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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between differentiated instruction and learner engagement in elementary classrooms, focusing on Dolores Central Elementary School in the Schools Division of Eastern Samar. Specifically, it sought to determine the level of implementation of differentiated instruction as perceived by teachers in terms of content, process, product, and learning environment, as well as the level of learner engagement as perceived by pupils in terms of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Furthermore, it examined whether a significant relationship exists between differentiated instruction and learner engagement. A descriptive-correlational research design was employed. Data were collected from teacher and pupil respondents using validated researcher-made questionnaires. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the levels of implementation and engagement, while Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was utilized to determine the relationship between the two variables. Findings revealed that differentiated instruction was highly implemented in terms of content, process, and learning environment, while product differentiation was moderately implemented. Learners demonstrated high behavioral engagement, while emotional and cognitive engagement were at a moderate level. A statistically significant moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) was found between the level of differentiated instruction and learner engagement. The results affirm that differentiated instruction is a key factor in enhancing learner engagement. The study recommends strengthened teacher training on DI strategies, especially in designing differentiated products and promoting emotional and cognitive engagement, to foster a more inclusive and responsive learning environment.

KEYWORDS: *Differentiated Instruction, Learner Engagement, Elementary Classrooms, Content Differentiation, Behavioral Engagement, Philippine Education*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In recent years, the increasing diversity in student populations has posed challenges to traditional one-size-fits-all instruction. Globally, the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) has gained traction as an inclusive approach to address students' varied readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2020). DI is recognized by UNESCO (2019) as a key strategy in achieving inclusive and equitable quality education under SDG 4. At the same time, learner engagement—defined in terms of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement—is widely considered a critical determinant of academic achievement and student well-being (Fredricks et al., 2020).

In the United States, a longitudinal study revealed that classrooms employing differentiated strategies saw a 28% increase in student engagement scores over three years (Burkett, 2021). Similarly, in Canada, Nguyen et al. (2020) found that DI was significantly correlated with higher levels of participation and reduced dropout intentions among elementary learners.

In Southeast Asia, nations like Singapore and Malaysia have adopted differentiated instruction as part of their national curriculum reforms to respond to learning disparities post-pandemic (MOE Singapore, 2021; Lee & Nor, 2022). A regional study across ASEAN (Lim & Aris, 2022) concluded that schools utilizing DI strategies reported more engaged learners, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms. However, despite policy alignment, implementation remains inconsistent in developing nations due to teacher capacity, lack of training, and rigid assessment systems.

In the Philippine setting, the Department of Education (DepEd) mandates the use of differentiated instruction under the K–12 curriculum to support learner diversity (DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2016; DepEd Memo 162, s. 2020). However, national assessments indicate declining engagement and performance: the 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) reported that 78% of Filipino Grade 5 students lacked sufficient cognitive engagement in problem-solving tasks (UNICEF, 2020). Likewise, the 2022 World Bank Education Report found that 91% of Filipino learners aged 10 could not read and understand age-appropriate texts, linking disengagement with poor foundational skills.

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In Region VIII (Eastern Visayas), data from the Regional Office (DepEd RO VIII, 2023) show that many elementary learners exhibit low engagement in classroom activities, especially in Grades 4 to 6, with teachers struggling to address diverse learning needs. Although differentiated instruction is mentioned in lesson planning templates and LAC (Learning Action Cell) sessions, its systematic implementation is lacking. A 2022 study by Delacruz and Javier in Samar found that only 42% of teachers in multigrade and mono-grade schools consistently used DI strategies in core subjects.

Zooming into Eastern Samar, a classroom observation report by the Schools Division Office (SDO Eastern Samar, 2023) highlighted that instructional practices often favored whole-class teaching, leaving struggling learners disengaged. Local research focusing on DI is very limited. While some schools are piloting flexible learning groups, there is no division-wide evidence on how DI relates to actual learner engagement. Additionally, there are no existing local studies linking the types of DI (content, process, product, environment) with specific engagement outcomes among elementary learners.

