The Use of Play as An Element of Differentiated Instruction for Students With Special Educational Needs

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Abstract: Differentiated instruction is defined as the alteration of the learning process through flexible and alternative teaching approaches and actions that respond to the range of differences in terms of learning readiness, interests, and the way each student learns. Therefore, it is necessary for teaching to be differentiated in terms of content, process, and final product. Regarding the differentiation of the learning process, i.e., the activities in which students participate in order to understand or master each new cognitive subject, educators often use playful activities, as children learn through play, since this approach to learning has been shown to be particularly important for their cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development. Research shows that the use of play in the learning process is highly effective for students with special educational needs, as it enhances their active engagement, cultivates the skill of effective communication and constructive collaboration, and positively influences their understanding of cognitive subjects. This study aims to demonstrate through literature review the positive impact of using play as an element of differentiated instruction on students with special educational needs.

Key words: differentiated instruction, play, special educational needs

1. Introduction

Differentiated instruction refers to the adaptation of teaching to meet the individual needs and differences of students in each class. Its purpose is to provide support to all students, regardless of their level, pace, and special needs. Differentiated instruction takes into account the various preferences, interests, skills, and levels of understanding of students. It entails changes in the pace, level, and type of teaching provided by the educator in order to better meet the individual needs, interests, or the way each student learns more easily and efficiently. It refers to the response of each child to the curriculum, taking into account what they know and what they need to learn, allowing them to use existing knowledge upon which to build new knowledge, leveraging their abilities while also considering the difficulties they may encounter (Koutselini, 2001).

According to Tomlinson (1999), differentiated instruction is an interactive situation between the educator and the student, through which the former responds to the latter's unique needs, enabling the latter to actively participate, continually learn, and reach their full potential. Direct learning, student satisfaction, and adherence to specific learning needs, considering the learning level, constituted the initial level of formulation of definitions for

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differentiated instruction (Ernest, Thompson, Heckaman, Hull, & Yates, 2011).

Differentiated instruction can be defined as an educational approach with a specific philosophy that is governed by basic principles, whereby the educator differentiates the teaching axis by adjusting its four dimensions: content, process, final outcome, and learning environment. Subsequently, the educator differentiates the aforementioned four dimensions of teaching based on the other three dimensions related to student diversity: readiness level, interests, and learning profile. As each child is unique, with different interests and learning in different ways using different strategies, teaching must adapt to the needs of each child. The challenge for every educator is to identify ways to adapt teaching and learning to the abilities, performance, interests, and particular inclinations of each child (Tomlinson & Edison, 2003).

Based on the philosophy of differentiated instruction, the diversity of the student population is the norm and is valuable. Therefore, learning experiences are organized based on this and strong inclusive student communities are built that reject the exclusion of the different. Additionally, the educator recognizes in each student the ability to learn and the potential for academic success and transfers this belief while simultaneously mediating to show them how to succeed. Finally, the educator takes responsibility for maximizing progress opportunities for every student. Additionally, they recognize and remove obstacles that exclude many students from equal access to knowledge and academic progress (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005).

The principles of differentiated teaching include the flexibility of the teaching process, focusing on essential aspects both in terms of learning objectives and content, and evaluating teaching with a focus on enhancing feedback, promoting learning, and encouraging engagement. All students participate in each teaching activity according to their dynamics, respecting their individuality and personality, while the value of their efforts to approach knowledge is acknowledged. A framework of healthy and constructive collaboration is developed among those involved in the teaching process, including students and educators. Educators continuously organize and reorganize their teaching efforts to achieve appropriate adaptations each time (Tomlinson, 2010).

2. The Significant Role of Play in Learning Process

Play is considered a fundamental method of expression and is closely linked to preschool education, being a primary pedagogical method for children's learning. It is a leading activity that concerns the child's personality. Play, and occasionally symbolic play, allows the child to utilize their intrinsic motives and flexibility, creating positive emotions and diverting negative experiences, focusing on the process rather than the outcome of the activity (Konstantinopoulos, 2007). During play, children solve their problems individually or in groups, in their own way and time, without fear of failure, while also experimenting with various behaviors, placing them in new situations and handling them accordingly (Petrovic-Soco, 2013).

Play is a primary characteristic of cognitive and social development of children. It's also considered a useful tool for understanding the world they live in and the situations they experience. These experiences are closely linked to the process of children' s socialization, both in their current childhood state and age and in their future identity as a member of the social group they inhabit. Developmentally, play contributes to physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of children's development, making it indispensable. Dyring playing, various mental processes are formed: initially, the development of symbolism is observed, followed by imagination, memory, thinking, language, creativity, and many other cognitive functions (Lillard et al., 2013).

Through the symbolism developed during play, children creatively reflect various social situations, providing positive stimuli not only for entertainment but also for the learning process. Through this process, children may adopt roles, engage in socialization, learn to operate according to rules, incorporate and understand cultural contexts and elements, as well as manage the selfish tendencies that are normal during development and various situations (Scales, Almy, Nicolopoulou, & Ervin-Tripp, 1991).

As children develop and are called upon to cultivate other skills such as writing and reading, the process of play can positively contribute to the cultivation of these skills. For example, role-playing is considered to have a significant presence in expanding knowledge, which combined with memorization and linguistic ability signifies the evolution of representational thinking. The fundamental characteristic of representational thinking lies in the child's ability to present objects and events through an assimilation process (Weininger & Fitzgerald, 1988).

