

“How Do Teachers and Students Perceive the Benefits and Challenges of Implementing Differentiated Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, Particularly in Relation to Workload, Classroom Management, and Inclusivity?”

Indrajeet M. Acharjee.

Abstract:

This study investigates how teachers and students perceive the benefits and challenges of implementing differentiated instruction (DI) in mixed-ability classrooms, with a particular focus on workload, classroom management, and inclusivity. Drawing on primary data from 85 teachers working mainly in middle and secondary sections, the research uses a structured questionnaire combining Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to capture both the extent of DI use and perceived impacts. Descriptive statistics show that a clear majority of teachers report regularly adapting tasks, modifying assessments, and using flexible grouping in their mixed-ability classes, and over 70% agree that DI improves lower-achieving students' understanding, keeps higher achievers challenged, and enhances overall participation and engagement. At the same time, more than 60–70% of respondents indicate that DI significantly increases their planning workload and stress, and many describe managing multiple groups and activities simultaneously as complex and demanding, especially in larger, exam-oriented classes.

Qualitative responses highlight DI as a key driver of inclusivity and equity “levelling the playground” and helping learners feel more visible, confident, and respected while also revealing tensions around fairness and potential stigma when differentiated tasks are highly visible or not aligned with uniform high-stakes assessments. These findings are interpreted in light of secondary studies showing that systematic DI can improve achievement and reduce inequality, but also contributes to teacher stress when structural supports are limited. Overall, the study concludes that teachers view DI as pedagogically valuable and ethically important for inclusive education, yet structurally under-supported in terms of time, resources, and assessment alignment. Implications include the need for targeted professional development, collaborative planning time, improved resource provision, and policy-level assessment reforms to make DI sustainable and fair for both teachers and students in mixed-ability classrooms.

Key words - Differentiated instruction, mixed-ability classrooms, teacher perceptions, student perceptions, inclusive education, workload, classroom management, equity and fairness, learning outcomes, learner diversity

Introduction:

Differentiated instruction has become a central strategy for addressing the wide range of abilities, motivations, and learning needs present in mixed-ability classrooms. By adjusting content, process, and assessment, teachers aim to provide multiple pathways to learning so that all students can access the curriculum and progress at an appropriate level. Research syntheses report that differentiated instruction can improve academic achievement, particularly for low- and mid-achieving students, and enhance students' social and emotional development. For example, a recent study of 10th-grade learners found that students taught with differentiated approaches outperformed those in traditional classes on content-based examinations. Systematic reviews also indicate that high-achieving students can benefit in terms of both performance and motivation when differentiation is implemented thoughtfully in mixed-ability settings.

However, the implementation of differentiated instruction is often experienced by teachers as demanding and complex. A large German study on teachers' stress and job satisfaction found that "high workload through DI" was one of the most frequently mentioned negative experiences, with many teachers describing a "permanent feeling of running after something" and never being "done" when they take differentiation seriously. Pozas and colleagues report comparable findings in Germany: teachers experience DI as pedagogically necessary but slightly stressful, especially when insufficient planning time and support structures are available. This duality strong belief in DI's value, coupled with high perceived cost frames the central tension of this research.

Broader teacher-stress research suggests that over 70% of teachers see heavy workload as a primary source of stress, which is amplified when they must prepare multiple versions of tasks and assessments for diverse learners. Qualitative studies in inclusive and mixed-ability classrooms similarly report that teachers perceive differentiated instruction as essential for equity but constrained by large class sizes, limited resources, and time pressures.

At the same time, differentiated instruction is widely promoted as a cornerstone of inclusive education, helping teachers respond to learner diversity and reduce barriers to participation. Evidence indicates that tailoring tasks and supports can foster a greater sense of belonging and fairness, particularly for students who might otherwise struggle or be marginalized. Yet student perspectives on how differentiation affects inclusivity, classroom climate, and fairness remain under-represented compared with teacher-focused research. This gap is especially important because students' perceptions of fairness, support, and challenge directly shape their engagement and learning behaviours in mixed-ability classrooms.

Given these tensions between promise and pressure, inclusivity and increased workload there is a clear need to understand how differentiated instruction is actually experienced by those most directly involved. This study therefore investigates perceptions from both sides of the classroom. The guiding research question is: **"How do teachers and students perceive the benefits and challenges of implementing differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms, particularly in relation to workload, classroom management, and inclusivity?"**

Literature review

Empirical work across diverse systems suggests that DI can improve learning outcomes when it is embedded systematically rather than used ad hoc. Studies of 10th-grade classes show that students taught with differentiated approaches outperform peers taught with traditional, whole-class instruction on content-based examinations, with especially strong gains for lower-achieving students. Systematic reviews also conclude that high-achieving students benefit from differentiation through increased challenge, opportunities for deeper conceptual work, and higher motivation in mixed-ability settings.

However, a parallel body of research documents the costs of DI for teachers. A large German study on teacher stress found that "high workload through DI" was among the most frequently mentioned negative experiences, with teachers describing a constant sense of "running after something" and never being "done" when they tried to differentiate seriously for all learners. Broader surveys suggest that more than 70% of teachers identify heavy workload as a primary stressor, and that DI expectations amplify this burden by requiring multiple task versions, constant formative assessment, and extensive preparation.

In inclusive and mixed-ability classrooms, qualitative studies indicate that teachers see DI as essential for equity but constrained by large class sizes, limited planning time, insufficient resources, and pressure to complete syllabi. Simultaneously, DI is credited with enhancing students' sense of belonging and fairness; tailoring tasks and supports is reported to help marginalized or struggling learners feel more visible, competent, and respected. Yet student perspectives on fairness and identity in differentiated classrooms remain under-represented, particularly concerns about labeling, stigma, and perceptions of "easier" or "harder" work. This study positions the primary data against this literature, extending it by focusing explicitly on the trio of workload, classroom management, and inclusivity in a high-stakes, mixed-ability context.

