

Switzerland (Ticino)

Differenziare per un apprendimento migliore per tutti

This project has the objective to improve pedagogical differentiation in heterogeneous groups of learners by capitalizing on the experience of teachers, instead of imposing the innovations as top-down initiatives. Operational aspects of successful practices from teachers are tested and shared with other teachers and schools. Examples of elements are group work, peer learning, and materials geared to the individual learners. Outcomes are evaluated in terms of learner attitudes, and socio-cognitive, organizational and metacognitive development. The focus has been on students aged 11 to 14. Participation in the project is voluntary and dependent on teacher interest.

Main Focus of Innovation: TEACHERS, RESOURCES, ORGANIZATION

General Information

Name of the ILE: Differenziare per un apprendimento migliore per tutti

Location/Address: Stabio, Canton Ticino, Switzerland

Website: <http://www3.ti.ch/DECS/sw/temi/scuoladecs/>

Rationale

Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

Innovations are often imposed as top-down initiatives, with a rather low impact on the players. When it comes to the case of promoting initiatives linked to pedagogical differentiation, we tried to best capitalize on the experience of a certain number of teachers who showed they know how to express this experiential knowledge in order to improve work in heterogeneous groups or classes, although these teachers made no references to known or existing theoretical frameworks. In this respect, they were able to foster successful learning in all of the learners, without having to recur to structural forms of differentiation. There is a vast literature on pedagogical differentiation. Paradoxically, however, we note that there appear to be rather rare and isolated concrete experiences applying these principles. The challenge upheld in Stabio, in particular, but also in other schools of the Ticino Canton, aims to develop and consolidate certain theoretical references, but above all focuses on testing out the operational aspects of these innovative practices so that they may become something to share with the greatest possible number of teachers and schools for them to try as well.

Evidence

Is there any evidence or indications showing that this initiative achieves the outcomes that it is aiming at?

The experiences carried out in recent years in Ticino (Bellinzona, Breganzona, Camignolo, Gordola, Minusio and in particular in Stabio) have brought to light and consolidated a number of valid pedagogical and teaching practices that produce equally good results (in terms of subject learning) as those normally achieved through more traditional types of teaching practice. The most encouraging outcomes, however, appear not only on the level of the positive attitudes that have come out in the learners (motivation, taking on of responsibility, improved relationship with learning itself, positive relationship with teachers) and on that of the classroom and school climates, but also on the level of the professional development of the teachers involved.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE

What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

Through differentiation, pupils are expected to better learn all the official curriculum aims into the disciplines they are taught. We want to stress that the new curriculum of Scuola Media, which has been recently implemented, includes a wide range of learning aims, on the side of knowledge, attitudes and social skills. This also implies a change in teachers' everyday activities, and consequently we can foresee some "learning aims" for them as well. Setting up your teaching according to the principles of differentiation requires the teacher to give his/her subject a lot of thought in order to transpose it into the teaching material and also requires great clarity in establishing goals (not only those related to the subject itself). Team work allows teachers to agree on the more general goals to reach, whether in the socio-cognitive domain (taking on responsibility, learning to work in a group), the organizational domain (managing one's own materials, planning personal tasks ...), the metacognitive domain, etc.

Learners

Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

The experience in Stabio has involved 9 classes in the current school year (2008/09) – 3 first-year classes, 4 second-year and 2 third-year, together with a cohort of pupils learning basic German in the third year, for a total of over 100 learners in the 11 – 14 year age range.

Facilitators

Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

The teachers involved in the innovative experiences based on the principles of pedagogical differentiation volunteered for the project. The willingness to take part originated in their desire to change, having realized the ineffectiveness of traditional methods ignoring the differences in their classes. Besides leading to less-than-satisfactory achievement, in some learners these methods seemed to nurture feelings of intolerance, apathy and in some cases even violence. Although they are aware of the efforts needed in order to change their ways of working, pedagogical differentiation has made a positive difference for these teachers in terms of class or group climate, of their relationships with the individual learners, of the quality of the learning going on and of better collaboration with colleagues. They have seen an ample and broad return on the efforts they have invested, not the least to mention in relation to their own professional growth. These “pioneers” did not themselves undergo any specific training on pedagogical differentiation. Rather, one of the main sources of their personal and professional development is the actual engagement in the project on-site.

