

Differentiated instruction to address boys' learning difficulties

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ABSTRACT: Data from various countries, such as Canada, the United States, France, and Algeria, highlight a consistent disparity in academic performance between boys and girls, with a favorable trend towards the latter. This inequality compromises the construction of an egalitarian and inclusive society, accentuating socio-economic gaps and perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes. These disparities can also have significant implications for civic participation and social cohesion, limiting opportunities for boys and excluding them from certain fields of activity. Through an experimental methodology and quantitative analysis, the study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogical differentiation in addressing this situation while operating in a mixed-gender classroom.

KEYWORDS: Academic Failure, Boys' Learning Difficulties, Differentiated Instruction, Gender Differences

RÉSUMÉ : Les données émanant de divers pays, tels que le Canada, les États-Unis, la France et l'Algérie, soulignent une disparité constante dans les performances académiques entre les garçons et les filles, avec une tendance favorable à ces dernières. Cette inégalité compromet la construction d'une société égalitaire et inclusive, accentuant les écarts socio-économiques et perpétuant les stéréotypes de genre traditionnels. Ces disparités peuvent également avoir des implications importantes pour la participation civique et la cohésion sociale, en limitant les opportunités des garçons et en les excluant de certains domaines d'activité. À travers une méthodologie expérimentale et une analyse quantitative, Cette étude vise à évaluer l'efficacité de la différenciation pédagogique à remédier à cette situation tout en opérant dans une classe mixte.

MOTS-CLÉS : Différences de Genres, Difficultés d'Apprentissage des Garçons, Échec scolaire, Enseignement Différencié,

Introduction

Within the realms of contemporary education, a persistent challenge continues to engage practitioners, researchers, and policymakers: the academic underachievement of boys. Indeed, statistics from several countries, such as Canada, the United States, France, and Algeria among others, reveal a consistent disparity between the academic performance of girls and their male counterparts. Generally, boys tend to perform less well in school than girls. In a survey, Bonnéry (2007) observed that among 16 students perceived as failing, there is only one girl. The same observation applies in Algeria; typically, girls outperform boys in secondary school (Belabès and Yasaad, 2017).

This is a multifactorial reality. To explain the differences in academic performance between the sexes, a widely held thesis suggests that boys have an innate need for manipulation and movement, as well as a natural inclination towards competition or combat. Saint-Amant and Bouchard (2003) qualify these assertions as stereotypes and lament their use in attempting to solve the problem. They demonstrate that to improve academic performance, it is crucial to move beyond gender stereotypes (Lafleur, 2003). According to Bouchard, precisely because of these stereotypes, some boys adopt traditional gender roles, which alienate them from school (Lafleur, 2003).

Duru-Bellat (1995) attributes female superiority in academic achievement to psychological and behavioral differences between the sexes, which influence interest in studies and predisposition to conform to the "school norm." Girls prioritize academic success and demonstrate a certain maturity, especially in their ability to manage interactions with the opposite sex (Auduc, 2012). Conversely, boys tend to value physical and athletic qualities over intellectual ones, being inclined towards relaxation, independence, and challenging rules, which often contrasts with school rules. From the beginning of adolescence, they also start to become interested in relationships with girls. Moreover, boys, especially those from working-class backgrounds, are generally socialized according to masculinity norms that stigmatize academic success as "feminine" (Le Prévost, 2010). During adolescence, it is often observed that girls have a

better ability to adapt and embrace the necessary changes for their development, while boys may face more pronounced challenges in finding their path and making important decisions. The absence of a rite of passage into adulthood can lead to compensatory behaviors to demonstrate masculinity, including, for some boys, a propensity for violence or rejection of authority and school work. These behaviors can hinder their adaptation to school, even leading to academic failure (Auduc, 2012).

As a French teacher in Algerian public schools for nearly 12 years, we can confirm that this is quite valid for this specific context. They tend to be physically active, excelling in sports and displaying enthusiasm for physical activities in class. Their demeanor is often relaxed, characterized by joking and teasing, sometimes pushing boundaries and leading to conflicts with staff. Despite their intelligence, they are less likely to actively engage in class discussions, preferring to remain quiet. Even when encouraged by the teacher, participation may lead to ridicule from peers.