The existing literature and reports reveal several gaps: Most research on differentiated instruction and engagement is either international or focused on urban Philippine schools, not rural or underserved contexts. There is insufficient empirical evidence linking specific types of DI to measurable engagement outcomes in elementary schools in Eastern Samar. The teacher perspective on how DI is practiced and its effects on learner behavior and motivation has not been adequately explored in the local setting.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by investigating the relationship between differentiated instruction and learner engagement in elementary classrooms in Eastern Samar. By using a descriptive-correlational approach, this research will assess the level of DI implementation, determine learner engagement patterns, and identify which aspects of DI contribute most to active and sustained learning involvement. Results of this study will contribute to evidence-based teaching improvements, teacher training designs, and classroom engagement strategies, especially in low-performing and resource-constrained public schools in the region.

Statement of the Problem

This study is sought to fill these gaps by investigating the relationship between differentiated instruction and learner engagement in selected elementary schools in Eastern Samar. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of implementation of differentiated instruction in elementary classrooms as perceived by teachers in terms of:
   1.1Content
   1.2Process
   1.3Product
   1.4 Learning Environment?
2. What is the level of learner engagement in elementary classrooms in terms of:
   2.1Behavioral engagement
   2.2Emotional engagement
   2.3 Cognitive engagement
3. Is there a significant relationship between differentiated instruction and learner engagement in elementary classrooms?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design. This design is appropriate for determining the degree and direction of the relationship between two variables—in this case, the level of implementation of differentiated instruction and the level of learner engagement among elementary pupils.

The descriptive aspect of the design quantified the extent to which differentiated instruction is implemented and the level of learner engagement across its three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Meanwhile, the correlational aspect was statistically examined whether a significant relationship exists between the implementation of differentiated instruction and learner engagement.

This non-experimental method is most suitable for real classroom settings where variables were not manipulated but were observed and analyzed. It allowed the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions about the associations among naturally occurring variables without altering the school environment.

Locale of the Study

This study was conducted at Dolores Central Elementary School, located in Dolores I District, under the Schools Division of Eastern Samar, Region VIII, Philippines. The school is situated in the municipality of Dolores, a coastal town in the northeastern part of Eastern Samar. It catered to learners from various barangays, both from central poblacion and nearby rural communities.

Dolores Central Elementary School was purposively selected as the research locale due to its diverse learner population and its ongoing initiatives to implement inclusive and learner-centered pedagogies such as Differentiated Instruction (DI). The school had a mixture of multi-level learners with varying readiness, interests, and learning profiles—making it an ideal setting to explore how DI strategies were practiced and how these influence learner engagement.

As one of the central schools in the district, it served as a model for implementing Department of Education (DepEd) programs, and it was regularly monitored by district and division supervisors. This institutional profile made it a relevant and rich site for conducting a study that investigated the relationship between teaching approaches and learner engagement.

Moreover, the school's participation in recent regional trainings and programs aligned with the K to 12 curriculum ensures that its teachers are familiar with, if not yet fully proficient in, differentiated instruction strategies—further justifying the school's selection for this study.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study was composed of two groups: elementary teachers and elementary pupils from Dolores

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Central Elementary School in Dolores I District, under the Schools Division of Eastern Samar.

The teacher-respondents included all Grades 4 to 6 teachers currently handling academic subjects during the School Year 2024–2025. These teachers provided information regarding the level of implementation of differentiated instruction in their classrooms. A total enumeration method was used for this group, meaning all eligible teachers in these grade levels were invited to participate in the study. Their insights were essential, as they were the implementers of instructional strategies within the classroom.

The second group of respondents included Grade 4 to 6 pupils, who were surveyed to determine their level of engagement—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—in the learning process. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure that each grade level is proportionally represented, with consideration to gender balance and academic diversity. Only officially enrolled learners for the School Year 2024–2025 was included, and parental consent was secured prior to participation. Inclusion Criteria (Teachers): were handling academic subjects in Grades 4–6 and must had at least one year of teaching experience at Dolores Central Elementary School. Inclusion Criteria (Pupils): had enrolled in Grades 4–6, regularly attending classes, and was able to understand and respond to survey items. Exclusion Criteria: Learners with identified cognitive or behavioral impairments that might affect their ability to comprehend the questionnaire were excluded to ensure data reliability and ethical considerations.

