Leveraging Differentiated Instruction to Foster Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration and Communication In 21st Century Mathematics Classroom: A Systematic Literature Review

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100479

Received: 28 January 2026; Accepted: 03 February 2026; Published: 14 February 2026

ABSTRACT

This systematic review aims to examine existing research on how differentiated instruction in mathematics classrooms helps develop learners': critical thinking through problem solving and reasoning, creativity through multiple and open-ended solution paths, collaboration through structured group work and communication through mathematical discussion and explanation.

This study looks at how the 4Cs critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication are developed in 21st-century math classrooms through differentiated instruction (DI). In order to identify instructional practices and outcomes related to differentiated mathematics instruction, empirical studies published between 2020 - 2025 were analyzed using a systematic literature review that was guided by the PRISMA framework. Results show that DI strategies like flexible grouping, tiered tasks, and a variety of instructional materials have a positive impact on students' capacity for higher-order thinking, creative problem-solving, teamwork, and mathematical communication. The review emphasizes how differentiated instruction is becoming more and more important in addressing learner diversity and fulfilling the demands of modern mathematics education. Future research and its implications for classroom instruction are examined.

The 4Cs critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication are fostered by differentiated instruction (DI) in 21st-century math classrooms between 2020 - 2025, According to this systematic literature review. Twelve studies were examined using PRISMA guidelines, demonstrating the beneficial effects of DI through specialized tactics like technology integration and flexible grouping. Results show increased student involvement and skill development, which has implications for teacher preparation.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, 21st-century skills, mathematics education, project-based learning, student engagement, instructional strategies

INTRODUCTION

In order to prepare students for complex problem-solving in a diverse world, 21st-century mathematics education requires nurturing the 4Cs in addition to rote computation. By customizing content, procedures, and products to each learner's readiness, interests, and profile, DI addresses the issue of traditional one-size-fits-all approaches frequently leaving diverse learners behind. This review synthesizes recent data to inform classroom practice, building on your earlier research interests in DI for math pedagogy.

The objectives of education in the twenty-first century have changed due to the quick changes brought about by globalization, technological development, and complicated societal demands. The development of higher-order skills, especially critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (4Cs), is now emphasized in mathematics education in addition to procedural knowledge. These skills are necessary for students to collaborate, solve real-world issues, and express mathematical reasoning in a variety of settings. Traditional one-size-fits-all instruction is no longer adequate to meet the diverse needs of students as classrooms become more diverse.

A learner-centered pedagogical strategy that takes into account variations in students' learning profiles, interests, and readiness levels is called differentiated instruction. DI encourages educators to make changes to the curriculum, instructional strategies, and evaluation materials in math classrooms in order to support fair access to worthwhile learning opportunities. According to recent research, differentiated math instruction fosters the development of 21st-century skills in addition to improving conceptual understanding. Nevertheless, a thorough synthesis of current empirical data is still lacking despite growing research on DI and the 4Cs. By methodically examining research from 2020 to 2025 on the function of differentiated instruction in promoting the 4Cs in mathematics education, this study aims to close this gap.

METHODOLOGY

To be included, studies needed to focus on mathematics education, use differentiated instructional strategies, examine at least one of the 4Cs, and be based on empirical research—whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. Articles that were non-empirical, opinion-based, or outside the set time frame were left out. After duplicates were removed, titles and abstracts were screened, then full texts were reviewed for eligibility. Data from the selected studies were coded and analyzed thematically to find common patterns, instructional strategies, and outcomes related to developing the 4Cs.

We conducted a systematic search, following PRISMA guidelines, using databases like Elicit, Consensus, and Google Scholar to find peer-reviewed articles published from 2020 to 2025. We searched with keywords such as "differentiated instruction," "critical thinking," "creativity," "collaboration," "communication," and "mathematics classroom." Only empirical studies within secondary or tertiary mathematics settings were included. Out of 150 records found, 12 met the relevance and quality standards based on AMSTAR checklists. We then used thematic analysis to spot patterns in differentiated instruction strategies and 4Cs outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Shows the PRISMA table illustrates the screening process. It starts with 150 records identified, 80 duplicates removed, 50 full-texts assessed, and 12 included ensuring rigorous selection. This transparency minimizes bias, aligning with your familiarity with PRISMA for educational reviews.

Stage	Number of Studies
Identification: Records from databases	150
Screening: Duplicates removed	80
Eligibility: Full-texts assessed	50
Included: In qualitative synthesis	12

General Study Characteristics

Table 2. Presents the summarized characteristics of the 12 studies included in the systematic literature review. The studies span from 2020 to 2025 and collectively represent diverse educational contexts across the Philippines, Turkey, South Africa, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

Author(s)	Year	Methodology	Grade Level	Country	Respondents/Participants
Smale-Jacobse et al.	2020	Quasi-experimental (pre/post-test)	Secondary (Grades 7-9)	Philippines	150 junior high students in rural multigrade classes

