Urban School Experience Reflection

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Urban schooling environments provide opportunities for unique problem solving skills to develop through difficult situations. Several strategies have been developed to help create an effective learning environment for students within the urban school system. Some of the methods that have proven to be the most effective include: differentiation, student initiative, and emphasis on relevance. When these three key elements can come together in a classroom, then the result in student achievement is outstanding.

Differentiation includes tailoring the content, process, and product of the overall assignment to create a better match for the student’s readiness, interest, and learning profile. Basically, differentiating according to content means that what the lesson requires the student must master can be done through information that is the most applicable to that student. A useful tool for differentiating content is Bloom’s Taxonomy. A student, who is unfamiliar with the content, can move up through the various learning levels, after starting from the very bottom. However, a student, who is more experienced with the content, could begin further along in Bloom’s Taxonomy and continue to progress their understanding of the topic by achieving the higher levels throughout the unit.

Differentiation that pays close attention to process should entail a look into the student’s learning style. Now this could mean allowing a student to grasp the content in a way that is the easiest for him, or it could be used as a challenge. This would mean that the teacher might not choose for that student to use his primary learning style for a certain activity. This means that the student must adapt, and learn to process the information in a new way. Teacher discretion will best decide when either approach is the most useful for that student.

Differentiation based on product includes a lot of variety. Product entails how a student will demonstrate his learning. However, this could expand to when, and how many, checkpoints that student has during a unit; in what ways they present the information; or how they are assessed. The fact that a teacher allows students to choose different means of demonstrating their mastery of a skill, does not take away from the student’s mastery of said skill. It simply does not penalize a student for performing better on an oral exam, rather than a true/false exam, and so on.

By differentiating based on student interest, a teacher maximizes a student’s motivation to learn. Ways for a teacher to respond to student interest include: paying attention to which techniques students found most helpful during a lesson; putting out extra resources, covering a certain topic discussed in class, for students to read during free time; asking the students what they hope to do during the unit; comparing student interests (like animal life cycles) to what you are studying (a human life cycle); allowing choices (which Spanish-speaking country do they want to research?); or connecting students to outside activities that relate to their interests in educational ways. As far as what the teacher can be doing and keeping in mind, there are various ideas. One is to determine where the students are at the beginning, and what their end goal is. Evaluate your students’ learning profile, readiness, and interest. Decide in advance how you are going to deliver information to get each student to the end goal. Also, when planning your unit, decide when formative assessments should be given.

The goal of differentiating by learner profile is to implement curriculum and instruction that supports different modes of learning and assessment to help students learn effectively and efficiently. A student’s learner profile is the combination of interests, dispositions, and modes in which the student learns best. Learning profile includes a number of concepts related to how a student likes to learn. Learning and thinking styles, multiple intelligences, culture, gender, and environmental preferences are all part of this aspect of differentiation. When students are allowed to work in ways that are comfortable for them, learning efficiency is maximized.

Differentiation by readiness refers to a complex set of factors that affect the level of difficulty at which students are ready to learn and the rate at which they grow. It is important for teachers to note that readiness is not synonymous with ability, although a student’s ability is likely to play a role in his readiness. This is not the only factor, others include whether or not a student’s needs are being met outside the classroom, physical and emotional developmental factors, previous exposure to a topic, physical and mental health on a particular day, the connection that has been established with the teacher, etc. Readiness is so strongly linked to interest and learning profile because students are more ready to learn if they are interested in a topic and if that topic is presented and practiced in ways that are comfortable to them.

Student initiative is all about students taking ownership of their own education; however, this actually requires a lot of assistance, guidance, and facilitating by the teacher of the classroom. A key to motivating students is helping them see that they can take responsibility for their own learning. Tying learning to students’ personal interests (as discussed earlier), letting students work together with other students to meet learning goals, and giving students a voice in their own learning is beneficial in motivating students. Teaching that fosters motivation to learn is a thoughtful process of aligning student choices so that students see the value of these choices as tools for meeting their learning needs and goals. At the same time, it is up to the teacher to set clear learning goals and help students understand the choices they are allowed to make within the context of the learning goals set by the teacher. These expectations work the best when they are established in the beginning of a course.

When students see that they can be successful, teachers have an opportunity to talk with them about how the standards and expectations are related to their own personal interests or to the skills they will need to succeed in life. Also, teachers should be providing choices that are meaningful to students, so they will develop a sense of ownership over the learning process. This can be done when the teacher is clear about how the choices relate to the learning objectives. Feedback is another major aspect in student initiative. Teachers should provide feedback to students that give them precise information about the particular skills they have acquired and/or need to improve in order to be successful in their class. Finally, teachers should encourage students to assess their own learning progress by using charts or journals, so they can evaluate the progress they are making as they acquire relevant knowledge and skills. As students learn to monitor their progress, they become more motivated by their successes and begin to acquire a sense of ownership and responsibility for the role they play in these successes.

The purpose of putting emphasis on relevance is so that students do not feel overwhelmed, dragged down, or flustered among information that is not directly related to the lesson. This is different from interest because gaining material related to interest is a choice made by the student, but irrelevant information is often brought on by bogged-down curriculums or teachers, by accident. Students should begin with the basics, and what they will definitely be tested on first and foremost. Once the student has begun to demonstrate mastery of a subject, as well as a steady progress of learning, extra information may be filtered in, so imagination, interest, and other skills may be sparked. Students do not need to feel like failures because they could not grasp a problem that will never apply to their lives again.

The teachers of Steven’s Elementary and Wheat Ridge 5-8 have done a marvelous job of bringing all of these ideas and theories to life, based on the visits made by the Urban School Field class. From the uniform classroom devices, like literacy curriculum introduced in second grade, then established in third and fourth, introduced by the principal of Steven’s Elementary School to the very visual way Spanish is being taught at Wheat Ridge 5-8, it is obvious that both schools take into account their situations. Because both schools do not shy away from the demographics, the home lives, the students, the area, or the continuous new teachers, they are able to begin making plans on how to best interact with what they have. Their ingenuity showed me, personally, why these concepts work so well in Urban Schools, and how to apply them. Everything I produced in this paper came from being able to visually see entire schools deciding that this is what works best to achieve success in the most efficient and enjoyable way. The focus they maintained on the students was astounding as I watched what I have been studying matter.

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