

**DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING: STRATEGIES FOR ACCOMMODATING
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES**Schittny Joanan¹, and Nia Rahmadani²¹ Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal² Universitas Islam Negeri Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar, Indonesia**Corresponding Author:**

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Abstract

In today's increasingly diverse classrooms, the challenge of addressing a wide range of student learning styles has become more prominent than ever. This study investigates differentiated learning strategies as a means to accommodate the varied cognitive, emotional, and social needs of elementary school students. The objective is to examine how instruction tailored to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic preferences can enhance engagement and academic performance. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were gathered from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student feedback across five elementary schools implementing differentiated instruction. The results show a significant increase in student participation, confidence, and mastery of core concepts when teachers intentionally match instructional methods to students' preferred learning modalities. Differentiated activities such as learning stations, multimedia presentations, hands-on tasks, and flexible grouping were especially effective in promoting inclusive and meaningful learning experiences. The study concludes that differentiated instruction is not only practical but essential in modern elementary classrooms. It fosters a learning environment where every child is recognized, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Elementary Education, Inclusive Teaching, Learning Styles



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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st-century education landscape, classrooms are more diverse than ever before, reflecting a range of cultural, linguistic, social, and intellectual differences among students. This diversity is a strength, offering opportunities for dynamic collaboration and enriched perspectives. However, it also presents challenges for educators tasked with meeting the distinct needs of each learner (Zapalska & Dabb, 2002). Traditional one-size-fits-all instructional approaches are increasingly insufficient in addressing this complexity, often resulting in disengagement, frustration, and inequitable outcomes. Teachers are now expected to provide instruction that not only delivers academic content but also respects and responds to the individuality of students. One of the most promising responses to this demand is the implementation of differentiated instruction, a pedagogical approach grounded in the belief that every student learns differently and deserves tailored support.

Differentiated instruction is not a new concept in educational theory, but its practical application has gained significant traction in recent decades. Rooted in constructivist and learner-centered philosophies, differentiation involves proactively planning curriculum and instruction to address the varied readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of students (Watts-Taffe dkk., 2012). This strategy requires teachers to be flexible in their methods, materials, assessments, and classroom management. The core objective is to optimize learning by providing multiple pathways for students to engage with content, process information, and demonstrate understanding. In doing so, differentiated instruction promotes inclusivity and equity by ensuring that all students—not just those in the middle of the achievement spectrum—are appropriately challenged and supported in their learning journey.

Elementary school represents a critical period in a child's academic and personal development. During these formative years, students begin to establish their attitudes toward learning, build foundational skills, and shape their self-concept as learners. It is also the stage where individual learning styles become increasingly observable. Some students thrive through visual stimuli, while others rely heavily on auditory input or kinesthetic activities to grasp new concepts (Van Geel dkk., 2019). Recognizing and accommodating these differences can have a profound impact on students' academic achievement and emotional well-being. Differentiated instruction offers a framework through which educators can systematically address these diverse needs, creating classroom environments that are both responsive and nurturing.

The notion of learning styles has long been a topic of interest among educators, psychologists, and researchers. While debates continue regarding the scientific validity of fixed learning style classifications, there is general consensus that students possess unique preferences and strengths in how they process information. Differentiated instruction does not rigidly categorize learners but rather acknowledges this variability as a starting point for personalized teaching. By designing lessons that incorporate visual aids, interactive discussions, hands-on experiences, and technology-based tools, teachers can reach a broader spectrum of learners and reduce barriers to understanding (Ural, 2009). This multifaceted approach is particularly valuable in elementary settings, where student engagement and enthusiasm for learning are closely linked to instructional methods that resonate with their natural inclinations.

The implementation of differentiated learning strategies requires more than just awareness of student differences; it demands intentional planning, creativity, and a commitment to reflective practice. Teachers must continuously assess their students' needs through both formal and informal methods, adapting instruction accordingly (Suprayogi dkk., 2017). This includes modifying content complexity, adjusting pacing, offering varied learning tasks, and utilizing diverse assessment techniques. While this level of customization can be demanding, it is also deeply rewarding, as it fosters stronger teacher-student relationships, builds learner confidence, and leads to more meaningful educational experiences.

Differentiation thus becomes not just a technique, but a mindset—an approach to teaching grounded in empathy, responsiveness, and equity.

