ORGANIZATION OF DIFFERENTIATED TRAINING AT A LESSON THROUGH CREATING A VARIABLE DIDACTIC MATERIAL

KEYWORDS: Individualization; differentiation; studying groups; variable art materials; educational and methodical set; module structure; contents.

ABSTRACT: This material in the differentiated art training system recommends a specific variable practice technology comprising of three mandatory components: 1. Differentiated presentation of training materials (the modules are: informational, problem-oriented, a module for increasing the eagerness to learn, training, control and self-control, corrective); 2. Working in small groups at several acquisition levels (groups that virtually fit in and function within a class and do not need any special environment); 3. Availability of educational and methodical sets for the subjects studied.

Differentiated training in art related activities helps the formation of an appropriate self-assessment in students, motivates them, helps each student build an individual path of cognition and creative development. It promotes a positive type of learning and allows adolescents to start believing in themselves. Thanks to differentiated training, students successfully develop their artistic and cognitive activities taking into account their individual abilities and capacities. In their practice, teachers have to carefully monitor students’ development so that they could duly support any positive trends noticed and correct any negative and unacceptable ones. Early interference is of key importance with regard to children’s failures. During the process of training one should not ignore even a single sign of unsuccessful course of personal development. If a response is delayed when failure to meet educational requirements is considerable and wrong approaches have become deeply rooted and habitual, a pedagogical correction will be much more complex. Taking into consideration students' individual characteristics is a kind of art in didactic activities. It is very important that teachers are not biased and do not act on grounds of prejudice. Using variable didactic materials in differentiated training is a key factor promoting students’ strategic, research and educational activities and resulting in their enhanced intellectual work and mastered rational activity algorithms.
Training differentiation has led to a number of mistakes in education practices all over the world. It often leads to social selection and segregation. Therefore, teachers’ background training is important when it comes to adopting a nondiscriminatory mode of differentiation.

It is a well-known fact that humanist and reformist pedagogues are fervent supporters of the idea that all children are gifted and talented in their own ways. At present, pedagogy is being drastically updated in terms of concepts and it is now focusing its attention on the research and development type of personal training. In the current social and political conditions in united Europe, the need of personal growth and development of children’s individuality and of its utmost distinctive manifestation and realization comes to the forefront. In this context the issue of differentiated approach to education and training becomes of crucial importance.

For rather long periods, conventional methods of training were focused on the so-called ‘abstract, average student’. Such an approach had a number of disadvantages: weak and unsuccessful students cannot fit in the conventional educational process and keep up with average skilled children. It takes them a lot of power and time and as a result they inevitably crash and lag behind, losing faith in their own abilities and becoming convinced in the impossibility of acquisition of the curriculum contents. High quality training of children of different background training and educational skills is the most complex and important task that teachers face. Without implementing an individual approach to training this task is unattainable. Individual and differentiated approaches are beneficial in terms of development training and they promote the creative manifestation of children’s natural skills eliminating the ‘abstract average student’ course. They make the educational process in school a highly productive and efficient one. This issue is of social significance also because it has to prepare all adolescents for their attestation in specific meaningful trends. It is an undisputed fact that the most shocking drawbacks of the class lesson system of teaching are the standardized approach to students and the ignorance of their individual characteristics.

The need to set up differentiated training organization systems aimed at individualizing the effects on children is justified by the different trends of reformist pedagogy. Rousseau, Kay, Decroly, Ferrier, Steiner, Montessori, Freinet, etc. were the first to place children’s interests in the center of the entire process of education. E. Claparede developed his concept of ‘made to measure school’, where a child’s intellectual powers could be freely developed under no compulsion.

M. Andreev considers individualization as ‘form of organization and development of training taking into account individual abilities, but integrated in the collective forms of organization’ [1, p. 335]. He studies the ‘didactic profile’ of students in education.

Rabunskiy relates individualization in education to ‘active attention to each student, his or her creative individuality in the class lesson environment in studying general subjects and optional subjects, involving reasonable combination of front, group and individual studies with the purpose of increasing the quality of education and development of each student’ [6, p. 15].