Methodology

The primary data were gathered through a structured teacher questionnaire administered to 85 teachers working mainly in middle and secondary mixed-ability classrooms. The instrument combined closed Likert-scale items (1–5) with open-ended questions to capture both the frequency and depth of differentiated instruction practices, as well as perceived benefits and challenges related to learning, workload, classroom management, and inclusivity. Items asked teachers to report how often they used strategies such as adapting tasks, modifying assessments, and flexible grouping, and to rate statements about impact on lower- and higher-achieving students, participation, and inclusion, alongside items on planning time, stress, and resource sufficiency. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively (means and percentages of teachers selecting 4 or 5 as “agree/strongly agree”), while qualitative responses were coded thematically around recurring categories such as learning gains, inclusivity, workload, classroom management, fairness, and structural constraints like high-stakes assessment.

The questionnaire addressed:

- Frequency of DI practices (use of DI strategies, adapting tasks, modifying assessments, flexible grouping, reflection).
- Perceived benefits (learning, engagement, inclusivity, relationships, outcomes).
- Workload and stress (planning time, workload, stress, sufficiency of resources).
- Classroom management and fairness (difficulty managing multiple tasks/groups, perceived fairness, inclusion of specific groups, impact on achievement gaps and language/cultural diversity).

The secondary data were obtained through a targeted review of empirical and review studies on differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms, focusing on three domains aligned with the research question: learning and equity outcomes, teacher workload and stress, and inclusivity/fairness for diverse learners. Key sources included quasi-experimental and evaluation studies on the impact of DI on achievement and equity (e.g., Valiandes on literacy gains and socioeconomic gap reduction), configurative and global reviews of DI as an inclusive pedagogy (e.g., Eikeland and related international syntheses), systematic reviews of DI for high-achieving students (Ziernwald et al.), and mixed-methods research on DI, stress, and job satisfaction among teachers (Pozas et al.). These studies were selected because they directly addressed mixed-ability contexts and the same core constructs as the primary questionnaire, allowing the primary findings to be interpreted and strengthened through triangulation with established international evidence.

Secondary data consist of peer-reviewed studies and reviews on:

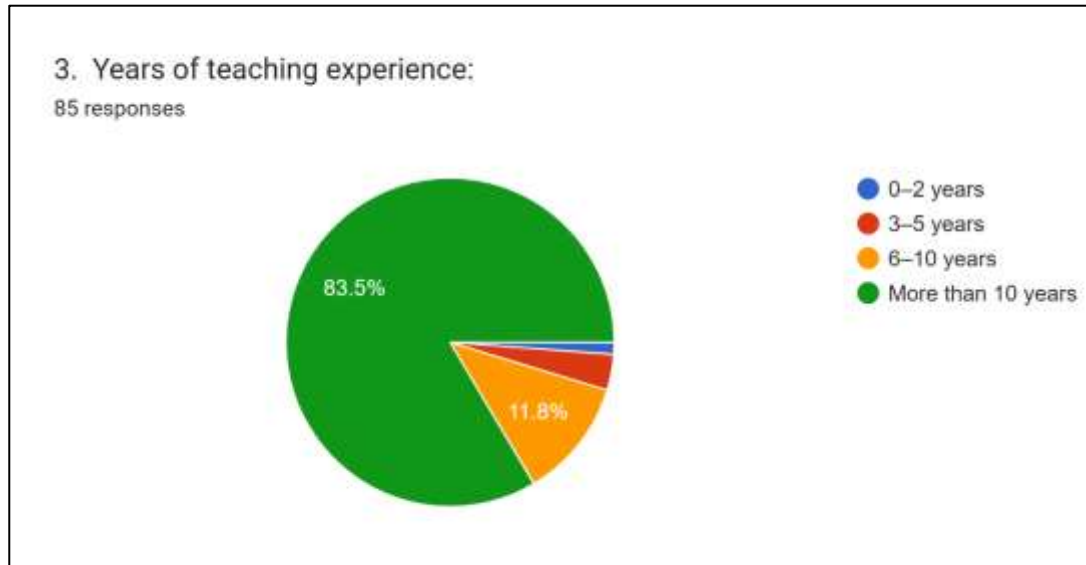
- Impact of DI on achievement and equity in mixed-ability classrooms (Valiandes; Eikeland).
- DI and teacher stress/job satisfaction (Pozas et al.).
- DI for high-achieving students (Ziernwald et al.).
- DI experiences of special education teachers in mixed-ability settings.

Key descriptive statistics

Table 1. Respondent and training profile (primary data)

Indicator	Value (primary)
Number of teacher respondents	85 teachers.
Experience: more than 10 years	Clear majority (over 83.5%).
Typical class size	16–25 students in most cases.

Formal DI training: Yes	75.3% of teachers.
Formal DI training: No	24.7% of teachers.



These descriptive patterns echo Ziernwald’s review, which notes that many teachers globally report limited systematic training in DI despite being expected to differentiate for both high- and low-achieving students.

Quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics and calculation of the proportion of teachers selecting 4 or 5 (“agree/strongly agree”) for each item. Qualitative responses were coded thematically around benefits (learning, engagement, inclusivity), workload/time, classroom management, fairness, and structural factors such as exams and resources. Secondary data consist of the literature-based narrative overview in the secondary analysis document, which situates findings within international evidence on DI, workload, and inclusive education.

The design is cross-sectional and descriptive, focusing on perceptions rather than direct observation or achievement data. Student views are not collected directly; they appear only through teachers’ reports of how students respond to DI.

