Students' populations are becoming more academically diverse due to ever increasing variety of learners in the heterogeneous classroom make-up. Effective teachers in contemporary classrooms have to learn to develop classroom routines that attend to learner variance in order to raise students’ achievement. Teachers need to focus on using sound instructional practices that will improve students’ performance for all types of learners. The purpose of the study was to investigate the teachers’ knowledge, attitude and practice of differentiated instruction in the case of faculty of education in the department of Educational Planning and Management (EdPM) at University of Gondar (UoG). The study employed qualitative research method with case study design which was used to answer the research questions raised. The research participants were dean of the faculty of education, the department head of EdPM and teachers at UoG. The participants were purposively selected. Interview and Focus Group Discussion were used to collect data. The data obtained were analyzed and interpreted using qualitative description and narration. The results of the analysis showed that teachers have positive attitude towards Differentiated Instruction (DI). However, the elements of DI were not properly practiced yet as expected for a number of reasons. It was then concluded that the prevailing practice of DI was poor. In addition to this, the trend of using the lecture method frequently and assessing students based on examinations as mere modes of teaching and assessment were emphasized at the faculty. To overcome this, it was suggested that the current mode of teaching which focuses on traditional lecture method should be changed. Moreover, the actual context of the faculty and its influence on the teaching learning process should be given due attention.

Keywords: Teachers’ Knowledge, Attitude, Differentiated Instruction
INTRODUCTION

There is an increase in academic diversity of students in contemporary classrooms in that no two students learn in the same manner or at the same rate. Each student is unique and has different learning styles and preferences. Teachers are expected to meet the needs of all learners in these diverse classrooms. This presents daily challenges for the teachers to address the learning needs of the students (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Differentiated instruction is a highly effective means of educating whereby teachers can meet the unique learning needs of all students in their class (George, 2005). Teachers need to customize their instructional delivery and assignments to address the needs of all learners while creating opportunities for success of all. The successful adoption of differentiated instruction depends on the willingness, commitment, readiness and support provided by the teacher to the learners as the facilitator. Teachers play a primary role in the application of differentiated instruction in classrooms and so they have the key to successful implementation of differentiated instruction strategies.

Students’ academic needs are more readily met in a classroom where teachers utilize the differentiated instruction approach (Tomlinson, 2004). Teachers face increased pressure to ensure that every learner demonstrate high academic achievement. To be successful in providing all learners a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education, teachers should consider differentiating instruction in order to give students meaningful and quality instruction. Johnsen (2003) argues that teachers have a responsibility to make school a place where every student can benefit. Teachers are instrumental in helping students to reach their heights and potential in learning. Thus teachers encounter unprecedented pressure to raise learning standards while meeting the needs of all learners in the diverse classroom.

Teachers need to prepare students for future by utilizing effective instructional alternatives for teaching an academically diverse population. Teachers should be sensitive to the needs of students, accommodate their different learning styles and find ways to help them make connections for learning to occur in the best possible way. Teachers are continually challenged to implement modifications to their lessons within the classroom to provide students with a positive, interesting, challenging, collaborative and supportive learning environment to ensure that each individual student’s academic needs are met. Teachers need to assist in creating instructional environments that will maximize the learning opportunities and will help students in developing the knowledge and skills necessary for achieving positive learning outcomes. Beecher and Sweeney (2008) assert that the focus of education should be about helping students experience significant progress in fulfilling their learning potential. Such learning potential can be realized through differentiated instruction for it allows teacher to tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of each individual students. The teacher has the responsibility for initiating and implementing hence has to take an active role to maintain the integrity of differentiated instruction approach. Teachers’ attitude is pivotal in determining effective implementation of differentiated instruction for success to be experienced.

There is immense student diversity in contemporary classrooms and so teachers are faced with a tremendous challenge to plan instruction that focuses on individual students academic needs. Despite the adoption of varied approaches in heterogeneous population there is need to tailor classroom instruction to meet the needs of all students. Teachers are a major
influence on learning success of students. Teachers need to differentiate their instruction in order to give each child equal and appropriate education. This new innovative way of differentiated instruction that enable students learn by making adaptations to key learning variables will help teachers meet the needs of all students.

