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The new Cypriot music curriculum: teachers' interpretation and implementation of differentiation

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Abstract

Differentiation is a key concept in the Cypriot music curriculum, last revised in 2010. This paper aims to investigate teachers' interpretation and implementation of differentiation in their music classrooms. Interviews with Cypriot classroom music teachers and focus groups with their students took place within the context of a larger research project that investigated how elements of the Cypriot music curriculum were interpreted and applied by teachers and how this pedagogy in turn influenced students' motivation. Interviews were carried out with eight music teachers. Differentiation, as understood and implemented by these Cypriot music teachers, differed in fundamental ways to differentiation as conceptualised in academic literature concerned with this concept. These findings may serve as a point of reflection for future professional development in Cyprus relating to differentiation and its implementation.

Keywords: Differentiation; secondary school; music education; music curriculum

Introduction

Previous research has shown that there is a gap between theoretical knowledge and pedagogical practice concerned with including varied learners in meaningful music making (Van Weelden & Whipple, 2014). Many studies have noted the challenges found in contemporary classrooms where teachers are responsible for supporting a wide spectrum of learners. Ongoing challenges include a lack of resources, training and research in instructional strategies and curriculum development, which are needed to equip teachers for their role in meeting a range of student needs (Raponi, 2019). While teachers understand that students have many differences, they can feel overwhelmed and unable to provide independent and differentiated educational plans for students in large music classrooms (Darrow, 2010). Since differentiation is found as a highly important concept in the Cypriot new music curriculum (MoEC, 2010), the aim of this study is to investigate the ways teachers interpret and implement differentiation in their music classrooms.

Context

It has been suggested that educational change in Cyprus need systematic, rigorous reflection and an improved research agenda (Angelides, 2001; Angelides & Leigh, 2004). In response for such calls to action, in 2010 (MoEC, 2010), the new Cypriot curriculum was introduced for gradual implementation. Differentiated learning has been adopted as the optimal instructional methodological tool (Neophytou et al., 2018). This curriculum reform also stressed the importance of teacher training practices, through which teachers would be able to implement differentiated instruction in mixed ability classrooms.

Accordingly, differentiation is found as a key concept in the new music curriculum (MoEC, 2010). It is defined as the teaching process that supports individual students with different needs as found in mixed ability classes (MoEC, 2010). Teachers are encouraged to acknowledge that students have different interests, experiences and abilities and to structure teaching and learning activities in order to facilitate individual students to reach the goals set in the curriculum (MoEC, 2010, p. 4). The new music curriculum states that personalised learning should serve the needs of each individual student, taking account of musical preferences and skills and allowing students to start their learning from their own level and move at their own pace (MoEC, 2010). Knowledge, attitude and skills for every module are identified and separated into categories labelled as basic, prerequisite and transformational and are used as a framework when organising the lessons and differentiation activities.

The theory of differentiation

Differentiation in education has its roots in the idea that learning should be structured in such a way as to respond to students' individual needs rather than trying to adapt students to fit the curriculum (Tomlinson, 1995, 2000). Several researchers agree that it is through differentiation that students' needs may be met (Maeng & Bell, 2015; DeNeve et al., 2015; Valiandes, 2015). Accordingly, differentiation requires that teachers provide multiple avenues through which students can acquire content, process information and develop final products. Differentiated instruction is the process of making sure that what students learn, the way they learn it and the way they demonstrate what they have learned match their readiness levels, interests and style of learning (Rock et al., 2008; Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017).

Four major principles of differentiated instruction originate from Tomlinson (2000). The first is flexibility with regard to the 'essentials', signifying that teachers may adjust the classroom content, processes and intended products. Secondly, assessment is ongoing and connected with instruction, providing teachers with information that helps them monitor the interest, prior knowledge and readiness levels of their individual students. The third principle is collaboration between the teacher and students. Accordingly, students and teachers work together in a manner that responds to each student's specific needs for guidance and yet provides the support and scope for individual learners to become self-directed. Finally, the fourth principle emphasises student participation in respectful work. The teacher provides all students with opportunities to work at their own pace, engaging in challenging tasks that will help them improve.

