



Article

Teachers' Experiences and Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences and challenges of teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) at Libertad Elementary School in Abulug, Cagayan. Specifically, it aimed to identify teachers' experiences in applying DI, determine the challenges they encountered, and formulate recommendations to improve the implementation of differentiated instruction in diverse classrooms. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences of teachers in implementing DI. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teacher-participants from Kindergarten to Grade 6. The collected data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to teachers' instructional practices, challenges, and recommendations. Findings revealed that differentiated instruction enhanced learner engagement, participation, comprehension, attentiveness, and academic performance by addressing diverse learning needs through varied instructional strategies. However, teachers experienced challenges such as time constraints, large class sizes, limited instructional materials, insufficient training, and heavy workloads. The study concluded that while DI is beneficial in promoting inclusive and learner-centered education, stronger institutional support, continuous professional development, and adequate resources are necessary to improve its implementation in rural and multicultural classroom settings.

Keywords: *Differentiated Instruction, Teacher Experiences, Inclusive Education*



1. Introduction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) has emerged as an effective teaching approach that addresses learners' diverse needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles. According to Carol Ann Tomlinson, differentiated instruction is a learner-centered approach in which teachers modify content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate students' readiness levels and learning profiles. This approach helps create inclusive classrooms where learners are actively engaged and given equal opportunities to succeed academically. In today's diverse educational settings, teachers are expected to use flexible instructional strategies that respond to differences among learners to improve participation, comprehension, and academic performance.

Globally, educational systems continue to promote inclusive and equitable education to address increasing classroom diversity brought about by cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and academic differences. International frameworks such as UNESCO Education 2030 Agenda emphasize the importance of quality education that is accessible and responsive to all learners. Studies have shown that differentiated instruction enhances learner engagement and achievement; however, teachers often encounter challenges such as limited resources, insufficient training, time constraints, and large class sizes. These difficulties affect the effective implementation of differentiated instruction in many schools.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education promotes learner-centered and inclusive education through the K to 12 Curriculum and the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). Teachers are encouraged to apply varied teaching strategies to address learners' diverse needs and abilities. Despite policy support, many teachers still experience difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction due to heavy workloads, lack of instructional materials, and limited professional training. These concerns are commonly experienced in public elementary schools, particularly in rural and multicultural settings.

Libertad Elementary School in Abulug, Cagayan is one example of a school with diverse learners coming from different linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers in the school are challenged to address varying learner needs while ensuring quality instruction and academic achievement. Although differentiated instruction is recognized as beneficial, there is limited research focusing on teachers' actual experiences and challenges in implementing DI in rural elementary schools. Hence, this study was conducted to explore the experiences and challenges of teachers in implementing differentiated instruction and to formulate recommendations that may help improve instructional practices and support systems in diverse classroom settings.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and challenges of teachers in implementing differentiated instruction (DI) at Libertad Elementary School. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it focused on understanding participants' perspectives, experiences, and instructional practices in their natural classroom settings. Specifically, phenomenology was used to describe and interpret the experiences of teachers regarding the implementation of differentiated instruction. This design allowed the researcher to gather rich, detailed, and meaningful information about how teachers adapt instruction to meet diverse learner needs and the challenges they encounter in the process.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Libertad Elementary School, a public elementary school located in Abulug, Cagayan. The school serves learners from Kindergarten to Grade 6 with diverse cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. The study site was selected because of its diverse classroom environment and the relevance of differentiated instruction in addressing learners' varied needs.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were teachers from Kindergarten to Grade 6 at Libertad Elementary School. The participants were selected purposively based on their teaching experience and involvement in implementing differentiated instruction in their classrooms. These teacher-participants provided valuable insights regarding their experiences, challenges, and recommendations related to DI implementation.

2.4 Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide prepared by the researcher. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions focusing on teachers' experiences, challenges, and recommendations regarding differentiated instruction. This allowed participants to express their thoughts freely while enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification and deeper understanding. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and field notes were taken to supplement the collected data.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher sought permission from the school head of Libertad Elementary School to conduct the study. After approval, the researcher coordinated with the selected teacher-participants and explained the purpose of the study. Informed consent was secured before conducting the interviews. Individual interviews were scheduled at a convenient time and place for the participants. During the interview, the researcher used the semi-structured interview guide and asked follow-up questions when necessary. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, while notes were also taken to capture important observations and responses.

2.6 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed multiple times to gain familiarity with the data. Significant statements and responses were identified, coded, and grouped into categories according to common patterns and meanings. From these categories, themes were developed to represent teachers' experiences, challenges, and recommendations regarding differentiated instruction. Relevant participant responses were used to support the identified themes and findings of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

A. Experiences of the Teachers in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

The teachers of Libertad Elementary School shared meaningful experiences in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) in their classrooms. Findings revealed that DI enhanced student engagement, participation, comprehension, and academic performance. Teachers observed that learners became more active, participative, and interested in classroom activities, especially during group work and hands-on learning tasks. Teachers also highlighted that DI enabled them to address learners' diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles through flexible grouping, tiered activities,

visual aids, and differentiated tasks. Furthermore, the implementation of DI contributed to teachers' professional growth by improving their instructional planning, classroom management, flexibility, and creativity in teaching.