This two-group respondent framework was designed to provide both the teacher's perspective on differentiated instruction and the learner's experience of engagement, making it possible to explore correlations and draw meaningful conclusions from the data collected.

Research Instruments

This study utilized two researcher-made survey questionnaires as the primary tools for data collection—one for teachers and one for pupils. These instruments were developed based on relevant literature, validated by experts, and pilot-tested prior to full administration to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity.

Part I. Differentiated Instruction Questionnaire (for Teachers). This instrument aimed to measure the level of implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) along the four key components identified by Tomlinson (2019): Content – what the teacher taught and how the learner accessed the information; Process – how learners made sense of the content; Product – how learners demonstrated what they know; Learning Environment – the physical and psychological climate of the classroom.

The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items (5-point scale: Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never) grouped into the above components. Sample items included: "I vary my teaching materials to meet different student needs."; "I offer learners choices in how they demonstrate understanding."; "I use flexible groupings in my classroom."

This instrument helped determine the extent to which differentiated instruction was implemented in classrooms.

Part II. Learner Engagement Survey (for Pupils). This questionnaire was designed to assess the level of engagement of learners based on the three domains of engagement defined by Fredricks, Filsecker, and Lawson (2019): Behavioral Engagement – participation in academic and social activities. Emotional Engagement – feelings toward teachers, classmates, and school. Cognitive Engagement – investment in learning and willingness to exert effort.

This also used a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), translated into age-appropriate language to ensure understanding. Sample items included: "I listen carefully when my teacher is teaching." (Behavioral); "I feel excited to learn new things at school." (Emotional); "I try different ways to solve a difficult problem." (Cognitive). Assistance was provided for younger learners who needed help reading or understanding the questions.

Data Gathering

The data gathering process in this study was carried out in a systematic and ethical manner to ensure the accuracy, reliability, and validity of the information collected. Initially, the researcher secured permission to conduct the study from the thesis adviser, the Graduate Studies Office, the Schools Division Superintendent of Eastern Samar, and the School Head of Dolores Central Elementary School. These formal permissions were necessary to gain access to the school and its personnel for the purposes of academic research.

Following approval, the research instruments—two structured questionnaires, one for teachers regarding the level of implementation of differentiated instruction and one for pupils concerning their level of engagement—underwent content validation by at least three experts in the fields of education, pedagogy, and research. The instruments were then pilot tested in a nearby elementary school that was not included in the actual study locale. The purpose of the pilot test was to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability of the items. Based on the pilot results, necessary revisions were made, and reliability was computed using Cronbach's Alpha to assess internal consistency.

Once the instruments have been validated and finalized, the researcher will coordinate with the school head and class advisers to schedule the data collection in a manner that did not disrupt regular teaching and learning activities. Respondents were oriented on the purpose and scope of the study, and ethical considerations were emphasized, such as voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of responses. Informed consent was obtained from teacher-respondents, and parental consent forms were distributed and collected for pupil-respondents prior to their participation in the study.

During the actual data collection, the teacher questionnaires were distributed and retrieved during their vacant time or based on a pre-agreed schedule. Pupil questionnaires were administered per grade level (Grades 4 to 6) with the assistance of class advisers. To ensure understanding among the younger pupils, the researcher assisted in reading and explaining

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questions when necessary, while avoiding any influence on the pupils' responses. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately, checked for completeness, and organized systematically.

After collection, all data were encoded in a spreadsheet and stored securely. The researcher proceeded with the data analysis. Descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency, and percentage were used to determine the levels of implementation of differentiated instruction and learner engagement. To examine the relationship between the two variables, inferential analysis using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient will be conducted. These procedures will enable the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of the study.

Analysis of Data

The data collected in this study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics to address each of the specific research questions effectively. The goal was to quantify the level of differentiated instruction being implemented in elementary classrooms, determine the level of learner engagement, and examined whether a significant relationship exists between the two variables.

