

Action research

Improving Student Motivation In Mixed Ability Classroom

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Introduction (identifying the problem)

This action research project report summarizes the methods used to reduce boredom and frustration and increase students' academic motivation in mixed-ability classrooms. This action research project included 75 students in grade seven and 50 students in grade eight

We observed several behaviors that highlighted boredom, frustration, and motivation, as problems in their classrooms. The behaviors we witnessed were talking during instructional and work time, rushing through assigned tasks, , working slowly, and lacking enthusiasm towards tasks.

Gathering data

To gather data regarding these problems, we developed and administered a documentation tool. This tool included a student survey. The outcome of the student surveys provided us with information about students' attitudes toward school. Over half of the students conveyed feelings of boredom while in the classroom . The majority of students also stated that they were always or sometimes distracted during work time .Other results included some students being excited, while a minority felt their work was never challenging.

We chose Differentiated Instruction as the intervention to be implemented. Three specific Differentiated Instruction strategies were selected. These included free-time activities, tiered assignments, and authentic assessments. Free-time activities encompassed different content areas and appealed to the students' multiple intelligences. Students were allowed to choose an activity to occupy any free-time they had in the classroom. Tiered assignments allowed the same objective to be obtained at various levels and modalities. We created assignments that appealed to the multiple intelligences ranging from simple to complex. Each student chose the assignment that best suited his needs. Authentic assessments were culminating activities and tests that targeted learning styles, multiple intelligences, and ability levels. Even though authentic assessments provided many options, the teacher was still testing a uniform objective.

At the conclusion of the project, we compared and analyzed our pre and post data to identify several changes that occurred in our classrooms. These include, fewer students distracted during work-time, and more students appeared bored while fewer students were excited about school.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

General Statement of the Problem :

In today's classroom, students come to school with a variety of academic abilities, learning styles, and multiple intelligences. It has become an immense challenge for teachers to meet every student's need in today's mixed ability classrooms. When students are not taught at their interest or readiness levels frustration and boredom increase causing a lack of motivation.

If you try to teach everyone the same thing at the same time in the same way at the same speed this is what will happen.

- * Some students will get further and further behind.
- * Some students will get very bored.
- * There will be bad behaviour.
- * Some students will stop trying.
- * You will have a bad atmosphere in the class.

Probable Causes

The present educational society is quite different from that of the past. Even the challenges the teachers encounter nowadays are different from that of the past. Current educational standards should be well covered and each learner's exclusive educational needs should be met .Instructional settings today are laced with obstacles that teachers cannot control. Present day teachers are frustrated with standardized tests that require them to cover an unmanageable number of skills in an unreasonable amount of time ,therefore, the “one for all” approach to assessment is not authentic These time restraints leave little room for teachers to be creative in presenting lessons, which today's students need to be motivated. If students' scores in the standardized tests are not that high , teachers will be held countable for that low achievement.

Not only do teachers feel the burden of the score of the standardized tests , but also with the diverse nature of today's classrooms. The current classroom is no longer a homogeneous setting. Today's classrooms are

melting pots of low achievers , average achievers , gifted student , sometimes students with special needs, and moreover, students with diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. Along with teaching the academic curriculum, teachers are now expected to teach diversity education. Some teachers do not know much about students' cultures So, when student comes to school with these very diverse backgrounds, teachers struggle to find a balance between standardization and incorporation of each student's cultural needs.

Furthermore , teachers can not control classrooms occupied by mixed-ability students. However, they can control how they manage their mixed-ability classrooms by developing curricula that appeal to a wide range of learning styles and abilities. This task leaves some teachers feeling as if they are teaching multiple grades simultaneously. Educators carry the heavy burden of appealing to the vast learning ranges in their classrooms. These learning ranges cause problems during teaching and assessments. Each student favors one or more intelligences. Therefore, the "one for all" approach to assessment is not authentic (Kane 1995). Teachers are pressured to have all students successfully complete standardized tests, which forces them to create tests that mimic these tests throughout the year. This is a thorny problem because standardized tests offer no personalized assessment (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005). This clearly poses a problem for educators who want each of their students to maximize their full learning potential.

Even though students are placed in mixed-ability classrooms, they still deserve quality instruction to meet their academic needs. When every child in a classroom is doing the same task, valuable learning is lost. Teachers cannot meet students' individual needs if every student is reading the same story and completing the same assignment. Typically, the only students receiving variety are special education students because generalizations are made that these students are the only ones who need modifications or additional resources to their instruction (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004). This is not true, regular education and gifted students also require adaptations. Each gifted students' potential is not fully reached unless they have a curriculum that allows them to individually excel (Callahan, 1999).