Table 1. Experiences of the teachers in implementing differentiated instruction

Core Ideas (Codes)	Subtheme	Theme
Improves student engagement and participation (T1, T4, T6, T7, T9, T13)	Active learner participation	Enhanced Student Engagement
Learners become more active and involved in group activities (T6, T7)	Collaborative learning engagement	
Student-centered environment (T9)	Learner-centered classroom	
Tasks matched to students' level (T2)	Readiness-based instruction	Meeting Diverse Learning Needs
Addresses diverse needs and abilities (T3, T8, T11, T12, T14, T15)	Inclusive teaching practices	
Adjusting teaching strategies based on learners' needs (T11, T12, T14)	Instructional flexibility	
Use of varied materials (visual aids, texts, advanced reading) (T5, T8, T15)	Resource differentiation	Instructional Adaptation Strategies
Tiered assignments and varied tasks (T5)	Content differentiation	
Flexible grouping and group discussions (T5, T8, T15)	Process differentiation	
Hands-on activities and varied methods (T15)	Multi-modal teaching approaches	
Improved understanding and academic performance (T11, T12)	Academic improvement	Positive Learning Outcomes
Makes learning easier for students (T2)	Learning accessibility	
Increased attentiveness and comprehension (T11, T12)	Improved focus and understanding	
Implementation occurs in stages (exploration, implementation, refinement) (T10)	Phases of DI practice	Teacher Professional Growth
Teachers learn to refine and improve strategies (T10)	Continuous improvement	

The findings showed that differentiated instruction promoted enhanced student engagement because learners became more involved in classroom activities when instruction was adjusted according to their readiness levels, interests, and learning styles. This supports the theory of Carol Ann Tomlinson, who explained that differentiated instruction increases learner engagement by providing meaningful and appropriate learning experiences. Likewise, Diane Heacox emphasized that students become more motivated when teachers use varied instructional approaches that address individual learning differences.

The findings also revealed that DI helped teachers address diverse learner needs through flexible instruction and inclusive teaching practices. Teachers modified activities, lessons, and assessments to ensure that learners with different abilities and learning profiles could participate effectively. This finding is supported by Pearl Subban, who stated that differentiated instruction recognizes learner diversity and responds to students' unique educational needs.

Furthermore, the study found that teachers used varied instructional strategies such as flexible grouping, visual aids, tiered activities, and differentiated tasks to make lessons more effective and accessible. These practices contributed to positive learning outcomes, including improved comprehension, attentiveness, participation, and academic performance. In addition, DI contributed to teachers' professional growth by helping them become more adaptive, reflective, and creative educators.

B. Challenges of the Teachers in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

The findings revealed that teachers experienced several challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI). The most common difficulties included time constraints, heavy workload, classroom management issues, learner diversity, limited instructional resources, and low student engagement. Teachers explained that preparing differentiated materials and activities required extensive planning and effort, especially in large classes with diverse learners. Managing multiple activities simultaneously and balancing attention among learners with varying abilities also became difficult. Despite these challenges, teachers remained committed to providing inclusive and learner-centered instruction.

Core Ideas (Codes)	Subtheme	Theme
Time-consuming lesson preparation (T1, T2, T3, T4, T7, T8, T10, T11, T12, T15)	Intensive planning demands	Time Constraints and Workload
Limited time in implementing activities (T2, T7, T8)	Insufficient instructional time	
Designing customized materials requires effort (T1, T3, T5, T10)	Material preparation difficulty	
Large class size (T1, T4, T15)	Overcrowded classroom	

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Managing multiple activities simultaneously (T4, T5, T11, T12)	Multi-tasking in instruction	Classroom Management Challenges
Difficulty balancing attention among groups (T11, T12)	Divided teacher attention	
Noisy and less controlled class (T6)	Behavioral management issues	
Managing learners with different levels (T7, T8, T9)	Diverse learner pacing	Learner Diversity Challenges
Presence of fast and slow learners (T9)	Learning pace differences	
Difficulty addressing special needs learners (T14)	Inclusion-related challenges	
Behavioral and emotional obstacles (T2)	Student-related difficulties	
Limited resources and materials (T4, T15)	Lack of instructional resources	Resource Constraints
Lack of training and support (T15)	Professional support gap	
Student dependency and low participation (T13)	Learner motivation issues	Student Engagement Challenges
Student resistance to activities (T15)	Lack of learner cooperation	

The findings indicated that time constraints and heavy workload were major barriers to effective DI implementation. Teachers found it difficult to prepare varied instructional materials, activities, and assessments that addressed learners' diverse needs. This finding supports the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson and Diane Heacox, who emphasized that differentiated instruction requires careful planning, preparation, and instructional flexibility.