Use of DI: Frequency, depth, and alignment with literature

Primary data

Likert items on DI usage (Q6–Q10) show:

- Mean scores in the 3–4 range for “I use DI strategies in my mixed-ability classes” and “I adapt tasks or activities to different ability levels.”
- Between approximately 70–90% of teachers selecting 4 or 5 (“agree/strongly agree”) for core practice items such as flexible grouping, adapting tasks, and modifying assessment criteria.
- Many respondents indicate they “regularly reflect and adjust” DI based on student feedback or results.

Qualitative responses describe DI as embedded (“not an add-on”) and “must for all lessons,” especially in mixed-ability contexts.

Secondary data

Valiandes’ quasi-experimental work shows that classrooms where DI is “systematically employed” (not occasional) produce better literacy outcomes and reduced socioeconomic achievement gaps, underlining the importance of regular, embedded DI rather than sporadic activities (Valiandes 17). Eikeland similarly argues

that coherent, curriculum-level differentiation is a core dimension of effective and equitable teaching, not a peripheral technique (Eikeland 1).

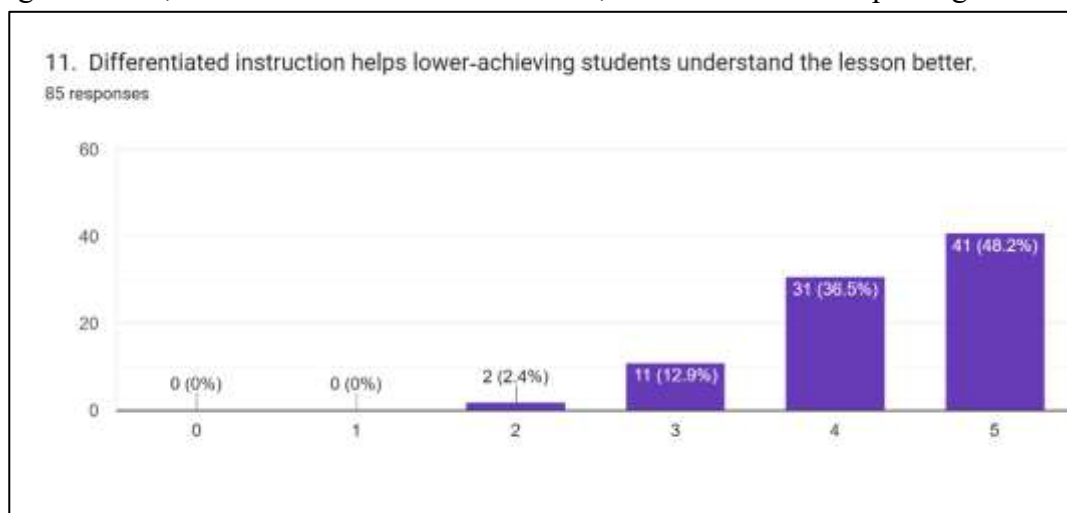
Ziernwald’s systematic review finds that DI for high achievers is often under-used and not proactive, despite teachers and high-achieving students perceiving it as valuable (Ziernwald et al. 493). The primary data echo this caution: several teachers note that DI tends to prioritize slower learners and that maintaining challenge for high achievers requires conscious effort. Together, primary and secondary data suggest that while teachers in this study use DI frequently, more systematic planning is needed to ensure high achievers are consistently and proactively extended.

Benefits for learning and engagement

Primary data: Perceived impact

Across items 11–16:

- For “DI helps lower-achieving students understand the lesson better,” “DI keeps higher-achieving students challenged and engaged,” and “Overall, DI has a positive impact on student learning outcomes,” >70% of teachers choose 4 or 5, with some items surpassing 80%.



- Teachers describe DI as “bridging the gap between high, moderate and low performers,” “levelling the playground,” and “upscaling the learning levels of learners.”
- Findings on participation and engagement show >75% agreement that DI improves overall student participation.

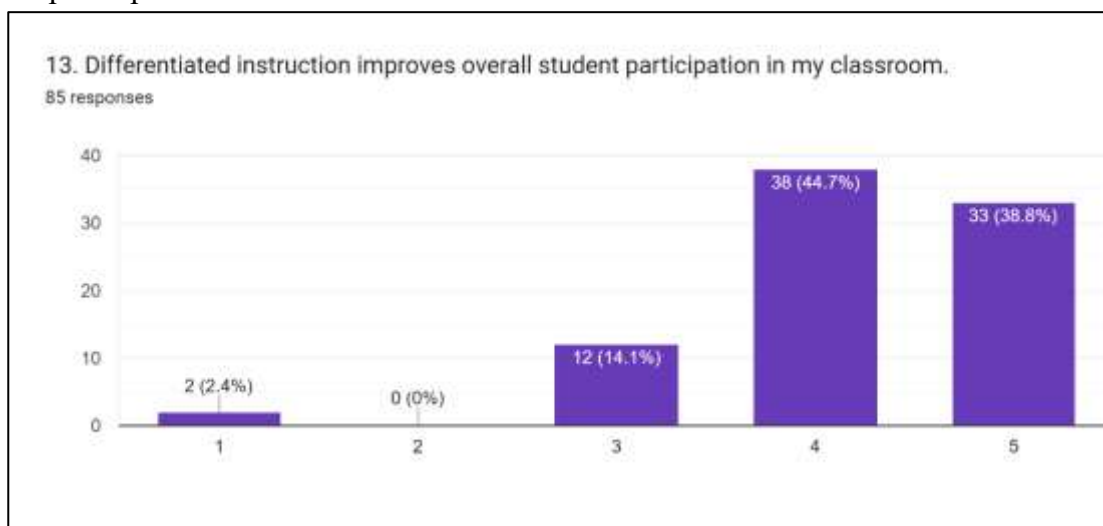


Table 2. Perceived benefits of DI (primary data)

Dimension	Typical agreement (4–5)	Primary pattern
Learning gains	Often >75%	Better understanding; bridging performance gaps.
Engagement	Often >75%	More participation, motivation, active involvement.
Outcomes overall	Often >70–80%	DI seen as raising overall learning outcomes.