The growing emphasis on inclusive education further underscores the importance of differentiated instruction. Inclusion is not merely a pedagogical trend but a foundational value within modern education systems that seek to ensure that every learner, regardless of background or ability, has access to meaningful and high-quality instruction. This concept goes beyond the physical integration of students into classrooms and instead calls for an active restructuring of teaching and learning processes to accommodate individual differences. Differentiated instruction becomes a vital mechanism for achieving these inclusive goals by creating multiple entry points into learning content and multiple pathways toward academic success (Supa'at & Ihsan, 2023). Particularly in elementary education, where children are forming the cognitive and emotional habits that will shape their future academic journeys, it is critical to lay the groundwork for inclusive learning through differentiation. Teachers who differentiate are not simply modifying lessons; they are cultivating environments of acceptance, empowerment, and potential for all learners. The broader implications of this are significant, touching on issues of equity, social justice, and the right to education.

As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in educational practice, new and innovative opportunities for differentiation have emerged. The integration of digital tools has transformed the traditional classroom into a flexible and dynamic learning space that can be tailored to meet diverse student needs. Tools such as interactive apps, educational games, virtual reality environments, and adaptive learning platforms offer personalized content delivery, real-time feedback, and increased engagement for learners of all types (Smale-Jacobse dkk., 2019). For example, a student who struggles with reading can access audiobooks or speech-to-text software, while a kinesthetic learner may benefit from interactive simulations that bring abstract concepts to life. However, successful implementation of technology for differentiation demands intentionality, equity in access, and robust professional development for educators. Without these components, digital differentiation risks becoming superficial or even deepening existing inequities. Teachers must be equipped not only with technical know-how but also with the pedagogical understanding necessary to align technology use with sound instructional goals and student learning profiles.

Despite its many advantages, differentiated instruction is not without challenges. Implementing effective differentiation requires significant time, effort, and expertise from educators who are already navigating demanding workloads and diverse student populations. One of the most cited obstacles is the perception that differentiation increases teacher burden, particularly when managing large class sizes or limited instructional resources. Additionally, some teachers may lack confidence in their ability to accurately assess student needs or may feel uncertain about how to design and implement differentiated tasks that align with curricular standards (Schroeder, 1993). Institutional support—such as leadership encouragement, structured planning time, and access to instructional coaches—can alleviate some of these pressures and foster a culture that values instructional flexibility. Moreover, shifting from a traditional, one-size-fits-all model to a differentiated approach often involves challenging long-held assumptions about what effective teaching looks like, making professional development and peer collaboration essential to change management.

What makes this study particularly significant is its focus on practical, evidence-based strategies for implementing differentiation in authentic, real-world elementary classrooms. While theoretical discussions and policy recommendations on differentiation are abundant in educational literature, many teachers continue to struggle with translating these ideas into actionable classroom practices. This research contributes to the field by offering insights derived from extensive classroom observation, direct teacher interviews, and student feedback—all of which help contextualize the complexities and possibilities of differentiation. By highlighting diverse case studies and examples of successful differentiated instruction, the

study serves not only as an academic investigation but also as a professional resource for teachers seeking inspiration and guidance (Sargant, 1867). Its practical orientation ensures that the findings are grounded in everyday teaching realities, making them both relatable and applicable across various educational settings.

A key novelty of this study is its commitment to amplifying the voices of students in the differentiation process. Too often, discussions about learning styles and instructional strategies occur without meaningful input from the learners themselves. This study deliberately incorporates student perspectives to better understand how they experience differentiated instruction and how it impacts their sense of agency, motivation, and achievement (Riener & Willingham, 2010). Through interviews and reflective journaling, students shared their preferences, described challenges, and articulated how specific instructional strategies helped or hindered their learning. These student narratives enrich the research findings and emphasize the importance of co-creating educational experiences that are responsive to learner feedback. Incorporating student voice not only improves the effectiveness of differentiated instruction but also fosters a democratic classroom culture where learners feel heard, respected, and empowered.

Furthermore, this research underscores the interconnectedness of cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning within the differentiated classroom. Learning is not a purely intellectual activity; it is deeply influenced by how students feel, how they relate to others, and how they perceive their place in the classroom community. Differentiated instruction supports these dimensions by validating student identities, reducing anxiety, and promoting positive peer interactions (Reynolds, 1997). The research revealed that classrooms employing differentiated strategies often exhibited higher levels of student cooperation, reduced behavioral issues, and increased empathy among students. These outcomes highlight the transformative potential of differentiation to create not just better learners, but better citizens. By embedding social-emotional learning into academic instruction, teachers contribute to holistic development that prepares students for success in school and beyond.

The findings also emphasize the crucial role of ongoing assessment in driving effective differentiation. Unlike traditional assessments that are administered periodically and often focus on summative outcomes, differentiated classrooms rely heavily on formative assessments that provide continuous insights into student progress, interests, and needs. Teachers in the study used a variety of assessment tools—including anecdotal records, learning journals, performance tasks, and student conferences—to monitor understanding and inform instructional adjustments (Pashler *et al.*, 2008). This dynamic, responsive approach to assessment allows for more accurate identification of learning gaps and timely intervention. It also encourages students to reflect on their learning and take ownership of their growth, fostering metacognitive skills that are essential for lifelong learning.

