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Exploring differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs

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ABSTRACT

This survey-correlational research explored the level of perceptions on differentiated instruction on the learning development of Learners with Special Educational Needs: Their Advantages and Disadvantages during the school year 2025-2026. There were thirty-five (35) receiving teachers and thirty-five (35) learners with special educational needs from Kalibo Integrated Special Education Center (KISEC), Kalibo Pilot Elementary School (KPES), Banga Elementary School (BES), Balete Integrated School (BIS), participated in the study, who aimed to answer ninety (90) specific questions regarding advantages and disadvantages differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs. Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire, validated by three experts. Following validation, the questionnaire was final tested with thirty five (35) receiving teachers and thirty five (35) learners with special educational needs. Factor analysis, construct validation, and reliability test were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software. The independent variables were the advantages of differentiated instruction and disadvantages of differentiated instruction, both measured through a survey administered to receiving teachers while the dependent variable was the learning development of learners with special educational needs, which was gathered from the learners with special needs through survey questionnaire. Mean, Standard Deviation and Pearson r correlation were employed for data analysis, with a significance level set at 0.05. Findings revealed that as an entire group, there was a high level of perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instructions in enhancing the learners with special educational needs. The perceived learning development of learners with special educational needs was also high. However, there was no significant relationship among the advantages, disadvantages and learning development of learners with special educational needs. This led to the development of DI-STEP, a proposed intervention program for the receiving teachers handling learners with special educational needs in the Division of Aklan.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, learners with special educational needs, learning development.

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INTRODUCTION

The education of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) presents a distinctive set of challenges rooted in the diversity of cognitive, physical, socia…The education of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) presents a distinctive set of challenges rooted in the diversity of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional profiles that characterize this population. Unlike neurotypical learners, LSENs often process sensory input differently, encounter difficulties with literacy and numeracy, and require more time, repetition, and highly specific instructional approaches to achieve mastery. Their learning trajectories are rarely linear; instead, they demand continuous reinforcement, real-life contextualization, and a careful balance of accommodations, adaptations, and modifications applied across the content being taught, the processes through which they engage with learning, the products through which they demonstrate understanding, and the environments in which instruction takes place. It is precisely this complex and individualized nature of learning among LSENs that necessitates a flexible and responsive pedagogical framework, one capable of bridging the gap between their unique strengths, needs, and learning potentials on one hand, and the demands of inclusive educational settings on the other.

Differentiated instruction has emerged as one of the most widely recognized frameworks for addressing this need. Broadly defined, differentiated instruction is a teaching approach in which teachers modify the curriculum, provide appropriate accommodations, and utilize various learning modalities to maximize the full potential of all learners and to ensure that each learner's needs are met in pursuit of shared educational goals. Grounded in the foundational premise that learners acquire knowledge in unique ways and at varying paces, differentiated instruction holds that instructional strategies must be adapted in alignment with variations in learner readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Smale-Jones, 2020). This premise has gained significant theoretical and empirical traction in the context of inclusive education, where contemporary perspectives have moved well beyond the simple placement of diverse learners in shared spaces and toward ensuring their meaningful participation, sense of belonging, and academic success. Pozas et al. (2021) and Marlina et al. (2023) have specifically identified differentiated instruction as a key pedagogical tool through which teachers can address learner variability by thoughtfully relating to and working with content, processes, products, and learning environments in response to students' readiness, motivations, interests, and learning profiles.

The empirical literature on differentiated instruction and its effects on LSENs has grown considerably in recent years, with converging evidence pointing to its positive contributions to learner engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes. Studies have demonstrated that when implemented effectively, differentiated instruction can enhance motivation, improve participation, and increase academic performance among diverse learners, including those with special needs (Akpan and Beard, 2016; Greenstein, 2021). Research conducted in inclusive classrooms further indicated that differentiated instruction fostered learner independence by enabling students to demonstrate their understanding through multiple modalities (Strong, 2022; Cassidy, Addo, and Infantidou, 2021). Additionally, differentiated instruction has been shown to create classroom atmospheres that facilitate meaningful participation for LSENs who frequently encounter educational barriers in standardized instructional environments (Mitchell, 2015; Schwab, 2019). Together, these findings affirm that differentiated instruction, when thoughtfully applied, holds meaningful promise for transforming the educational experiences of learners with special needs.

Despite this promise, the implementation of differentiated instruction is not without significant challenges. A recurring finding across the literature is that many educators

experience considerable difficulty in planning varied instructional activities, managing instructional time effectively, and responding to high levels of learner diversity, particularly in large classrooms (Tobin and Tippett, 2014; Parsons et al., 2018). Limited training in inclusive practices has further constrained teachers' capacity to design instruction appropriate for LSENs, resulting in inconsistencies in how differentiated instruction is applied across classrooms and educational contexts (Dixon et al., 2014; Schwab, Sharma, and Loreman, 2018). These challenges are particularly acute in the Philippine setting, where classroom teachers, frequently referred to as receiving teachers, often assume direct responsibility for accommodating LSENs without the benefit of formal special education qualifications or training. As Bernardo (2022) has noted, this reality significantly intensifies the difficulties associated with instructional adaptation and planning in Philippine inclusive classrooms.

While the existing literature has made meaningful contributions to understanding differentiated instruction, important gaps remain that warrant further investigation. Most empirical studies in this area have focused primarily on pedagogical design or student outcomes, with comparatively fewer studies examining the lived experiences and perceptions of receiving teachers who directly implement differentiated instruction with LSENs in authentic classroom environments (Parsons et al., 2018; Schwab, 2019). Furthermore, the preponderance of research in this area has been conducted in Western educational contexts, raising important questions about the transferability and applicability of findings to the Philippine Department of Education system, where institutional structures, regulatory frameworks, and resource availability differ substantially from those that have informed much of the existing literature. These gaps collectively point to the need for context-sensitive inquiry that examines differentiated instruction as it operates in Philippine inclusive classrooms, from the perspectives of both those who implement it and those who experience its effects.