Teachers give concrete examples of improved outcomes: “better teaching and learning outcome, better bonding, improvement in result,” “inclusive class, better results for the weaker students,” and “the results are rewarding and evident that you are levelling the playground for all students.”

Secondary data: Achievement and motivation

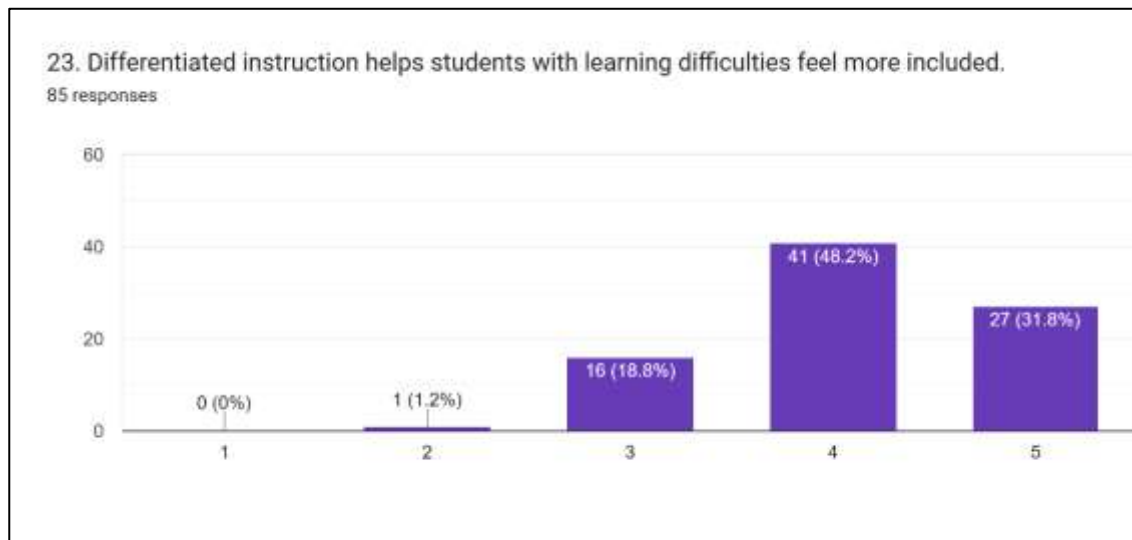
Valiandes reports that in grade-four mixed-ability classes, systematic DI led to statistically significant improvements in literacy and reading, with the quality of DI correlating positively with student achievement. Importantly, DI also prevented socioeconomic status from determining achievement, supporting its role in promoting equity. This echoes teachers’ claims in the primary data that DI “bridges the gap” and “helps each learner progress.”

Ziernwald’s review of 49 studies finds that DI tends to have predominantly positive effects on high-achieving students’ academic and motivational outcomes, although effect sizes vary across studies. Teachers and high-achieving students in these studies report DI as valuable for providing deeper conceptual work and avoiding boredom (Ziernwald et al. 493). This complements the primary finding that teachers perceive DI as keeping higher achievers “challenged and engaged,” but also warns that proactive DI for high achievers is necessary, something several respondents acknowledge as an ongoing challenge.

Inclusivity, fairness, and student experience

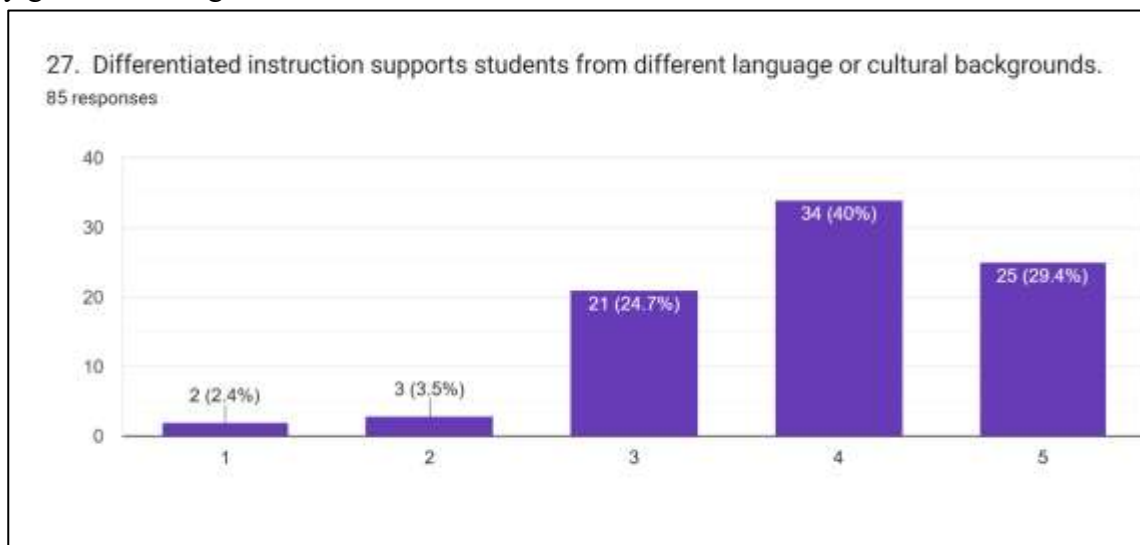
Primary data: Inclusivity and equity

Inclusivity-linked items (e.g., DI making classrooms more inclusive, helping students with learning difficulties feel included, recognizing advanced students’ abilities, supporting language/cultural diversity) show consistently high means and 75–90% agreement at levels 4–5. Teachers repeatedly use terms such as “inclusive environment,” “equitable access,” “fair and focused class,” and “sense of fairness for teenagers.”