In Algeria, despite constitutional guarantees ensuring access to free and compulsory education for all children, without gender discrimination, the academic failure of boys remains a major concern, known but rarely studied. This situation highlights a lack of effective implementation of educational policies, thus compromising the democratization of schools and equality of opportunities. Perpetuating the current state, namely the high academic failure of boys, can lead to social and economic disparities between the sexes and phenomena such as delinquency. It can also have profound repercussions on family structure, the labor market, and social cohesion. Faced with these specificities, differentiated teaching emerges as a likely response to the particular needs of boys in learning.

Numerous studies suggest that pedagogical differentiation can help all learners progress and overcome challenges hindering their full development (Algozzine and Anderson, 2007). However, despite these promising indications, the lack of empirical evidence of its effectiveness persists (Subban, 2006). Thus, it is crucial to conduct more in-depth research to assess its impact in different learning environments. It is with this perspective that this study is undertaken (Algozzine and Anderson, 2007; Subban, 2006). It aims precisely to test the ability of pedagogical differentiation to help boys with learning difficulties overcome their academic challenges. Thus, the study focuses on the following question: to

what extent could this pedagogy play a role in improving the academic success of boys in difficulty while operating in a mixed-gender classroom?

It is assumed that by assigning adapted learning paths to each learner, this pedagogy could significantly help them improve their performance in this discipline. We wish to place this study in the field of pedagogy, thus avoiding specifying a particular school subject in the title or this introduction.

The interest in addressing this topic lies in avoiding exclusion and symbolic violence imposed by standardized teaching on boys in difficulty. By highlighting the limitations of this type of teaching, this study seeks to open up alternative perspectives that recognize the specificities of this category of learners, who are nevertheless educable, and which foster a more inclusive and respectful educational environment towards them. Thus, this research questions the role of the school in a society that aims to be democratic and is committed to highlighting the issues related to the principles of equal opportunities and the democratization of education.

An education that is not inclusive, not taking into account the specific needs of students with learning difficulties, is, in our view, an education "of violence" and "to violence" in the sense that it exercises a kind of segregation, marginalization, and symbolic exclusion towards boys with learning difficulties. This can have serious consequences. Firstly, it nurtures negative feelings towards school and society in these learners. Moreover, repeated academic failure can undermine their self-esteem, plunging them into a spiral of failure and despair. These negative feelings of marginalization, exclusion, and self-deprecation can translate into school avoidance behaviors, resignation towards studies, or even rebellion against educational authority, feeding the cycle of delinquency and hindering their civic participation. Therefore, an inclusive and adapted educational approach is essential, not only to promote academic success but also to preserve social cohesion and the construction of a positive citizenship.

This article is structured in three parts. The first, theoretical in nature, aims to clarify the concept of pedagogical differentiation as well as other key associated notions, drawing on specialized literature. The objective is to anchor the study in its field of expertise and to enable readers to better understand the didactic-pedagogical choices adopted in the practical part. Next, a methodological section will detail the investigation method used, the studied population, the research field, the experimental and control groups,

as well as the sampling method and the question of representativeness. Finally, the third part will focus on the implementation and evaluation of the differentiated approach proposed within the framework of this study.

1.Theoretical Framework

Pedagogical differentiation involves tailoring teaching methods to accommodate the diverse needs of students, prioritizing their individual learning processes and emphasizing flexibility. It is also referred to as "individualization of teaching" or "personalized teaching" (Perrenoud, 1996, p. 29). This approach, as described by Meirieu (1992), encompasses various learning situations and tools, including impositive-collective, individualized, and interactive situations, as well as speech, gestures, writing, and technology in education. Przesmycki (2004) proposes an approach centered around three axes: processes, contents, and learning structures, allowing for variation in paths, knowledge, skills, methods, and groupings. Meirieu (1992) discusses two methods of differentiation: successive and simultaneous. Pedagogical differentiation can be based on pre-established evaluation or "regulated in action," promoting a dynamic, evolutionary perspective on teaching (Meirieu, 1995). Aylwin (1992) distinguishes minimal and maximal differentiation, with this study adopting a minimal approach focused on regulation in action, alternating between successive and simultaneous differentiation to accommodate the Algerian context of class overload.