Another challenge identified was classroom management difficulty. Teachers struggled to handle multiple activities and groups simultaneously while ensuring that all learners remained engaged and focused. Since DI often involves flexible grouping and varied learning tasks, classroom organization became more complex. This supports the findings of Carol Ann Tomlinson, who emphasized that effective differentiated instruction requires strong classroom management skills.

The study also showed that learner diversity, limited instructional resources, and low student engagement affected the successful implementation of DI. Teachers reported difficulties in addressing the varying readiness levels, learning styles, and interests of learners. In addition, limited access to instructional materials and insufficient professional support further complicated instruction. Despite these challenges, teachers observed that DI remained beneficial in improving learner participation, comprehension, and academic performance.

C. Recommendations to Address the Challenges Experienced by Teachers in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

The findings revealed several recommendations to improve the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) at Libertad Elementary School. Teachers emphasized the importance of strengthening instructional strategies, promoting learner-centered practices, providing continuous professional development, ensuring adequate instructional resources, and applying effective assessment and feedback practices.

Core Ideas (Codes)	Subtheme	Theme
Use of varied teaching strategies (T1, T2, T6, T8, T14)	Instructional variety	Instructional Enhancement Strategies
Use of group work and hands-on activities (T1, T2, T6)	Interactive learning approaches	
Integration of technology and visual aids (T1, T2, T6)	Use of instructional tools	
Know learners' strengths and weaknesses (T3, T13, T15)	Learner assessment and awareness	Learner-Centered Practices
Conduct diagnostic and regular assessment (T8, T11, T12, T15)	Continuous assessment practices	
Group learners based on ability/level (T9)	Ability grouping	
Create flexible, student-centered classroom (T7, T10)	Flexible learning environment	
Provide professional development (T4, T5, T11, T12)	Teacher training and support	Professional Development and Support
Allocate planning time for teachers (T4)	Time support for teachers	
Collaboration among teachers (T5, T8, T11, T12)	Professional learning communities	
Share resources and best practices (T5, T11, T12)	Resource sharing	
Provide diverse instructional materials (T4, T5)	Access to teaching resources	Resource Provision
Use formative assessment tools (T5, T11, T12)	Monitoring student progress	Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms
Use feedback to adjust instruction (T11, T12)	Instructional improvement through feedback	

Start small and differentiate gradually (T15)	Gradual implementation approach	Implementation Strategies
Set flexible goals and learning pathways (T15)	Adaptive learning goals	

The findings showed that teachers recommended the use of varied instructional strategies such as group activities, hands-on tasks, visual aids, and flexible teaching approaches to make learning more engaging and meaningful. This supports the theory of Carol Ann Tomlinson, who emphasized that differentiated instruction requires adaptive and flexible teaching methods to address learner diversity effectively.

Teachers also recommended promoting learner-centered practices by focusing instruction on learners' readiness levels, interests, and abilities. They emphasized the importance of active participation, collaboration, and independent learning in improving student engagement and academic performance.

Another important recommendation was continuous professional development through seminars, workshops, and collaborative learning opportunities. Teachers expressed the need for ongoing support to strengthen their knowledge and skills in differentiated instruction. In addition, they emphasized the need for adequate instructional resources and effective assessment and feedback practices to guide instruction and monitor learner progress.

4. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Differentiated Instruction (DI) promoted enhanced student engagement, participation, comprehension, attentiveness, and academic performance. It also encouraged the use of varied instructional strategies such as flexible grouping, tiered activities, and visual aids, which helped create inclusive and learner-centered classrooms. Furthermore, DI contributed to teachers' professional growth by improving their instructional planning, flexibility, and classroom management skills.
2. Teachers experienced several challenges in implementing DI, including time constraints, heavy workload, classroom management difficulties, diverse learner needs, limited instructional resources, and low student engagement. These challenges affected the preparation and implementation of differentiated lessons and activities.
3. Teachers recommended strengthening DI implementation through varied instructional strategies, learner-centered practices, continuous professional development, adequate instructional resources, and effective assessment and feedback practices. These recommendations aim to improve teaching practices and support the successful implementation of differentiated instruction in diverse classrooms.

5. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Teachers should continue using varied instructional strategies such as flexible grouping, tiered activities, visual aids, and hands-on tasks to improve learner engagement and address diverse learning needs.
2. School administrators should provide adequate instructional support, teaching materials, and professional development opportunities to strengthen teachers' implementation of differentiated instruction.
3. The Department of Education should strengthen policies and support systems related to differentiated instruction through continuous training programs, instructional resources, and inclusive education initiatives.
4. Future researchers may conduct further studies on differentiated instruction focusing on larger populations, different educational settings, and strategies for addressing challenges related to time management, classroom management, and instructional resources.

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