Open responses emphasize that DI:

- “Cater[s] to inclusivity.”
- “Promotes equity.”
- Creates an “inclusive environment” where “each and every learner is catered and engaged and they gain something.”



Teachers also highlight emotional and social benefits: students feel more “confident,” “less anxious,” and experience “respect” and a sense that their needs are “visible” and valued.

Secondary data: Inclusion and diversity

A recent study of special education teachers in mixed-ability classrooms reports that DI, when supported by flexible grouping and curriculum adaptation, improves student progress, classroom dynamics, and perceived inclusivity, even though it increases workload and requires additional planning. This aligns directly with primary teacher perceptions that DI supports both social and academic inclusion while being demanding.

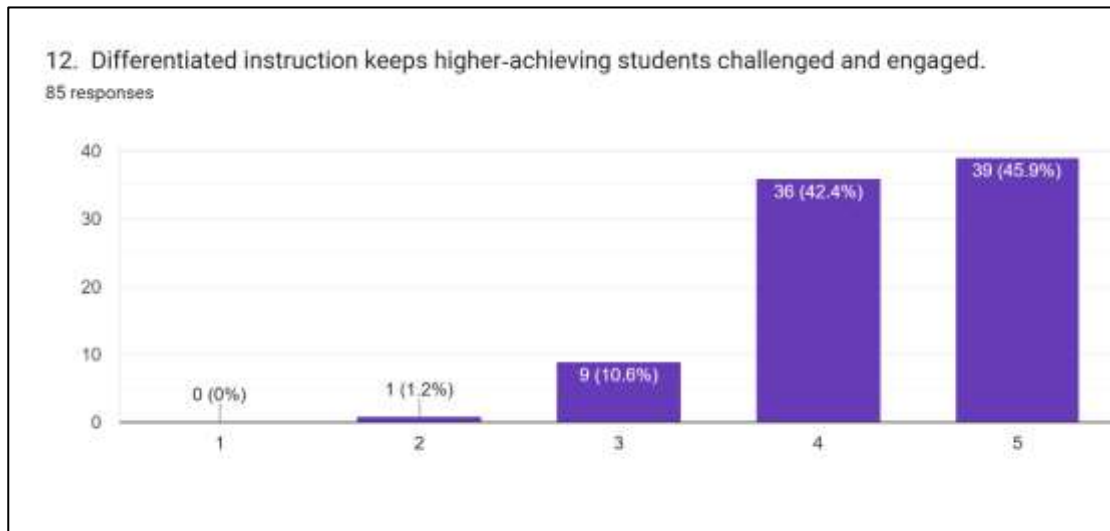
Eikeland’s review situates DI as a key mechanism for inclusive education systems, arguing that it allows teachers to respond to learner diversity without lowering standards, thereby promoting both quality and equity. The primary data echo this by noting that DI “improves learning outcomes without lowering standards” when conceptual depth and scaffolding are balanced.

Fairness and labeling

Despite positive inclusive perceptions, some teachers warn that visible differentiation can create new inequities:

- Differentiated tasks may “create divisiveness,” “lower self-esteem” in learners with specific learning difficulties, or make lower-achieving students feel “embarrassed” or “offended.”

- High achievers may feel that DI “added up challenges for the strong ones” or that they are not given equal time, particularly when tasks are tiered and external exams are uniform.



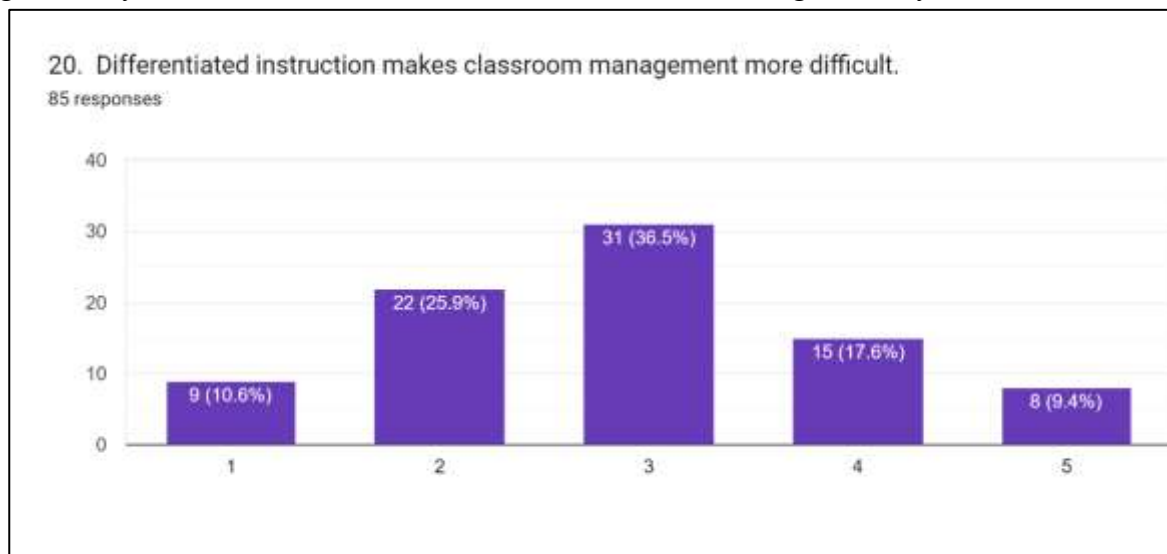
Ziernwald’s review notes similar tensions: while DI is perceived as useful for high achievers, teachers often lack training or time to implement higher-tier challenges systematically, and high-achieving students may feel neglected if DI focuses mainly on remediation (Ziernwald et al. 493). This converges with primary respondents’ concern that DI can unintentionally concentrate on slow learners at the expense of high achievers.