In our opinion, individualization is a rational and constructive form of training organization with long-term personal and social effects aimed at creating the best possible preconditions for individual and joint productive activities with the purpose of maximum development of students’ individual talents, interests and abilities, overcoming failures, eliminating mistakes and prejudice, developing and establishing in students positive vital strategy and socially integrative behavior, achieving high quality and optimal results in the process of training.

Individualization and differentiation provide students with conditions for a maximum development of their abilities, meeting their cognitive needs in such a way that a child’s training is of good quality, conducted with no significant difficulties at an accessible level and optimal rate.

Tasks of differentiation in art training:
- creating a socially positive, supporting and stimulating training environment with optimal conditions not only for increasing the success rate of weak students, but for further developing of skilled and talented children;
- implementing a variable and creative approach to students in group and individual activities, to curriculum contents in schools and their syllabuses;
- providing basic, minimum and obligatory levels of general training in compliance with approved governmental standards that each student is obliged to reach;
- increasing the interest in studying science, art and technology in both weak and strong groups since training is aimed at students’ ‘closest cognitive perspective zone’ and has a markedly developing nature;
- increasing the quality of knowledge and acquired competencies in subject based, module and interdisciplinary meta-subject education;
• changing children’s attitudes to school and out of school activities and shaping up a proper motivation for studying;
• increasing pedagogues’ professional skills and their social status along with extending the range of didactic features of intended and taught lessons in the field of art;
• Improving the competitiveness of educational bodies in compliance with their social and individual assignments.

The development of a system of methods and personified programs for influencing students when taking into account their individual and age-related development characteristics is the challenge that teachers face when implementing the individual approach in practice. A key starting point in this system should be the studying of students. Studying first-graders is usually performed via methods of interviewing their parents, holding discussions with them, examining their living standards and medical records. The introduction of mandatory pre-school training in Bulgaria enhanced the succession between kindergarten and school stages. Elementary school teachers now have more versatile, objective and detailed information regarding their first-graders’ identified abilities and achievement levels. The results from the initial study of students’ backgrounds and evolution are grounds for designing pedagogic measures for efficiently influencing trainees.

Studying children’s personalities is a continuously developing process. Most of all, teachers will be interested in children’s trainability and levels of learning (degree of knowledge in a certain subject; level of general training skills; listening skills, workplace organization and maintaining order at the workplace, abilities to quickly join an activity and work at set rates, abilities to complete tasks and assignments and verify their appropriate performance (self-control and self-assessment).

It is important to take into account students’ intellectual development specific features:

a) attention, memory, imagination, brain activity;

b) level of learning the training materials – cognitive and practical independence, work rates, i.e. slow, fast, etc.;

c) students’ speech development; meta-cognitive level of understanding – learning, views and beliefs, general outlook.

Also important is any information regarding students’ emotional and value oriented attitude to studying, i.e. positive, negative or different /attitudes to their own successes and failures in studying, to teachers and classmates’ grades, as well as their levels of development of the will, i.e. high, moderate or low.

What also matters is diligence, interest in studying and the motivation dominating the process of learning. Also taken into account should be discipline and moral and volitional qualities like courage, determination, responsibility, concentration, perseverance, and the pursuit of goals.

The term ‘differentiation’ translated from the Latin ‘difference’ means stratification or dividing the whole into separate parts (involves group training activities; variable use of training contents and educational technologies – methods, approaches, techniques, forms and means of performance). A.P. Suhodimtseva and E.A. Gevurkova analyze respectively three types of students’ training activities that functionally arise from the application of a differentiated approach to training: situational activity (i.e. operational level), supra-situational activity under modified circumstances (tactical level) and creative activity (strategic level) [8, p. 255]. With regard to this they point out, ‘If we correlate the displayed three levels of activity to the requirements of the Russian Federation Governmental Educational Standards, we can easily establish that schools are supposed to take students to the strategic level (they should be able to learn, skillfully use the knowledge acquired in various training situations and social practices, etc.). Meta-subject education results include students’ acquisition of universal training activities (cognitive, regulatory, communicative) securing the acquisition of key competences that build the foundations of the ability to learn.’ [8, p. 255].