This involves theoretical inputs, team preparation of teaching activities, classroom visits by the coordinator, formative interviews, and shared moments of reflection and discussion of the experiences carried out. Five subject areas are involved (Science, Arts, German, Geography, Italian, English). It is important to note, however, that particular attention is paid to the social, communicative and methodological interdisciplinary competences that help students face their learning challenges successfully.

Organization of the ILE

How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

Carrying out these innovative experiences also impacts on the organization of the school, meaning greater flexibility in the rolling out of the teaching activities (group merging, forms of co-teaching, project days, activity displays during presentations to other learners, teachers and parents). The teaching is fine-tuned to closely follow how the pupils’ learning evolves, thanks to the key role played by formative assessment strategies monitoring learner progress and offering the appropriate improvement support. How the learning progresses is thus clearly visible, which allows teachers to collaborate in setting up targeted activities (even in class) together with SEN teachers when dealing with children facing greater challenges in their learning and adjustment to the class/school.

Learning Context

In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

The use of pedagogical differentiation, with a particular fostering of group work, entails a greater variety of learning environments (classrooms, laboratories, open and free spaces, virtual learning environments), the development of forms of interactive and peer learning, besides the use of materials and aides that are geared more readily to the individual learner profiles and their levels of achievement. Thanks to these experiences the teachers also develop a new attitude, together with more varied teaching strategies, thus breaking the routine that often characterizes classroom life.

History of ILE

Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

From the very start in the late '70s and early '80s of lower secondary schooling in the Canton Ticino, the principle was accepted of keeping practically all school children together under the same roof and in the same classrooms (only approx. 2% of Ticino learners attend special schools). Actually, however, and in spite of its inclusive integrating vocation, lower secondary schools in Ticino have maintained forms of structural differentiation in the last 2 grades, which have evolved over time (Grade sections A and B at the beginning, levels 1 and 2 in certain subjects later on and nowadays basic-level and aptitude-level course streaming in Maths and German, and optional subjects). Although this model assures a certain degree of equity, it also has discriminatory effects based on socio-cultural and economic status. The project supporting pedagogical differentiation practices constitutes one of the seven strands constituting Reform 3 and aims to foster innovative change in the Canton's lower secondary schools.

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

This Reform is supported by the Department for Education, Culture and Sport (DECS, the Canton Ticino Ministry of Education). However, in spite of this institutional support, the initiatives tied to the pedagogical differentiation strand have an uphill road in engaging a critical mass of participants, thus appearing as marginal activities with little impact on the educational environment. The project undertaken at Stabio was championed by the school head, who was been able to collect a number of teachers willing to take part in the initiative together with their classes.

Learning Outcomes

What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

The experiences of these recent years in some of the Canton's lower secondary schools have not been subjected to a systematic evaluation of the results obtained. However, the "experimental" classes taking part in the project have not scored overall significantly better or worse than the rest in the Canton's testing scores. Within the individual schools, the achievement of learners engaging in the differentiation initiative bears witness to improved motivation towards the teaching imparted, better self-assessment skills, competence development related to responsibility-taking for learning at school (self-regulation, keeping to the formative contract with their teachers, meta-reflection on their learning pathways). These experiences counteract the negative effects (for learners and their parents) of disillusionment and stigmatisation that often accompany structural differentiation (streaming into basic and aptitude course levels).

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE

Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

In this moment the types of documentation available on the pedagogical differentiation initiatives are: a number of reports written by the teachers involved, 2 videos, a global report on the Stabio experience and, to this regard, also a retrospective assessment of the experience by the coordinator. The above-mentioned Reform 3 has a web site with the report on the "pedagogical differentiation" strand at: <http://www.scuoladecs.ti.ch/riforma3/pratiche-pedagogiche/index.htm>

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

The project running in the Stabio lower secondary school is in its second year (2007/08 and 2008/09). In the future we expect to award it a research label so as to boost and enriched the practices under way, by placing them in a comparative perspective and setting up the bases for a better evaluation of the results obtained in this first experimental phase.