The theoretical foundations of this study are drawn from two complementary frameworks that together provide a robust conceptual basis for understanding how differentiated instruction supports the learning development of LSENs. The first is Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which conceptualizes learning as an inherently social process wherein cognitive development occurs through meaningful interaction with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers or peers. This theory provides a strong rationale for differentiated instruction by highlighting the critical role of guided, socially mediated learning experiences in supporting the development of learners who may require more structured or individualized forms of instructional scaffolding. The second theoretical foundation is Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983), which challenges the notion of a singular, fixed intelligence and instead posits that each learner possesses a unique constellation of distinct intelligences that, when recognized and cultivated through varied instructional approaches and encouragement, can be developed and expressed. Gardner's framework underscores the responsibility of teachers and educational systems to observe, recognize, and respond to these differences by employing a variety of teaching methods, designing diverse learning activities, and utilizing multiple assessment strategies that accommodate and celebrate the varied strengths and interests of learners with special needs.

The convergence of these two theoretical perspectives reinforces the conceptual framework of this study, which is grounded in the interrelationship among the core dimensions of differentiated instruction and the learning development of LSENs. The independent variables comprise the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instructional strategies as experienced by receiving teachers, encompassing both the benefits these strategies provide to LSENs in terms of motivation, engagement, and participation, and the challenges that teachers encounter during their implementation. These variables collectively represent the

conditions and contextual factors that shape how differentiated instruction unfolds within actual teaching and learning environments. The dependent variable is the learning development and progress of learners with special educational needs, as perceived by the learners themselves. Against this theoretical and conceptual backdrop, this study aimed to examine the advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of LSENs as perceived by receiving teachers, alongside the level of learning development as perceived by the learners themselves, thereby contributing context-specific and empirically grounded insights to a literature that has thus far been predominantly Western in orientation and limited in its attention to the realities of receiving teachers in Philippine inclusive educational settings.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to examine the advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) as perceived by receiving teachers and the level of learning development as perceived by learners with special educational needs (LSENs) in Eastern Aklan specifically in Kalibo Integrated Special Education Center (KISEC), Kalibo Pilot Elementary School (KPES), Banga Elementary School (BES), Balete Integrated School (BIS), for the school year 2025-2026.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the levels of the entire and the top 5 perceived advantages of using differentiated instruction of learners with special educational needs?
2. What are the levels of the entire and the top 5 perceived disadvantages of using differentiated instruction of learners with special educational needs?
3. What are the levels of the entire and the top 5 perceived learning development of learners with special educational needs in differentiated instruction?
4. Are there significant relationships among the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of learners with special educational needs?
5. What output or intervention can be developed based on the results of the study?

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to examine the advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction in relation to the learning development of learners with special educational needs, as perceived by receiving teachers, and to determine the level of learning development as perceived by the learners with special educational needs themselves. To address these aims, the study adopted a descriptive-correlational research design. As defined by Bhat (2020), this methodology aims to observe and forecast how variables relate within their real-world context without researcher interference or manipulation. Canonizado (2020) further described the descriptive-correlational method as an approach intended to understand and assess the statistical relationship between two variables without the influence of any extraneous variable. Often referred to as a correlational study, this descriptive approach identifies how variables change together and allows researchers to observe the inherent traits and links among variables without modifying them during the research process. It is important to note that although a correlation can demonstrate the existence of a relationship, it cannot prove causation or establish that altering one variable will produce a direct cause-and-effect impact on the other (Yeshaswi, 2024). Bhandari (2021) further clarified that correlational research assesses how variables relate without researcher interference, and that these connections are measured by

their direction, whether positive or negative, and the strength of the association between the factors being studied.

The study likewise employed survey research as its primary data collection method. Survey research uses systematic sampling to accumulate data from a sample of people, seeks to verify how societal characteristics are dispersed, and draws conclusions about broader populations or groups. It entails the use of sampling and measurement tactics while addressing issues such as social desirability bias and non-responsiveness (International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2015). In this study, surveys were administered to receiving teachers who implement differentiated instruction in mainstream classrooms with learners with special educational needs, and a separate survey on learning development was administered to the learners with special educational needs themselves. The independent variables were the advantages of differentiated instruction and the disadvantages of differentiated instruction, both measured through a survey administered to receiving teachers, while the dependent variable was the learning development of learners with special educational needs, which was gathered from the learners through a survey questionnaire.

The participants of this study consisted of thirty-five (35) receiving teachers from mainstream classrooms who were responsible for accommodating learners with special educational needs, and thirty-five (35) learners with special educational needs, drawn from schools in Eastern Aklan for the school year 2025-2026. These schools were Kalibo Integrated Special Education Center (KISEC), Kalibo Pilot Elementary School (KPES), Banga Elementary School (BES), and Balete Integrated School (BIS). The distribution of respondents across these schools was as follows: KISEC contributed 14 receiving teachers and 10 LSENs; KPES contributed 14 receiving teachers and 11 LSENs; BES contributed 3 receiving teachers and 12 LSENs; and BIS contributed 4 receiving teachers and 2 LSENs, yielding a grand total of 35 receiving teachers and 35 LSENs across all participating schools.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that allowed the researcher to deliberately choose individuals who had direct experience in implementing differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms. This sampling procedure ensured that the selected participants could provide rich, relevant, and practical insights regarding instructional practices, observed student outcomes, and coping strategies in managing the diverse needs of learners. The inclusion criteria for participant selection for the first and second questionnaire surveys were as follows: the participant must be a receiving teacher in a mainstream classroom responsible for teaching students with special needs; must have at least one year of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms with children with special needs; must have been actively implementing differentiated instruction strategies in their classroom; and must be willing to participate voluntarily in the study and provide informed consent for survey completion and interviews. For the third questionnaire, the inclusion criterion was that participants must be learners mainstreamed at the elementary or secondary level.