Studies have proposed two approaches to differentiation (Bray, 2000). First, differentiation by task describes different routes to constructing knowledge and signifies flexibility concerning content and process. Secondly, differentiation by outcome refers to open-ended tasks that allow for the achievement of differentiated, personalised outcomes. Bray (2000) suggests that ideally teachers should include both differentiation approaches in their lessons, so that all students will be able to achieve acceptable levels of understanding.

The results of previous research in the general educational context revealed that students were not challenged enough in 'one-size-fits-all' classes (Tomlinson, 1995). According to Tomlinson & McTighe (2006), teachers try to differentiate instruction by giving struggling learners less to do and by giving more advanced students more. In relation to this, Tomlinson et al. (2003) noted that differentiation should not be an excuse for teachers to have low expectations for low-achievers but should encourage teachers to find ways to broaden all students' knowledge.

The principles of differentiation in the field of music education

In relation to differentiation by task, the first principle of differentiation, which is communicating essential objectives at different levels, has been broadly discussed by music education researchers

(Hillier, 2011; Standerfer, 2011). Strategies such as including a variety of tasks and learning objectives that promote differing ways to simplify or alternatively heighten a task and allowing different ways for students to practice skills students can be given appropriate challenges (Standerfer, 2011), feel successful and work to improve their skills (Roberts, 2012). Roberts (2012, p. 24) provides specific music examples of ways that teachers could provide appropriate challenges through different tasks. For example, he refers to different ways in which students can work on reading melody cards with *so*, *mi* and *la*. Students who struggle can read common pattern such as *so-mi-la-so-mi*, while advanced singers can sing less common pattern such as *mi-so-la-la-la* and some students may need time to study the patterns in their head. In the same vein, Standerfer (2011) reported that good music teachers provide students with various ways to practice skills and process new information. She further explained that when music teachers let students choose the most appealing task, they can process the new information or practice the new skill in a way that matches their skills level, interest or preferred ways of learning.

Current research in the music context has also discussed the importance of group work (Brown, 2007; Hillier, 2011; Roberts, 2012; Standerfer, 2011) and the ways groups are formed (Hallam et al., 2011). Roberts (2012) reported that small groups can be an effective way to differentiate as it allows more successful students to lead and less successful students to follow while it provides social opportunities to students. For example, while students work together to find the notes of a known song on the xylophone, strong students can help students who are not so strong in this skill.

The link between assessment and instruction in a differentiated music classroom has been discussed in a previous research. Hillier (2011) stressed the significance of the ongoing process of observing and communicating with students through formative observational assessments such as providing feedback and correcting hand positions. Roberts (2012) reported that through assessment music teachers can modify instructions in simple ways. For example, a student with difficulties can demonstrate how to accurately perform a siren. Students benefit in many ways through this opportunity; not only the student who performed the siren has an opportunity to perform, which can then lead to improved singing skills and improved self-esteem, but also other struggling students can have a child model. In relation to assessment, Standerfer (2011) reported that pre-assessing students helped teachers to adjust the curriculum and structure the learning experiences in response to each learner's unique needs. Standerfer proposed that students should be offered choice in how prior learning is demonstrated, so as to reduce stress levels related to assessment and help students shine.

The significance of collaboration between the teacher and students has also been stressed in the music classroom context (Hillier, 2011). Hillier (2011) stressed that in a differentiated classroom, the student has the role of a leader and director of ideas and lessons, and the teacher has the role of the facilitator of time and resources. For example, music students contribute to create goals for performances and provide feedback to the teacher indicating whether a task is too easy or too difficult. This form of differentiation encourages their self-directed learning as they can express their needs, understand their abilities and take responsibilities for their progress (Hillier, 2011).