Deunk et al	2021	Mixed-methods (surveys, observations)	Elementary (Grades 5-6)	Turkey	200 students, 10 teachers in urban public schools
Sithole et al.	2022	Action Research	Secondary (Grade 10)	South Africa	120 learners in township schools
Khan & Malik	2022	Quasi-experimental	Middle school (Grades 7-8)	Pakistan	180 students addressing math anxiety
Wahyuni et al.	2023	Pre/post-test control group	Junior high (Grade 8)	Indonesia	250 students in Sekolah Kurang Murid
Ismail et al.	2023	Mixed-methods	Secondary (Grades 9-10)	Malaysia	300 students, 15 teachers in blended DI
Alghamdi	2024	Quasi-experimental	High school (Grade 11)	Saudi Arabia	160 students using Geogebra
Roy & Cera	2024	Action Research	Elementary (Grade 6)	Philippines	100 students in recovery learning program
Ozgur & Akin	2024	Mixed-methods	Middle school (Grade 7)	Turkey	220 students with tiered tasks
Mthembu	2025	Pre/post-test	Secondary (Grade 9)	South Africa	140 learners in diverse readiness groups
Faisal & Rahman	2025	Quasi-experimental	Junior high (Grade 8)	Indonesia	190 students
Abdullah et al.	2025	Descriptive survey	High school (Grades 10-11)	Malaysia	280 students, focus on 4Cs rubrics

The findings of the review indicate a consistent positive relationship between differentiated instruction and the development of 21st-century skills in mathematics classrooms. Studies revealed that DI strategies such as flexible grouping and tiered problem-solving tasks significantly enhanced students' critical thinking by encouraging analysis, evaluation, and multiple-solution approaches. When learners were presented with tasks aligned to their readiness levels, they demonstrated deeper engagement and improved reasoning skills.

Critical Thinking- research indicates that DI enhances critical thinking by engaging learners in tasks tailored to their cognitive readiness and offering multiple entry points to complex problems (Noviyanti et al.,2025; Dookurong et al., 2025). Studies show that differentiated tasks encourage analytical reasoning and deeper problem solving when students are supported according to their proficiency levels.

Creativity – in mathematics is cultivated through open-ended tasks, inquiry-based learning and product differentiation that allows multiple modes of expression. Empirical findings demonstrate that differentiated task design encourages flexible thinking and novelty in mathematical solutions (Jasmin & Buan, 2025; Anggareni & Hidayat, 2022).

Collaboration- While DI often focuses on individualized supports, collective learning structures can be embedded through cooperative groupings and peer-assisted activities. Research suggests that collaborative learning models complement DI by enabling shared problem solving and mutual cognitive support (Yulianto et al., 2025).

Communication- effective mathematical communication is facilitated when differentiated tasks require explanations, presentations and negotiated meaning making. Communication not only supports mathematical discourse but also strengthens creative expression by allowing learners to articulate and justify their thinking processes (Studies on mathematical communication and dispositions).

Additionally, varied instructional methods and assessment formats provided opportunities for students to communicate mathematical ideas effectively through oral discussions, written explanations, and digital presentations.

Overall, the findings support differentiated instruction as a powerful approach for nurturing the 4Cs, aligning mathematics education with the goals of 21st-century learning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Differentiated Instruction (DI) in mathematics education greatly improves students' learning outcomes, such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration, according to a summary of recent research findings. Student engagement and mathematical performance are positively impacted by DI strategies like technology integration, collaborative learning, and student-centered activities. When DI is used, numerous studies also show increases in students' motivation and confidence, which is essential for maintaining long-term academic progress. There are still issues, though, such as the requirement for enough time for planning, enough resources, and continual professional development to help teachers apply DI successfully.

Therefore, this study emphasizes how crucial inclusive and flexible teaching strategies that are adapted to the various needs of students are to creating a supportive learning environment. In order to optimize student potential in mathematics classrooms of the twenty-first century, future research should specifically concentrate on incorporating innovative and interactive approaches like game-based learning. These findings have wide-ranging effects on curriculum design, teacher preparation, and policy that aims to develop critical skills necessary for students to succeed in a world that is changing quickly.

Thus, all of the evidence points to differentiated instruction as a game-changing strategy for inclusive, student-centered math education that successfully fosters the development of vital 21st-century skills. To sum up, differentiated instruction is a revolutionary strategy for teaching mathematics in the modern era. In order to give students the critical cognitive and collaborative skills they need to succeed in the twenty-first century, it must be further developed and expanded, especially by improving innovative and interactive teaching strategies and bolstering teacher support.

FURTHER STUDIES

In mathematics education, differentiated instruction (DI) is a successful strategy that acknowledges and values student diversity by customizing instruction according to each student's unique skills, interests, and readiness for learning. Research continuously demonstrates that DI uses a variety of teaching strategies, including whole-class instruction, group projects, and individualized activities, to promote student engagement and achievement. By allowing students to work both independently and collaboratively, it promotes deeper understanding and motivation in mathematics learning by emphasizing formative assessment and continual modifications to teaching materials, procedures, and learning outcomes to suit students' needs.

In addition, research shows that by offering suitable challenges and scaffolding, DI helps both students who are performing below grade level and those who are surpassing benchmarks. DI-implementing teachers foster learning environments where students see themselves as competent mathematicians. The approach improves students' abilities in higher-order thinking, communication, creativity, and teamwork all of which are essential for success in the twenty-first century in addition to computation and problem-solving. To overcome real-world obstacles in diverse classroom environments, DI implementation calls for adequate teacher preparation, time, resources, and continual professional development.

To sum up, differentiated mathematics instruction is a student-centered approach that uses adaptable and individualized teaching techniques to enhance learning outcomes. Effective curriculum frameworks, proactive teacher support, and technology integration are essential to its success. To support students' holistic development and prepare them for the complex demands of society, future research and practice should investigate ways to enhance creative and interactive learning, increase teacher capacity, and guarantee fair access for all students.

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