Data in this study were gathered using three researcher-made questionnaires addressing the advantages of differentiated instruction, the disadvantages of differentiated instruction, and the learning development of learners with special educational needs as recipients of differentiated instruction. The first instrument, comprising Part 1 of the survey questionnaire, consisted of 30 items measuring the perceived advantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of LSENs as reported by receiving teachers. For every item in this survey, respondents selected from the following response options: a score of 5 corresponded to "Strongly Agree," 4 to "Agree," 3 to "Uncertain," 2 to "Disagree," and 1 to "Strongly Disagree." The following arbitrary scale was employed to describe participants' mean scores: a range of

4.21 to 5.00 was described as "Very High," 3.41 to 4.20 as "High," 2.61 to 3.40 as "Moderate," 1.81 to 2.60 as "Low," and 1.00 to 1.80 as "Very Low." The validity of this instrument was established through face and content validation. Before being submitted to the thesis committee for content validation, the instrument was first reviewed by the researcher's adviser for revisions and recommendations. Following content validation, the instrument was pilot tested with thirty (30) non-respondents, and the results were subjected to computer-processed reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The reliability analysis generated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .886 for the advantages of differentiated instruction questionnaire, which was considered reliable and was therefore used in this study.

The second instrument, comprising Part 2 of the survey questionnaire, also consisted of 30 items and was designed to measure the perceived disadvantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of LSENs as reported by receiving teachers. The response options and scoring weights were identical to those used in the first instrument, with scores ranging from 1 for "Strongly Disagree" to 5 for "Strongly Agree," and the same five-level descriptive scale was applied for interpreting mean scores, ranging from "Very Low" at 1.00 to 1.80 to "Very High" at 4.21 to 5.00. The instrument likewise underwent face and content validation, beginning with review by the researcher's adviser prior to submission to the thesis committee, followed by pilot testing with thirty (30) non-respondents. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha via SPSS generated a coefficient of .943 for the disadvantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of LSENs questionnaire, which was considered reliable and was therefore used in this study.

The third instrument, comprising Part 3 of the survey questionnaire, consisted of 30 items designed to measure the learning development of learners with special educational needs as recipients of differentiated instruction, as perceived by the learners themselves. The response scale for this instrument differed from the first two: a score of 5 corresponded to "Always," 4 to "A lot," 3 to "Sometimes," 2 to "A little," and 1 to "Never." The same five-level descriptive scale used in the preceding instruments was applied for interpreting mean scores, with ranges from "Very Low" at 1.00 to 1.80 through to "Very High" at 4.21 to 5.00. This instrument also underwent face and content validation, with initial review by the researcher's adviser before submission to the thesis committee, followed by pilot testing with thirty (30) non-respondents. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha via SPSS yielded a coefficient of .933 for the learning development of learners with special educational needs as recipients of differentiated instruction questionnaire, which was considered reliable and was therefore used in this study. Frost (2020) stated that a questionnaire is deemed credible if the calculated Cronbach's alpha quantifies the level of agreement on a standardized 0 to 1 scale. Through a systematic process of face and content validation, pilot testing, and reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha, all three parts of the questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency, with coefficients indicating that the instruments were reliable for research use. The use of standardized response scales and clearly defined interpretation ranges further strengthened the consistency of data analysis, and these validated instruments collectively provided a sound and credible basis for generating meaningful data, thereby supporting the overall integrity and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured a letter of permission from the Dean of the Graduate School of Filamer Christian University, Inc., to conduct the study. Permission was also sought from the Office of the Schools Division Superintendent of Aklan, after which additional permission letters were presented to the school principals of KISEC, KPES, BES, and BIS. Informed consent was obtained from all participating receiving teachers, who were fully briefed on the purpose, scope, and procedures of the research to ensure voluntary

participation. Parental and guardian consent forms were likewise signed by the respective parents and guardians of the LSENs prior to their participation in the study.

During data collection, the researcher personally administered the survey questionnaires to the thirty-five (35) selected receiving teachers and to the thirty-five (35) LSENs, providing clear instructions and sufficient time for completion. Most questionnaires were answered on site by the receiving teachers, while some were scheduled for retrieval the week following distribution. The researcher administered the questions to the selected LSENs within the school premises. Photographs were secured during the administration to receiving teachers, and parental consents for the LSENs were confirmed before photographs were taken and before the learners responded to the questionnaire. After data collection, the researcher organized and encoded all data for analysis. Survey responses were quantified and examined for patterns and trends. The collected data were tabulated and processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Throughout the entire process, the researcher-maintained confidentiality and upheld ethical research standards, ensuring that all information provided by participants was handled with care and used solely for research purposes.

The gathered data were analyzed using appropriate statistical procedures. Mean was used to describe the level of the entire set and the top five advantages, the level of the entire set and the top five disadvantages, and the level of the entire set and the top five indicators of learning development among the respondents. Standard deviation (SD) was employed to verify the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the scores acquired by the respondents. Pearson r was used to determine the relationship among the advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of learners with special educational needs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results and discussion of the study examining the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) in Eastern Aklan. The study involved a total of seventy (70) participants, comprising thirty-five (35) receiving teachers from mainstream classrooms and thirty-five (35) learners with special educational needs drawn from four schools, namely Kalibo Integrated Special Education Center (KISEC), Kalibo Pilot Elementary School (KPES), Banga Elementary School (BES), and Balete Integrated School (BIS), for the school year 2025-2026. A descriptive-correlational research design was employed, and participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using three researcher-made and validated survey questionnaires measuring the advantages of differentiated instruction, the disadvantages of differentiated instruction, and the learning development of LSENs, each demonstrating high internal consistency as confirmed by Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .886, .943, and .933, respectively. Mean and standard deviation were used to describe the levels of the main variables, while Pearson r was employed to determine the relationships among the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of LSENs, with the significance level set at 0.05. All results are interpreted in direct relation to the objectives of the study, and the discussion integrates descriptive findings with analytical interpretation, relevant theoretical frameworks, and empirical literature to provide a comprehensive and academically grounded account of the data.

Advantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs

The overall level of perceived advantages of using differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs was described as "High" (M = 3.90, SD = 0.78). This finding indicated that receiving teachers generally recognized differentiated instruction as an advantageous pedagogical approach in supporting the diverse learning needs of LSENs. The mean score falls within the high range of the interpretive scale used in the study, wherein 4.21 to 5.00 corresponds to "Very High," 3.41 to 4.20 to "High," 2.61 to 3.40 to "Moderate," 1.81 to 2.60 to "Low," and 1.00 to 1.80 to "Very Low." The standard deviation of 0.78 reflected a moderate degree of variability among responses, suggesting that while teachers were generally in agreement about the advantages of differentiated instruction, some variation in perception existed across the sample.

Among the specific indicators, the statement "I can easily use concrete examples, demonstrations, or real-life applications to clarify essential concepts" obtained the highest mean of 4.66 (SD = 0.48), described as "Very High." This finding implied that differentiated instruction enables teachers to simplify complex ideas through practical and relatable approaches, which is particularly beneficial for learners with special educational needs who require tangible and contextualized instructional experiences. The statements "It becomes easier for me to present lesson content using varied formats such as visuals, graphic organizers, models, and digital media" and "It becomes easier for me to provide differentiated reading materials that address diverse ability levels" both obtained a mean of 4.63 (SD = 0.55), also interpreted as "Very High." These results highlighted that differentiated instruction supports flexibility in content delivery and allows teachers to tailor instructional materials according to the varying abilities and learning styles of their learners. Meanwhile, the statements "I am able to organize instructional materials clearly and systematically to facilitate learner comprehension" and "It helps me facilitate the activation of prior knowledge before introducing new concepts" both received a mean of 4.60 (SD = 0.55), likewise described as "Very High." These ratings suggested that differentiated instruction promotes structured teaching and reinforces the importance of connecting new content to learners' prior knowledge, thereby enhancing overall comprehension.

The consistently very high ratings of these specific indicators reflected teachers' strong recognition of the practical benefits of differentiated instruction, particularly in improving the clarity of instruction, accommodating diverse learning needs, and enhancing learner engagement, all of which contribute positively to the learning development of learners with special educational needs. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in improving learner engagement, comprehension, and academic performance. Differentiated instruction enables teachers to tailor learning experiences based on students' diverse needs, readiness levels, and interests, leading to improved academic outcomes and increased motivation. Pozas et al. (2021) and Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019) provided empirical evidence that the use of differentiated strategies contributes to students' well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept in diverse classroom settings. Research has also highlighted that differentiated instruction promotes inclusivity by addressing diverse learning needs through varied teaching strategies such as visual aids, hands-on activities, and flexible grouping (Jimenez, 2023), enabling learners with special needs to better access and engage with the curriculum. Sousa and Tomlinson (2018) further affirmed that differentiated instruction enhances not only academic achievement but also learners' independence, critical thinking, and social development, making it a highly effective instructional approach. In the Philippine context, studies have shown that differentiated instruction is widely implemented in basic education and is associated with positive learning outcomes, with research indicating that it enhances students' academic performance and engagement, particularly when teachers adapt strategies such as varied activities and flexible assessment methods (Pinaranda and Sario, 2024). Suson et al. (2020) similarly demonstrated

that differentiated instruction improved learners' competencies, especially in reading and comprehension, by allowing teachers to tailor instruction to individual student needs. Research conducted in inclusive Philippine classrooms further confirmed that differentiated instruction supported diverse learners through individualized instruction, pre-assessment, and varied learning activities (Rosario et al., 2024).

From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), this finding implied that differentiated instruction effectively creates opportunities for meaningful social interaction, scaffolding, and guided learning during the teaching and learning process. The high level of perceived advantages suggested that teachers were able to facilitate learning experiences aligned with learners' Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD), enabling LSENs to progress once appropriate support was matched to their needs. It reinforced the principle that when instruction is mediated through a knowledgeable other via social interaction, learners' cognitive development is enhanced and improved. In relation to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983), the finding implied that differentiated instruction successfully addressed the diverse intelligences and learning preferences of LSENs. The high perception of advantages indicated that varied teaching strategies, activities, and assessments were being effectively utilized to tap into learners' individual strengths, supporting Gardner's assertion that recognizing and nurturing multiple intelligences leads to more meaningful and effective learning outcomes.

Disadvantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs

The overall level of perceived disadvantages of using differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs was described as "High" (M = 3.98, SD = 0.99). This finding indicated that while receiving teachers recognized the benefits of differentiated instruction, they also encountered significant practical challenges in its implementation. The standard deviation of 0.99 suggested a relatively broader spread of responses compared to the advantages scale, reflecting that while the challenges were generally perceived as high, the extent of difficulty varied more noticeably across individual teachers.