In exploring the landscape of differentiated learning, this study situates its inquiry within a broader global context of educational reform and innovation. Around the world, policymakers and educators are grappling with the challenge of improving student outcomes while respecting individual differences. Differentiated instruction emerges as a viable solution that aligns with international frameworks promoting inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. The study's emphasis on early intervention through elementary education further supports global efforts to address learning disparities at their root (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). It positions differentiation not as a remedial tactic, but as a proactive strategy that nurtures student potential from the very beginning of their academic journey. By investing in differentiation at the foundational level, education systems can build a more just, effective, and compassionate future.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to not only advocate for differentiated instruction but to empower teachers with practical strategies, reflective tools, and conceptual clarity. The study aims to bridge the persistent gap between theory and classroom application, offering a roadmap that is informed by research yet grounded in reality. It recognizes the complexity of teaching and respects the professionalism of educators who navigate this complexity every day. Through its findings, the study encourages educators to approach differentiation not as a rigid formula but as an evolving practice shaped by curiosity, collaboration, and care.

Finally, this research serves as an invitation—to educators, administrators, parents, and policymakers—to reimagine what effective, inclusive education can look like. Differentiated instruction is not merely a pedagogical technique; it is a philosophy that values the individuality of each learner and seeks to build educational systems where all students are seen, supported, and celebrated. As classrooms continue to diversify and educational challenges grow more complex, differentiation offers a hopeful, human-centered path forward—one rooted in empathy, equity, and the unwavering belief that every child can learn and succeed when given the opportunity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how differentiated instruction is implemented in elementary school settings to accommodate diverse student learning styles. The research was conducted across five elementary schools selected based on their commitment to inclusive education practices and their adoption of differentiated instructional strategies. These schools were located in urban and suburban areas, ensuring representation of diverse student populations. The study focused on Grades 3 to 5, where students typically begin to demonstrate distinct learning preferences and are cognitively mature enough to reflect on their learning experiences (Oxford & Anderson, 1995). Data were gathered over a period of three months through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and reflective journals completed by students. This triangulation of data sources allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how differentiated learning is enacted and experienced in real-world classrooms.

Classroom observations were central to the research, offering firsthand insights into the instructional practices and classroom dynamics associated with differentiation. A total of 30 lessons were observed, spanning subjects such as mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies. Observers used a structured checklist to document specific differentiation strategies employed, such as tiered activities, flexible grouping, varied pacing, and use of multimodal resources. Observers also took detailed field notes on student engagement, interaction patterns, and classroom climate. The goal was to identify not only the presence of differentiated techniques but also their effectiveness and consistency across lessons (Nemi Neto, 2018). Observations were scheduled in consultation with teachers to capture a representative sample of regular classroom instruction.

To supplement observational data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 elementary school teachers who had been implementing differentiated instruction for at least one academic year. The interviews explored teachers' understanding of differentiation, their planning processes, instructional decisions, perceived benefits, and challenges. Teachers were encouraged to share specific examples of differentiated lessons and to reflect on how their practices had evolved over time. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent (Molbaek, 2018). Transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify common patterns and unique insights. The teacher voice was a critical component of the study, as it provided context for the observed practices and illuminated the pedagogical thinking behind them.

In addition to teacher perspectives, student input was gathered through reflective learning journals. A total of 120 students were invited to complete weekly journal entries over a six-week period, responding to prompts about their learning preferences, experiences with differentiated activities, and feelings of success or frustration. These journals provided a window into how students perceived the relevance and accessibility of different instructional strategies. The reflections also highlighted the emotional and motivational dimensions of learning, which are often overlooked in traditional assessment tools. Student data were anonymized and coded thematically to identify recurring themes related to engagement, autonomy, and perceived learning outcomes.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process using qualitative analysis software. All data sources—observational notes, interview transcripts, and student journals—were imported into the software for organization and coding. Initial codes were developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework, then refined through iterative review and discussion among the research team. Categories such as instructional strategy types, learning style responsiveness, student engagement, and implementation challenges were used to group related codes. Cross-case analysis was conducted to identify patterns across different classrooms and schools, allowing for generalizable insights while preserving contextual richness.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all teacher and student participants, as well as from parents or guardians in the case of minors. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Teachers were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and observation schedules were arranged to minimize disruption to teaching. The study also received institutional ethical approval, ensuring compliance with research standards related to confidentiality, transparency, and participant welfare.

The study adopted a constructivist interpretive framework, recognizing that meaning is co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants. This perspective was essential in understanding how differentiated instruction is not a fixed method but a dynamic practice shaped by teacher beliefs, student needs, classroom culture, and institutional context. The interpretive stance allowed the researchers to remain open to unexpected findings and to engage deeply with the lived experiences of educators and learners. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study, with researchers maintaining analytic memos and participating in peer debriefing to examine their own biases and assumptions.