Training differentiation involves dynamics in the training activities progress and is related to creating different training conditions for individuals, different classes and groups with the purpose of taking into account their specific features. The accepted training differentiation models are directly related to a country’s educational policy. Thanks to the differentiated nature of education, the training of youngsters is synchronized with the workforce market needs. The social division of labor always requires a kind of division of training, a combination of an optimal method of conducting general compulsory and the specialized vocational education.

Interrelation between training individualization and differentiation:

• Individualization is taking into account in the training process of trainees’ individual characteristics and creating appropriate conditions for an individual’s manifestation and development.

• Differentiation is dividing students in a class into smaller groups for separate training on grounds of certain characteristic individual features.

• Training individualization defines the profound meaning and the very nature of the differentiation purposefulness.
Hence, the key elements of differentiation are as follows:

1. Taking into account individuals’ typical personal characteristics.
2. Dividing students into groups.
3. Different training process designs for the different groups by means of differentiating contents, methods, approaches, techniques, forms and means of training used.

Differentiated training is a training process that studies, takes into account, stimulates and positively develops students’ individual characteristics. Differentiation can be external and internal, quantitative and qualitative.

**External differentiation affects the institutional diversity of the system of education.** It involves the separation of firm groups to be trained separately. There are two types of external differentiation: *elective (flexible) differentiation by using* a free choice of subjects based on an invariant core, of elective variable training contents; and *selective (relatively rigid) differentiation* through profile training differentiation, forming groups for extensive studying of subjects like mathematics, music, choreography, art, etc. There are also specialized schools (sports, language, music, mathematics, vocational) set up on grounds of an intended profession. At the same time they ensure the most favorable conditions for educating talented children.

**Internal differentiation** is conducted in heterogeneous groups of children without dividing them into firm subgroups. This is training differentiation in the conditions of an ordinary heterogeneous class, i.e. a case of the so called intragroup differentiation. Children within one and the same class can study different contents. This is performed in several directions: according to the number of tasks assigned by using the so called training cards or boards (for supplementary or further tasks); according to the levels of difficulty of assignments and the levels of independence displayed by students in doing them. There is also differentiation according to the rate of studying (fast or slow) and on grounds of other factors.

Differentiation can be applied according to the levels of acquisition of the contents of subjects, modules (mandatory training level; minimum level of acquisition; extended and additional training level).

Internal differentiation can proceed at one or several levels:

- **Single-level** – when children of different individual and psychological abilities try to cover the curriculum at the level required by a governmental standard;
- **Multi-level** – following one and the same curriculum, students may cover it at different difficulty levels. There are different technologies of internally differentiated training.

**Multi-level training differentiation includes:**

- a basic mandatory level of general training that trainees have to reach to comply with standards;
- the basic level is grounds for differentiation and individualization of requirements to students of art;
- the basic level should be attainable by all students /minimum standard/;
- along with the basic level student are allowed training grounded on the expansion principle /higher level/ defined through the level of subject contents understanding.

So this is how a ‘scale’ of activity is formed when assignments are graded with reproductive, reconstruction and variable and creative character.

Within the differentiated art training system the use of specific terminology for variable training is recommendable. It consists of three compulsory elements:

- Differentiated module presentation of module presentation of training materials (modules are: informational, problem-oriented, a module for increasing the eagerness to learn, training, creative, control and self-control, corrective);
- Working in small groups at several acquisition levels (groups that virtually fit in and function within a class and do not need any special design);
- Availability of educational and methodical sets for the subjects studied with the option of recoding training contents.

The technology of personally oriented training is a combination of training deemed as a statutory social activity and learning as an individually significant activity of each child.

**Variable training is:**

- Such an organization of the training and education process in which every student can cover the contents of separate school subjects at different levels (A, B, C) not lower than the basic level stipulated by governmental standards (supposed to be the minimum level) according to his or her own abilities and individual characteristics;
- Multi-level training allows each student to organize his or her training so that he or she can take full advantage of the opportunities provided by training differentiation.