Darling-Hammond (1998) claims that in response to the increasingly complex society and a rapidly changing, technology based economy, schools are being asked to educate the most diverse student body in our history to higher academic standards than ever before. As is evidenced across the literature, the “one size-fits-all” approach to teaching no longer meets the diverse needs of today’s learners. In contrast, differentiated instruction benefits all students by focusing on essential skills and ideas in content areas, responding to individual learner variance, and integrating assessment with instruction (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001; Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998; Tomlinson & McTighe, Gregory & Chapman, 2007, Heacox, 2002). Within the approach all learners profit from a variety of instructional methods and scaffolds combined with an appropriate balance of challenging instruction and successful learning opportunities (Lawrence & Brown, 2004). Moreover, the environment in a differentiated classroom is one of high regard for students' diverse abilities (Pettig, 2000; Tobin, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999). Differentiated instruction as a framework has the capability of assisting schools in providing all learners with maximum opportunity to fully succeed in school which in turn improves quality of education.

Although differentiated instruction is widely recommended (Rock, Ellis, Greg & Gable, 2008; Lawrence-Brown, 2004), implementing the approach is complex and not without difficulty (Tomlinson, 1999). Some literature reports the challenges teachers have encountered using differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1995; Tomlinson, Moon and Callahan, 1998). However, the knowledge on teachers’ response to adopting the new differentiated instruction approach is limited. Hence, this study explored the teachers' knowledge, attitude and practice towards differentiated instruction approach in teaching and learning process in the faculty of Education at UoG.

Hence, the study aims to answer the following basic research questions.

1. What is the teachers’ knowledge about differentiated instruction?
2. What is the attitude of teachers towards differentiated instruction?
3. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?

**Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to:

- Investigate teachers’ knowledge in their practice of differentiated instruction.
- Examine the attitude of teachers towards the practice of differentiated instruction.
- Assess teachers’ practice of differentiated instruction in their teaching.

**METHOD AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

**Method of the Study**

The method used in this study was qualitative research method which allows to have detailed understanding about the issue under investigation. In relation to this Patton (2002) suggested that qualitative methods assist the researcher seeking to gain a deeper understanding of a central phenomenon.

**Design of the Study**

The study employed qualitative case study design since it aimed at investigating the knowledge, attitude and practice of teachers in the case of Faculty of Education in the department of EdPM at UoG. A case study is a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle (Nisbet and Watt, 1984). Hence, case study design is used in order to investigate the knowledge, attitude and practice of differentiated instruction.

**Sources of Data**
The sources of the data for this study were teachers, department head and the dean of the faculty of education.

**Sample and Sampling Techniques**

The participants of the study were the dean, department head and teachers in the faculty of education. There are about three departments in the faculty of education. The department of EdPM was purposively selected since the researcher is the member of the department and assumed to get relevant data from teachers of the department selected. There are about 18 teachers where 15 are males and 3 are females. Among these 6 teachers were purposively selected to be participants of the study. The dean and the department head were also purposively selected.

**Instruments of Data Collection**

In order to get first hand information and relevant data for the study from the participants, interview and focus group discussion were used.

**Method of Data Analysis**

The data from the interview and focus group discussion were categorized and described qualitatively using narration and explanation by categorizing the data in to themes.

**Results and Discussion**

The data obtained through interview and focus group discussion (FGD) were treated under three major parts.

1. Teachers’ knowledge about DI
2. Teachers’ attitude towards DI,
3. The practice of DI in the selected study area.

In relation to the knowledge of teachers about DI the dean of the faculty was asked. The dean replied that:

*As to me DI is providing instruction according to the students’ level of understanding and teachers are not strange for this. But I did not see such practice among teachers because most teachers in our faculty are mostly using LCD, Smart Board and power point presentation.*

From the above response of the dean, it is possible to deduce that the dean and the teachers have the knowledge about the concept of DI. Supporting this Levy (2008) explained that differentiated instruction is not new as teachers have differentiated instruction to some extent since teaching began. But their practical application in the classroom is very low. As it is very known teachers’ knowledge about the concept of DI is very crucial for its implementation or practice. But knowledge alone does not make sense unless it is supported by practice. As it is stated in some literatures teachers have higher responsibility in practicing DI in their classroom. In relation to this, Tomlinson (2001) suggested that differentiated instruction obliges that a teacher makes reasonable approaches of learning much at a time. In addition, the role of a teacher in a differentiated instruction class is to make sure that each child is mastering the goals. The teachers have a plan for each child to follow. The teacher’s job is to make sure that they are assisting the children with different options to try different ways of learning. A differentiated instruction teacher provides strategies for children that are already goal oriented. Differentiated teachers usually allow their students multiple times of trying, before they will join in and offer solutions to a problem. In sum, though teachers have the knowledge about DI, their practical application is not as expected.

