

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is a philosophy and an approach to teaching where teachers and school communities actively support the learning of *all* students through strategic formative assessment, careful planning, and flexible instruction. It allows students to have multiple opportunities for learning, make sense of new ideas, and demonstrate what they've learned in a variety of ways.

Differentiated instruction in its simplest form means that the teacher will find ways to help every student in the classroom learn. This may require adaptations for some students, but in most cases, it means that the teacher will employ different teaching strategies based on the abilities and learning styles of the students. Frequent formative assessment is necessary.

Most teachers naturally incorporate elements of differentiated instruction to some degree. The key features of DI include:

1. Knowing your students

Teachers need to know their students individually, and as a group. This means knowing their interests as well as their abilities, and realizing that students sometimes behave differently in certain groupings. Teachers need to be aware of the different learning styles in the classroom, and they need to be familiar with Individual Program Plans (IPPs) that might exist for some students.

2. Understanding the curriculum

Teachers need to be completely familiar with the curriculum they are teaching. They need to use 'backward design' when planning teaching units. They need to participate in Professional Learning Community activities, both in their own school and with teachers in other schools.

3. Providing Multiple Pathways to Learning

Teachers will vary their teaching methods to match the different learning styles of students. Their lessons will appeal to students' interests, while addressing their different levels of ability. Teachers will allow students to work on open-ended tasks. They will allow student work and discussion of ideas using partners, small groups, and whole-class discussion.

4. Sharing responsibility with students

Lessons presented by the teacher will often involve students directly, by using 'scaffolding' in their instruction as well as by taking into account student interests and skills. Students will often be given a choice as to how they learn material or demonstrate what they've learned. Teachers will also help students to set goals, and to master strategies for organizing information, understanding ideas, and communicating what they've learned.

5. Taking a flexible and reflective approach to learning

Teachers know that ongoing formative assessment both drives and extends instruction. Constant reflection on the learning taking place in the classroom is necessary, and teachers must be ready to adapt or change their planning when necessary.