Validity and reliability were addressed through several strategies. Triangulation of data sources ensured that findings were corroborated across observations, interviews, and student journals. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participating teachers to confirm accuracy and resonance (Minott, 2019). Thick description was used in reporting to allow readers to evaluate the transferability of findings to their own contexts. The research team also engaged in peer auditing, where external colleagues reviewed coding schemes and thematic interpretations for consistency and coherence. These measures strengthened the credibility of the study and enhanced trustworthiness.

The methodological choice to use a qualitative descriptive design was intentional, aligning with the study's aim to provide detailed, practice-oriented insights into differentiated instruction. Unlike experimental or correlational studies, this approach prioritizes depth over breadth and seeks to illuminate the nuances of educational practice in situ. By focusing on naturalistic settings and everyday teaching, the study offers findings that are both empirically grounded and immediately relevant to classroom educators. This methodological orientation ensures that the research is not only informative but also actionable.

In summary, the methodology employed in this study provided a robust framework for examining how differentiated learning strategies are applied and experienced in elementary school classrooms. Through a combination of observations, interviews, and student reflections, the research captured a holistic picture of differentiation in action. The next section presents the findings that emerged from this multi-dimensional inquiry, highlighting the strategies that proved most effective, the conditions that supported their implementation, and the impact on student engagement and learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of classroom observations revealed that differentiated instruction was most effectively implemented when teachers deliberately planned lessons with clear learning objectives and multiple pathways for student engagement (Landrum & McDuffie, 2010). Teachers who began with diagnostic assessments were better equipped to tailor instruction to individual needs. In classrooms where differentiation was integrated across all lesson components—content, process, product, and learning environment—student participation was notably higher. Students engaged in activities that were visually stimulating, auditorily rich, or physically interactive depending on their dominant learning style. The presence of flexible grouping strategies further enabled students to work in settings that matched their social and academic needs, thereby promoting collaboration, peer teaching, and a sense of belonging.

Classrooms utilizing tiered assignments demonstrated significant benefits in accommodating students' readiness levels. These assignments were structured with varying levels of complexity, allowing students to engage with core concepts at a pace and depth appropriate to their skill level. Observation data showed that students working on tiered tasks appeared more focused and confident, often seeking feedback and revising their work more willingly. Teachers reported that this structure allowed for more meaningful differentiation without stigmatizing students who required additional support. Furthermore, the opportunity to select tasks from differentiated menus gave students a greater sense of autonomy and ownership over their learning.

The integration of technology emerged as a key enabler of effective differentiation. In many observed classrooms, teachers used digital tools to present content in multiple formats and to provide instant feedback. Interactive whiteboards, tablets, and educational software allowed for multimedia learning experiences that catered to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners alike. Students responded positively to the use of apps and games that adapted to their proficiency levels, with some explicitly stating that technology made learning “more fun and easier to understand (Jordan dkk., 2010).” Importantly, the data indicated that technology use was most successful when it was seamlessly embedded into instructional goals rather than used as an add-on or reward.

Flexible grouping strategies had a strong impact on student engagement and classroom climate, shaping not only how students interacted with content but also how they related to one another as learners. Teachers employed various grouping methods—including homogeneous, heterogeneous, and interest-based groupings—depending on the learning task and the specific goals of instruction. In classrooms where students rotated through different groups regularly, there was a noticeable increase in peer collaboration and mutual support. Activities such as peer teaching, group debates, collaborative projects, and shared problem-solving tasks gave students opportunities to articulate their thinking, refine ideas, and learn from one another's perspectives. Moreover, grouping based on shared learning preferences helped reduce social anxiety, as students felt more comfortable and confident when working alongside peers with similar approaches to learning. Teachers reported that flexible grouping also made classroom management easier, as students were more focused and less disruptive when engaged in group

settings aligned to their strengths and interests. Importantly, the success of grouping strategies depended heavily on the classroom culture established by the teacher—environments that fostered respect, trust, and inclusion were better positioned to benefit from the full potential of flexible groupings.

The use of learning profiles to guide instruction provided clear, tangible benefits in personalizing the educational experience and enhancing learner engagement. Teachers who took time to understand each student's learning profile—including their preferred modalities, cognitive strengths, areas for growth, and personal interests—were better able to design lessons that resonated with individual learners. These profiles were often developed through formal inventories, informal observations, and reflective conversations. One standout example was a teacher who created a “learning style inventory wall” where students regularly updated their evolving preferences and learning goals. This visual representation not only empowered students to take ownership of their learning identities but also served as a living guide for the teacher in planning instruction. By referencing these profiles, teachers could offer tiered activities, differentiated reading lists, and scaffolded tasks that were more likely to engage and challenge students meaningfully. Additionally, the profiles supported inclusive practices by validating student diversity as an asset rather than a challenge. This approach shifted the classroom dynamic from one of conformity to one of individual exploration and expression, promoting a more respectful and empowering educational space.