The fourth principle of differentiation which is the participation of all students in respectful work has been discussed in music education (Hillier, 2011). Van Weelden & Whipple's (2014) research reported that students with difficulties were given peripheral and insignificant roles in the music class. Students bring different learning preferences and individual experiences and teachers can find it overwhelming to try to accommodate these differences. Music teachers need to strive to show respect for all students and honour/support their differences by finding ways to provide them with opportunities of success (Hillier, 2011). As Roberts stated, by providing activities that target different ways of learning, music teachers can provide learning opportunities for all kinds of learners. Teachers should ensure that students work on their own pace, contribute with their own strengths to the class and are inspired and challenged to focus on areas of improvement (Hillier, 2011).

Implications of differentiation for student motivation

The link between differentiation and enhanced motivation has been discussed by various researchers in the music education context (Hillier, 2011; Standerfer, 2011). Hillier (2011) proposed that the practice of differentiation increases students' engagement and passion for making music. Standerfer (2011) stressed that students' motivation can increase when lessons respond to individual preferences for particular styles of music and through listening to students' interests, teachers can provide an exciting connection to music.

Enjoyment, which has been considered as a major aspect of students' motivation (Hallam et al., 2011; Hadjickou, 2021), has been found to increase with opportunities of choice (Green 2008). In relation to this, opportunities for choice where students can select their skill level and their preferred way of responding to a task has also been stressed in differentiation music studies (Robert, 2012). For example, as Robert (2012) reported, a student who struggle when decoding notation may be able to sing his part in a canon and a student with fine motor delays with difficulties on the recorder may sing a solo. By providing a variety of activities in a given class, teachers can help students feel successful.

Difficulties in implementing differentiation

There is no doubt that teachers face many difficulties when differentiating instruction (Nikolaie, 2014; Moosa & Shareefa, 2019). For example, research showed that academic diversity amongst the students was found to be challenging (Tomlinson, 1995), and that teachers were not aware of the ways in which they could modify the curriculum in order to meet the needs of the students whose proficiencies were above the grade-level curriculum (Callaham et al., 2003). Arguably, many teachers believe that they adopt differentiated instructions in their teaching but they are not (Nicolae, 2014). Research has stressed the importance, for teachers, of understanding the components of a good lesson, developing a clear understanding of what differentiated instruction is and understanding and practising differentiation in their classrooms (Tomlinson, 1995).

The failure of effective teachers' training has also been criticised by many researchers in the music context (Salvador, 2010; Gangi, 2011). Colwell and Thompson's (2000) research on music educator preparation to teach diverse learners reported the lack of music-specific courses, while 74% of the programs offered a course on teaching exceptional learners and only 21% were music specific. Building on Colwell and Thompson's study, Salvador (2010) also reported that lack of course content was a barrier in preparing music educators to teach a variety of learners. In Salvador's (2010) study, results showed that content on teaching varied learners was not always purposefully integrated in the music teacher preparation curriculum and even when content was given to students of undergraduate music education courses, it was not music-specific. Earlier research highlighted that the constantly changing nature of the mixed ability classroom context needs effective and strategic support (Raponi, 2019). Research showed that when in-service music teachers are provided with professional development and in-service training, they may respond better to varied learners (Linsernmeier, 2004; Yun Chen, 2007). Current studies in the broader education context also address the need of ongoing teacher professional development which is vital in achieving high-quality teaching and learning (Moose & Shareefa, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2018; Smets, 2019). In the Cypriot context, Stavrou & Koutselini (2016) stressed that ineffective pre- and in-service education was the primary reason for teachers' limited differentiation strategies.

Whereas research on differentiation has been undertaken in the Cypriot general classroom context (Valiandes et al., 2011; Stavrou & Koutselini, 2016; Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017), the present study investigated differentiation in the Cypriot music education context.

Research Question

This study investigates Cypriot secondary school teachers' interpretations and implementation of differentiation in their music classrooms.

Therefore, the research question addressed in this paper is

- How do teachers interpret and implement differentiation in their music classrooms?

Method

The findings reported in this paper are drawn from interviews with eight Cypriot secondary school (Year 7) classroom music teachers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allowed the researcher to investigate feelings, behaviours, perceptions, attitudes, values and beliefs underpinning the ideas emerging from the interviewees (Bell, 2005).