2 .Methodological Framework

To test the hypothesis, a provoked and controlled experiment was conducted during the academic year 2022-2023, at Salah Ben M'henna High School. It is a public institution located in the heart of the Kerkera municipality, in the west of the Skikda province. The experiment focused on first-year secondary students in the common core science and technology stream (1YSCCST) due to their high retention rates and adaptation challenges particularly among boys. The study population consisted of 55% girls and 45% boys. This trend is attributed to the high success rate of girls in the Middle School Certificate in the Kerkera region, in contrast to boys. However, the gender gap could have been more pronounced without the high retention rate among boys in the 1YSCCST class, reaching nearly 82% of retakers during the 2022/2023 academic year.

The experiment focused on the French program's "Producing an argumentative text" project, aiming to improve writing skills, which are crucial for academic success. Additionally, we deliberately excluded oral assessment from our study to avoid biases commonly associated with its evaluation, which could undesirably influence the results of this study. The choice to focus on French is justified by the observation that this subject presents particular challenges within our high school, especially for boys, as evidenced by quarterly analyses of academic results conducted by the guidance counselor.

The experimental group is randomly selected, it comprised 22 learners, approximately 11% of the study population, exhibiting similar characteristics to the target population in terms of gender, age, and retention rates, as indicated in the following table:

	Gender		Age			Grade repetition
	Boys	Girls	> 15 years	15 years	< 15 years	
SP	45%	55%	27%	66%	7%	31%
EG	41%	59%	27%	64%	9%	27%

Table 1. Composition of the experimental group and the study population

In the experimental class, differentiated instruction is implemented. To evaluate the effect of the experimental intervention, a control group (CG) composed of the same number of learners as the experimental group (22 learners) is designated. In this group, standard, undifferentiated instruction is provided. Both groups exhibit similarities in terms of their composition and initial performance in written comprehension and production, as indicated in the following table:

	Gender		Age			Grade repetition
	Boys	Girls	> 15 years	15 years	< 15 years	
EG	41%	59%	27%	64%	9%	27%
CG	45%	55%	18%	73%	9%	18%

Table 2. Composition of the experimental group and the control group

In both groups, a pretest and a posttest are administered under fairly similar conditions to assess the learners' performance. The pretest evaluates the learners' performance before the didactic and pedagogical intervention to ensure that the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG) are comparable. The posttest assesses the students' final performance after the intervention to measure the impact of the experimented differentiated approach on their performances.

Both the pretest and the posttest consist of two parts: comprehension of a argumentative text and a written production focusing on this text type. In both tests (preliminary and final), the comprehension part aims to assess the learners' ability to identify key elements of argumentation, namely the theme of the text, the author's thesis, their arguments, and their explanations or illustrations. The questionnaire also covers the tools ensuring the coherence of this type of text, notably substitution and connectors for classification, illustration, explanation, and conclusion. In total, 18 items are to be evaluated, scored out of 10 points.

As for the "Written Production" part, it is identical in the pretest and the posttest, focusing on the production of an argumentative text. The writing task proposed is as follows : “Certains parents, par peur pour leurs enfants, leurs interdisent de surfer sur internet. Qu’en pensez-vous ? Etayez votre position par des arguments pertinents et illustrés. (Dix lignes environ)”. And here is its translation into English: “Some parents, out of fear for their children, prohibit them from surfing the internet. What do you think about this? Support your opinion with relevant and illustrated arguments (approximately ten lines).”

The pretest assesses the first draft, while the posttest evaluates the final draft. The evaluation of the written production, both in the pretest and the posttest, is conducted using a scoring rubric developed based on the EVA grid (1991), comprising twenty criteria covering various pragmatic, semantic, morphosyntactic, and material aspects of written production. Each criterion is scored on a one-point scale, totaling 10 points for the written production. All evaluations are carried out by ourselves. To minimize biases, the scripts are anonymized, shuffled, and corrected three times with a time interval between each correction. Deviations are individually analyzed to ensure objective evaluation. A uniform scoring method is applied for both groups: each correctly fulfilled criterion is worth half a point, zero points for unsatisfied criteria,

and a quarter of a point is awarded when the criterion is partially fulfilled. This approach aims to reduce variability in evaluations.

