

Weaving the Threads of Diversity: Exploring How General Education Teachers Differentiate Instruction Across Content, Process, Assessment, and Classroom Environment in Response to Student Academic, Developmental, Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Needs

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ABSTRACT

Ineffective teaching in inclusive classroom is alarming. Using qualitative descriptive study, I explored the general education teachers consider when teaching mainstream learners within inclusive classroom settings. I interviewed 10 purposively selected teachers and analyzed their data using thematic analysis. Learners vary in needs and styles, express learning differently, and benefit from supportive classrooms that value growth. I found that general education teachers differentiate instruction by considering student academic, developmental, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional needs across lesson content, learning processes, product assessment, and the classroom environment to ensure effective and inclusive learning. Education leaders may provide training to help teachers adapt instruction and develop skills in identifying diverse learner needs for effective differentiated teaching. Future studies may use Multiple Linear Regression and Exploratory Factor Analysis to examine and measure how key aspects of differentiated instruction influence its effectiveness.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, content, process, assessment, classroom environment

INTRODUCTION

In this section, I presented the problem and its setting, the significance of the study, the research questions, the theoretical lens, and the assumptions.

The Problem and Its Setting

Teaching in general education classes with mainstream learners has become increasingly complex and demanding in today's inclusive education landscape, and I recognize this reality firsthand. Research indicates that a major barrier is the limited institutional support for teachers, which hinders their ability to adopt transformative, inclusive teaching methods (Aftab et al., 2024). I have observed that this lack of support often leaves teachers, including me, struggling to address the diverse learning needs in a single classroom effectively. Moreover, I found in recent studies that many teachers initially feel unprepared for inclusive settings due to limited training, inadequate institutional support, and the emotional burden of navigating behavioral and learning diversity (Oliveros et al., 2025), which I also observe in my own teaching context. In Qatar, I have learned that many teachers report feeling unprepared and a lack of confidence in meeting the complex needs of students with disabilities (Gallego-Ortega & Rodriguez-Fuentes, 2021). Similarly, in the United States, the inclusion of students with special needs was not a priority in mainstream education (Florian, 2021). Furthermore, in Australia, Sharma and Armstrong (2022) reported that many teachers feel ill-prepared to differentiate instruction for students with high-support needs, often resulting in passive or symbolic inclusion rather than true participation.

In the Philippines, I have found that Acosta and Dizon (2022) noted that teachers struggle to manage inclusive classrooms due to overcrowding, a lack of assistive materials, and limited professional development, which

leaves learners with exceptionalities marginalized. I have personally witnessed similar conditions in my own setting. Moreover, in Meycauayan City, Philippines, research conducted by Dela Cruz (2020) unveiled the different challenges faced by regular teachers, including myself, such as the lack of training or seminars in handling children with disabilities, lack of administrative support, lack of teamwork among regular teachers, and increased workload.

Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive education, there remains a limited body of research that specifically explores the experiences of general education teachers in handling mainstreamed learners within diverse classroom environments. This gap suggested the need for further studies to provide deeper insights into how teachers navigate inclusion in actual practice, which I saw as a strong basis for conducting this study. It was for this reason, and as a consequence of the problem I had encountered, that I conducted this study.

Significance of the Study

In this qualitative descriptive approach, I aimed to provide a clear understanding of how general education teachers support mainstream learners and enhance classroom practices. It offers practical insights to improve teaching strategies and address diverse learning needs in an inclusive classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), by fostering inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, ensuring no learner is left behind. At the same time, it reflects the Vision-Mission-Goals of Holy Cross of Davao College (HCDC), which aim to produce holistically developed individuals who are academically competent, morally grounded, socially responsible, and committed to Christian leadership and service.

Research Questions

In this study, I aimed to answer the question: What conditions do general education teachers consider when teaching mainstream learners within inclusive classroom settings? Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What student conditions do general education teachers consider when differentiating lesson content for mainstream learners?
2. What student conditions do general education teachers consider when differentiating learning processes for mainstream learners?
3. What student conditions do general education teachers consider when differentiating the product rating for mainstream learners?
4. What student conditions do general education teachers consider when differentiating the learning environment for mainstream learners?

Theoretical Lens

This study was anchored on the Differentiated Instruction Theory (1999) developed by Carol Ann Tomlinson. In order to differentiate instruction for students

Given the variety of interests and learning needs, Tomlinson posits that teachers must adapt the content, processes, products, and learning environment to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Differentiation includes the works of teachers to respond to the differences among learners in the classroom, such as what students learn, how students make sense of the information and ideas, how they show what they have learned, and the way the classroom works and feels, in order to build the best learning experience possible, which indicates that the teacher is differentiating instruction.

