under-resourced settings. Nevertheless, for culturally responsive differentiation to achieve its full potential, it must be supported by a broader commitment to educational equity, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their geographic location or socio-economic circumstances, have access to the resources and opportunities necessary for academic success.

Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

Recent research has shown that educators in the Caribbean lack adequate training in differentiation and its implementation (Suryati et al., 2023). While stakeholders increasingly advocate for inclusive and equitable learning environments, teachers are often expected to meet the diverse needs of their students without sufficient preparation, resources, or ongoing professional support. This disconnect underscores the need for greater attention to be placed on how culturally responsive differentiation is understood, implemented, and supported within Jamaican schools.

Hence, as educators, it is important to remember that learners possess diverse cognitive abilities and prior knowledge. Educators must be intentional about creating a classroom culture that normalizes and affirms learner diversity. Although navigating increasingly diverse classrooms can be quite challenging, educators. One must remember that learners’ academic, behavioural, and independent functioning abilities vary now more than ever. This is compounded by the fact that these variations often exist without formal diagnoses or documented support needs. As a result, teachers are frequently required to identify and respond to diverse learning needs based on their professional observations and classroom interactions. This reality underscores the importance of culturally responsive differentiation, which enables educators to proactively address learner variability and create equitable opportunities for success.

Therefore, teacher preparedness and professional development are essential for effectively implementing culturally responsive differentiation. To achieve this, educators must have access to training that is culturally relevant and reflective of the Jamaican educational context. Professional learning opportunities should move beyond generic approaches and instead equip teachers with practical strategies that address the realities of Jamaican classrooms, including linguistic diversity, large class sizes, and resource constraints. This means that teacher training institutions all have a role to play by championing this approach by developing short courses, workshops, and professional learning communities focused on culturally responsive differentiation and inclusive pedagogical practices. By investing in such initiatives, educators will be better positioned to recognize, accommodate, and celebrate the diverse strengths, needs, and identities of their learners, ultimately fostering more equitable and meaningful learning experiences for all students.

Summary

Culturally responsive differentiation offers a meaningful approach to addressing learner diversity by intentionally integrating students’ linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds into the teaching and learning process. Within the Jamaican context, this means affirming the Jamaican learner’s identity while simultaneously promoting equity in the classroom. Consequently, culturally responsive differentiation functions both as a pedagogical framework and a sociocultural intervention. The equation is simple. The interest in differentiation developed because of educational inequalities, policy reform and the need for culturally responsive pedagogy. Ultimately, culturally responsive differentiation has the potential not only to strengthen educational practice in Jamaica but also to contribute to broader conversations about inclusive education within postcolonial societies and other developing contexts around the world

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Gillian Campbell is passionate about learners and learning. An experienced educator she describes herself as a facilitator of learning, an agent of positive change, and an exceptional educator. In her classroom she adopts a learner-centered approach, using a range of methodologies to promote critical thinking and real-world teaching and learning. Gillian exemplifies the profession living by the mantra, “To create an indelible mark on everyone I come in contact with.” Beyond teaching and learning, she’s an avid reader who enjoys solitude, appreciating scenic views, and spending quality time with family and friends.



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