A current trend, ability grouping, is believed to meet students' individual needs. Ability grouping is a strategy that groups students based upon academic ability. It is thought that lower students need more discipline,

a slower pace, less interaction, basic skills, and easier material, but this belief only keeps them at the low level (Tomlinson, 2006). Another belief is that higher students need a rapid pace, advanced material, independence, and higher level thinking. However, this is not true for all gifted students (Tomlinson, 2006). Some teachers are beginning to realize that this type of grouping is doing more harm than good. Students are beginning to catch on that the groups never change. It is not taking them long to identify whether they are placed in the low, medium, or high group. This leaves the lower grouped students with a diminished self-esteem and the higher grouped students feeling superior (Ashman & Kraayenoord, 1998). Therefore, grouping students based on ability provides no positive results (Tomlinson, 2001). Most teachers who do not use ability grouping develop curriculum based around the average student (Tomlinson, 2001). This also causes a problem because the rest of the class can not learn the way the material is being taught. Teachers struggle, though, to accommodate all learners because they also have to think about the best way to teach the greatest amount of material, keep students engaged, and build a high amount of student retention. Teachers often do too much skill and drill and do not get kids involved in the learning (McTighe & O'Conner, 2005). Unfortunately, this means that students' interests take a back seat to teachers' interests. If teachers neglect to develop curricula that appeal to mixed-ability students, boredom becomes a major obstacle in the classroom (Anderson, 2007). Boredom reduces achievement and attention and increases drop-out rates (Crump, 1995). Learners that are not given the opportunity to work at their optimal learning level will soon become frustrated, changing the outcome of their learning possibilities.

Another problem in our schools today is low student motivation. Often when students are bored, they do not view education as purposeful or beneficial, resulting in low student attendance (Crump, 1995). Lack of educational success helps to develop the idea that education is worthless. Learners often dislike participating in activities in which they are unsuccessful (Margolis & McCabe, 2004). If a learner does not experience success often, they will soon withdraw from all educational activities. Educational focus should be on reactivating students' will to learn. Teachers should strive to develop activities in which student enjoys and gains success. When students are motivated, there is a greater chance of engagement and retention of material (Vacca, 2006). When students are not motivated, behavioral problems will arise. Students may react to teachers in an aggressive manner to avoid educational situations that produce stress due to low performance (Bru, 2006).

A reluctance to join in can damage a student's academic self-esteem because the student is not receiving positive feedback from their teacher. Students, especially reluctant ones, require this positive interaction with their teacher to boost their academic self-esteem. One factor that contributes to poor academic self-esteem is negative comments a student hears regarding their classroom performance (Ashman & Kraayenoord, 1998, p.51). These comments can be heard from both classmates and teachers. Teachers may have a difficult time eliminating negative comments verbalized by other students, but they can undeniably control the amount of negative comments they deliver. When hesitant students offer an answer that is not correct, teachers should still respond in an encouraging manner to persuade future participation. Experiencing negative comments and frequent failure will lead to poor academic self-esteem, lack of educational interest and stop success (Bru, 2006).

Adolescent students generally have more on their minds than academic success and failure., adolescent boys grapple to maintain a positive self-concept, however, this is not widely recognized (Hendel, 2006).

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

In order to document evidence of these behaviors we are going to distribute student survey.