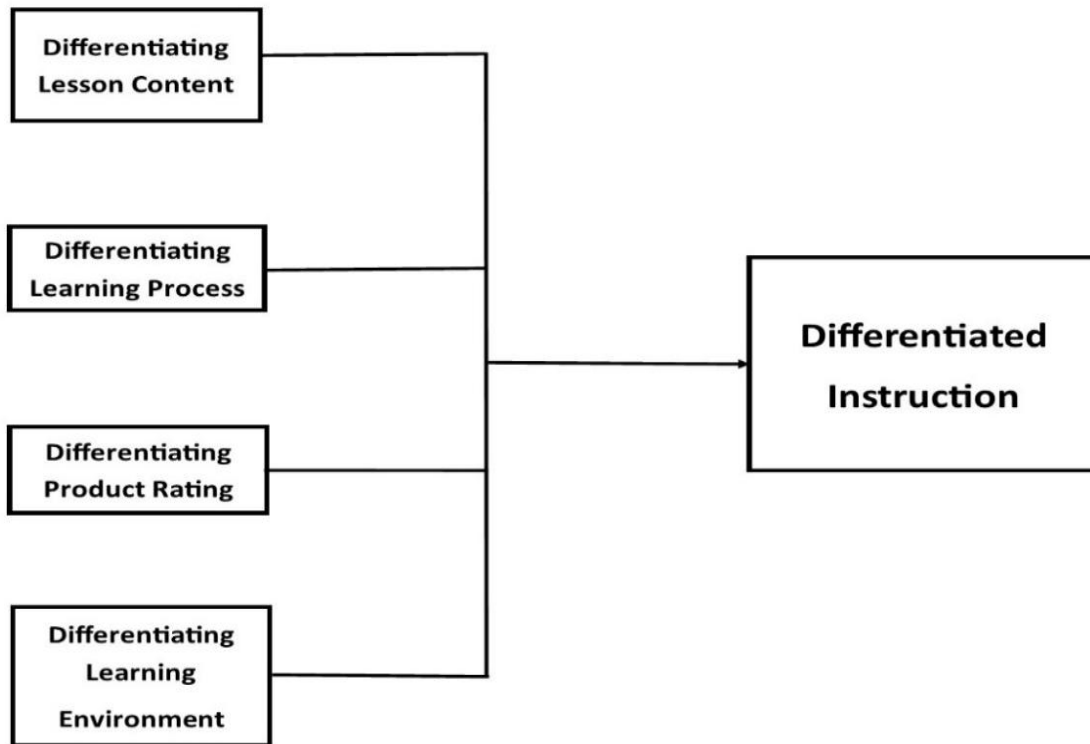


Figure 1. Conceptual Paradigm

Assumptions

In studying teachers' experiences with mainstream learners in general education classes, I assumed that these experiences are influenced by their environments and cultural contexts. By listening to their narratives and examining their perspectives, I can uncover the meaningful patterns that explain the factors driving their success. Furthermore, whether teachers differentiate content, process, product, or the learning environment, the use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping makes this a successful instructional approach. Finally, inclusive education policies may exist, and teachers continually assess their teaching approaches, learn from experience, and adjust to better support the inclusion of all learners.

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I presented my research design, the study locale, the sample and sampling technique, the data-gathering technique, the data analysis technique, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

In my study, I employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the student conditions that general education teachers consider when differentiating lesson content for mainstream learners. Qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a straightforward account of participants' experiences and perspectives in real-world settings (Sandelowski, 2000). It was particularly useful in studies that seek to describe phenomena without extensive interpretation or theorizing. This design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gather clear, rich descriptions of teachers' practices and considerations, particularly in addressing learners' readiness, interests, and learning needs.

Locale of the Study

This study was conducted in Monkayo East District, Division of Davao de Oro, Municipality of Monkayo, Region XI, Mindanao, Philippines. The district is a public school district serving diverse communities, where learners with varying academic abilities, including those with exceptionalities, are accommodated in regular

classroom settings, providing accessible education to the community. This makes it an appropriate site for exploring how inclusive education is practiced on the ground, particularly through the experience of teachers directly involved in mainstream instruction.

Sample and Sampling

In this study, the participants were 10 teachers in a general education class with mainstream learners. Those included were teachers aged 25-40 years from Monkayo East District who had firsthand experience teaching mainstream learners in general education classes. Teachers aged 25-40 were ideal respondents because this age range typically represents early- to mid-career educators who possess both adequate teaching experience and high levels of professional engagement.

To identify participants for the study, I utilized purposive sampling. According to Creswell (2014), purposive sampling emphasizes the selection of participants who can provide valuable insights into the research question. This approach, which is valuable in qualitative research, ensures that I selected 10 teachers who had direct experience in handling mainstream learners in general education classes. The participants all took part in an in-depth interview. To maintain anonymity, I assigned unique codes to each participant (P1, P2, P3, up to P10) that I used for data analysis and reporting.

Data Gathering Technique

In this study, I used in-depth interviews (IDIs) as the primary data collection method. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive qualitative approach, the interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured, flexible manner, using open-ended questions to allow participants to express their experiences fully and in their own words. With participants' informed consent, all interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in a notebook to preserve the authenticity of their voices, while recognizing that the transcripts represent interpretive accounts. All transcripts and digital recordings were systematically organized, stored securely, and treated with strict confidentiality to safeguard participants' identities and personal information throughout the research process.

Data Analysis Technique

The study employed thematic analysis to systematically examine and interpret the qualitative data gathered from the respondents. Thematic analysis was chosen because it offered a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involved a structured six-phase process that allowed researchers to move from raw data to meaningful themes that reflected the participants' experiences. The analysis began with familiarization, wherein the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' responses. Following this, the researcher conducted initial coding, marking significant statements and meaningful segments of text. These codes were then organized into broader categories during the theme-seeking phase. Next, the potential themes were reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, coherence, and alignment with the research questions. Defining and naming themes required articulating the essence of each theme and how it reflected respondents' experiences. Finally, the themes were integrated into a structured narrative in the writing-up phase, supported by direct participant quotations to enhance credibility and authenticity.

Trustworthiness

The four elements of trustworthiness in qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, I ensured the protection of participants and upheld the integrity of the research process by adhering to the principle of trustworthiness. I ensured that the research adhered to ethical standards by obtaining informed consent, safeguarding participants' confidentiality, and minimizing risks. These measures foster trust between the participants and me, thereby creating a secure and respectful environment. I also make sure to avoid bias, report data accurately, and respect participants' rights at all stages. Through these measures, I sought to conduct the study responsibly and ethically, reducing potential risks and strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings.

