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### **A Qualitative Study Identifying Perspectives, Experiences, and Needs of School Principals and Teachers to Lead a Culture of Differentiated Teaching and Learning**

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**A QUALITATIVE STUDY IDENTIFYING PERSPECTIVES,  
EXPERIENCES, AND NEEDS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS  
AND TEACHERS TO LEAD A CULTURE OF  
DIFFERENTIATED TEACHING  
AND LEARNING**

by

Natalie Gray Pope, B.S., M.A.Ed.

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education: Educational Leadership

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
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We hereby recommend that the dissertation prepared by

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entitled **A Qualitative Study Identifying Perspectives, Experiences, and Needs of  
School Principals and Teachers to Lead a Culture of Differentiated Teaching  
and Learning**

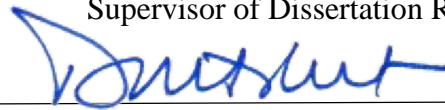
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**Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership Concentration**



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## **ABSTRACT**

Differentiated instruction is defined as providing all students access to the same set of curricula while at the same time providing tasks and instruction tailored to a student's specific learning style. This expectation has led researchers to study and understand differentiated instruction for embedded applications across all classroom and district experiences, public perceptions, and effective implementation of future trends. However, there is a gap in literature addressed by this study relating to the leadership of differentiated instruction in school settings.

Data for this study were collected from school principals and classroom teachers using both virtual and face-to-face interviews, documented field observations, and a 24-question survey. The study was guided by the theoretical framework of Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, specifically because Gardner's theory served as a lens for the research questions. To garner a leadership perspective and establish the success of institutional change, the study used Armenakis' Organizational Change Theory. Evidence from interviews as data were triangulated and analyzed by graphing common themes that emerged as data points.

Differentiated instruction is a valuable and helpful technique in achieving district-wide educational goals by considering diverse academic knowledge and backgrounds. It was also stated that through the leadership implementation of differentiated instruction in schools, students become the center of learning leading to the achievement of district

goals. Finally, student engagement and overall academic performance throughout the district increase when school systems implement differentiated instruction that focuses on three things for students and classroom success: actual readiness levels, popular interests, and individual learning preferences.

Adhering to the mantra that to grow teachers means to grow students, this research project focused on the leadership of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is an essential yet complex teaching skill that most instructional leaders have not mastered and often feel unprepared to implement. The study produced findings that principals and teachers seem to have a rudimentary understanding of differentiated instruction, but lack depth in their knowledge of differentiation or specifically how to overcome barriers to successfully leading it.

Another finding was that school administrators indicated that one of their most significant challenges with implementing differentiated instruction on their campus is a lack of knowledge by their teachers. Two themes emerged from the interviews with participants that answered these research questions: teachers need support and training, and teachers need time and support to plan for diverse learners and implementation.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The diverse group of student needs is more wide-ranging in classrooms today than ever before; thus school administrators and teachers are encountering more students with both language and learning differences at a greater rate (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019). Further, school administrators and educators have long strived to meet the needs of students while struggling to find the most effective ways to do so. Therefore, the topic of differentiated instruction has become critical to the successful leadership of educational settings (Kronberg & York-Barr, 1997).

According to Watts-Taffe et al. (2012), differentiated instruction is defined as providing all students access to the same set of curricula while at the same time providing tasks and instruction tailored to each student's specific learning style. Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) also considered differentiated instruction to be a key component of academic success in most areas of school curricula. Therefore, researchers have become interested in enhancing student performance through this instructional technique (Tomlinson, 2000). This expectation has also led researchers to study and understand the use of differentiated instruction in schools, administrative perceptions, and necessary areas for effective implementation (Tomlinson, 2000; Watts-Taffe et al., 2012).

Wu and Chang (2015) stated that differentiated instruction is a valuable and helpful technique for achieving students' educational goals, specifically those students from diverse academic knowledge and backgrounds. Tomlinson (1999) further noted that through differentiated instruction, students become the center of learning, and educational leaders can create and tailor curricula based on individual needs while creating a learning environment where students feel safe and respected. According to Tomlinson (2000), students adapt to the learning process when learning styles, intelligence, and interest are at the forefront of instruction.

To examine the effects of differentiated instruction on student learning, both qualitative and quantitative indicators have been utilized in this research study. Most of the studies identified in this research are quantitative with specific findings related to the quantitative data collected. Because there are a limited number of qualitative studies, this study was qualitative with an emphasis and focus on the perceptions and understanding of differentiated instruction by today's school leaders. This study also identified specific concerns of teachers and the assistance needed by their administrators to help encourage and facilitate the use of differentiated instruction.

According to Leithwood et al. (2020), leadership is second only to classroom instruction in terms of factors that promote and foster student learning and success. Further, Togneri and Anderson (2003) stated that school leaders play tremendous roles in influencing goals and establishing methods that support teachers in implementing and delivering methods of instruction that promote student success. Although research and studies show that leaders are imperative to promoting change, leaders sometimes lack the abilities to effectively do so (Leithwood et al., 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In education today, both school administrators and teachers are held accountable for the successes and failures of their students. In a quest to assist educators, recent studies have focused on the effects of differentiated instruction on a student's academic performance (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Gettinger & Stoiber, 2012; Jones et al., 2012). To better understand the definition of differentiated instruction, Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) defined differentiated instruction as instruction that allows all students access to the same curriculum set while providing an alternative means to understand, interpret, and use the information according to their identified learning styles. According to Connor et al. (2010), differentiated instruction, specifically through small group instruction, encompasses most areas of instruction and creates a positive, productive, and effective learning environment. Finally, Wormeli (2017) stated that differentiated instruction is making sure that all students learn well and in ways that are structured to meet their needs.

