

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AS AN INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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The foundation of lifelong learning starts with the elementary education. It plays a critical role in shaping the skills, attitudes, and values of each learner toward learning. At this stage, teachers are tasked not only with delivering content but also with responding to the diverse developmental, socio-emotional, and cognitive needs of learners. Classrooms are composed of learners with varying learning abilities, backgrounds, interests, and levels of readiness. This makes it a uniform instruction insufficient for ensuring equitable learning opportunities. As such, instructional practices should be inclusive, flexible, and responsive. One pedagogical approach that addresses these demands is Differentiated Instruction.

Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching that recognizes learner diversity as normal and expected condition of the classroom. Tomlinson (2014) states that differentiated involves proactively modifying instruction in response to learners' readiness, learning profiles, and interests. Teachers intentionally design learning experiences that allow learners to access the curriculum and demonstrate understanding in meaningful ways. This is more effective rather than teaching to the "average" learner.

In the context of the elementary education, and when inside the classroom, differentiated instruction may be implemented by adjusting content, process, product, and learning environment. Content differentiation involves presenting concepts using varied materials such as manipulatives, visual aids, and contextualized examples. Process differentiation includes providing learners with varied activities and instructional strategies such as independent work, cooperative learning, guided practice, and hands-

on tasks. Product differentiated allows learners to demonstrate mastery through different outputs, including written work, oral presentations, projects, or performance-based tasks. Lastly, the learning environment is structured to be supportive, engaging, and conducive to collaboration.

Inclusive education is supported by the application of differentiation instruction. It ensures that learners with different abilities and learning needs are given appropriate opportunities to succeed. Struggling learners benefit from scaffolded instruction and additional support, while on the other hand, advanced learners are challenged through enrichment activities. This approach aligns with DepEd's commitment to inclusive, learner-centered education and the principles outlined in the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST).

Research consistently indicates that differentiated instruction improves learner engagement and academic achievement. Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012) found that classrooms employing differentiated strategies demonstrated increased learner participation, improved task completion, and positive learning attitudes. Learners become more motivated and confident in their abilities when they feel that the tasks given to them are achievable and relevant. This means that engagement increases as learners take ownership of their learning and actively participate in classroom activities.

Differentiated instruction contributes to a positive learning environment from the perspective of classroom management. This means that learners are less likely to exhibit disruptive behavior when they are actively engaged in appropriately challenging tasks. The use of flexible groupings allows learners to collaborate with peers, develop social skills, and learn from one another. These practices promote respect for individual differences and foster a supportive classroom culture.

The role of teachers extends beyond effective classroom instruction. As instructional leaders, teachers are expected to model best practices, mentor colleagues,

and contribute to school-wide instructional improvement. Teachers demonstrate pedagogical expertise and provide concrete examples that colleagues can observe, adapt, and replicate by consistently implementing differentiated instruction. This can be done through lesson demonstrations, coaching sessions, and collaborative planning.

In conclusion, differentiated instruction is an essential pedagogical approach in elementary education. It responds to learner diversity, supports academic achievement, and promotes engagement ensuring an inclusive learning environment. Consistent and effective use of differentiated instruction demonstrates professional competence, instructional leadership, and commitment to quality education.

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