Play is considered the predominant activity for the development and learning of children in preschool age. Children engage socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively with other children and adults, with familiar or new objects and representations, with realistic and fantastical situations. Play is also an integral part of the learning process within the school environment, ensuring that the school environment monitors the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development. It has been shown to help children adapt to the school environment and even enhance children's readiness for learning, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills. Play-based differentiated instruction offers a dynamic and inclusive approach to teaching and learning that recognizes and celebrates the unique strengths and needs of every student, as it creates a positive and enjoyable learning experience that motivates students to actively engage with content and persevere through challenges. It fosters a love of learning and curiosity that extends beyond the classroom. Observing students during play provides valuable insights into their understanding, skills, and misconceptions. Teachers can use informal assessments during play to monitor progress, provide feedback, and adjust instruction accordingly. Play-based instruction allows for the integration of multiple subjects and domains, promoting interdisciplinary learning and connections across different areas of knowledge. This interdisciplinary approach enhances students' understanding and retention of concepts. Furthermore, Play can incorporate diverse cultural perspectives, experiences, and traditions, making learning more relevant and meaningful for students from various backgrounds. It fosters cultural sensitivity, empathy, and appreciation for diversity (Velaoras, 2016).

Through play, children of all ages learn as they discover and control ideas, create, improvise, represent, and communicate. Learning through play can emerge spontaneously or be organized with specific goals by the educator, be suggested by children through their questions and reflections, or be selected by the educator based on the needs of the class. Moreover, it can involve students, educators, situations from everyday life, or current events (Ginsburg et al., 2007).

Studies have shown a strong connection between playing and its contribution to learning. Play is considered future learning tools. Educational games can support theoretical learning, practical learning, collaboration, problem-solving skills, and participation. They offer students challenges and rewards that increase interest, simulate real-life situations, and lead to further development of skills and knowledge. It is noted that through play, the educational process is differentiated, and the role of the educator shifts from authoritative to supportive, flexible, and motivating, catering to students' interests and creating conditions for the development of their independence and responsibility (Avgitidou, 2001).

In recent years, more and more educators have been trying to incorporate play into their teaching as an educational tool because play entertains and educates students, helps them develop their abilities, and shapes them.

Educational play has been utilized in teaching since the time of Montessori to construct knowledge through practice. Play is considered both a way of learning for children and a way of learning how to learn. Through play, processes related to learning are stimulated and reinforced. Repetition, practice, exploration, discovery, composition, imitation, and memorization are just some of the basic learning processes. Also, through play, children develop skills closely related to the learning process. Engagement, self-regulation, self-esteem, trust, cooperation, internal motivation, perseverance are essential abilities for learning (Kappas, 2005).

Research shows that the use of play in the learning process is highly effective for students with special educational needs, as it enhances their active engagement, cultivates the skill of effective communication and constructive collaboration, and positively influences the level of understanding of cognitive subjects. It also promotes the development of dexterity, imagination, intelligence, attention, dominance, agility, and flexibility, and cultivates other valuable behaviors such as patience, courage, sincerity, chivalry, honesty, superiority, tolerance, and virtue in victory and defeat, will, initiative, and perseverance in achieving a specific goal (Schwander & Andersen, 2005).

Other researchers claim that especially the new generation of students (digital natives), who have grown up in the digital age surrounded by computers, digital games, and mobile phones, has developed different ways of learning, and they conclude that changes are needed both in the content of learning and in methodology, with games playing a dominant role in guiding them. The need for the use of play in the education of students with or without special educational needs is also emphasized by Van Eck (Van Eck, 2006) and Oblinger (Oblinger, 2006), highlighting the necessity of adapting schools to a cultural framework that includes them, taking into consideration that the use of play as a means of differentiated instruction offers several advantages for meeting the diverse needs of learners because Play-based activities can be tailored to match the individual learning styles, interests, and abilities of students. Teachers can adapt the level of challenge, complexity, and support provided within the play context to accommodate diverse learners. Play incorporates multiple sensory modalities, allowing students to learn through visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile experiences. This multi-sensory approach benefits students with different learning preferences and strengths, while at the same time play allows students to explore topics and concepts at their own pace and in ways that resonate with them personally. It encourages autonomy and self-directed learning, empowering students to take ownership of their education. Finally, Play-based activities offer flexibility in how students engage with content, allowing for differentiation based on readiness, interest, and learning profile. Teachers can provide a variety of play materials, prompts, and challenges to accommodate diverse learners within the same classroom (Oblinger, 2006).

In summary, we can say that play is both a developmental agent and a learning tool for every child. Educational play offers numerous benefits for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Some of these benefits include enhanced learning, as it facilitates learning in a natural and engaging way. It allows children to explore concepts, experiment with ideas, and develop problem-solving skills in a hands-on manner. Moreover, play stimulates cognitive skills such as memory, attention, language development, and executive functions like planning, organizing, and decision-making. It encourages creativity, imagination, and divergent thinking. Through play, children learn to interact with others, negotiate, share, and collaborate. They develop empathy, perspective-taking, and communication skills, laying the foundation for healthy social relationships. Play provides a safe space for children to express and regulate their emotions. It helps them cope with stress, anxiety, and frustration, fostering emotional resilience and self-confidence while promoting gross and fine motor skills, coordination, balance, and spatial awareness. Play during the learning process encourages children to use

their imagination, create imaginary worlds, and engage in pretend play scenarios. This fosters creativity, innovation, and flexible thinking. Educational play often presents challenges and obstacles for children to overcome, encouraging them to think critically, strategize, and find solutions independently or collaboratively while at the same time they develop self-discipline and self-control, essential skills for academic success and personal well-being. Overall, educational play offers a holistic approach to learning that addresses the diverse needs and developmental areas of children while promoting joy, creativity, and lifelong curiosity. It also serves as an excellent element of differentiated teaching for educators as it allows for the mobilization of students while ensuring their active participation in the learning process. It helps children develop their creative and critical thinking skills while providing all students with the opportunity to approach knowledge through different approaches that suit their individual learning styles (Kappas, 2005).

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