RESULTS

In this section, I discussed the study's findings from interviews with participants and presented the modified paradigm derived from the results.

Differentiating Lesson Content for Mainstream Learners

In exploring what general education teachers consider when differentiating lesson content, I received some feedback and sharing from my study participants. As I explored those possible questions, I interviewed some teachers, and these were their responses:

(I adjust the difficulty of tasks. For example, if a task is too difficult for a mainstream learner, I simplify it and provide clear instructions.) (P1-IDI,p4,L45)

After this study participant shared, another one said...

Stands out more in my experience, preparing differentiating content of mainstream learners it is important nga kanang careful jud ka sa imong planning and flexibility kay di man pwede og di ka mag flexible sa imohang pagtudlo unya narealize pod nako nga mas effective kung magadjust jud si teacher different learning level.

(Teaching rigidly does not work. I have realized that instruction is far more effective when the teacher adjusts strategies to meet the different learning levels of the students.) (P7-IDI,p5,L64)

This idea was sustained by another study participant, who expressed that...

Ang pinaka nag stand out most kay lahi lahi man akoang gipatrabaho sa mga bata sila tanan maka cope up sa lesson kay haom man silang capacity

(Even though I gave the students different tasks, they were all able to cope with the lesson because the activities matched their capabilities.) (P4-IDI,p4,L55)

I felt motivated by how the teacher emphasized engagement, and it made me reflect on how much interest we can generate ourselves. Her voice became thoughtful as she shared how engagement becomes interest: As I listened to the teachers, their lesson-planning experiences demonstrated deep reflection and careful preparation for inclusive classrooms. Their responses emphasized the need for thoughtful planning and flexible strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners. Despite the seriousness of the discussion, their expressions revealed a mix of responsibility, concern, and quiet fulfillment as they adjusted instruction and saw students succeed at their own level.

While I was looking at the teachers, I could not help but focus on their faces because I noticed how very tired they were. I talked to them, and they shared that...

Stands out most, energy draining kay naa naa koy experienced nga gikapoy na gyod kaayo ko pag-maayo tungod kay lack ko og kanang knowledge gani, so mao to mapasalamaton kayo ko sa SNED katong niaging seminar gud.

(What stood out the most was how energy-draining it was. There were times when I felt extremely exhausted because I lacked sufficient knowledge.) (P5-IDI,p5,L58)

This idea was reinforced by another participant, who stated that...

Mmmm, base sa akoang experience ahhh kabalo diay ko na mura kog ma kanang ma overwhelm na kabalo diay ko mo pa haom haom sa lahi lahi nga instruction para sa akong mga bata kay aron ma meet gyod nako ang ilahang learning needs which is sauna wala ko na gihunahuna nga maabot ko ana nga punto nga makatuon diay ko pag-apply sa differentiated instructionsa sulod sa akong klase.

(Even when I sometimes felt overwhelmed, I was able to adjust and tailor different instructional strategies for my students. I never thought I would reach the point where I could effectively apply differentiated instruction in my classroom, but through practice, I learned how.) (P9-IDI,p6,L70)

While talking with the teachers, I saw their struggles, their exhaustion, and their growth. Despite challenges in differentiated instruction and a limited SNED background, they stayed committed. A seminar encouraged them and provided useful strategies to meet each learner's needs better. I continued listening to the teacher, and as I looked into her eyes, I could see a sense of happiness behind the responsibility she had experienced in adjusting the lesson, and she said...

At first, I noticed that some students quickly understood the lesson, while others needed extra examples or a visual aid. So I planned different ways to present the same concept, such as using pictures, hands-on activities, group discussions, or kanang step-by-step explanations. During the lesson, I could see which method worked for each student. Halimbawa, a student who struggles with reading, understood a story better when we acted it out, while ang uban nga studyante who grasped concepts quickly enjoys extra challenges. It taught me to be flexible, patient, and observant. I realized that differentiating content is not just for students with learning difficulties; it also helps mainstream learners engage, stay motivated, and learn at their own pace.

(I used pictures, hands-on activities, group discussion, and step-by-step explanation, observing which worked best for each student. For instance, a struggling reader understood a story better through acting it out, while faster learners enjoyed extra challenges.) (P8-IDI,p6 L66).

While I was listening to the teacher, I could hear the voice of an educator who has become a careful observer of her own practice, someone who views her classroom as a laboratory where she is both the researcher and the practitioner. The peer-teaching dynamic, faster learners helping struggling classmates, emerged repeatedly as both a content delivery strategy and a social resource. Participant 1 described it as a spontaneous and meaningful moment:

(When I have a pupil who is struggling, the faster learner helps teach them how to complete the task properly.) (P1-IDI,p2,L17).

She said this with warmth; it was clearly not merely a strategy she had implemented but a moment of classroom community that had moved her. I saw both fatigue and warmth in the teacher's eyes. Though managing diverse learners was draining, her expression softened when students helped each other, turning exhaustion into quiet fulfillment. Another teacher responded again, clearly describing...

Ang pag-differentiate sa content nahitabo pinaagi sap ag-usab sa akong leksyon ug mga buluhaton aron muangay sa lain-laing lebel sa mga estudyante. Nagkinahanglan kini og maayong pagplano ug pagtan-aw sa ilang panginahanglan kada adlaw.

(Differentiating the content involves adjusting my lessons and activities to match students' different levels. This requires careful planning and daily assessment of their needs.) (P10-IDI,p7,L72).

The teacher spoke confidently about the importance of daily observation in content differentiation. She emphasized that daily assessment is a continuous, real-time process, and realized that understanding goes beyond correct answers, appearing in many forms of expression.