The application of variable contents training at different difficulty levels helps teachers achieve the following goals:

**Group 1 (group A)** – children in constant need of extra help:

1. Arouse interest in a subject by using accessible basic level tasks that allow students to work in compliance with their individual abilities.
2. Eliminate any gaps in the knowledge and skills and ensure regularity in the cognition process.
3. Develop individual work skills following a pattern by problem solving rational algorithms acquisition.

**Group 2 (group B)** – children capable of coping on their own:
1. Develop sustainable interest in a subject.
2. Go over and reinforce acquired knowledge and working modes.
3. Update available knowledge for successful learning of new material.
4. Develop individual work skills with regard to assignments.

**Group 3 (group C)** – children capable of coping on their own and of rendering assistance to others:
1. Develop sustainable interest in a subject.
2. Develop new productive working modes and increased complexity task performance skills.
3. Develop imagination and associative thinking skills, reveal creative skills, improve students’ language skills.

Students are divided into groups according to their test results.

Using differentiated approach in training.

**Group 1** – students are described as poorly trained for school, having low grades and inadequate formation of psychological processes and the required general education skills. They need the teacher’s constant attention and support.

A teacher’s mission is to pay special attention to them, support them and help them learn working on an individual basis.

**Group 2** – adequate, satisfactory level of students’ training for school, their abilities to study are close to average; they have acquired the basic mandatory volume of knowledge and skills. Such students need certain teacher’s help when summarizing and reviewing contents in order to reach a higher theoretical level.

A teacher’s mission is to develop their abilities, encourage their independence and self-confidence and create conditions for their further growth and gradual transition to group 3.

**Group 3** – high level of learning the contents, sustainable high grades, marked motivation for cognitive and practical activities, individual work and creative skills during task performance, willingness to take part in research.

A teacher’s mission is to develop students’ social skills, encourage their assiduousness and exactingness, promote high self-assessment criteria, prosocial values orientation and greater altruism, and suppress their individualism and self-centeredness.

In pedagogical practice differentiation according to the intellectual development level not always receives a positive assessment. Methods are neither good or bad, no single way of education and training can be predetermined as effective or ineffective without taking into account the conditions it is applied in. Every child is unique in his or her own way. This is what we really have to take into account.

Differentiated art training should meet the following conditions:
- awareness of individual and typical characteristics of individual students and groups of students;
- teachers’ ability to analyze in depth subject contents and identify any possible difficulties that the different groups of children might face;
- including differentiated work with different groups and individuals in the lesson plan with the purpose of developing students’ cognitive and art related practical skills;
- setting the closest pedagogical tasks when working with individuals and getting operative feedback;
- discreet pedagogical guidance in group work while keeping pedagogical tact;
- avoiding the competitive confrontation model of group training.

Options and trends in group differentiation in art activities are grounded on different indicators:
- abilities or lack of abilities;
- creativity level;
- types of educational activities – following patterns, i.e. reproductive; reconstruction and variable with partial research or research character;
- educational goals;
- material complexity, i.e. difficulty level and acquisition mistakes;
- number of tasks, i.e. volume of performance;
- training, task performance time;
- methods, forms and means of training used;
- types of assistance provided by teachers or by classmates and partners during training mutual control;
- cognitive independence level;
- ways of practical application of knowledge – problem solving in standard or non-standard situations;
- performance evaluation – by means of grades; analytical, qualitative evaluation; through emotional reactions;
- age;
- interests;
- gender;
- success rate;
- intellectual development level;
- temperament;
- individual psychological types or characterological similarity;
- professional orientation and plans;
- place of residence;
- social background;
- quantitative group composition – working in pairs, etc.
Differentiated approach to art training has a number of positive results:

- Reduces stress levels, tension and overload in children, which sometimes hardly meet the requirements within the standard curriculum;
- Solves the problem related to students’ failures since every child studies the way he or she can and improves the social and psychological class environment;
- Makes sure each student reaches the educational minimum in the art cycle of subjects.

Differentiated approach in training also has a positive effect on the students’ development dynamics in terms of:

- students’ social skills (harmonizing their immediate interaction, their formal and informal communication; developing tolerance and goodwill in individuals);
- interest in learning;
- own research in cognitive and practical fields of activity;
- mutual training and self-training.
REFERENCES