The sample was composed of the first eight teachers who, after a telephone conversation, agreed to take part in this research. Seven of the eight teachers were female. Among lower secondary school music teachers in Nicosia, the majority are female teachers (75%). Thus, the gender imbalance of this sample was not far from being representative of music teachers in Nicosia. Three were aged 35-44 years, while four were aged between 45 and 54 years, and the one male teacher was aged between 55 and 63 years. One of the teachers had a PhD in education, four had MA or MPhil qualifications in education and three had Bachelor of Arts qualifications.

The semi-structured teacher interviews focused on their interpretation and implementation of the principles of differentiation, as articulated in the Cypriot music curriculum. Interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings and translated to English from the Greek original. The interviews took place in the teachers' offices, music classrooms or other unoccupied classrooms in the school. Each teacher interview took place during a school break, and the average duration was 20 minutes. The analysis took place once all of the interviews were complete.

Prior to commencing this research, ethical approval from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Policy and Society, Institute of Education, University of London as well as the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus were obtained. The ethical issues involved in this research included consent, confidentiality and power relationships. Teachers were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point that their responses were valued and that the role of the interviewer was that of a researcher and not that of a teacher evaluator. The research was designed to be in accordance with the ethics of educational research stated in the literature (Creswell, 2003).

The scope of this study has some limitations such as the size of the study and the selection of the participants. Interviews with teachers took place during their free time at school, at a mutually convenient time. This made interview time limited, and it may have also constrained the teacher responses, as the interviews were fit to their busy teaching days within the school environment.

Data analysis

This study used thematic analysis as the analytic approach, allowing for a rich and detailed interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each teacher response was marked with a number for anonymity and each student with a pseudonym. Through an iterative process of coding and returning to the data, a number of themes emerged that were deemed as representing the teachers' understandings and experiences of differentiation. Grouping of the data led to the emergence of different themes relating to differentiation. When a theme was supported by evidence from more than one teacher, then it was counted as a theme. After reading the initial themes, these were merged into higher order themes with shared meanings.

Findings

The following six themes under the overarching topic of differentiation were found.

- Through small group work all students can benefit.
- Appropriate tasks can be devised according to students' abilities.
- Teachers should use a variety of approaches in order to keep all students engaged.
- Strategies can be used to attract the interest of demotivated students.
- The repertoire has to meet students' individual needs.
- The pace of the lesson can be challenging.

The themes are presented under two headings that correspond to the research question of the study: how the teachers interpreted differentiation and how the teachers implemented the principles of differentiation.

How the teachers interpreted differentiation

Our analysis showed that teachers facilitated group work in their classroom, with students working in groups of three, four or five. In relation to group work, the teachers explained that mixed ability grouping was the ideal way of grouping students. They explained that weak students were helped by stronger students and stronger students reinforced their knowledge by working with students with fewer abilities. A teacher explained that she ensured that all groups included a strong student who was able to lead the group in order for all groups to succeed in their work. The social skills such as teamwork that are gained through cooperative learning were discussed as being significant. Teachers also mentioned that they generally encourage students to help each other. In addition, teachers highlighted the importance of setting out clear guidelines so that students learn how to cooperate and work effectively in their groups, and the importance of modeling was advocated.

T: 'There are different groups where weak students work with strong students. In this way the opportunity is given to weak students to be active in a group with the help of stronger students. Thus, the weaker students benefit from the help and ultimately they become more confident. Also, with group work, the strong students are not disadvantaged as they have to work in a way that the less able students could understand. In this way all students benefit'.

T: 'Groups are of mixed abilities. After I get to know the students, I allocate strong students as leaders in different groups and then separate the rest of the students in the groups'.

Teachers explained that they tried to differentiate their teaching through the choice of learning tasks for individual students. They reported that it was their responsibility to structure 'easy' tasks for students they perceived as 'weak'. For example, they gave percussion instruments to students who cannot read notes and assigned extra work or more difficult tasks to students who they deemed as capable to meet these additional challenges.

T: 'Let's say I have students who attend private lessons and are already in grade 5. What we do in class seems rather odd to these students. Thus, they might not be bothered to take part because they already know the exercise. So, I have to find other ways to maintain their interest. I might let them be the leaders and ask them to help others, or I will give them something more difficult to play'.