The department head has also supported the idea of the dean in that his knowledge about the concept of DI is not as such strange. But the application in the actual classroom practice is difficult due to different reasons. In relation to the concept of DI the department head replied that

*DI is helping students depending on their needs which allow teachers to be diversity responsive. What I am not very clear is the way of differentiation.*

From the above response of the department head.
head it is possible to understand that even though he is not strange to the concept of DI, he has a limited concept about the ways of differentiation. As I have observed during the period of the interview most teachers have few understanding about the different approaches of DI mainly on its implementation.

The teachers in the FGD suggests that they have a certain know how about DI. But because they are mainly focusing on traditional lecturing they are not practicing it in their classroom regularly by early planning and preparation.

In relation to this one of the discussants said that

*I am not clearly stating my course objectives and plan with respect to the principles of DI except providing some assignments and group work as usual for my students to fulfill course requirements.*

This response of the participant indicates that teachers’ knowledge about DI is not as expected from them. Because their response indicates that they have low understanding about the concept of DI. In principle, applying DI requires teachers to have clear knowledge, positive attitude and commitment. In addition as far as students’ diversity is concerned, it is impossible to satisfy the needs and interests of each student with the traditional role of the teacher. Instruction in higher education is dominated by one-size-fits-all pedagogical method, which poorly serves a diverse student body (Ernst & Ernst, 2005). Therefore, providing teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills about DI is very important activity in the practice of DI in the actual teaching learning process.

During the interview about the teachers’ knowledge of DI, I understand that teachers have certain know how about it. But except general knowledge issues like content differentiation, methodology differentiation, objective differentiation and assessment differentiation are not as such clear. Because most teachers state objectives and identify contents randomly and they provide similar tests, assignments and examinations for the sake of course completion without the principles of differentiation. Hence, teachers need further knowledge on DI in order to apply it appropriately.

Another participant added that

*My knowledge about DI is not as such as the principle says. To me DI is very complicated which is difficult to apply it in the actual classroom context.*

In this case the participant’s response indicates that the actual classroom context is below the expected as far as their knowledge is concerned. In relation to this Tomlinson (2003) suggested that the school environment will support or deter the student’s quest for affirmation, contribution, power, purpose, and challenge in the classroom. The learning environment includes the physical layout of the classroom, the way that the teacher uses the space, environmental elements and sensitivities including lighting, as well as the overall atmosphere of the classroom. The teacher’s goal is to create an environment that is positive, structured, and supportive for each student. The physical environment should be a place that is flexible with varied types of furniture and arrangements, and areas for quiet individual work as well as areas for group work and collaboration. This supports a variety of ways to engage in flexible and dynamic learning. Teachers should be sensitive and alert to ways that the classroom environment supports students’ ability to interact with others individually, in small groups, and as a whole class. This demands to have clear conceptual knowledge about DI in order to apply it appropriately.

As to the teachers’ attitude towards DI all participants (those participated in the interview and focus group discussion) replied that they have positive attitude towards it. In relation to this one of the interviewee forwarded that

*I am highly interested to the issues and
objectives of differentiated instruction because it allows teachers to know and understand their students. It also enables us to be diversity responsive and it is when we have positive attitude towards something that will be easier to apply it.

From the above response of the participant it is possible to infer that application of a certain program or teaching method requires positive attitude and commitment on the side of the practitioners where DI is one. Supporting this Anderson (2004) stated that whatever is done in terms of distributing new material or developing new curriculum, educational effectiveness depends on teachers’ attitude and their ways of teaching and handling classes. Students deserve the opportunity to have a teacher who will be waiting at the end of each student road block or challenge with a smile. In the same vein, it will be that optimistic teacher attitude that will encourage the student to continue toward successful achievement.

This explanation indicates that having positive attitude towards something is very important for its effective implementation. Hence, developing positive attitude towards DI will be essential for its implementation which could enable teachers to facilitate students learning.