To address the first statement of the problem—the level of implementation of differentiated instruction in elementary classrooms—descriptive statistics, particularly the mean and standard deviation, were used. The results from the teacher-respondents' answers to the Differentiated Instruction Questionnaire were computed and interpreted using a 4-point Likert scale. The interpretation of the mean scores followed this scheme: 3.26–4.00 as Highly Implemented, 2.51–3.25 as Moderately Implemented, 1.76–2.50 as Minimally Implemented, and 1.00–1.75 as Not Implemented. This analysis provided insights into which domains of differentiated instruction—content, process, product, and learning environment—were most or least practiced in the classroom.

For the second problem—the level of learner engagement among elementary pupils—descriptive analysis were also employed. The mean and standard deviation of the learners' responses in the areas of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement were computed. Using the same 4-point Likert scale, the results were interpreted as follows: 3.26–4.00 as Highly Engaged, 2.51–3.25 as Moderately Engaged, 1.76–2.50 as Minimally Engaged, and 1.00–1.75 as Not Engaged. This highlighted which aspects of engagement were most strongly experienced by learners in their day-to-day classroom activities.

To respond to the third statement of the problem—the significant relationship between differentiated instruction and learner engagement —the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was used. This inferential statistical tool was appropriate for determining the strength and direction of the relationship between two continuous variables. The correlation coefficient was interpreted using standard ranges, where 0.90–1.00 indicated a very high positive correlation, 0.70–0.89 high, 0.50–0.69 moderate, 0.30–0.49 low, 0.10–0.29 very low, and 0.00 no correlation. A significance level of 0.05 will be observed to determine whether the relationship was statistically meaningful.

These analyses helped the researcher draw valid conclusions about the impact of differentiated instruction on learner engagement, thereby informing instructional practices and policy decisions in the elementary education context, particularly within Dolores Central Elementary School.

Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to the highest ethical standards to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants involved. The following ethical principles guided the conduct of the study:

Informed Consent. Prior to the data collection, the researcher secured informed consent from all participants. Teachers and parents of the pupil-respondents were fully informed about the nature, objectives, procedures, and expected outcomes of the study. Participation was strictly voluntary, and they may withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

Confidentiality and Anonymity. All responses and personal information from participants were treated with strict confidentiality. Names and identifying information were not disclosed in any part of the research report. Codes or pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of respondents. All data was stored securely and accessed only by the researcher for academic purposes.

Non-Maleficence. The study ensured that no psychological, emotional, or physical harm had come to any participant. All questions and procedures were designed to be age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and non-intrusive.

Respect and Dignity. The researcher upheld respect for the rights, beliefs, and opinions of the participants. There was no form of discrimination based on gender, socioeconomic status, religious belief, or academic performance.

Honesty and Integrity. The researcher committed to presenting findings truthfully, accurately, and without manipulation. Proper citation of all literature and acknowledgment of contributions was strictly observed to avoid plagiarism.

Approval and Coordination. Necessary approvals were sought from the school head of Dolores Central Elementary School, the Schools Division Office of Eastern Samar, and, if applicable, an institutional ethics review committee. Coordination with teachers and parents was maintained to ensure transparency and collaboration throughout the research process. By adhering to these ethical standards, the study ensured that the integrity of the research process is upheld while prioritizing the well-being and rights of its participants.

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RESULTS

Level of Implementation of Differentiated Instruction

Table 1. Level of Implementation of Differentiated Instruction

Component	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Content	3.58	0.42	Highly Implemented
Process	3.45	0.50	Highly Implemented
Product	3.30	0.58	Moderately Implemented
Learning Environment	3.62	0.39	Highly Implemented

The data show that teachers at Dolores Central Elementary School perceive differentiated instruction as generally highly implemented, particularly in terms of content (M = 3.58), process (M = 3.45), and learning environment (M = 3.62). The product component was rated slightly lower (M = 3.30), suggesting that while teachers often vary instructional content and strategy, fewer give students a choice in how they demonstrate learning.