Kini nadiscover nako nga nagkadaiya gyod diay ilang style like matingala ko magklse ko dili man gud sila makasabot pero pag sila na imong paistoryahon sa ilang kaugalingon nga language, sa ilang kaugalingon na way ahhh ing ani diay makakat-on like sa addition mag-ing ani akong way magdrawing ko ilaha lahi diay ilang pamaagi, so mao to amazing.

(During class, they did not seem to understand. However, when I let them explain in their own language and way, I realized this is how they actually learn. For example, in addition, I would teach it by drawing, but they had a different method. That was amazing.) (P5-IDI,p11,L119)

She said "amazing," and she meant it. I can see from the teacher's eyes how surprised and wonder at the student's unique ways of understanding the concept. What she was describing was not merely a teaching strategy but an epistemological discovery that understanding is not always visible through conventional demonstration, and that the teacher's job is partly to find the format in which each learner's comprehension can become visible.

Differentiating Learning Processes for Mainstream Learners

Differentiating Learning Processes for Mainstream Learners In examining what general education teachers consider when differentiating the learning process, I gathered insights and shared experiences from my study participants. I interviewed several teachers, and these were their responses:

I adjust my teaching approach to the pupils na naay special needs, halimbawa, and bata dili ka puyo kay naa siyay ASD, so, hatagan nako siya ug buhat buhaton niya na makakuha sa iyang attention like mag-drawing siya or whatsoever para ahhh para for double purposes na mapuyo siya sa iyang bangko while listening to the lesson.

(If a child cannot stay seated because he has ASD, I give a task that can catch his attention, such as drawing or another quick activity. This serves a double purpose: to remain seated at the desk while still listening to the lesson.) (P3-IDI,p7,L83).

While talking with a co-teacher, the teacher showed emotional strain in sustaining engagement. Participant 3 shared that a student's interest in drawing could serve as both behavior management and instructional support. The teacher appeared tired as she explained how she kept the child settled during lessons. Overall, the accounts showed that classroom management is inseparable from process differentiation, as instruction cannot succeed without behavioral control.

So, ang result niya sa akong teaching is ni improved akoang management skills sa mga bata kay kung wala dili nimo ma manage ang mga bata dili ka ka kuan sa imohang lesson og nakit-an pod nako nga effective gyod kayo siya nga kinahanglan gyod nimo mahibal-an ang matag behavior sa bata og unsaon sila pag handle.

(If you cannot manage the students, you cannot effectively deliver your lesson. I also realized that it is very important to understand each student's behavior and know how to handle them properly.) (P6-IDI,p9,L92)

The transformation she described from a class that was very difficult to one that became more organized was achieved through a specific set of process interventions: research-informed strategies, consistent routines, and motivation and rewards.

First, it was so difficult. Na feel nako nga dili ko effective nga teacher mao to nga naghuna-huna jud ko og way kung unsaon sila pagmanage labi natong naay behavioral problem og ASD nga bata. Nag research ko og mga strategies nga di nga para mahimong han-ay akong klase, gipasunod nako sila sa routines og ginahatagan pod nako sila og motivation og rewards kung makabuhay sila sa akoang task nga gipabuhay sa ilaha.

(At first, it was very difficult. I felt that I was not being an effective teacher.) (P6-IDI,p9,L91).

She said this with the retrospective equanimity of someone who had passed through that difficulty and emerged with something she did not have before.

I could see that the teacher was struggling with her work because of the varying abilities of the students. She seemed discouraged as she spoke, as if she felt she was not an effective teacher, like a candle flickering in the wind, trying to stay lit despite the constant pressure around it. I heard from many accounts:

Usahay kay kapuyon ko kay need man sya og extra time sa pagprepare para mao muahom sa ilahang panginahanglan para makakat-on.

(Sometimes I feel tired because it requires extra time to prepare lessons that fit their needs so they can learn effectively.) (P4-IDI,p8,L86).

The word "extra" is doing significant work here; it names the invisible labor that differentiated instruction demands beyond the already substantial demands of ordinary lesson preparation.

While the teacher was speaking, she seemed on the verge of tears from exhaustion. I could see that she was tired, yet she still wanted to prepare materials to teach the children:

So, ang labing dako nako nga hagit ani is ang pagbalanse sa akong leksyon aron dali ra sabton og sayon sabton para sa mga bata pero tungod lagi kay lahi lahi og level ang intellect sa akong studyante naa gyod na syay challenges dili jud nato na malikayan, dili pod nato maiwasan nga mag reteach ta mag enhancement about sa lesson nga gihatag.

(My biggest challenge is balancing my lessons so that they are easy to understand for students. However, because my students have different levels of intellect, challenges are inevitable. We also cannot avoid reteaching or providing lesson enhancements when necessary.) (P9-IDI,p10,L100).

While I was listening to the teacher, another teacher also agreed that challenges in an inclusive classroom are inevitable and cannot be avoided. However, amid the weight of fatigue and self-doubt, a pattern of professional transformation emerged with equal consistency across the ten accounts. Teachers who described their worst moments of inadequacy also, without exception, described arriving at a place of competence, confidence, and an enlarged professional capacity.

Nakasinati ko og hagit apan naka learn ko nga mahimong mas pasensyoso ug flexible sa akong pagtudlo aron maapil ang tanang estudyante sa paglearn.

(I have experienced challenges, but I have learned to become more patient and flexible in my teaching so that all students can be included in the learning process.) (P10-IDI,p10,L103).

Patience and flexibility, identified here as learned qualities rather than natural traits, represent a significant professional development claim that inclusive teaching practice produces in teachers the very capacities that inclusive learners most need their teachers to possess. I was talking to the teacher, who expressed gratitude for her experience, with a tone of professional growth. It was reflective and focused on development rather than on emotion or drama.

