

Exploring the Experiences of the Teachers Using Differentiated Instruction Strategies in Inclusive Classroom in Abu Dhabi

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Abstract: *This study explored the lived experiences of teachers implementing differentiated instruction strategies in inclusive classrooms at Al Qeyam Charter School in Abu Dhabi. Employing a phenomenological research design, the study aimed to capture teachers' personal narratives as they adapted instructional approaches to meet the diverse learning needs of students, including those with special educational needs (SEN). Five teachers were purposively selected based on their experience in inclusive settings. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, reflective discussions, and optional classroom observations to uncover insights into the implementation of differentiated instruction in a multicultural environment. Findings revealed that teachers utilized various strategies, such as scaffolding, flexible grouping, individualized education plans (IEPs), tiered assignments, project-based learning, and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for students with autism and learning disabilities. Teachers also emphasized the use of visual aids, chunking, and differentiated questioning techniques to support students' varying abilities and language proficiencies. Continuous assessment and instructional adjustments were deemed essential for effective differentiation. Despite these practices, challenges such as time constraints, classroom complexity, and limited resources were prominent. Teachers expressed a strong need for professional development and institutional support to sustain differentiated instruction. As a key outcome, the researcher developed the FATIMA'S GUIDE Framework (Framework for Advancing Tailored Instruction and Maximizing Adaptability), offering a strategic, practical guide for differentiated instruction. This research contributes to the growing literature on inclusive education and provides valuable implications for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers committed to enhancing equitable and adaptive learning environments in diverse educational settings.*

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Inclusive Classrooms, Teacher Experiences, Special Educational Needs (SEN)

1. Introduction

Inclusive education emphasizes equal access and active participation of all learners, regardless of ability, background, or need. To uphold this commitment, educators must adopt flexible teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning profiles. Differentiated instruction (DI) has emerged as a key approach in meeting this goal by tailoring content, process, product, and learning environment based on student readiness, interests, and learning preferences

(Tomlinson, 2001; Subban, 2006). DI enables educators to shift from a one-size-fits-all model to a more equitable, student-centered classroom.

The theoretical foundations of DI are grounded in Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, which emphasizes recognizing students' individual strengths, and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which promotes scaffolding and the zone of proximal development as essential for learning. These perspectives support the idea that instruction should be adapted to match students' varying levels of ability and understanding (Tomlinson, 2001).

Numerous studies support the effectiveness of DI in inclusive classrooms. It enhances student engagement, promotes academic achievement, and fosters a more positive learning environment (Alavinia & Sefidi, 2013; Holloway, 2000; McTighe & Brown, 2005). DI strategies such as flexible grouping, tiered assignments, learning contracts, and the use of technology have been shown to address the learning needs of both struggling and advanced students (Doubet & Hockett, 2017; Tobin & Tippet, 2014). However, its implementation is not without challenges. Teachers often cite constraints such as limited planning time, insufficient training, and lack of resources as major barriers (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012; Chamberlin & Powers, 2010).

In multicultural contexts such as the United Arab Emirates, where classrooms are composed of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, differentiated instruction becomes even more critical (Parks et al., 2007). The integration of special educational needs (SEN) learners into general education settings further reinforces the need for adaptive instructional strategies.

Despite the growing literature on DI, there is a paucity of research focusing on how teachers in the UAE charter school context implement and experience these strategies. Thus, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of teachers implementing differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms at Al Qeyam Charter School in Abu Dhabi.

The study specifically aimed to:

1. Identify the different differentiated instruction strategies that have been implemented in the inclusive classrooms at Al Qeyam Charter School;
2. Examine the major themes that emerged based on the significant experiences of the participants;
3. Draw insights gained by the researcher from the participants' narratives; and
4. Propose a strategic framework based on the results of the study to support and enhance differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms.

Through rich narrative accounts and thematic analysis, this research contributes to the growing literature on inclusive pedagogy by offering practical implications for educators, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to strengthen differentiated instruction practices in diverse and inclusive educational contexts.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of teachers implementing differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms at Al Qeyam Charter School in Abu Dhabi. Phenomenology was selected to gain deep insights into

how teachers perceive, adapt, and apply instructional strategies to address the diverse learning needs of their students, including those with special educational needs (SEN).

Participants and Sampling

Five in-service teachers were purposively selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) current employment at Al Qeyam Charter School; (2) at least one year of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms; and (3) direct involvement in implementing differentiated instruction strategies. The participants represented various subject specializations, cultural backgrounds, and levels of teaching experience, which enriched the diversity and depth of the narratives.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews, guided by a validated interview protocol aligned with the research objectives. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Optional follow-up discussions were held to clarify emerging themes. The interviews were designed to elicit rich, reflective accounts of participants' strategies, challenges, and insights related to differentiated instruction. Where possible, optional classroom observations and reflective notes were also used to provide contextual support.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. All responses were anonymized to maintain ethical standards.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Colaizzi's phenomenological approach. Transcripts from in-depth interviews, reflective notes, and optional observations were reviewed to identify significant statements, from which meanings were formulated and grouped into thematic clusters. This process highlighted shared strategies, challenges, and insights related to differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms.