In addition, teachers discussed that some students had started secondary school without any formal musical background and, for example, found difficulties with music notation.

Notwithstanding the acknowledgement of individual student needs, teachers placed responsibility for failure to learn on students. Only one teacher stated that they believed that all students would be able to respond effectively in classroom tasks if teachers were to give the appropriate guidelines and tasks.

T: 'Some students never bothered to learn how to read notes. They come to secondary school and they say 'At primary school we were singing all the time, we didn't learn how to read notes'. Of course they might not tell the truth and say this as an excuse. ...'

How the teachers implemented the principles of differentiation

The importance of flexibility and diversity in teaching approaches was advocated, with a view to meeting individual student needs and sustaining engagement in learning. It was stressed that activities should be presented in different ways to maintain levels of interest.

T: 'What makes a good music teacher is to never repeat oneself year after year. A music teacher has to be flexible. ... the way we present activities is really important'.

T: '... we have to find ways to present activities in different ways and make them more appealing'.

T: '... We have to see each student as a different personality and not put them all under the same umbrella. Students might like certain activities more than others. A group of students might prefer some activities and a group of other students might prefer different activities'.

Our analysis showed that teachers used differentiated practices to engage students they had identified as being demotivated. These differentiated strategies included talking to them individually, asking them about their musical preferences, putting them in charge of a classroom task or encouraging them and getting to know them.

T: 'I would talk with them individually ... ask them about their interests ... You can try to find a simple musical instrument that they could use to play a short melody from a song they like ... I have once said to a student "you are my assistant, you will bring me stuff, you will connect the computer" ... You need to keep trying to attract their interest'.

T: 'Students who think that they won't manage to complete the activities are rather quiet. You have to say to them "don't worry, even if you do a mistake its ok, we will do it over and over again" and try to convince them to participate in order to gain their interest'.

It was also mentioned that teachers should have the autonomy to use different activities for different groups of students depending on student preferences. By choosing relevant repertoire teachers stated that they believed that they could meet students' individual needs and therefore enhance their interest in the lesson. Relevant repertoire was thought to comprise musical styles that students were familiar with and listened to every day.

T: 'Students usually are more responsive to songs they know and thus the lesson is easier. You have to try to find new songs that suit their preferences'.

T: 'Depending on the students you have, you change your repertoire. For example at the previous school I worked for, students really liked rock and metal. At another school I worked ... they liked Greek and traditional songs'.

T: 'What I teach is not limited to one kind of music. You have to give students the opportunity to sing something which belongs to them . . .'

Pacing of lessons was highlighted as a challenge for teachers, with some mentioning that they did not have enough time to complete their classroom activities as planned. Lessons moved towards achieving goals set by the teacher therefore providing limited opportunities to students to work at their own pace. For example, a teacher reported instances where there had been insufficient time for the students to achieve the standard of performance she had hoped for.

T: 'My lesson plan does not allow me to dedicate more time for the orchestration. Therefore, it is disappointing not to achieve this 100%.

T: A disappointing lesson may result from the fact that students cannot play the orchestration. I feel that I need more time to work on the orchestration with them but I cannot spend a whole lesson on this activity'.

Discussion

This paper has explored teachers' interpretations and implementation of differentiation in their music classrooms. The findings of this research are discussed in relation to previous literature and to the specific elements that have been introduced into the Cypriot music curriculum. The discussion is structured under two headings corresponding to the research question: How the teachers interpreted differentiation and how the teachers implemented the principles of differentiation.