So, ang result niya sa akong teaching is ni improved akoang management skills sa mga bata kay kung wala dili nimo ma manage ang mga bata dili ka ka kuan sa imohang lesson og nakit-an pod nako nga effective gyod kayo siya nga kinahanglan gyod nimo mahibal-an ang matag behavior sa bata og unsaon sila pag handle.

(I have developed my patience, my resourcefulness, and my teaching style to support the children better.) (P6-IDI,p9,L60).

I saw in the teachers' smiles their feelings of moving from struggle and exhaustion toward growth, reflection, and professional empowerment, where inclusion serves as a challenging yet transformative teaching experience.

Differentiating the Product Rating for Mainstream Learners

In exploring how general education teachers approach product rating for mainstream learners, I gathered insights and experiences from my study participants through interviews. The teachers shared their responses as follows:

When I allowed learners to show their learning in different ways, ahm, I noticed they became more confident and engaged in all the activities we did that day. They can express themselves better through presentation, drawings, and discussions rather than written work. Moreover, it also helps their motor skills to develop and improve well."

I noticed that they became more confident and more engaged in all the activities we did that day. They were able to express themselves better through presentations, drawings, and discussions rather than just through written work.) (P1-IDI,p11,L107).

This notion was echoed by another participant, noting that...

Kini nadiscover nako nga nagkadaiya gyod diay ilang style like matingala ko magklse ko dili man gud sila makasabot pero pag sila na imong paistoryahon sa ilang kaugalingon nga language, sa ilang kaugalingon na way ahhh ing ani diay makakat-on like sa addition mag-ing ani akong way magdrawing ko ilaha lahi diay ilang pamaagi, so mao to amazing.

(During class, they did not seem to understand. Nevertheless, when I let them explain in their own language and in their own way, I realized that this is how they actually learn.) (P5-IDI,p12,L119)

Hearing these words made me feel how serious they were about upholding real understanding. The teacher realized that learners already understood the lesson, but the output format obscured this, becoming visible only when it was changed. Participant 1 added that varied outputs revealed learning and also supported motor skill development. Even with quick checks, teachers still ensure that reviewing work shows respect, values effort, and promotes deeper engagement. They explained how they would let the pupils work, saying:

Mmm kuan kanang siguro I accept and see their their work then I accept it and try to show nga ma learn nila ang ilahang confidence and creativity unya para pod makatabang pod sa akoa nga marecognize pod nako ang mga bata sa ilang strength.

(Maybe what I do is accept and really look at their work, then show that I appreciate it so that they can build their confidence and creativity. At the same time, it also helps me recognize each child's strengths.) (P7-IDI,p13,L129).

Another participant affirmed this idea, who shared that...

Naka experience ko og mas aktibo nga pag participate ug mas dako nga kumpiyansa sa mga pupils kay nakapili sila unsaon pagpakita sa ilang nahibaloan.

(Pupils participate more actively and gain greater confidence because they can choose how to demonstrate what they have learned.) (P10-IDI,p14,L138).

This response made me feel a quiet sense of appreciation and encouragement. As I was talking to the participant to get their response, the way they let the pupils participate showed genuine recognition of learners' work, building their confidence, creativity, and sense of value, while also helping them identify and develop their strengths. Learning of the student is the teacher's deepest reward. The teachers said:

Happy kay ang kalipay sa teacher kay isa ra jud ang makita nga sa nga sa iyang nga makita niya iyang studyante nga nay nahibalan.

(A teacher's happiness comes from seeing that their student has learned something.) (P3-IDI,p11,L113).

This response made me feel a mix of emotions. I could imagine the intensity of the moments shared, not "my happiness" but a teacher's happiness, and, in doing so, named what she believed to be the fundamental motivational structure of the teaching profession: the student's learning as the teacher's deepest reward. Another teacher said:

So, ang akong experience is na happy gyod ko nga makasabay sila sa akoang mainstream og katong naay special needs kay dili jud sya easy nga makitan nimo ba nga nag nag maglisod jud ang katong naay special needs pero through sa imohang intervention mas na kuan ka na overwhelm ka kay makitan na nimo sa ilaha nga medyo nakasabay na sila sa regular class nako.

(It is really not easy, and you can really see how much those with special needs struggle. However, through your intervention, you somehow feel overwhelmed in a good way because you can see that they are gradually able to keep up with my regular class.) (P6-IDI,p12,L125).

Teachers felt deeply moved and positively overwhelmed when students with special needs kept pace with the rest of the class. At the same time, they honestly recognized that not all students meet expected outcomes, viewing this not as failure but as part of professional reality. Participant 9 articulated this reckoning with a maturity that I found exemplary:

Ahmm, makalipay kay naa pud mga bata nga mo excel pod sila sa ilahang mga output nya part pod Katunga sa akong kasing-kasing maguol kay naa pud mga bata nga wala jud naka meet sa imong expected na output.

(It is a mix of emotions. It is heartening to see some children excel in their outputs, but at the same time, it is saddening because there are also students who do not meet the expected outcome.) (P9-IDI,p13,L136).

The "mix" she describes is not confusion; it is the emotional complexity of a teacher who has abandoned the false comfort of uniform expectations and accepted the genuine complexity of teaching diverse learners. What followed this acknowledgment in her account was a statement of educational philosophy that I consider one of the most important in the entire study:

So, importante man jud noh na tagaan nato og chance ang atong mga estudyante nga bisan paman sa lahi lahi nga level ilag intellect, ilahang capacity to learn so tagaan nato sila og chance to show ahmmm there are pupils nga maka meet jud sa imong expectation but naa pud dili pero at the end of the day atoa raman jud paningkamutan naay learning nahitabo sa mga bata although dili man ma meet imong expectation na 100 pero atleast naay na learn naay nakuha ang mga bata sa imoha samtang nagsulod sila sa imong klase karung adlaw.