3. The Differentiated Instruction Framework

Our approach takes place over 14 sessions of 45 minutes each, totaling approximately 10 and a half hours. The objective is twofold. Firstly, to enable each learner to understand an argumentative text autonomously and subsequently to independently write a text of the same type on the effects of the Internet on children. This task is chosen for its direct relevance to the learners' experience, giving concrete meaning to their learning.

The tailored teaching framework includes four main phases: setting the scene; diagnostic assessment; reading comprehension workshops; and detailed writing workshops as described below.

3.1 Initial setup

During the initial thirty-minute phase, a learning contract is established with the learner audience. Project objectives are outlined, focusing on understanding and interpreting an argumentative text on the theme of leisure, as well as on learning to produce it. Learners' prior knowledge of argumentative discourse is activated, and a positive collective atmosphere is fostered in a traditional classroom arrangement. The role of mediator and facilitator is assumed, primarily through the questioning method, with questions asked and reformulated as needed to aid understanding or guide reflection. Various aspects of argumentative discourse are addressed, including purpose, structure, tools for expressing opinions, and logical connectors. A wide heterogeneity of levels is observed among learners, ranging from mastery of text structuring to limited theoretical knowledge or little to no familiarity with argumentative text. Finally, the structure of argumentative text, particularly the inventory plan, is presented orally and visually through a diagram.

3.2 Diagnostic Evaluation

The diagnostic assessment is carried out based on the pretest. It reveals a total score of 255.5 points, with an average of 11.6 points per learner. Only 18% of participants achieved the average of 10/20, while 14% scored zero,

indicating glaring deficiencies in comprehension and written production. The diagnostic assessment highlights the diversity of learners' needs and levels classified into three distinct tiers according to their skills, as illustrated in this grid:

	L1	L2	L3
Obtained Grade	[0-7]	[7-14]	[14-20]
Learners	11 learners	7 learners	4 learners

Table 3. Distribution of the experimental class by level

It is observed that all the boys are classified in L1 corresponding to students facing significant difficulties, except for two of them: one in L2 and the other in L3. This observation confirms the previously established finding in the general introduction that boys, more than girls, are affected by academic failure.

The decisions made following the diagnostic assessment are as follows:

1°) Adopting a successive differentiation approach to address the diverse needs of learners in written production due to the large number of students and the complexity of their needs. This involves structuring the writing project into workshops covering comprehension of written texts, grammar instruction, and written production.

2°) In the reading comprehension workshops, the focus is on leveraging learners' cultural knowledge to understand the communicative situation presented in the writing task. The aim is to help them acquire thematic vocabulary, understand argumentative structure, and make logical connections.

3°) Grammar workshops aim to provide learners with tools to express their opinions clearly and develop well-structured arguments. A functional grammar approach is preferred to enhance clarity in written communication.

4°) Teaching planning in written production focuses on helping students understand the constraints of the writing task, enabling them to respond effectively. Sessions for revision and correction are included to foster autonomy and ensure language correctness, enhancing the communicability of their writing.

5°) To manage the diversity of levels, skill groups are formed, and differentiation of materials, content, and support levels is implemented. Students are placed in subgroups based on their performance levels, allowing for tailored learning to meet individual needs.

3.3 Written comprehension workshops

Three workshops (RC1, RC2, and RC3) aim to improve reading comprehension, each corresponding to an increasing level of difficulty (L1, L2, and L3). Each workshop is based on an activity sheet consisting of an argumentative text and a questionnaire. The activity sheets are adapted according to three criteria: the density of information contained in the textual support, the type of textual coherence (explicit/implicit), and the type of questions. Help sheets are available to provide reformulations and hints to students. The mode of work varies between collective, individualized, and interactive approaches, following the Meirieu model. Additionally, students participate in choosing the themes of the texts through a semi-open questionnaire administered at the launch of the project. The table below summarizes the differentiation strategy implemented for this phase:

	Targ et Leve l	Comple xity Level	Volu me of Mater ial	Type of Textua l Cohere nce	Question naire	Scaffol ding	Organizati on Mode
R C1	L1	basic	short	explici t	Closed	Strong	Whole- class/Inter active/Indi vidualized
R C2	L2	interme diate	medi um	explici t	Question s closed/op en accordin g to estimated difficulty level	Mediu m	
R C3	L3	advance d	fairly long	implici t	Open- ended	No scaffol	

					questions	ding	
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Table 4. Framework for differentiation of reading comprehension

3.4 Grammar Teaching Workshops

The grammar teaching phase includes two consecutive workshops: one concentrating on expressing opinions and the other on coherent argumentation. To prevent cognitive overload, both workshops adopt a targeted approach, particularly for struggling learners. Each workshop implements simultaneous differentiation, dividing students into six groups based on assessed proficiency levels: three at a low level (L1), two at a medium level (L2), and one at a high level (L3). Tailored instruction is provided to each group, adjusting content, materials, and pedagogical support accordingly, as illustrated in this table:

Targeted Level	Complexity Level	Volume of Materials	Taught Linguistic and Cultural Content	Types of Activities	Degree of Scaffolding
L1	Basic	Short	Restricted (Closely related to the topic of written production (effects of the internet on children))	More systematization activities than production activities	Strong
L2	intermediate	Medium	Less varied	Balance between systematization and production activities	Medium
L3	advanced	Fairly long	Varied	More production activities than	Weak

				systematization activities	
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Table 5. Differentiation Framework for Grammar Teaching

3.5 Writing Production Workshops

Three workshops are established to teach writing production. The first, focused on planning, lasts about forty-five minutes and emphasizes pragmatic and textual aspects. An explicit approach is used to meet the needs of three levels (L1, L2, and L3), guiding students in understanding task challenges and integrating elements learned during reading comprehension activities. Success criteria and a self-assessment grid are established to promote learner autonomy. The teacher facilitates this collective workshop.

The second workshop, on revision and rewriting, consists of two forty-five-minute sessions. It teaches revision, self-evaluation, and self-correction, with level-based groups and differentiated materials. Students at L3 revise peers' texts at the same level, while L2 and L1 students work on L2-level texts. L1 students do not revise texts at their level due to low initial production. The teacher intervenes to maintain focus, identify errors, and offer advice during group work.

The third workshop, for final writing production, is a single forty-five-minute session where students create autonomous final drafts. The teacher supervises without providing assistance to avoid influencing results.

These pedagogical choices, though carefully planned, are approximations, as noted by Meirieu. The teacher makes approximate decisions, unable to determine precisely what is suitable for each individual at all times.

4. Analysis and Results

The pretest scores for the experimental group totaled 127.75 points, with 23.5 points scored by boys and 104.25 by girls. In the posttest, the experimental group achieved a total of 313 points, with boys earning 119 points and girls 124 points. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of the differentiated approach for both genders. Boys showed a more significant increase in scores compared to girls, although girls maintained a

high level of performance. This suggests that the intervention benefited the entire group, with a potentially greater impact on boys, narrowing the initial performance gap between genders, as illustrated in this figure:

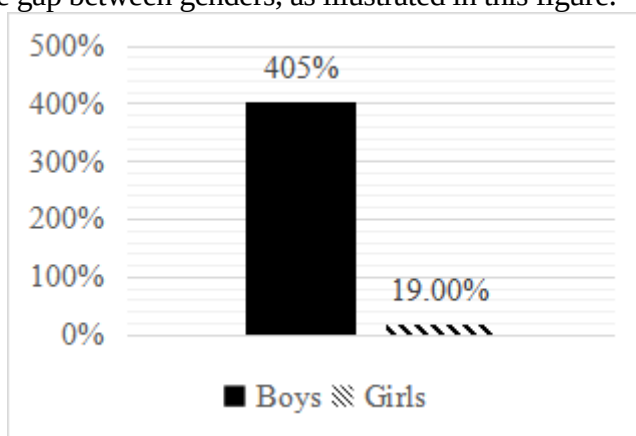


Figure 1. Rate of Evolution of Both Genders in the Experimental Group

The progress made by boys is nearly twenty-two times greater than that of girls, underscoring the potential of differentiated pedagogy in addressing learning difficulties, especially in reading comprehension and written production in French as a Foreign Language. Standard teaching seems to perpetuate these challenges, as evidenced by the control group's minimal improvement. Despite a slight increase in scores, girls maintain a notable superiority over boys in the control group. These results prompt questions about the efficacy of standard teaching in supporting boys' academic advancement and suggest that girls continue to outperform boys in this context. The findings imply that the intervention tested in the experimental group is more effective in enhancing overall academic performance, including that of boys, compared to standard teaching methods.

5. Discussion

The results obtained from this experiment invite a deeper reflection on the pedagogical mechanisms through which differentiated instruction contributes to more equitable learning outcomes. Beyond the observed quantitative improvements, the data reveal qualitative shifts in learner

engagement and attitudes toward learning, particularly among boys. This outcome underscores the importance of considering pedagogical differentiation not merely as a set of techniques but as a dynamic process of mediation that reconfigures the classroom's relationship to learning, authority, and cooperation.

One central insight concerns the redefinition of teacher–student interactions within a differentiated framework. By adopting varied modalities of instruction—successive and simultaneous differentiation, heterogeneous grouping, scaffolded materials, and self-assessment tools—the teacher assumes the role of mediator rather than transmitter. This shift appears crucial in mitigating behaviors often associated with masculine disengagement, such as withdrawal, resistance to authority, or reluctance to participate. The differentiated setting, by validating multiple forms of success and encouraging autonomy, helps to re-establish boys' sense of competence and belonging within the academic sphere.

These findings also resonate with socio-constructivist and inclusive education theories. From a Vygotskian perspective, differentiation creates conditions for learning within each student's "zone of proximal development," allowing them to progress through guided interaction and peer collaboration. Similarly, the approach aligns with inclusive pedagogical models emphasizing equity through adaptation rather than uniformity. In the Algerian educational context—characterized by large classes and limited resources—this experiment demonstrates that even minimal differentiation ("regulated in action") can yield significant pedagogical benefits when implemented systematically.

However, the study also reveals the complexity of applying differentiation in real classrooms. Despite its success, the approach demands sustained diagnostic evaluation, flexible organization, and extensive teacher commitment. It also raises questions regarding institutional support: differentiation cannot rely solely on individual teacher initiative but requires systemic backing, including professional development, curricular flexibility, and adequate instructional resources. Without such structural reinforcement, differentiated instruction risks remaining an isolated innovation rather than a durable pedagogical transformation.

Furthermore, this experiment highlights the cultural dimension of school performance. In many contexts, including Algeria, school success is symbolically gendered, often associated with feminine qualities such as obedience, verbal aptitude, and perseverance. Differentiated instruction indirectly challenges these cultural codes by legitimizing alternative learning postures—active, kinesthetic, collaborative—that may better correspond to boys' socialization patterns. Thus, the issue at stake extends beyond mere didactic efficiency: it concerns the capacity of educational institutions to integrate diverse identities and learning modalities into the definition of academic excellence.

Finally, while the differentiated approach proved effective within the limited scope of this study, its implications extend to broader educational reform. It invites reconsideration of the principle of equality in education—not as uniformity of treatment but as fairness in opportunities and responses to learners' diversity. By re-centering pedagogy on the learner rather than on a standardized curriculum, differentiation may serve as a lever for democratizing education and counteracting the symbolic violence inherent in rigid, homogeneous teaching models.

Conclusion

Academic failure is not "gender-neutral," as boys and girls exhibit differences requiring tailored pedagogical approaches. Research investigates whether differentiated pedagogy could address gendered heterogeneity in mixed-gender classrooms, particularly targeting boys' academic struggles. The study shows a more pronounced improvement in reading and writing skills among boys compared to girls following a differentiated intervention. Although improvement varies among learners, it is significant overall. In contrast, the control group demonstrates minimal progress in both genders, affirming female superiority. This suggests that differentiated pedagogy can effectively address common challenges in mixed-gender classrooms by considering specific needs, while standard teaching may perpetuate deficiencies.

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