How the teachers interpreted differentiation

Teacher interviews revealed strong views regarding students' musical knowledge that they considered to be 'appropriate', as a teacher said, upon entering secondary school. Here, teachers referred to their evaluations of students' musical backgrounds, difficulties with musical notation, lack of knowledge of musical concepts and lack of knowledge of the notes of the recorder. There was a sense of disappointment and fatigue in coping with a reported mismatch between the teachers' expectations of what students should know about music upon entering secondary school and the actual prior experience and knowledge of students they had encountered. For some teachers, the limited 'appropriate' knowledge of students was interpreted as a lack of interest in music, while others shifted responsibility for this to the primary school teachers who, they implied, had neglected to provide the students with the basics of music. This evidence might have some implications regarding teachers' lack of acknowledgement that students start from their own level and move on their own pace (MoEC, 2010) and reveal that teachers do not pre-assess students which is a requirement in differentiated instruction (Standerfer, 2011). Thus, teachers should not expect all students to have the same level of experience. As noted in previous music education research, teachers should not assume that students will change themselves to fit the curriculum, but teachers should modify their teaching according to students' needs (Standerfer, 2011).

The findings of this study showed that teachers tried to differentiate instruction by assigning additional work and responsibilities to the most able and advanced students and gave easier tasks to weak students. This may signify that these teachers seemed to plan their lesson having in mind two groups of students, the 'more able' and the 'less able' rather than identifying meaningful characteristics for flexible student groupings which is required in differentiating music instruction (Standerfer, 2011). As indicated in previous research, 'it is not helpful to struggling learners to do less of what they do not grasp' (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 41). This relates to the findings of previous studies which reported a tendency among teachers to believe they differentiate their

teaching when they are, at best, making minor and occasional classroom modifications (Tomlinson, 1995; Tomlinson et al., 2003; Valiandes et al., 2011).

How the teachers implemented the principles of differentiation

In relation to the first principle of differentiated instruction originated from Tomlinson (2000), which is flexibility with regard to the 'essentials', our findings suggested that there was evidence of an awareness of the multiple benefits for students that could be derived from a flexible approach. The importance of diversity in teaching approaches was advocated, with a view to meeting individual student needs and sustaining engagement in learning. This relates to previous research in music education which highlighted that teachers should be able to offer a variety of opportunities to communicate essential objectives at various levels (Hillier, 2011) and provide different tasks for different students by simplifying and heightening the skill requirement (Robert, 2012). As Standerfer (2011) noted, effective music teachers allow students to process new information or practice new skills through offering multiple teaching strategies.

In differentiated classrooms, the teacher is the professional who prescribes for the learning needs of students and facilitate learning and students are critical partners in classroom success (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Collaboration between the students and the teacher, which is a major principle of differentiation in the music classroom (Hillier 2011), seemed to exist in the classrooms that took part in this research. Teachers seemed to understand the importance of collaboration between them and their students.

Teachers in this study tried to engage students that had identified as being demotivated through listening to them and taking account of their preferences and experience. It seemed that teachers tried to influence their students' motivation to try harder, improve and enhance their independent learning. This relates to previous literature suggesting that music teachers should strive to show respect for their students, honouring their differences by providing opportunities of success (Hillier, 2011). Arguably, this evidence shows that teachers have actually acknowledged at least at some level the principles of differentiation as outlined in the music curriculum and tried to address the different knowledge and experiences students have. In addition, teachers indicated that they met students' individual needs by acknowledging their music interests and the repertoire they liked. This finding is in line with previous research which noted that knowing students' favourite music can give teachers information in order to design motivating learning experiences (Standerfer, 2011).

Interestingly, while assessment is an important differentiation principle (Tomlinson, 2000), the participating teachers did not necessarily perceive assessment as being embedded in differentiated practices, as is suggested in the literature (Hillier, 2011).

Assessment, which is outlined by Tomlinson (2000) as the second principle of differentiated instruction, aims to provide teachers with information that helps them monitor the interest, prior knowledge and readiness levels of their individual students. It may be that participant teachers did in practice use assessment on an ongoing basis (e.g. formative assessment) as part of their differentiated activities, but they did not discuss this as being part of how they understood differentiation.

In relation to the fourth principle of differentiated instruction which emphasises student participation in respectful work (Tomlinson, 2000), our analysis showed that teachers did not provide students with opportunities to work at their own pace. Teachers' disappointment of students not being able to achieve the goals set by the teachers, provide evidence that they worked in a teacher-directed learning, with lack of opportunities to students to work at their own pace. This suggests that teachers did not make sure that struggling learners will not become overwhelmed with too much information as highlighted in differentiation principles (Hillier, 2011). It also suggests that students in the class did not respond to tasks in their preferred way, thus they were not able to achieve the feeling of success (Robert, 2012).