Workload, time, and teacher wellbeing

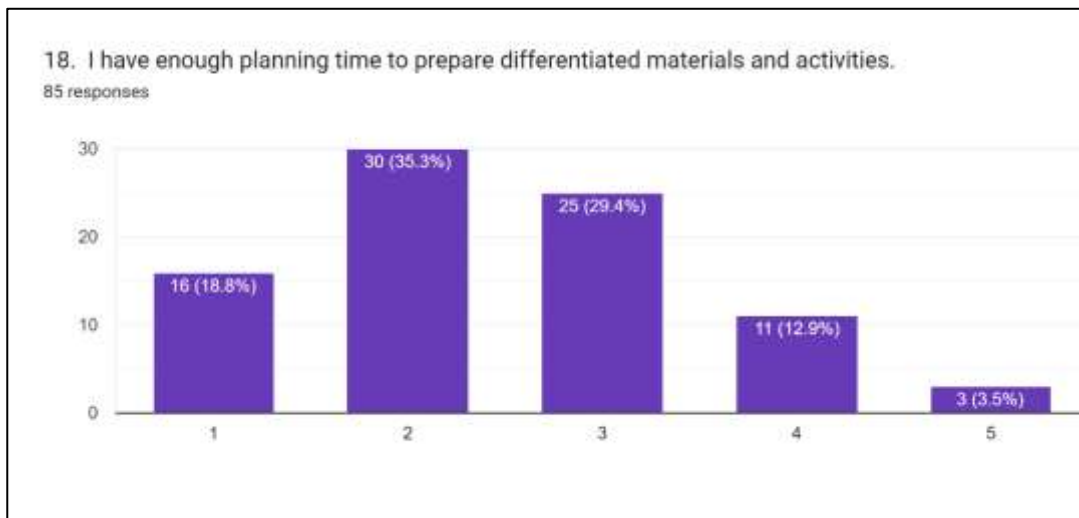
Primary data: Workload and resource strain

Workload-related items (17–22) show:

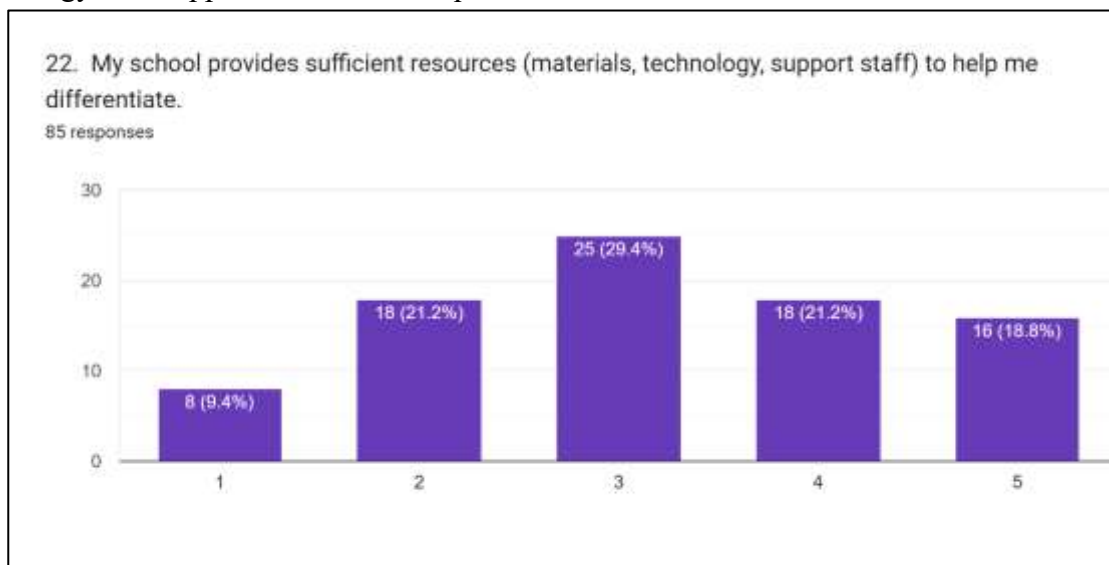
- High agreement (>60–70%) that “Planning differentiated lessons increases my workload significantly” and that teachers feel stressed when differentiating for many needs in one class.



- Lower agreement on “I have enough planning time to prepare differentiated materials,” with several teachers rating this 1–2, indicating insufficient time.



- Mixed perceptions of resource support, with many indicating that school-provided materials, technology, and support staff are inadequate.



Teachers repeatedly list “workload,” “time management,” “pressure of completing syllabus,” “too less time to plan and execute differentiated strategies,” and the burden of “other work than teaching” as primary challenges. They request “ready-made resources,” “tiered worksheets,” “subject-specific exemplars,” and “AI-assisted tasks and rubrics” to reduce planning load.

Secondary data: Stress and job satisfaction

Pozas et al. examine DI and teacher wellbeing using mixed methods with 209 teachers, finding that:

- DI is associated with slightly increased stress, especially when combined with heavy workload and limited planning time.
- Teachers report feelings of insufficiency and lack of support when expected to differentiate extensively without adequate resources.
- However, DI can also support job satisfaction when teachers see positive student outcomes and feel supported by school structures.

These findings mirror the primary data’s “pedagogically worthwhile but burdensome” theme: teachers in this study clearly value DI but feel the system does not consistently provide conditions (time, resources, collaboration) to implement it sustainably.