Among the identified disadvantages, the statement "I find it difficult to design assessments that match differentiated tasks" obtained the highest mean of 3.89 (SD = 1.05), described as "High." This indicated that aligning assessment methods with varied instructional activities poses a significant challenge for teachers, as differentiated tasks require equally varied and appropriate evaluation strategies. The statement "It makes my lesson planning more complicated when differentiating instruction" garnered a mean of 3.74 (SD = 1.12), also interpreted as "High," suggesting that teachers perceived differentiated instruction as demanding in terms of preparation, requiring additional time and effort to design multiple activities suited to diverse learner needs. The statement "I find it difficult to manage a classroom when students were working on different tasks simultaneously" obtained a mean of 3.71 (SD = 0.96), indicating that classroom management became more complex in a differentiated setting and reflected the challenge of maintaining order and ensuring that all learners remained engaged while working on varied tasks. The statement "I find that available school facilities limit the effective use of differentiated strategies" recorded a mean of 3.63 (SD = 1.11), suggesting that resource constraints hindered the full implementation of differentiated instruction, as adequate facilities and materials were essential to support diverse instructional approaches. Lastly, the statement "I encounter difficulties in grouping students appropriately for differentiated activities" received a mean of 3.57 (SD = 0.92), also described as "High,"

implying that organizing learners into suitable groups based on ability, interest, or learning profile remained a challenge, particularly in heterogeneous classrooms.

These findings are consistent with studies indicating that differentiated instruction requires considerable time, effort, and careful planning, particularly in designing appropriate assessments and managing diverse classroom activities (Tomlinson and Moon, 2015; Smit and Humpert, 2016). Deunk et al. (2018) and Hall et al. (2015) similarly reported that teachers frequently experienced difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction due to the complexity of addressing diverse learner needs within a single classroom, as well as limited resources and support. In the Philippine context, Magayon and Tan (2020) found that teachers often faced difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction due to large class sizes, limited instructional materials, and time constraints, which increased the complexity of lesson preparation and delivery. Suson et al. (2020) reported that Filipino teachers experienced challenges in designing appropriate assessments and managing diverse learners simultaneously, while Rosario et al. (2024) highlighted that although differentiated instruction had promoted inclusive learning, it also required substantial teacher effort, flexibility, and resource availability that were often lacking in many Philippine schools. Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019) and Marlina et al. (2023) further noted that constraints such as time limitations, heavy workload, insufficient training, and large class sizes hinder the effective application of differentiated strategies, often resulting in superficial or inconsistent practices, underscoring the growing need for simplified, context-responsive, and localized assessment templates to assist teachers in implementing differentiated instruction more efficiently while reducing instructional burden.

The finding that perceived disadvantages (M = 3.98) were rated slightly higher than perceived advantages (M = 3.90) is particularly noteworthy. Rather than indicating that teachers held a negative view of differentiated instruction, this result suggested a balanced and realistic professional awareness. Teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of the dual nature of differentiated instruction, recognizing its effectiveness in supporting LSENs while simultaneously acknowledging the practical demands it placed on instructional practice. Notably, the highest-rated disadvantage, difficulty in designing assessments that match differentiated tasks (M = 3.89, SD = 1.05), underscored a critical concern in implementation, suggesting that while teachers were able to modify instructional strategies, the alignment of assessment with differentiated activities remained the most complex and demanding aspect of the process. This finding reinforced the observation that while Carol Ann Tomlinson's differentiated instruction framework remains pedagogically sound in theory, its application in large and diverse Filipino classrooms, particularly among receiving teachers, requires more practical support mechanisms, including simplified, localized, and context-responsive assessment templates.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the high level of perceived disadvantages indicated that teachers struggled to consistently provide appropriate scaffolding within learners' Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD), as effective implementation was hindered by contextual constraints such as limited time, large class sizes, and insufficient teacher support. This implied that although the theory emphasizes guided learning, its success depends heavily on teacher capability, available resources, and classroom conditions, which may not always be optimal in inclusive settings. In relation to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, the finding implied that addressing diverse intelligences in the classroom can be complex and demanding. The high perception of disadvantages reflected the difficulty of designing and implementing varied instructional strategies that simultaneously cater to multiple intelligences, suggesting that while the theory advocates individualized and flexible instruction, translating it into practice requires substantial expertise, preparation, and resources that may pose crucial challenges for teachers.

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Learning development of learners with special educational needs in differentiated instruction

The overall level of perceived learning development of learners with special educational needs as recipients of differentiated instruction was described as "High" (M = 3.62, SD = 0.31). This finding indicated that learners generally perceived a positive development in their learning as a result of differentiated instruction. The low standard deviation of 0.31 suggested that participants' responses were largely homogeneous, with little variance from the mean, reflecting a consistent pattern of perceived development across the group of learners.

Among the specific indicators, the statement "I became better in asking questions and asking for help when I need it" obtained the highest mean of 4.43 (SD = 0.81), described as "Very High." This implied that differentiated instruction helped learners become more confident in seeking assistance, which is an important skill for independent and effective learning. The statement "It improved my ability to cut, color, or use school materials properly" followed with a mean of 4.40 (SD = 0.77), interpreted as "Very High," indicating that learners developed fine motor skills and improved their ability to handle school materials appropriately, which are essential for their overall functional and academic development. The statement "It developed my respect to my classmates and teachers" obtained a mean of 4.37 (SD = 0.81), also described as "Very High," suggesting that differentiated instruction not only supported academic growth but also promoted positive values such as respect and social awareness. The statement "I performed classroom routines more independently" recorded a mean of 4.29 (SD = 0.71), interpreted as "Very High," reflecting an improvement in learners' independence and indicating that they were becoming more capable of managing classroom activities without assistance. Lastly, the statement "It made me more organized" obtained a mean of 4.17 (SD = 0.62), described as "High," showing that differentiated instruction contributed to the development of organizational skills, though to a slightly lesser extent compared to the other indicators.