(What matters is that we make an effort; learning still happens for the child. Even if they do not fully meet your expectations, at least they have learned something and gained from being in your class today.) (P9-IDI,p13,L135)

This was a growth-oriented assessment philosophy expressed in the plainest possible language, not the language of academic discourse but that of daily professional conviction. It was the more powerful for its plainness.

Differentiating Learning Environment for Mainstream Learners

To examine how general education teachers differentiate the learning environment for mainstream learners, I collected insights and experiences from my participants through interviews. Their responses were presented below:

From my experience, a tidy, friendly classroom helps students join activities, ask questions, and work well with others, making them more confident and interested in learning. On the other hand, a messy and noisy classroom made it hard for students to focus and learn.

(A tidy and friendly classroom helps students participate in activities, ask questions, and work well with others. On the other hand, a messy and noisy classroom makes it difficult for students to focus and learn.) (P8-IDI,p17,L165).

As I listened to the teacher share their experience, they described their classroom as a carefully designed environment where the physical setup, routines, rules, and emotional safety work together to support or hinder inclusive learning. The opposition she draws, tidy/friendly versus messy/noisy, is not merely aesthetic. It was developmental: the physical and emotional qualities of the environment directly determine the quality of learning that could occur within it. One coach spoke with calm confidence and said:

Okey, ahhm experience nako in setting the rules dapat apil sila like okey unsa may dapat buhaton pag gusto mo answer sila dapat mo ang mo ahhh kining mutubag like mam dapat mag raise og hands, so dapat kana nga mga sets of rule ma follow nila ma ang imohang klase kay linaw kay kabalo na sila mismo nga mao na ang rule kay apil man sila.

(When setting rules, they should be involved. Like, what should we do if someone wants to answer? They should say, " Ma'am, we should raise our hands. Those sets of rules should be followed. Your class will be peaceful because they themselves know the rules since they were involved in making them.) (P5-IDI,p16,L154)

During the interview, I noticed that the teacher was empowered and responsible, and that students felt valued and included in rulemaking, leading to a sense of security and cooperation in the classroom. The environmental structure produced by participatory rule-setting is more inclusive, not less, than a structure imposed from above.

She knew that, while she had an account that was self-authored rather than externally imposed, she also had limits, and she respected that balance. One teacher spoke with calm confidence and said:

Ahhh, kung magpakita man gud ka og positive and supportive classroom environment, matabang na sya sa mainstream learner to participate more in your more activities and share more ideas, nga wala silay kahadlok, madevelope nila ang ilang confidence.

(If you show a positive and supportive classroom environment, it helps mainstream learners participate more in activities and share more ideas without fear. They can develop their confidence.) (P7-IDI,p16,L161).

Listening to her, I felt respect for her openness and willingness to participate, supported by a sense of safety and trust in the classroom. The teacher clearly described the causal relationship between environmental quality and student participation. The phrase 'without fear' names the specific emotional condition that inclusive learning requires, not merely the absence of explicit exclusion but the positive presence of safety. Another teacher supported and said:

When teaching learners with different needs, I made sure the classroom was calm and supportive, kay mao mana dapat ang ilahang una ma-feel para dili sila magtantrum, and I gave clear instructions, arranged seating properly, and helped learners individually when they needed it most.

(I made sure the classroom was calm and supportive, as this is important for preventing tantrums. I also give clear instructions, arrange seating properly, and provide individual support to learners when needed.) (P1-IDI,p14,L143).

Participant 1 described the practical management strategies that maintain emotional safety in the inclusive classroom, including the specific challenge of managing potential tantrums. On the other side, the teacher implied tension as teachers openly express the challenges, personal struggles, and mixed emotions involved in inclusive education:

Kuan kanang ang gusto jud unta nako is e separate unta ang naay kuan murag dili kaayo ko as in convince sa inclusive education jud sa tinuod lang kay ngano lisod para sa atoa nga regular teacher nya dili nato mahatag sa ilaha ang ilahang dapat makuha kay lahi baya jud ang regular class sa kanang naay kanang special needs, so murag ikaw ba mismo sa imong self maka-ingon ka nga kanang kaluoy ba sa akoang naay special dili man kaayo nako sila matagad mas matagad man jud nako ang naa sa regular kay mas daghan man gud sa akoang regular, ma left behind jud nako ang akoang kanang naay special needs mao gani ng sa usahay sa klase tungod sa kadaghan pud nila ipabilin sa jud nako ang naay kuan para mabuhat lang jud niya ang task na dapat mabuhat niya kay mahuman jud ang klase nga wala syay mahimo kung kanang murag kanang e priority lang pud jud nako ang kuan ang regular mao ng dapat hatagan jud nako sila og time one on one.

(What I really want, actually, is to separate those who have special needs. Honestly, I'm not really convinced about inclusive education. It's difficult for us regular teachers because we can't always give them what they really need. A regular class is very different from a class with students who have special needs. Sometimes, within myself, I feel pity for my students with needs because I can't give them much attention. I tend to focus more on the regular students since they are the majority. My students with special needs get left behind.) (P6-IDI,p16,L157)

Participant 6 highlighted a structural mismatch in inclusive education, expressing concern that it does not fully meet all students' needs. Her feelings reflected care and professional distress rather than dissatisfaction. Another teacher expressed a similar structural frustration:

Experience sa classroom nga naa sa inclusive, overall experience is kapoy, dili lalim maka-ingon ka ban ga gilahi nalang unta ni sila, wala nalang unta giipon sa mainstream aron ma focus pero wala mantay mahimo since isa pod na sa DepEd mandates nga inclusive education.