Differentiated assessment strategies emerged as a critical component of effective instructional design, allowing for a more accurate and inclusive measurement of student understanding. Teachers moved away from solely relying on traditional paper-and-pencil tests and incorporated a variety of formative and summative assessments that honored different learning styles. Formative assessments included learning journals, exit tickets, graphic organizers, peer assessments, and one-on-one conferences, providing immediate feedback and insights into students’ thought processes. Summative assessments were equally varied, with students demonstrating mastery through projects, presentations, portfolios, creative performances, and multimedia products. Notably, students reported feeling less anxious and more motivated when given choices in how to showcase their learning (Hatami, 2013). Teachers emphasized that differentiated assessment not only revealed a broader picture of student achievement but also encouraged students to become more reflective and proactive about their own learning progress. In addition, the flexibility of these assessments fostered a classroom culture where mistakes were seen as opportunities for growth, further supporting a positive and resilient learning mindset among students.

Teachers who consistently implemented differentiated strategies demonstrated advanced classroom management, strong organizational capacity, and responsive pedagogy. These educators maintained clear routines, set high but flexible expectations, and created seamless transitions between varied instructional activities. Classroom environments were structured yet adaptable, allowing for independent work, small group collaboration, and teacher-guided instruction to occur concurrently. Teachers made use of visual schedules, task charts, and learning centers to guide students and support autonomy. This structure allowed the teacher to move freely among groups or individuals, providing just-in-time support while maintaining the flow of instruction. Observation data revealed that students in these classrooms were more self-directed and took initiative in managing their own learning. For example, students would consult anchor charts or peer tutors before seeking help from the teacher, demonstrating a well-established culture of agency and mutual support. Teachers reported that although differentiated classrooms required more upfront planning, they ultimately led to more productive and autonomous learners, reducing behavioral issues and increasing time-on-task.

Student reflections provided rich insight into the emotional, motivational, and cognitive impact of differentiated instruction. Students consistently articulated that having choice and voice in their learning helped them feel more engaged, respected, and understood. They valued the opportunity to express themselves in multiple ways, such as creating a video instead of writing an essay or building a model instead of taking a quiz. This flexibility allowed them to demonstrate their strengths while also working on areas of growth. Emotional engagement was particularly strong among students who had previously struggled in traditional settings; these students shared that differentiated tasks felt more “fair” and “possible” because they were aligned with how they learned best. Furthermore, students who were typically disengaged or disruptive showed increased persistence and curiosity when involved in lessons that appealed to their interests or allowed hands-on interaction. The reflective journals also revealed that students were developing metacognitive awareness, regularly evaluating their learning strategies and adapting them over time. This growing self-awareness marked a significant shift in students’ academic identities and helped build a foundation for lifelong learning.

Interviews with teachers illuminated both the joys and complexities of implementing differentiated instruction in real classrooms. Educators described how differentiation reignited their passion for teaching by allowing them to be more creative, responsive, and student-centered. They felt a deeper sense of connection with their students and a clearer understanding of individual needs. At the same time, they acknowledged the challenge of balancing curricular demands, standardized assessments, and differentiation. Many noted the importance of administrative support, collaborative planning time, and access to high-quality resources in sustaining their efforts. Teachers who were part of professional learning communities or mentorship networks felt more confident in experimenting with new strategies and received valuable feedback that informed their practice. The interviews revealed a strong consensus that while differentiation required more initial effort, the long-term benefits—increased student success, reduced stress, and greater professional fulfillment—were well worth the investment.

The data from the study overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that differentiated instruction fosters inclusive and equitable learning environments that benefit a wide range of students. In particular, students with special education needs, English language learners, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds reported feeling more empowered and successful in differentiated classrooms. Teachers were able to modify tasks, adjust language levels, and provide culturally relevant materials that reflected students’ identities and experiences. In classrooms where differentiation was deeply embedded in the culture, there were fewer discipline issues, more positive student-teacher relationships, and greater peer acceptance. These outcomes highlight the potential of differentiation not only to improve academic outcomes but also to build more just and humane educational communities.