The dean of the faculty replied about teachers’ attitude towards DI as follows.

*Most teachers’ attitude towards DI is good. They show some kind of interest when we discuss about the teaching learning process. But they mostly practice lecturing and sometimes use group discussion method in their teaching.*

From the above response one can conclude that teachers have positive attitude towards DI but their actual practice is not as expected. Developing positive attitude towards DI is very essential and timely in order to facilitate students learning and be responsive to the diverse needs of students. Supporting this Gregory & Chapman (2007) explained that differentiated instruction assists teachers in planning strategically in order to meet the diverse needs of learners in today’s classrooms to achieve specific standards.

Practicing DI is very important in order to satisfy the diverse needs of students. In relation to the actual practice of DI in the faculty, the department head replied that

*Of course most teachers try to differentiate instruction but it is difficult to say it is properly practiced based on the principles of differentiation. Because most teachers prepare course plan by defining objectives and select contents based on the objectives. But objectives are not prepared in a differentiated manner since most of the objectives are focusing on the cognitive domain giving less emphasis to the affective and psychomotor domains.*

Since students have diverse needs and capabilities the three domains of the Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives need to be included in defining objectives. This shows that though contents are differentiated the objectives defined are not differentiated. Hence, the practice of DI is very poor.

The participants of the FGD also explained that the practice of DI in their faculty is low. In relation to this one of the discussants suggested that

*The practice of DI is said to be very poor in the faculty because most of us use traditional mode of instruction. Of course we differentiate contents and methods to some extent but we provide similar test, assignment and examination for all students of the classroom. But as we know in a DI it is not only the contents and methods that should be differentiated but also the assessment techniques.*

From the above suggestion it is possible to say that assessment which is one of the most important elements of differentiation is not properly practiced which in turn indicates that DI is not fully practiced. In relation to
assessment in DI. Sternberg & Zhang (2005) suggested that when teaching with the philosophy of DI is applied, assessments are used throughout the implementation of DI and are the driving force which remind teachers to pre-assess students and provide formative assessments throughout the learning process.

As to the opportunities to practice DI in the faculty the participants suggested that

Some of the classrooms are with fixed desks which are difficult to move from place to place within the class and others are with smart board where applying DI is very difficult. This in turn makes it difficult to move students from one side of the classroom to the other.

From the above explanation it is possible to understand that the actual context of the classroom arrangement is not suitable to apply or practice DI. In relation to the learning environment Tomlinson (2003) suggested that environment will support or deter the student’s quest for affirmation, contribution, power, purpose, and challenge in the classroom. The learning environment includes the physical layout of the classroom, the way that the teacher uses the space, environmental elements and sensitivities including lighting, as well as the overall atmosphere of the classroom. The teacher’s goal is to create an environment that is positive, structured, and supportive for each student. The physical environment should be a place that is flexible with varied types of furniture and arrangements, and areas for quiet individual work as well as areas for group work and collaboration. This supports a variety of ways to engage in flexible and dynamic learning.

Some of the factors are lack of commitment among all the concerned ones, lack of training about the implementation of DI, students’ lack of readiness and motivation to their learning and large number of students in the classroom.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusions

Based on the results, the following conclusions were made.

• Teachers had positive attitude towards DI. They also noted that it was of importance to implement differentiated instruction within their classrooms because this approach is necessary to address the diversity of learners.

• The prevailing practice of the elements of DI was poor. Thus, it is difficult to say that the elements of DI are fully practiced in the faculty. The trend of using the lecture method frequently and assessing students based on examinations as mere modes of teaching and assessment were emphasized.

• Many factors affect the implementation of the elements of DI. These include large class size, heavy workload, and shortage of time, teachers’ lack of commitment, poor coordination and lack of support at different levels and pupils’ reluctance to express their ideas in front of their friends.

Recommendations

The researcher suggested the following recommendations in light of the summary and conclusions made.

• The current mode of teaching which focused on traditional lecture method should be changed. The actual context of the faculty and its influence on the practice/implementation of DI should be considered and given due attention.

• Differentiated instruction approach is an effective instructional strategy to meet the needs of all students and should be implemented in instruction.

• Teachers need to be provided with support, information relating to effective implementation of differentiated instruction.

• Further researches on the area should be conducted in other institutions

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