(My overall experience in an inclusive classroom is tiring. It's not easy. Sometimes you find yourself wishing they had just been separated instead of being placed in the mainstream class so you could focus better. But we don't really have a choice since inclusive education is also one of the mandates of DepEd.)(P9-IDI,p17,L168).

Participant 9 highlights the lack of choice in policy decisions, showing a structural critique. Despite this, teachers still experience meaningful professional fulfillment:

Makalipay sad, usahay malagot , makasuko pero kung imohang tan-awon man gud nga makita nimo sa imong mga bata nga naa diay kabag-ohan bisan sa gamay na butang naa jud diay silay gamay nga natun-an bisan paman lisod sya e manage comopare didto sa bata nga pareha lang tanan pero ma overwhelm gihapon ka kay naka impart ka og learning sa mga bata.

(It is also fulfilling at times. Sometimes you feel annoyed or frustrated, but when you look at your students and see improvement even in small things, you realize they have really learned something. Even though it is harder to manage, you still feel overwhelmed in a good way because you were able to impart learning to the children.)(P9-IDI,p17,L169).

When I looked at the teacher, I felt sorry for her from exhaustion, and I almost cried because I could relate to her experience. She moved from describing exhaustion and frustration to genuine fulfillment. The mix of frustration and "overwhelmed in a good way" reflects the real emotional complexity of meaningful professional work. However, I also talked to another teacher who seemed very enthusiastic and energetic, and she said:

(Sometimes it is chaotic because of the different behaviors of the children, but this is also what brings energy and liveliness to the classroom.)(P3-IDI,p14,L22).

Participant 3 described the energy that comes from the very diversity that also generates challenge. Chaos and liveliness in the same breath, as two faces of the same inclusive classroom reality. This is phenomenological testimony at its most honest: the refusal to choose between the difficulty and the gift.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Academic, developmental, and behavioral needs

When differentiating lesson content, the teachers consider students' diverse academic needs, such as learning abilities, learning styles, pacing, and comprehension; developmental needs, specifically socioemotional needs; and behavioral needs.

Learning styles, behavior, and cognitive levels

When differentiating learning processes, the teachers consider students' learning styles, behavior, and cognitive levels. They apply an adaptive instructional process and a flexible process to ensure that all students can participate effectively.

Varied ways of expression, value effort, and growth

Teachers consider students' communication abilities, confidence, and learning progress when differentiating product ratings. They allow varied ways of expression, value effort and growth, not just uniform outcomes.

Classroom order, management, and emotional climate

Teachers consider classroom order, management, and emotional climate when differentiating the learning environment. A clean, calm, and supportive setting with clear rules and structure helps students focus, participate, and build confidence.