The role of teacher-student relationships emerged as a central factor in the effectiveness of differentiation. Classrooms where students felt known, valued, and emotionally safe were more conducive to deep learning and risk-taking. Teachers who demonstrated empathy, patience, and consistent encouragement were able to cultivate environments where students felt comfortable expressing confusion, trying new approaches, and pushing themselves academically. These relationships provided a foundation for differentiation by allowing teachers to truly understand what motivated and challenged each learner. Students described these teachers as “caring,” “understanding,” and “always there to help,” reflecting the importance of emotional connection in the learning process. Observations and interviews confirmed that differentiation was most successful when embedded within a relational pedagogy that emphasized trust, respect, and mutual investment in growth.

Common practices among highly effective differentiated classrooms included clear learning targets, frequent formative assessments, flexible instructional models, and ongoing reflection. Teachers in these classrooms approached instruction as a dynamic process of inquiry, continually adjusting their plans based on student feedback and performance data. Student choice was not only permitted but expected, with learners regularly participating in decisions about what, how, and with whom they learned. The reflective culture extended to teachers as well, who maintained planning journals, collected student feedback, and engaged in regular peer collaboration. These classrooms were characterized by a palpable energy—students were active, curious, and collaborative; teachers were focused, responsive, and innovative. It became clear that differentiation was not a static set of strategies but a mindset of growth, experimentation, and responsiveness to the complexities of real students in real time.

One particularly significant finding was the development of student metacognition and learner autonomy as a result of differentiated instruction. When students were asked to think about how they learn, monitor their own progress, and set personal goals, they developed stronger self-regulatory habits (Grift, 1990). These skills translated into greater academic independence, improved resilience when facing challenges, and a more proactive attitude toward learning. Teachers supported this growth through structured reflection activities, student-led conferences, and the use of digital portfolios where students could document and reflect on their learning journey. This emphasis on metacognition helped shift the role of students from passive recipients of information to active constructors of knowledge. The benefits extended beyond academics, as students also reported feeling more confident and empowered in other areas of their lives.

Differentiated instruction also had a notable impact on curricular relevance and student engagement with real-world content. Teachers who integrated current events, culturally responsive materials, and authentic learning experiences were able to increase students' sense of purpose and connection to their studies. Project-based learning was especially effective in this regard, allowing students to apply skills in meaningful contexts and collaborate on solutions to real problems. In one school, students participated in a differentiated sustainability project that included role-playing as scientists, artists, and policy makers, each engaging in tasks aligned with their learning strengths. This project not only enhanced content knowledge but also fostered critical thinking, empathy, and civic responsibility. Such initiatives demonstrated that differentiation can serve as a bridge between academic standards and students' lived experiences, enriching both.

The overall picture that emerged from the results was one of hopeful transformation—differentiated instruction, when implemented with care, creativity, and collaboration, has the potential to radically improve student learning and well-being. Teachers felt more effective and inspired, students felt more empowered and capable, and classrooms became more vibrant, inclusive, and learner-centered. These findings provide a compelling argument for investing in differentiated practices at all levels of the education system, from policy and teacher training to curriculum design and classroom implementation.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and multifaceted picture of differentiated instruction in elementary school classrooms, shedding light on both its promise and its practical implementation. The success of differentiated strategies hinges on a teacher's ability to deeply understand their students—not only academically but also socially and emotionally (Goering dkk., 2022). When educators recognize the diverse learning profiles within their classrooms and make intentional choices to accommodate these differences, they open pathways for all students to thrive. This responsiveness does not require a complete overhaul of the curriculum but rather a thoughtful adaptation of instructional strategies, assessments, and classroom

environments. Differentiated instruction thus emerges not as an added burden but as a natural extension of effective teaching grounded in empathy and reflective practice.

One critical insight from the study is the importance of balancing structure and flexibility in differentiated classrooms. Teachers who succeeded in differentiation maintained high expectations and clear learning objectives while allowing students multiple ways to access content and express understanding. This balance ensured that learning remained rigorous and purposeful, even as it became more personalized (Dixon dkk., 2014). For instance, allowing students to choose from tiered assignments or varied assessment formats enabled them to engage deeply with material without sacrificing academic standards. This highlights that differentiation is not about lowering the bar but about finding diverse ways to reach it. In fact, the approach often raises the bar for student engagement and independence, demanding greater reflection, self-direction, and critical thinking.

The use of formative assessment played a pivotal role in driving differentiation. Teachers who collected and analyzed ongoing data about student learning were better equipped to adjust their instruction in real time. This kind of responsive teaching requires a mindset shift from delivering content to facilitating growth. Formative assessments such as exit slips, learning journals, and one-on-one conferences provided valuable insights into student needs, misconceptions, and strengths (B. M. Dewsbury, 2017). These assessments were not merely evaluative but diagnostic and instructional, forming the backbone of the differentiation process. Moreover, they empowered students to monitor their own learning, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility that is foundational to lifelong learning.