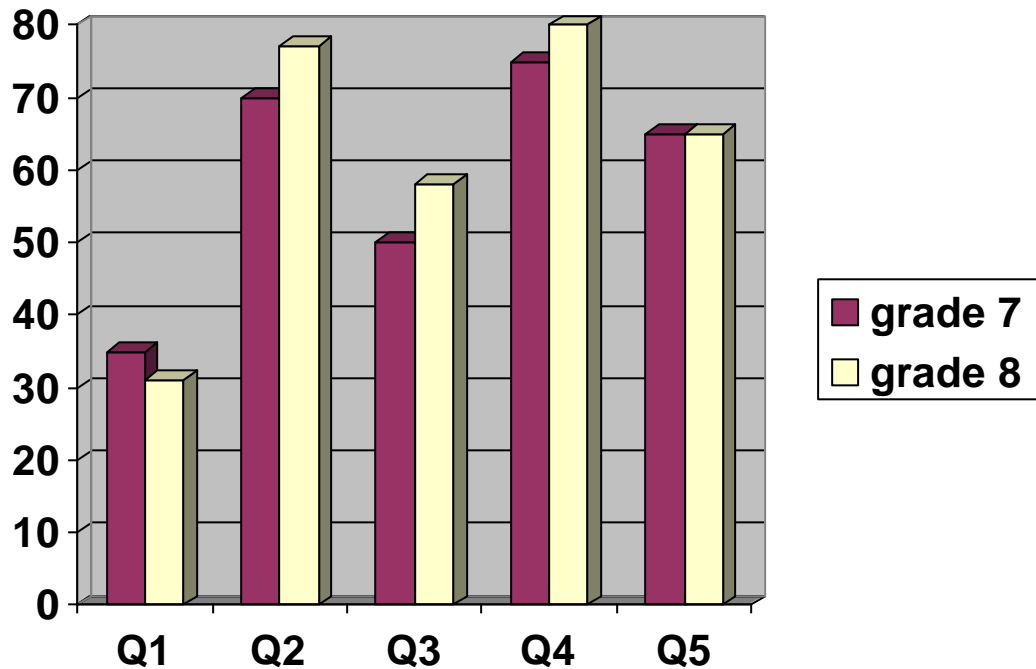
Evidence of the Problem

The purpose of this research project was to increase motivation in the mixed-ability classrooms the evidence was documented using a Student Survey. The Student Survey was administered to the targeted students to understand students' attitudes towards their learning.

Student Survey

The Student Survey was administered in our classrooms on may 19, 2008, to 125 students, three classes in grade seven and two classes in grade eight The purpose of this survey was to assess students' academic motivation at school. The Student Survey included five questions, The scale provided choices of always, sometimes, and *never*.

After we checked all their surveys ,their choices can be seen in the following graph :



In question one, students were asked if they were excited about school. 32% of the students stated that they were sometimes or never excited about school.

In question two, students were asked if they were easily distracted during work time. 75% stated that they were always or sometimes distracted during work time.

In question three, students were asked if their work was too hard. 55% stated that their work was never hard for them to complete.

In question four, students were asked if they feel bored when they finish their work. 77% stated that they were always or sometimes bored when they finished their work.

In question five, students were asked if they would like a choice in the kind of work they do 63% stated that they would like a choice.

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

You cannot learn to teach mixed ability classes well overnight. You have to work at it. In addition to the main strategies that we followed to teach mixed-ability classes, here are some ideas:

Know your students.

How much data do you actually have on the students you teach? Do you know if they are also interested in Maths? Music? Art? Their own first language? If students are struggling to master literacy in Arabic or their first language then they may also struggle with English. If they are interested in Art or music then it may help them if you include songs or design activities in your lessons. Students who do well in Maths may enjoy such things as substitution tables and verb tense constructions as they appear logical to them. Find out about your classes strengths and weaknesses in other subjects with a simple questionnaire near the start of the course.

Use group and pair work

These are essential for effective teaching of a mixed ability class. The alternative is something called 'lockstep'. This means that everyone does the same thing at the same time. 'The class' is shown a structure on the white board. 'The class' does a practice exercise. 'The class' reads a passage. What happens is that some of the children do some of the work that the teacher gives but they do not all complete it or understand it.

Group work and pair work mean that the teacher can let children work more at their own pace and help each other. They also mean that you can give different tasks to different groups if you want to. Also, as the teacher is not standing in front of the class, he has more time to help students with individual problems.

Plan for mixed ability

This may seem obvious but lessons will be successful if you expect that some children will have problems and some children will finish early. You can plan what you will do if this happens. The key to planning successfully is something called 'differentiation'. It means realising that all children are different and planning different activities for different children so that everyone can succeed.

This point is to be discussed fully later but for the time being here are some ways to differentiate in your classes.

Give children different tasks.

Not different lessons, but different tasks to do with the same lesson material.

Students can have different responsibilities on a project. We can organise the class into ability groups. An example of the first would be using the same reading text, but asking a weaker group to identify 'action verbs' and a more advanced group to identify 'words with prefixes and suffixes'. If you are 'planning a new restaurant', a less able group can make the menus, a more able group can write a review for a newspaper about the restaurant.

You can put the children into mixed ability groups. This gives the more able a chance to help the less able. Let's say they are reading a passage together about directions to a place where treasure is buried. One child can read the difficult vocabulary. Another may be good at drawing a map. Another may be good at puzzles. Design the task so that everyone has something to do that they are good at.

support some children more than others.

This is when you need well-organized group work. Set the class a group task or an individual task that they can get on with quietly and then spend your time with the group or child that is having trouble, and work with them for part of the lesson.

Give your class different worksheets to work on. For example, in a lesson to make a picture story from pictures:

Group A (struggling) are given a gap fill story based on some pictures.

'One day Tom was Suddenly he.....'

Group B (middle group) have pictures and some key words.

'bicycle' 'hippopotamus'

Group C (very good group) have just the pictures.

Give children different homework

Homework is private time and there is less embarrassment about getting different work, so different homework tasks can be given to individual students. You can give longer or shorter homework.

'Open' tasks are also very useful for homework. 'If you prepare a writing task in class like: Write about your favourite animal and then give this as homework, children can write two sentences or 2 pages depending on their ability.'