Though not all steps of Colaizzi's method were applied in full, its core principles—familiarization with the data, extraction of key statements, and clustering of meanings—were followed to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives. The emergent themes were further interpreted through reflective analysis and compared with existing literature to contextualize the findings within broader pedagogical discourse.

This approach allowed the researcher to explore both instructional and emotional dimensions of teachers' experiences, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in real-world classroom practices while contributing to the theoretical understanding of differentiated instruction in inclusive settings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Differentiated Instruction Strategies Implemented at Al Qeyam Charter School

The findings revealed that teachers at Al Qeyam Charter School applied a wide array of differentiated instruction (DI) strategies to meet their students' diverse needs. These strategies were selected based on learners' academic readiness, language proficiency, cognitive profiles, and behavioral characteristics. Common techniques included the use of visual aids such as

pictures, diagrams, and visual schedules—particularly helpful for visual learners and English language learners. Scaffolding and chunking were also frequently employed to support gradual skill development and prevent cognitive overload.

Flexible grouping allowed students to collaborate based on shared readiness levels or interests, while project-based and inquiry-based learning promoted critical thinking and real-world application. For learners with special educational needs (SEN), teachers developed and regularly updated Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Behavioral interventions rooted in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), such as Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT) and Token Economy Systems, were used for students with autism and behavioral challenges. Technology integration further supported differentiation by offering personalized, interactive content that engaged students across various modalities.

These strategies reflected a learner-centered, inclusive, and adaptive approach to teaching—one that ensured access, engagement, and achievement for all students.

3.2 Major Themes from Teachers' Lived Experiences

Thematic analysis generated five major themes that captured the essence of the teachers' experiences:

- *Growth-Oriented Planning* – Teachers continuously reflected on and improved their instructional strategies to adapt to students' needs.
- *Understanding Learners' Differences* – Teachers emphasized the value of recognizing individual learning profiles, strengths, and challenges.
- *Instructional Enhancement for Engagement* – Teachers prioritized dynamic strategies to keep students motivated and involved.
- *Differentiated Pathways and Supports* – Multiple entry points and scaffolds were created to ensure all learners could access the curriculum.
- *Encountering and Navigating Challenges* – Teachers described systemic barriers such as time constraints, limited resources, and large class sizes.

These themes illustrate how differentiation was not just a technical process but a mindset deeply rooted in empathy, flexibility, and responsiveness.

3.3 Insights Gained by the Researcher

The study revealed that differentiated instruction functions as an adaptive, learner-centered process that requires careful planning, personalized delivery, continuous assessment, and behavior support. Teachers used assessment data and IEPs to design tiered tasks that aligned with curricular goals while addressing diverse needs. Their interdisciplinary expertise—spanning education, psychology, and behavioral science—strengthened their ability to personalize instruction.

However, the study also exposed systemic barriers. Teachers cited insufficient support staff, lack of time, and overcrowded classrooms as significant obstacles to implementing DI fully. Despite this, they remained committed to inclusive education through innovation and reflective practice. The findings highlight that sustaining DI requires institutional investment, collaboration, and ongoing professional development.

3.4 Proposed Strategic Framework: FATIMA’S GUIDE

Based on these findings, the researcher developed the FATIMA’S GUIDE—Framework for Advancing Tailored Instruction and Maximizing Adaptability. This strategic model supports the design and delivery of effective differentiated instruction in inclusive settings.

The framework integrates five key components based on the core themes of the study:

- Growth-Oriented Planning
- Understanding Learner Diversity
- Instructional Enhancement for Engagement
- Differentiated Pathways and Supports
- Encountering and Navigating Challenges

FATIMA’S GUIDE offers teachers a clear, practical tool to support inclusive education practices, emphasizing adaptability, intentionality, and student empowerment. It also calls for systemic collaboration among educators, administrators, and policymakers to create inclusive environments where differentiated instruction can thrive.

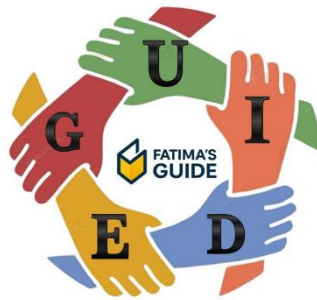


Figure 1: The FATIMA'S GUIDE Symbol

4. Conclusion

The findings of this phenomenological study underscore that differentiated instruction, when grounded in intentional planning and responsive adaptation, can effectively address the diverse needs of learners in inclusive, multicultural classrooms. Teachers at Al Qeyam Charter School implemented a broad array of strategies that extended beyond content delivery to include behavior management, learner engagement, and instructional flexibility. These efforts reflect a strong professional commitment, though they are often challenged by systemic limitations such as time constraints, resource scarcity, and the lack of institutional support.

The emergence of five key themes—ranging from strategic planning to the navigation of classroom realities—reveals that effective differentiation is both a pedagogical skill and an ongoing reflective practice. The development of the FATIMA’S GUIDE Framework responds directly to these insights, offering a structured model to support teachers in sustaining inclusive and adaptive instruction.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by centering teacher experiences and offering a practical framework grounded in real-world application. It calls for strengthened collaboration among educators, administrators, and policymakers to institutionalize support systems that make differentiated instruction not just a strategy, but a sustainable norm in inclusive education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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