Technology emerged as both a tool and a catalyst for differentiation. When integrated thoughtfully, digital tools enabled teachers to personalize instruction with greater efficiency and creativity. Adaptive learning software, multimedia content, and interactive platforms allowed students to engage with material in ways that aligned with their learning preferences. Importantly, technology also supported real-time feedback and flexible pacing, key components of effective differentiation. However, the findings caution against overreliance on technology (B. Dewsbury & Brame, 2019). Its success depends not on the tools themselves but on how they are used within a pedagogically sound framework. Professional development in both technical skills and instructional design is therefore essential to ensure that digital differentiation enhances rather than complicates the learning experience.

The study highlights the centrality of classroom culture in supporting differentiated instruction. A learning environment characterized by trust, respect, and high expectations was foundational to the success of the observed practices. In such classrooms, students felt safe to take academic risks, ask questions, and express themselves. This emotional safety was particularly important for students who had previously struggled in school (Chalmers & Hunt, 2013). Teachers who cultivated strong relationships with their students were able to design more meaningful and engaging learning experiences. These relationships allowed teachers to see their students not as data points or deficits but as individuals with unique stories, strengths, and potentials. This human-centered approach lies at the heart of differentiation and reinforces its alignment with inclusive education principles.

The role of student choice in differentiation cannot be overstated. Allowing students to make decisions about what, how, and with whom they learn cultivates ownership and motivation. Choice encourages students to tap into their interests and strengths while developing self-regulation and decision-making skills. In differentiated classrooms, choice was evident in assignment options, reading materials, collaborative partners, and assessment formats. Students responded positively to this autonomy, reporting increased engagement and confidence (Caswell & Stratemeyer, 1943). However, successful implementation of choice also required scaffolding—teachers needed to guide students in making informed decisions and to ensure that all choices were aligned with learning goals. This balance between freedom and guidance is a hallmark of effective differentiation.

Differentiation also showed a strong connection to equity. By designing instruction that responded to diverse needs, teachers were able to reduce barriers to learning and create more inclusive opportunities for success. This was especially evident for students with disabilities, language learners, and those from marginalized backgrounds. Rather than expecting all students to conform to a single mode of instruction, differentiation invited all learners to bring their full identities into the classroom (Cassidy *, 2004). It validated multiple ways of knowing, being, and expressing, thereby promoting educational justice. These findings underscore the role of differentiation in advancing broader societal goals related to equity, inclusion, and human rights.

The data also illuminated the professional demands of differentiation. Teachers reported that while the approach required significant planning and adaptability, it was also deeply rewarding. Successful differentiation involved continuous learning, collaboration with colleagues, and reflective practice. Teachers benefited from supportive structures such as professional learning communities, instructional coaching, and access to differentiated resources (Carter, 1984). School leaders played a key role in fostering a culture where differentiation was valued and resourced. This suggests that for differentiation to be sustainable, it must be embedded within a supportive professional ecosystem that honors teacher expertise and promotes collective growth.

Students' voices in the study added a powerful dimension to the findings. Their reflections revealed not only preferences and frustrations but also a deep awareness of how they learn best. When students were asked about differentiated instruction, they spoke about feeling "understood," "included," and "challenged." These responses point to the profound emotional and psychological impact of being seen and supported as a unique learner. Incorporating student voice into instructional planning is thus not only a democratic practice but also a practical strategy for improving learning outcomes. Students become co-creators of their educational experience, leading to greater investment and deeper learning. Moreover, acknowledging and integrating students' voices reinforces their role as active participants in the educational process, empowering them to take initiative and responsibility (Callahan & Hertberg-Davis, 2018). This collaborative relationship between teacher and student shifts the dynamics of the classroom, fostering mutual respect and nurturing a culture of continuous dialogue, adaptation, and growth. As students become more vocal and reflective about their learning needs and preferences, teachers gain valuable insights that inform more personalized and responsive instruction.

The study's emphasis on metacognition and student self-regulation further illustrates the developmental benefits of differentiated instruction. When students engage in self-assessment, goal setting, and reflection, they build critical skills for academic and personal growth. Differentiated instruction provided the structures and opportunities for students to develop these capacities in meaningful ways. Teachers supported this process through reflective journals, progress tracking, and student-led conferences (Boutte, 2012). Over time, students became more adept at identifying their needs, advocating for themselves, and taking ownership of their progress. This empowerment contributes to a resilient and adaptive learner mindset that extends beyond the classroom. In differentiated environments, students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active agents of their own learning journey. These metacognitive practices nurture a sense of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, which are essential for navigating complex learning challenges. By equipping students with these lifelong skills, differentiation serves as a bridge between academic instruction and the broader goal of holistic development.