Conclusion

Differentiation, as understood and implemented by Cypriot music teachers, differed in some fundamental ways to differentiation as conceptualised in relevant education literature (Tomlinson, 1995, 2001) as well as music education literature (Hillier, 2011; Standerfer, 2011; Rapone, 2019) and in the new music curriculum (MoEC, 2010). In particular, whilst teachers focused in some cases on differentiation by task, there was not the same emphasis on differentiation by content or outcome. Previous research suggested that both approaches should be used (Bray, 2000). The teachers were very committed to their jobs and explained their considerable efforts to differentiate their instructions by task, giving easy tasks to weak students and more difficult or challenging tasks to strong students. There was a sense that differentiation, as described in this study, involved a 'deficit' model, labelling students in ability groupings and then lowering expectations accordingly. What teachers were expressing here was a view of the curriculum as being a fixed framework into which the students must fit. Thus, if the students had not reached a certain level, they were labelled as being in deficit, with 'not enough' knowledge, as expressed by a teacher. However, that approach on its own does not align with the principles underlying the new curriculum which encourages reaching the curriculum's goals by considering individual interests, experiences and abilities (MoEC, 2010). This is also in contrast with the differentiation principles which suggest honouring student differences by finding ways for each student to shine and grow (Hillier, 2011). The findings of this study revealed that there was limited evidence of differentiated learning by providing different tasks whereby teachers cater for the prior experience that students' have as indicated in previous research (Bray, 2000).

Differentiated instruction as a way to address student differences is now widely accepted as a good teaching practice, and it seems promising and effective. However, its actual implementation remains critical. Despite the benefits of differentiated instruction found in existing research, it seems challenging for teachers to embrace change and adopt such innovation. The results of the present study can be considered as a benchmark for the Cypriot music education context. The findings of this research reporting that teachers did not have the expertise in addressing diverse academic needs amongst their students and need help in order to employ differentiation in their classrooms align with previous research findings in music education showing that teachers find difficulties in attaining independent educational plan for different students (Darrow, 2010). Despite teachers' efforts, their efforts remain at the surface level.

In general, this study revealed a need for deeper investigation of how music teachers can use differentiation in their classrooms and be able to teach diverse populations. As Culp & Salvador (2021) suggested, it is critically important that future research investigates the ways music teacher education programs prepare future music educators to respond to diverse populations. More studies, such as Salvador's (2010) and Culp and Salvador's (2021) studies which examined how undergraduate and graduate music teacher education programs prepared music educators to meet the needs of diverse learners should be conducted in order to provide more evidence which can help teachers expand their practices in terms of accommodating student differences and responding to the individual needs of all students.

These findings may serve as a point of reflection for future professional development in Cyprus relating to the new Cypriot music curriculum and its implementation. We suggest professional development for music teachers is needed to increase their personal knowledge and to provide purposeful experiences that will equip them to meet all learners' needs.

Existing literature provides strong evidence regarding the positive relationship between implementation of differentiation and teacher knowledge (Moose and & Shareefa, 2019), extensive professional development support and reflective practice needs to be in place in order for music teachers to be able to implement differentiation. The need of such support which considers the curriculum and the existing teaching practices has already been stressed in the general classroom Cypriot context (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017; Neophytou et al., 2018).

The findings reported here provide teachers the opportunity to understand students' experiences of differentiation and thus reflect on their own teaching to implement differentiation in ways which can enhance learning outcomes. Future research could also investigate the actual differentiation practices teachers use in their music classroom. Additionally, the ways students experience these practices as well as the different ways in which teachers respond to the professional development offered to them and the potential improvement of the teaching strategies they use could also be investigated. More research into all these areas could help researchers understand the factors that influence teachers' abilities to teach diverse students and develop possible plans to help teachers.

Note

1 This research was conducted one year after the implementation of the new curriculum.

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