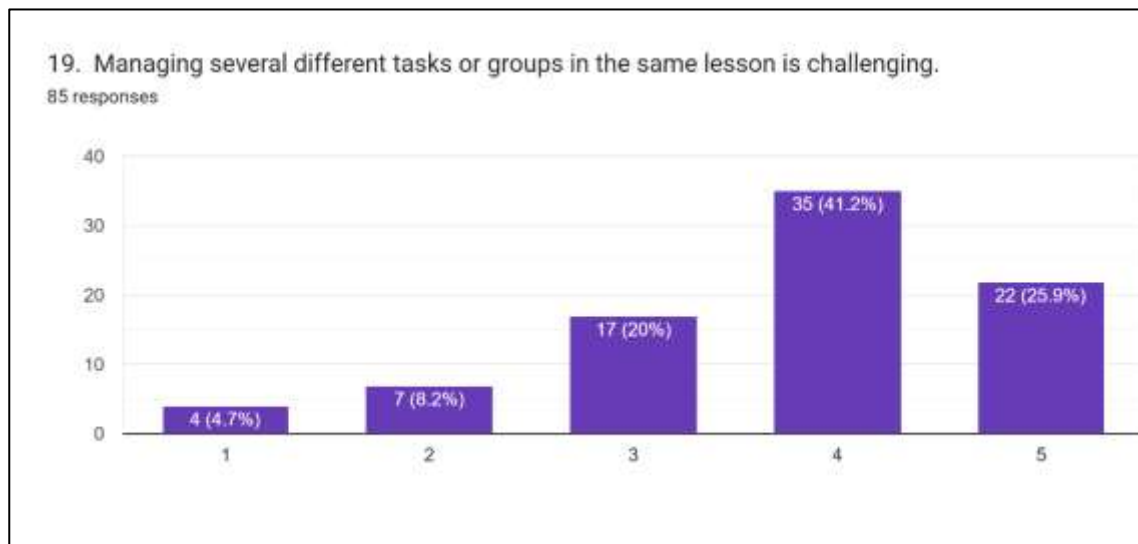
Valiandes' work also highlights that high-quality DI requires “extended time and concentrated effort” to master and implement, and that large class sizes, limited materials, and lack of collaborative structures make the task “daunting,” reinforcing the structural nature of the workload problem.

Classroom management and mixed-ability complexity

Primary data: Managing multiple pathways

Items on management (e.g., “Managing several different tasks or groups in the same lesson is challenging”; “DI makes classroom management more difficult”) show mean scores above 3 and 50–60% agreement at levels 4–5, indicating that most teachers find DI increases management complexity, though some disagree. Teachers describe:

- Difficulty managing “multiple activities and groups at the same time” and keeping “all students on task,” especially in classes with 21–25 students.
- Increased noise, off-task talk, and challenges maintaining routines when different groups work on different tasks.



Yet others report that once routines are established, DI actually supports management: “all are engaged to their capacity,” “better understanding reduces discipline issues,” and DI can reduce disruptive behaviour by matching tasks to readiness. Many explicitly request support for “managing mixed-ability groups,” “classroom discipline,” and “how to manage different kids at the same time,” emphasizing management as the orchestration of complexity, not merely behaviour control.

Secondary data: Management in inclusive and special-education contexts

Special-education teachers in the Praxis study likewise cite management as a key challenge in implementing DI in mixed-ability classrooms, especially when resources and support staff are limited. They note that flexible grouping and curriculum adaptation improve classroom dynamics and engagement but demand careful planning and continuous monitoring. This is strongly consistent with primary teacher descriptions of simultaneous group management as both the strength and the strain of DI.

International reviews also stress that successful DI requires routines, clear expectations, and formative assessment practices that allow teachers to monitor multiple groups efficiently, which again requires time and training. The primary data show that many teachers have these routines to some extent but still seek more structured classroom-management training specific to DI.

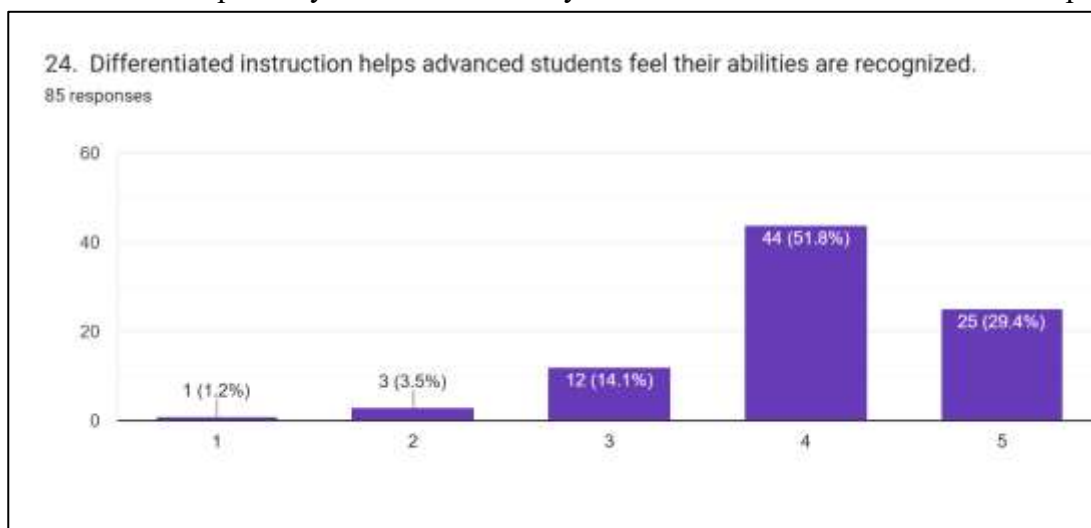
Structural tensions: High-stakes assessment and DI

Primary data: Exam alignment issues

A recurrent theme in open responses is the misalignment between differentiated instruction in class and uniform external assessments:

- Teachers note that all students ultimately sit the same IB/IGCSE/national board exams with identical mark schemes, regardless of the differentiated pathways used during instruction.
- Some describe DI as “pointless” or frustrating in senior classes because differentiated support does not translate into differentiated expectations or grading.
- One teacher uses the metaphor of “teaching all types of animals skills as per their need, but asking them all to climb a tree during the exam.”