Modified Paradigm

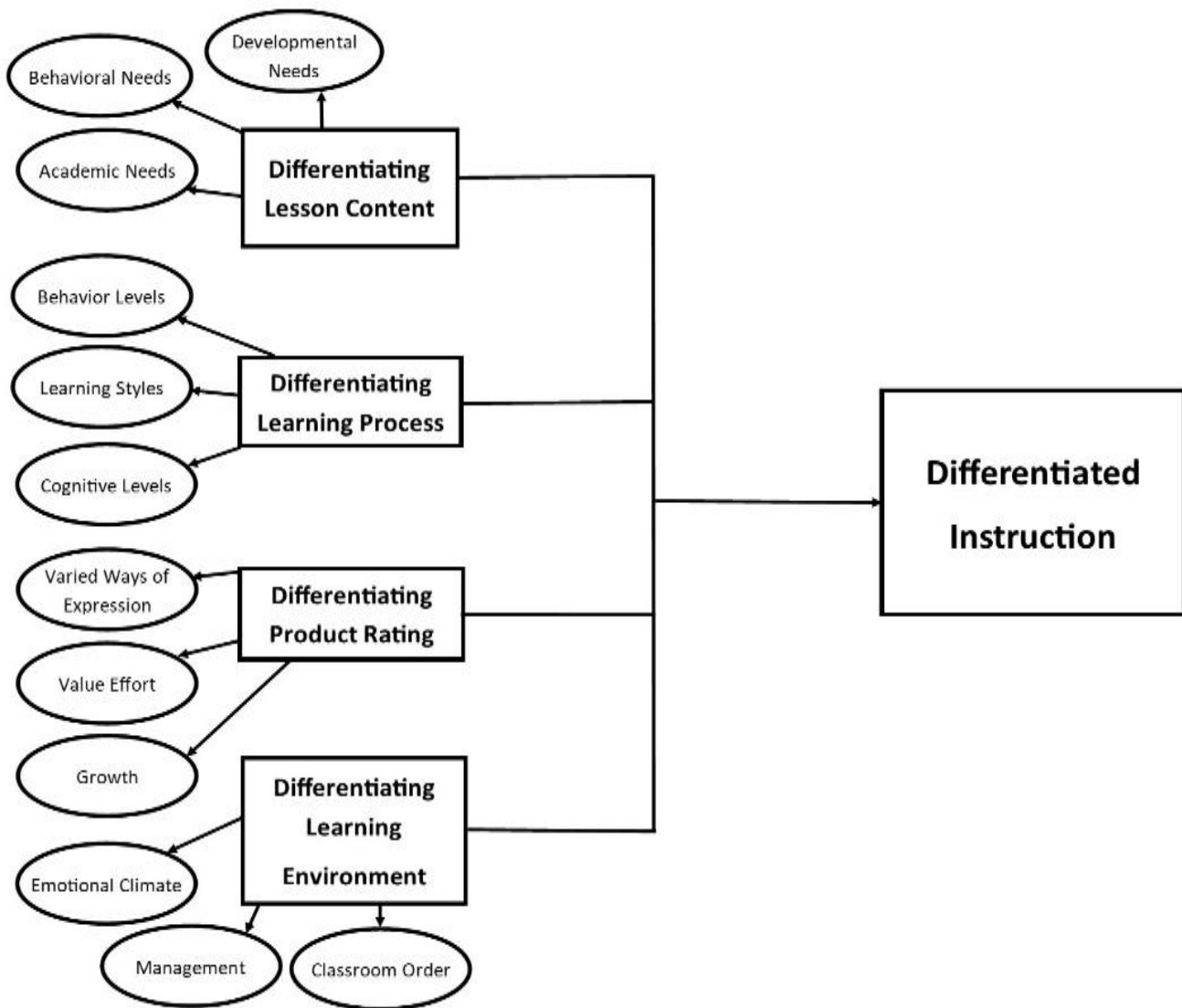


Figure 2, A Schematic Diagram of the Central Themes, Main Themes, Sub-Themes, and Emerging Themes of Differentiated Instruction

DISCUSSIONS

In this section, I presented the study's findings and outlined its implications for practice and future research directions.

Academic, developmental, and behavioral needs

Through an analysis of the discussions with my study participants, it became evident that when differentiating lesson content, teachers take into account students' diverse academic needs, such as learning abilities, learning styles, pacing, and comprehension; developmental needs, particularly socio-emotional needs; and behavioral needs. Drawing on this insight, I affirm the study by Taş and Minaz (2024), which explains that students exhibit diverse learning styles and readiness levels, requiring teachers to adapt instructional methods and content to ensure meaningful learning experiences across varying ability levels. Furthermore, my findings align with

Vacalares et al. (2024), who stated that differentiated instructional practices are closely associated with students' emotional engagement, motivation, attention, and classroom behavior, underscoring the importance of adjusting learning environments to address both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. This perspective leads me to challenge the claim that instructional delivery remains largely standardized, despite teachers' reported lack of time, resources, and institutional support for dynamically adjusting instruction to meet students' cognitive and behavioral differences (Dulfer et al., 2025; Bi et al., 2023).

Learning styles, behavior, and cognitive levels

An analysis of the dialogue revealed that, when differentiating learning processes, teachers take into account students' learning styles, behavior, and cognitive levels. They implement adaptive instructional processes and flexible strategies to ensure that all students can participate effectively. This finding supports the study by Rincon-Flores et al. (2024), which asserts that instruction becomes more effective when it is continuously adjusted to students' cognitive demands and learning pace, allowing learners to progress through personalized pathways. Similarly, my findings affirm Tithi et al. (2026), who indicated that tailoring instructional steps based on learner behavior and engagement significantly enhances participation and learning outcomes, particularly when instruction is dynamically adjusted in real time.

The current finding disagrees with van Geel et al. (2023), who suggested that the complexity of differentiating instruction in real classroom environments often constrains teachers' ability to consistently implement adaptive strategies during instruction, despite their recognition of its importance.

Varied ways of expression, value effort, and growth

An analysis of my conversation with the study participants revealed that teachers consider students' communication abilities, confidence, and learning progress when assigning product ratings. They provide varied ways of expression and place value on effort and growth rather than focusing solely on uniform outcomes. A recent review agrees with Taş and Minaz (2024), who argued that differentiated instruction emphasizes students' expression of learning through diverse product formats that more accurately reflect individual achievement and developmental progress rather than standardized outputs. My findings align with those of Ziernwald et al. (2022), who claim that differentiated instruction enhances student engagement and self-confidence while supporting continuous progress monitoring, encouraging teachers to attend to both cognitive and affective dimensions in assessment practices.

In contrast to the current findings, the study by Alquwez et al. (2022) reports that some educators still face challenges in implementing flexible assessment approaches due to workload demands, curriculum pressure, and limited training in differentiated assessment strategies, leading to more traditional, uniform grading practices.

Classroom order, management, and emotional climate

I found that teachers consider classroom order, management, and emotional climate when differentiating the learning environment. A clean, calm, and supportive setting with clear rules and structure helps students focus, participate, and build confidence. This finding corroborates the study by Tomlinson and Imbeau (2022), which found that classroom management quality is a key enabling factor in successfully implementing differentiated instruction, particularly in maintaining engagement and reducing off-task behavior in diverse classrooms. Likewise, this finding agrees with Sammons et al. (2023), who argued that emotional climate and teacher–student relationships significantly influence student engagement and learning outcomes in differentiated classrooms.

Conversely, the current finding differs from that of Smets and Struyven (2023), suggesting that while classroom climate is important, its impact may be limited when differentiation is superficial or inconsistently applied, resulting in minimal differences in student engagement and achievement.

Implications for Practice

To strengthen teachers' capacity to implement differentiated instruction effectively, education leaders should provide targeted training on adapting lesson content, diversifying learning activities, modifying assessments,

and creating flexible learning environments. Equally important, teachers need to develop strong skills in identifying students' diverse backgrounds, learning styles, interests, and cognitive abilities, enabling them to become effective advocates and implementers of differentiated teaching.

Future Direction

Future studies may include Multiple Linear Regression Analysis focusing on the strength of the differentiating lesson content, learning process, product rating, and learning environment as determinants of differentiated instruction, and Exploratory Factor Analysis to develop quantitative questionnaires for the variables mentioned.

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