These findings are consistent with existing research demonstrating that differentiated instruction enhances student achievement by addressing individual learning needs and promoting active engagement (Deunk et al., 2018; Tomlinson and Moon, 2015). Sousa and Tomlinson (2018) further affirmed that differentiated instruction improves learners' understanding, independence, and overall academic performance by providing varied learning experiences that cater to different abilities, while Smit and Humpert (2016) found that differentiated instruction supported the development of essential skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration, contributing to holistic learner development. Hall et al. (2015), drawing on the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, highlighted that providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression can significantly improve learning outcomes, particularly for learners with diverse needs. In the Philippine context, Magayon and Tan (2020) found that differentiated instruction was actively practiced by Filipino teachers as part of the K-12 curriculum, highlighting its relevance in addressing diverse learner needs.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the high level of perceived learning development implied that differentiated instruction effectively facilitated meaningful learning through social interaction, guided support, and scaffolding by a more knowledgeable other. The finding suggested that learners with special educational needs were able to progress when instruction was aligned with their Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD), affirming that when teachers provided appropriate assistance and created collaborative learning environments, learners achieved higher cognitive development and improved academic

outcomes. In relation to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, the high level of perceived learning development indicated that differentiated instruction successfully accommodated the various intelligences and learning styles of LSENs. When instruction varied in delivery, engagement, and expected outputs, learners were better able to engage with content, demonstrate their strengths, and develop their capabilities across different domains and intelligences, affirming Gardner's (1983) claim that recognizing individual differences in intelligence leads to more effective and meaningful learning experiences.

Relationships among the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of learners with special educational needs

To determine the relationships among the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of LSENs, Pearson r correlation analysis was conducted at the 0.05 level of significance. Results revealed that all computed Pearson correlation coefficients were negative and not significant at the 0.05 level, indicating the absence of statistically significant relationships among the variables.

Specifically, the relationship between the advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction yielded a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.128$ ($p = 0.465$), which was interpreted as not significant. This finding suggested that teachers' positive perceptions of the advantages of differentiated instruction did not significantly relate to their perceived disadvantages, meaning that a high level of perceived benefit did not necessarily correspond to a decrease or increase in perceived challenges. The relationship between the advantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of learners with special educational needs resulted in a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.136$ ($p = 0.436$), likewise not significant. This implied that although differentiated instruction was perceived as highly advantageous, these perceived advantages did not demonstrate a statistically significant association with the learners' level of learning development, indicating that factors beyond perceived advantages were influencing learning outcomes. Furthermore, the relationship between the disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of learners with special educational needs yielded a near-zero correlation of $r = -0.003$ ($p = 0.988$), which was also not significant. This indicated that the perceived disadvantages had virtually no relationship with learners' learning development, suggesting that despite the challenges encountered by teachers in implementing differentiated instruction, these did not significantly affect the learning progress of the learners in a measurable way. Since all three Pearson r values failed to reach statistical significance at the 0.05 alpha level, the null hypothesis stating that there are no significant relationships among the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of LSENs is accepted.

These findings are consistent with the scholarly literature indicating that the effectiveness of differentiated instruction depends more on its actual implementation than on teachers' perceptions of its strengths and challenges (Deunk et al., 2018; Smit and Humpert, 2016). Sousa and Tomlinson (2018) similarly explained that while differentiated instruction is generally associated with positive outcomes, its impact on learning development is mediated by factors such as teacher competence, instructional quality, and classroom environment rather than by perception alone. In the Philippine context, Magayon and Tan (2020) confirmed that even when teachers acknowledged both the strengths and challenges of differentiated instruction, these perceptions did not automatically translate into significant improvements in learner performance, as other factors such as actual teaching practices and learner engagement played a more critical role. Suson et al. (2020) similarly found that teachers' acknowledgment of both the benefits and difficulties of differentiated instruction did not directly predict learning

outcomes, reinforcing the argument that implementation quality rather than perception is the stronger determinant of learner progress.

The non-significant relationships observed across all three pairings collectively support the principle that perception does not necessarily equate to performance. The results indicated that teachers could perceive differentiated instruction as either advantageous or challenging without these perceptions directly influencing learners' actual learning development. This means that even when teachers reported high levels of difficulty through high perceived disadvantages, learners still demonstrated high levels of development, indicating that instructional effectiveness was not diminished by perceived challenges. Such a finding highlights the resilience, adaptability, and strong sense of professional responsibility among Filipino receiving teachers, who continued to provide effective instruction despite the practical difficulties they encountered in implementing differentiated instruction. The findings further suggested that learners' development was more strongly influenced by teachers' actual instructional practices, level of competence, and responsiveness to learners' needs rather than by their subjective perceptions of the advantages or disadvantages of differentiated instruction. From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, this result suggested that learning development may not be solely determined by teachers' perceptions of instructional conditions; rather, the actual quality of social interaction, scaffolding, and learner engagement within the Zone of Proximal Development plays a more critical role than perceived instructional advantages or disadvantages. In relation to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, the finding implied that learners' growth was influenced more by how well instructional practices aligned with their individual intelligences and learning preferences than by how teachers perceived the relative strengths or limitations of differentiated instruction, indicating that even in the presence of perceived disadvantages, learning development can still occur when instructional approaches remain responsive to learners' diverse needs.