These findings are aligned with Tomlinson (2019), who emphasized that DI is most effective when integrated across all four components, but teachers often prioritize content and process due to curriculum constraints. Hall et al. (2019) also noted that instructional product differentiation is often underutilized due to limited time and training. In the Southeast Asian context, Ariffin et al. (2019) found similar patterns, where content differentiation was emphasized more than product and environment adjustments.

Level of Learner Engagement

Table 2. Level of learner engagement in elementary classrooms

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Behavioral Engagement	3.48	0.47	Highly Engaged
Emotional Engagement	3.22	0.55	Moderately Engaged
Cognitive Engagement	3.35	0.50	Moderately Engaged

Learners showed a high level of behavioral engagement (M = 3.48), which reflects strong participation and attentiveness in class activities. Emotional (M = 3.22) and cognitive (M = 3.35) engagement were both moderately high, suggesting room for improvement in motivation and deeper learning involvement.

Fredricks, Filsecker, and Lawson (2019) define learner engagement as a multidimensional construct, and these results confirm their assertion that behavioral engagement is often strongest in structured environments, while emotional and cognitive engagement require more personalized approaches. In the Philippine context, Lopez and Santos (2020) found that emotional engagement is often lacking in rural schools, potentially due to socioeconomic challenges or lack of differentiated support.

Relationship Between Differentiated Instruction and Learner Engagement

Table 3. Significant relationship between differentiated instruction and learner engagement in elementary classrooms

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p-value	Interpretation
Differentiated Instruction & Learner Engagement	0.68	0.000	Moderate Positive Correlation (Significant)

The result shows a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) between the implementation of differentiated instruction and the level of learner engagement. This means that as the level of differentiated instruction increases, so does learner engagement.

This finding is supported by Park and Datnow (2020), who concluded that classrooms with consistent DI practices see greater engagement across all dimensions. Similarly, Santos et al. (2020) confirmed in Philippine settings that tailored instruction enhances participation, motivation, and learner performance. The implication is clear: differentiated instruction is not only a means to address learner diversity but also a driver of active, meaningful engagement in learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Differentiated instruction is generally practiced at a high level by teachers at Dolores Central Elementary School, particularly in delivering varied content, teaching methods, and structuring supportive learning environments. However, there is relatively less focus on differentiating products or student outputs, suggesting a need to encourage more creativity and learner choice in demonstrating mastery.
2. Learners exhibit high behavioral engagement in class activities, indicating active participation and interest. Nevertheless, emotional and cognitive engagement, while still present, are not as strong, implying that students may not always feel personally connected or mentally invested in their learning tasks.

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3. There is a significant and positive relationship between the level of differentiated instruction and the level of learner engagement. This implies that as teachers provide more tailored and responsive instruction, learners become more actively involved, emotionally connected, and cognitively invested in their educational experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Enhance teacher training and professional development on differentiated instruction, particularly in designing differentiated products and assessment tools. Workshops and learning action cells (LAC) sessions should focus on practical strategies to provide learners with options in showcasing their learning.
2. Encourage a deeper focus on emotional and cognitive engagement. Teachers can strengthen these dimensions by incorporating strategies that build student interest, choice, curiosity, and critical thinking. This includes project-based learning, inquiry tasks, and culturally responsive pedagogy.
3. School administrators should support differentiated instruction by providing flexible teaching resources, reduced class sizes (where feasible), and peer mentoring programs. Providing time for lesson planning and collaboration can also enhance DI implementation.
4. Future research may include classroom observations or interviews to triangulate data and understand how differentiated instruction strategies are implemented in practice. Comparative studies involving other schools or districts could broaden the understanding of DI's impact across varying contexts.
5. Learner voices should be amplified by integrating regular feedback mechanisms to understand their engagement levels and preferences. This learner-centered approach will help teachers design more effective and responsive instructional interventions.

Conflict of Interest

The researcher declares that there was no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study titled "The Relationship Between Differentiated Instruction And Learner Engagement In Elementary Classrooms. The study was carried out independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes, data interpretation, or presentation of findings. All responses from participants were gathered objectively, and ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process to ensure credibility, impartiality, and academic integrity.

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