Others suggest that DI is more feasible and impactful in primary and lower secondary, while in upper secondary, correct subject selection and pathway differentiation may better match students’ abilities and aspirations.



Secondary data: Equity, standards, and assessment

Valiandes’ work underscores that DI can promote equity by reducing the effects of socioeconomic status on achievement when implemented systematically within coherent curriculum and assessment frameworks. However, much of this research occurs in contexts where internal assessment can be aligned with differentiated teaching; tension increases when external high-stakes exams are rigid.

Broader policy-oriented analyses and global reviews of DI around the world highlight the same challenge: DI is endorsed in policy as a tool for inclusive education, but assessment regimes often remain standardized, creating a disconnect that teachers must bridge personally. The primary data in this study provide concrete, teacher-level evidence of that disconnect and its emotional consequences, particularly in senior grades.

Synthesis: How primary and secondary data converge

When triangulated, primary and secondary data jointly support the following conclusions:

- DI improves learning and equity: Teachers’ reports of improved understanding, participation, and reduced achievement gaps are consistent with Valiandes’ quasi-experimental evidence and with special-education and inclusion studies showing DI boosts progress and classroom inclusivity.
- High achievers can benefit if proactively included: Teachers’ perceptions that DI keeps high achievers challenged align with Ziernwald’s finding that DI supports high achievers’ academic and motivational outcomes, but both primary and secondary data warn that high achievers are often not targeted systematically (Ziernwald et al. 495).

- Workload and management are systemic, not attitudinal, issues: Both this study and Pozas et al. emphasize that teachers generally believe in DI but experience it as stressful due to limited time, resources, and structural support.
- Inclusivity is both strengthened and complicated: DI supports inclusion and fairness for many students, especially those with learning difficulties or language differences, but may create new perceived inequities or stigma if visible differentiation is not carefully framed.
- Assessment misalignment undermines perceived fairness: Teachers' frustration with undifferentiated external exams parallels theoretical and empirical critiques that see assessment policies as lagging behind inclusive pedagogy reforms.

Overall, the convergence of primary and secondary data makes the argument stronger: DI is an evidence-based, equity-oriented practice that teachers in this context strive to implement, but its sustainability, fairness, and full impact depend on systemic changes rather than individual effort alone.

Conclusion, limitations, and open questions

Conclusion

In this mixed-ability, exam-oriented context, teachers perceive differentiated instruction as a central, effective, and morally important approach for addressing learner diversity, enhancing engagement, and promoting inclusion. The quantitative data show high levels of DI use and strong agreement often above 70–80% that DI benefits lower and higher achievers, increases participation, and creates more inclusive classrooms. These perceptions are supported by international evidence that systematic DI can raise achievement, reduce inequities, and improve classroom climate in mixed-ability settings.

However, more than 60–70% of teachers in this study also report significant increases in workload and stress, and many describe managing multiple tasks and groups as challenging, particularly in larger, high-stakes classes with undifferentiated external assessments. Secondary research reinforces that this is not an isolated finding but a global pattern: DI is experienced as complex, time-intensive, and demanding without adequate structural and professional support. Inclusivity is strongly endorsed but nuanced; DI can both reduce and inadvertently reinforce inequities depending on how differentiation is designed, communicated, and aligned with assessment. The combined data suggest that the key issue is not teachers' belief in DI, but whether schools and systems provide the time, resources, collaborative structures, and assessment reforms needed to make DI a sustainable, fair, and genuinely inclusive practice.

Limitations

- Single-context sample: The primary data come from one institutional context with specific curricular and assessment frameworks; generalizability to other countries or systems is limited.
- Experienced-teacher bias: The sample is dominated by teachers with more than 10 years' experience; novice teachers' perceptions of DI demands and benefits may differ.
- Self-report and social desirability: Both DI usage and perceived benefits rely on self-report, which may be influenced by professional norms and policy expectations.
- Indirect student voice: Student perceptions are inferred through teacher descriptions and not collected directly, limiting conclusions about how students themselves experience DI.
- Cross-sectional design: The study captures a single time point, so it cannot show how perceptions change as teachers receive further training, or as policies and assessment conditions evolve.

Open questions

1. Student perspectives on fairness and identity - How do students across achievement levels and backgrounds perceive fairness, inclusion, and stigma in differentiated classrooms, especially when external assessments remain uniform?
2. Sustainable DI models and teacher wellbeing - What specific combinations of workload reduction, collaborative planning time, and resource provision most effectively reduce DI-related stress while preserving its positive impact on learning?
3. Phase- and subject-specific differentiation - How should DI be tailored for primary versus senior secondary phases and across subjects (e.g., conceptual STEM vs. discursive humanities) to balance depth, coverage, and manageability?
4. Aligning assessment with DI - Which assessment reforms such as differentiated internal assessments, flexible grading criteria, or pathway differentiation best align with DI without compromising standards or comparability?
5. Role of technology and AI - How can AI-based tools and digital platforms support planning, resource creation, and formative assessment in DI, and what new equity or ethical concerns might such tools raise in mixed-ability classrooms?

The combined data suggest that the key issue is not teachers' belief in DI, but whether schools and systems provide the time, resources, collaborative structures, and assessment reforms needed to make DI a sustainable, fair, and genuinely inclusive practice.

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