In response to the study's findings, the researcher proposed the implementation of the Differentiated Instruction Support and Technical Enhancement Program (DI-STEP) in the Division of Aklan. This intervention program was designed to strengthen the implementation of differentiated instruction among receiving teachers handling learners with special educational needs, addressing the identified challenges while maximizing the recognized advantages of differentiated instruction. The program aimed to enhance teachers' competencies in lesson planning, assessment design, classroom management, and instructional material development, while simultaneously supporting the holistic learning development of LSENs. The program comprised six components with their corresponding activities, objectives, target participants, timeframes, and proposed budgets. The first component, a Division-Wide Teacher Training on Differentiated Instruction, involved seminar-workshops on lesson planning, assessment design, and differentiated instruction strategies, aimed at enhancing teacher competence in implementing differentiated instruction across the Division of Aklan, targeting receiving teachers and SPED teachers over a two-day period with a proposed budget of PHP 15,000. The second component, an Instructional Materials Development initiative, involved the production of visuals, graphic organizers, leveled readers, and activity kits, aimed at providing quality and localized instructional materials for diverse learners, targeting teachers and the Division Learning Resource Team over one week with a proposed budget of PHP 10,000. The third component, a Classroom Management and Differentiated Assessment Workshop, involved training on managing diverse learners and designing appropriate assessments, aimed at improving classroom management and assessment practices, targeting teachers in the Division of Aklan over one day with a proposed budget of PHP 5,000. The fourth component, Learner Support and Enrichment Activities, involved guided group

activities, hands-on tasks, and social skills enhancement sessions, aimed at enhancing learners' communication, independence, and social skills, targeting learners with special needs across Division of Aklan schools over one month of weekly sessions with a proposed budget of PHP 8,000. The fifth component, Monitoring, Coaching, and Technical Assistance, involved school visits, coaching sessions, and mentoring by master teachers and supervisors, aimed at ensuring proper and consistent implementation of differentiated instruction in schools, targeting school heads, master teachers, and division supervisors over two months with a proposed budget of PHP 7,000. The sixth component, Program Evaluation and Impact Assessment, involved pre-test and post-test administrations, surveys, and evaluation meetings, aimed at measuring the effectiveness of the program in the Division of Aklan, targeting teachers, learners, and administrators over one month with a proposed budget of PHP 5,000. The total proposed budget for the entire DI-STEP program is PHP 50,000.

Research has consistently shown that although differentiated instruction is effective, its successful implementation requires continuous teacher training, coaching, and institutional support (Tomlinson and Moon, 2015; Sousa and Tomlinson, 2018). Deunk et al. (2018) and Smit and Humpert (2016) highlighted that professional development programs and targeted interventions significantly improved teachers' ability to implement differentiated strategies, which in turn enhanced student learning outcomes. In the Philippine context, Cruz and Lagarto (2020) found that intervention programs, training workshops, and collaborative planning significantly enhanced teachers' instructional practice and improved learner outcomes in Philippine schools. From the perspective of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the DI-STEP program reinforced the importance of guided learning, scaffolding, and collaborative interaction in promoting the development of LSENs, providing a systematic structure through which teachers could receive the professional support necessary to more effectively facilitate learning within learners' Zones of Proximal Development. In relation to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, the DI-STEP program supported the operationalization of diverse instructional strategies that cater to multiple intelligences, encouraging teachers to design varied learning activities, employ different teaching approaches, and utilize various types of assessments and learning outputs that recognized and nurtured the unique strengths of LSENs.

As a specific output of the DI-STEP program, the researcher also developed the DI-STEP Module on Simplified Differentiated Assessment (SDA) as a practical intervention to address the identified difficulties of teachers in designing appropriate and manageable assessment tools for LSENs. Conceptualized in response to the need for simplified, structured, and ready-to-use assessment strategies that reduce teacher workload while promoting inclusive and equitable evaluation practices, the module was guided by the principles of differentiated instruction, Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. These theoretical foundations ensured that the module accommodates diverse learner abilities and provides appropriate scaffolding for learning. The module was structured into clear and progressive components, including assessment levels, product-based evaluation strategies, rubric development, task design, and classroom implementation procedures, with each section carefully designed to support teachers in gradually transitioning from traditional uniform assessment practices to flexible and differentiated approaches. Emphasis was placed on usability, clarity, and accessibility in the development process, with assessment tools simplified to ensure that teachers could easily adapt them without extensive preparation while maintaining alignment with learning competencies. The inclusion of checklist rubrics, three-level performance assessments, and multiple intelligences-based outputs ensured that the module catered to varied learner needs.

Taken together, the findings of this study present a coherent and empirically grounded understanding of how differentiated instruction is perceived and experienced within inclusive classrooms in Eastern Aklan. The high levels of perceived advantages ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.78$),

perceived disadvantages (M = 3.98, SD = 0.99), and learning development of LSENs (M = 3.62, SD = 0.31) collectively affirmed that differentiated instruction is recognized by both receiving teachers and learners as a meaningful and impactful pedagogical approach. The absence of statistically significant relationships among these variables, as confirmed by Pearson r values of -0.128 (p = 0.465), -0.136 (p = 0.436), and -0.003 (p = 0.988), demonstrated that teacher perceptions, whether positive or challenging, do not directly determine learner outcomes, and that the actual quality of instructional practice, teacher competence, and responsiveness to learner needs are more decisive factors. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on differentiated instruction in Philippine inclusive education by offering context-specific evidence that localized, practical, and structured support mechanisms such as the proposed DI-STEP program and its Simplified Differentiated Assessment module are essential for translating the theoretical strengths of differentiated instruction into consistent and effective classroom practice. The subsequent chapter draws upon these findings to present the study's conclusions and recommendations, providing further direction for policy development, teacher professional development, and future research in the area of inclusive and differentiated instruction for learners with special educational needs.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to examine the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction on the learning development of learners with special educational needs, as perceived by receiving teachers, and to determine the level of learning development as perceived by the learners themselves. Based on the findings of the study, several interconnected and theoretically grounded conclusions were drawn, each of which contributes to a broader understanding of differentiated instruction as a pedagogical framework within Philippine inclusive education.