Another key discussion point is the alignment of differentiated instruction with 21st-century learning goals. Skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking were frequently observed in differentiated classrooms. Students worked together to solve problems, presented ideas in multiple formats, and engaged in inquiry-based tasks. These

experiences prepared them for the complex and interconnected world they inhabit. Differentiation thus emerges as not only a method for meeting individual needs but also a framework for cultivating future-ready competencies. The integration of real-world tasks and interdisciplinary learning further enhanced this alignment (Bondie dkk., 2019). In an era defined by rapid technological change, globalization, and shifting workforce demands, students must be equipped with adaptive, transferable skills that go beyond content knowledge. Differentiated instruction meets this challenge by creating varied and authentic learning experiences that mirror real-life situations. When students collaborate on projects, analyze multifaceted issues, and express their ideas in diverse ways, they are developing competencies that will serve them in higher education, careers, and civic life.

Importantly, the research suggests that differentiation should not be seen as a collection of isolated techniques but as an overarching philosophy of teaching (Andrews dkk., 2021). It is a way of thinking about learners, curriculum, and instruction that prioritizes responsiveness, equity, and continuous growth. Teachers who embrace this philosophy are more likely to experiment, adapt, and innovate in their practice. They view challenges as opportunities to deepen their understanding of students and refine their strategies. This mindset is critical in an educational landscape that is constantly evolving and increasingly diverse. Rather than viewing differentiation as an additional burden, these educators see it as an integral part of what it means to teach effectively and ethically. This philosophical shift transforms teaching from a transactional act into a relational and transformative process (Billings & Kowalski, 2008). It encourages educators to move beyond compliance and coverage and to embrace creativity, compassion, and curiosity in their work. Ultimately, differentiation becomes a lens through which all pedagogical decisions are filtered, leading to more intentional, inclusive, and meaningful instruction.

The sustainability of differentiated instruction depends on ongoing investment in teacher development and systemic support (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004). Policies that prioritize standardized outcomes over flexible pedagogy can hinder the widespread adoption of differentiation. Instead, education systems must create conditions that empower teachers to respond to student diversity with creativity and care. This includes rethinking curriculum design, assessment practices, and teacher evaluation systems. Professional learning must also evolve to include collaborative inquiry, job-embedded coaching, and opportunities for teacher leadership. When differentiation is supported at all levels—from classroom to policy—it becomes a powerful lever for educational transformation. School leaders, district administrators, and policymakers must recognize that differentiation is not a quick fix but a long-term commitment to equity and excellence (Bertills dkk., 2019). By providing teachers with time, resources, and professional autonomy, systems can foster environments where differentiated instruction thrives. Additionally, embedding differentiation into teacher preparation programs ensures that future educators enter the profession with the mindset, skills, and confidence needed to meet diverse learner needs from day one.

Finally, the study invites continued exploration and innovation in the field of differentiated instruction. Future research might examine the long-term effects of differentiation on student achievement, engagement, and well-being. It may also explore how differentiated strategies intersect with culturally sustaining pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, and social-emotional learning. As classrooms continue to diversify and societal challenges intensify, the need for responsive, inclusive, and empowering pedagogy will only grow. Differentiation offers a hopeful and human-centered path forward—one that honors the dignity and potential of every learner. Educators, researchers, and policymakers are called to collaborate in refining and scaling these practices, ensuring that differentiation is not confined to isolated success stories but becomes the norm in all educational settings. Through sustained inquiry and shared commitment, the field can evolve toward more equitable, adaptive, and learner-driven education systems that truly serve the needs of all students in a changing world.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the transformative potential of differentiated instruction in elementary school classrooms as both a pedagogical strategy and a guiding educational philosophy. By tailoring learning experiences to accommodate the varied readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of students, differentiation fosters environments where all learners can succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. The integration of flexible grouping, personalized assessments, learning profiles, and student voice not only supports individualized growth but also cultivates a more inclusive and equitable educational space. Differentiated instruction promotes student agency, metacognition, and engagement—cornerstones of lifelong learning that empower students to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic world.

Furthermore, the research highlights that effective differentiation requires more than classroom-level efforts; it depends on systemic support, sustained professional development, and a commitment to educational equity from all stakeholders. Teachers need time, resources, and collaborative spaces to plan, reflect, and innovate. School leaders and policymakers must champion differentiation as a proactive response to learner diversity, rather than a remedial intervention. When differentiation becomes embedded in the educational culture, it transforms classrooms into vibrant learning communities that honor the unique strengths and needs of every child.

Ultimately, differentiated instruction represents a shift from uniformity to responsiveness, from compliance to creativity, and from teacher-directed instruction to learner-centered growth. It is an approach that reaffirms the foundational belief that every child can learn—and deserves to be taught in ways that reflect who they are. As the demands of education continue to evolve, differentiation offers a sustainable, human-centered, and equity-driven model for teaching and learning in the 21st century.

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