Differentiated Instruction

Today's schools are in abundance of mixed ability classrooms instead of classrooms with just high, average, or low. So, teachers must meet the immediate needs of all learners so they can progress successfully (Tomlinson, 2000). Students need to feel a sense of belonging and 2) have teachers see them as individuals with individual needs. When this happens, and the curriculum is based on interest, teachers will increase motivation, productivity, and achievement while meeting students' needs (Tomlinson et al., 2003. (Morelock & Morrison, 1999).

1) Differentiated Instruction is not a strategy, but a way of life in a classroom that uses a mix of various teaching methods. Differentiated Instruction benefits students with a wide range of levels, learning styles, and allows students to work at different speeds and abilities. Differentiated Instruction actually makes teachers align their objectives and teach to the standards because teachers need a starting goal. Once teachers have that goal, they can determine where students' starting abilities fall and then adjust the curriculum accordingly. Classroom instruction is another factor that influences how Differentiated Instruction is delivered. Teachers need to vary instruction in order to avoid predictability (Crump, 1995). Student learning will be impacted the most if the students are taught with a variety of learning strategies using a rich fast pace curriculum.

Implementing Differentiated Instruction exposes students to a variety of experiences and learning strategies as differentiation and, which helps them to be successful in society. Some teaching strategies that should be kept in mind when first using this technique are that differentiation should be done a little at a time and begin with a single subject or curricular element. As the school year moves forward, the teacher can gradually increase the class or content (Tomlinson, 2000). Differentiated Instruction requires the teacher to restructure their curriculum by adjusting content, creating whole group lessons, open ended lessons, and varying student responses (Johnsen, 2003). When this restructuring happens, the level of student engagement increases because students are working at their ability and interest levels. Finally, Differentiated Instruction benefits all students by creating a reciprocal relationship between the content, teacher, and student. When this relationship is established, students will feel a higher engagement with the curriculum.

Differentiated Instruction will also allow students to feel engaged with the curriculum because it makes sure that the content and instruction match readiness levels, interests, and learning styles. Some of the factors that may be used to assess readiness levels are pre-tests, portfolios, interests, and multiple intelligences (Willard, 2003). Every student possesses their own readiness level and Differentiated Instruction allows students to build upon what they have already retained. Through Differentiated Instruction, each student will be able to master critical skills while also gaining an education that challenges them. Differentiated Instruction allows for different learning rates and structuring tasks at different complexities. Each child has a Zone of Proximal Development, which is the zone where students feel comfortable doing challenging work with support (Morelock & Morrison, 1999).

By giving students various choices and ways that they can work to learn together, all students will become engaged and take responsibility in the classroom (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004). Along with increasing engagement, student motivation can also be improved through Differentiated Instruction by giving students choices. Learners will invest in education if it interests them in content and skill. Differentiated Instruction gives students a chance to take a variety of paths that will ultimately lead to the same learning outcome. Giving students power to be involved in decision making allows them to participate in their preferred style of learning and increases on-task behavior.

Therefore, through these suggested solutions I think boredom and frustration will become reduced (Anderson, 2007).

When teachers start Differentiated Instruction they need to make sure that students have enough choices in the curriculum and are not repeating old material in class so that students do not become bored or frustrated. Through our research, we have found many benefits to giving students choices. Allowing students to choose activities in the classroom creates a higher level of student thinking and gives students the opportunity to reinforce skills they may need to improve on (Hughes, 1999). Meanwhile authentic assessments have students apply what they know in a new situation, which create a true learning experience. Students will also have the opportunity to select their own projects and be given a variety of questions types on assessments. Hopefully, when given choices, students will take more responsibility for their learning.

Many teachers, parents, and students believe that it is responsibility of the teacher to make sure students learn, but the students also need to be held accountable. When students are held responsible for their own learning, their pride and motivation in school rises.

Differentiated Instruction is the way to find out who learns at what level, who needs support, how we can help the gifted, and how we can have separate but related lessons. When the curriculum appeals to the whole student, then the student will be able to self-monitor, be responsible, and motivated about their learning because their needs are being met.

Differentiated Instruction, when implemented effectively, can be a solution to managing mixed-ability classrooms, reducing boredom, increasing motivation, improving behavior, and can close educational gaps.

Differentiated Instruction is a lot of work, but the students love it, frustration levels are lowered, and deeper understanding occurs (Scherer, 2000).

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The students' survey

My feelings about learning

Please circle one response that shows how you feel about each statement. This survey must remain anonymous. Therefore do not write your name anywhere on this paper

1 -I am excited about learning in school.

Always sometimes never

2- I get distracted during work time

Always sometimes never

3-My work is too hard

Always sometimes never

4 -I feel bored when I finish my work

Always sometimes never

5- I would like to have a choice in the kind of work I do

Yes No