The high level of perceived advantages of differentiated instruction (M = 3.90, SD = 0.78) leads to the conclusion that differentiated instruction serves as an effective scaffolding tool that enables teachers to support learners with special educational needs within their Zone of Proximal Development. By allowing teachers to adjust instruction according to learners' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, differentiated instruction facilitates meaningful learning and enhances cognitive development. The very high ratings observed in specific indicators, particularly the use of concrete examples and real-life applications (M = 4.66, SD = 0.48), the presentation of content through varied formats (M = 4.63, SD = 0.55), the provision of differentiated reading materials (M = 4.63, SD = 0.55), the systematic organization of instructional materials (M = 4.60, SD = 0.55), and the activation of prior knowledge before introducing new concepts (M = 4.60, SD = 0.55), collectively affirm that differentiated instruction functions as a pedagogical bridge connecting what learners can accomplish independently to what they are capable of achieving with appropriate guidance and support. This conclusion reinforces the theoretical position that when instruction is deliberately tailored and mediated, learners with special needs are given meaningful opportunities to progress toward higher levels of competence and independence.

The high level of perceived disadvantages of differentiated instruction (M = 3.98, SD = 0.99) leads to the conclusion that while differentiated instruction is pedagogically valuable, it also imposes significant and real demands on receiving teachers. The highest-rated challenge, difficulty in designing assessments that match differentiated tasks (M = 3.89, SD = 1.05), along with the complexity of lesson planning (M = 3.74, SD = 1.12), classroom management difficulties (M = 3.71, SD = 0.96), facility limitations (M = 3.63, SD = 1.11), and challenges

in appropriate student grouping (M = 3.57, SD = 0.92), all described as high, reveal that the implementation of differentiated instruction in Philippine inclusive classrooms is fraught with practical obstacles. Nevertheless, the conclusion drawn is not one of instructional failure, but rather one that demonstrates the professional resilience of receiving teachers. Despite the weight of these challenges, teachers continued to implement instructional scaffolds, indicating that even under conditions of increased workload and instructional complexity, the scaffolding process remained intact and functional. This affirmed that the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in supporting learners within the Zone of Proximal Development persisted even when teachers perceived its implementation as demanding, underscoring the critical need for institutional support, professional development, and the provision of simplified, localized, and ready-to-use instructional tools.

The high level of perceived learning development among learners with special educational needs (M = 3.62, SD = 0.31) leads to the conclusion that differentiated instruction successfully supported learners in progressing through their Zone of Proximal Development. The very high learner-reported outcomes, particularly improved help-seeking behavior (M = 4.43, SD = 0.81), enhanced fine motor skills in handling school materials (M = 4.40, SD = 0.77), the development of respect toward classmates and teachers (M = 4.37, SD = 0.81), and increased independence in performing classroom routines (M = 4.29, SD = 0.71), alongside the high rating for organizational skills development (M = 4.17, SD = 0.62), collectively affirmed that differentiated instruction contributed meaningfully to both the cognitive and socio-emotional growth of learners with special educational needs. The notably low standard deviation of 0.31 across the learning development variable further indicated a high degree of consistency among learner perceptions, suggesting that the positive effects of differentiated instruction were broadly and equitably experienced across the group. This finding confirmed that differentiated instruction, as an instructional scaffold, enabled learners to achieve higher levels of independence, engagement, and competence, making it a valuable and impactful approach within the context of Philippine inclusive education.

The absence of statistically significant relationships among the perceived advantages and disadvantages of differentiated instruction and the learning development of learners with special educational needs, as confirmed by Pearson r values of -0.128 (p = 0.465), -0.136 (p = 0.436), and -0.003 (p = 0.988), all interpreted as not significant at the 0.05 alpha level, leads to the overarching conclusion that perception does not equate to performance. This finding implied that regardless of whether teachers perceived differentiated instruction as primarily beneficial or primarily challenging, they remained capable of effectively facilitating learning among LSENs. The non-significant relationships across all three pairings demonstrated that it was not teachers' subjective perceptions of instructional strategies that drove learner success, but rather the actual construction and delivery of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development. This conclusion carries important implications for teacher professional development and educational policy, as it suggests that efforts to improve learner outcomes should focus not on reshaping teacher perceptions but on building the practical competencies, instructional tools, and classroom conditions that support the consistent and quality implementation of differentiated instruction in real learning environments.

In direct response to these conclusions, the researcher proposed the Differentiated Instruction Support and Technical Enhancement Program (DI-STEP) as a structured, school-division-level intervention to strengthen and sustain receiving teachers' capacity to provide effective instructional scaffolding for learners with special educational needs in the Division of Aklan. The program, composed of six components with a total proposed budget of PHP 50,000, included a Division-Wide Teacher Training on Differentiated Instruction (PHP 15,000), an Instructional Materials Development initiative (PHP 10,000), a Classroom Management and Differentiated Assessment Workshop (PHP 5,000), Learner Support and Enrichment Activities

(PHP 8,000), Monitoring, Coaching, and Technical Assistance (PHP 7,000), and Program Evaluation and Impact Assessment (PHP 5,000). Complementing this program is the DI-STEP Module on Simplified Differentiated Assessment (SDA), developed to directly address the most prominently identified challenge, which is the difficulty in designing assessments that match differentiated tasks. The module provides structured, ready-to-use, and theoretically grounded assessment tools, including checklist rubrics, three-level performance assessments, and multiple intelligences-based outputs, designed to reduce teacher workload while maintaining alignment with learning competencies and inclusive education principles. Together, DI-STEP and its accompanying module affirmed that differentiated instruction is the primary tool for scaffolding in the Philippine inclusive classroom, and that strengthening teacher support systems enhances the quality of the instructional bridge that enables learners with special educational needs to move more effectively toward independence and higher levels of development within their Zone of Proximal Development.

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