Because differentiated instruction seems to be a catchphrase in many school settings, some school site administrators lack the knowledge, understanding, and training to create differentiated learning environments (Connor et al., 2010). There is much research on differentiated instruction from an instructional point of view; however, additional research is needed to determine a leadership level of understanding of the topics, perceptions, and resources school leaders may need to help teachers to consistently and effectively implement widespread differentiated instruction practices.

Differentiated instruction is a measured component of the Louisiana Compass (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2021) evaluation rubric; therefore,

teachers must use and understand this instructional method in order to achieve school success. School leaders and administrators have the ultimate responsibility of ensuring that this occurs on their campuses. Therefore, this study investigated and determined specific educational needs and the roadblocks and challenges administrative leaders face when promoting and encouraging the use of differentiated instruction to satisfy those needs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate administrative perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction. The study also focused on the role of school leaders in ensuring that differentiated instruction exists on their campuses and identifying any roadblocks or challenges that school leaders face in bringing about a shift to sustainable differentiated classrooms. According to DuFour and Mattos (2013) school leaders are increasingly in a difficult situation to satisfy divergent constituencies and must find innovative ways to increase academic achievement by developing and nurturing teachers. Qualitative data for this study were collected through interviews, surveys, and classroom observations to determine the perceptions and needs of today's classroom teachers and the challenges faced by school leaders. Attention was also given to the purpose and reasoning of why time and effort should be afforded to promote and implement differentiated instruction.

### **Significance of the Study**

According to McIntyre et al. (2005), children who struggle academically at a young age often continue to work and remain behind their peers when measuring their



academic performance. The leadership findings of this study could influence how teachers are trained in educational settings. The results could also help principals and teachers better understand how they implement differentiated instruction to improve their level of overall academic achievement.

Effective leadership is critical to student achievement in public education (Salter, 2013). Additionally, effective school leaders must promote professional growth among their teachers by demonstrating efficacy in pedagogy (Honig et al., 2010). Research also shows that administrators must clearly understand and support teachers in the understanding of the challenges they face (Paulsen & Martin, 2014). By recognizing the responsibilities, challenges, and roadblocks teachers face, school leaders will be better prepared and equipped to assist teachers in the implementation of effective methods and instructional strategies (Paulsen & Martin, 2014).

Data collected for this case study could provide administrators with answers and insight into why teachers are reluctant to implement differentiated instruction. Interviews with administrators provided a clearer understanding of their perceptions, thus providing information to assist future administrators and leaders.

### **Method and Research Questions**

The study was a single case study design that focused on the experiences and perceptions of classroom teachers and challenges faced by school leaders. According to Yin (2009), the benefit of a case study is that it allows the researcher to obtain detailed information in a real-life situation. Yin (2009) stated that case study research is frequently used when other methods are inappropriate. Although several research methods were considered for this study, a case study design is the most appropriate.

The method of data collection included semi-structured interviews triangulated by classroom observations. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), semi-structured interviews ask the same general questions to each participant. This type of questioning is most appropriate because it offers a glimpse into the participants' experiences and perceptions. When participants are asked the same general questions, a comparison of their responses can be created, and themes will emerge. The same approach was given to the school leaders who were interviewed. Interviews and conversations with participants were completely voluntary. Interviews were audio-recorded for a detailed account of question responses. Subsequent interviews were conducted to gain clarity or more information based on the participants' initial responses. There were no predetermined number of interviews decided.

The research questions examined are:

1. What is the level of understanding of differentiated instruction by today's classroom teachers?
2. What support and resources do teachers need to assist them in implementing differentiated instruction consistently?
3. What challenges do school leaders face when implementing and encouraging the use of differentiated instruction on their campuses?
4. What factors contribute to teachers' and school leaders' being reluctant to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques?
5. What can school leaders do to affect and encourage change?

### **Impact on Professional Practice**

An increased leadership investment in understanding the challenges administrators, educational leaders, and teachers face in implementing effective differentiated instruction will result in the increased use of differentiated instruction in the classroom. Because an expectation to incorporate differentiated instruction exists, the results of this study have the potential to impact current and future educators as they seek to implement this method of teaching. The results of this study also can affect how future school principals and teachers are taught and trained in their initial certification programs and their professional careers. By researching the perceptions, needs, effectiveness, and implementation of differentiated instruction in the classrooms, teachers and administrators can better meet the increasingly diverse needs of students. This information could also be used to guide future decisions made by administrators in an attempt to motivate and ensure the use of differentiated instruction.

### **Assumptions**

This study assumed that classroom teachers and school site administrators understand the concept of differentiation and what it looks like in practice. Another assumption is that the teachers and principals involved in this study are open to the benefits of instructional differentiation and are of a disposition to participate in this study as proponents of improved curricular leadership that includes differentiated instruction.

### **Limitations**

Through the lens of qualitative case study, research bias can exist more prominently than when using other lenses. The researcher needed to be reminded of accountability and objectivity when providing authentic accounts of the data collected.

### **Delimitations**

Participants were restricted to school principals and teachers in the elementary school setting, in a single school district, grades kindergarten through fifth grade, who had demonstrated a level of proficiency of highly effective or effective as measured by the Compass evaluation instrument. The study did not stretch across middle or high school levels or to schools that were not given a proficiency of highly effective or effective.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Compass* is an evaluation instrument used to evaluate the effectiveness of educational professionals. According to the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) (2021), the Compass instruments are also used as tools for teachers and principals to define expectations for student learning groups and to measure goals for student learning.

*Differentiated instruction* is defined by Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) as instruction that allows all students to have access to the same curriculum while providing them with a variety of methods to learn the information through different entry points and learning tasks. Subsequently, instructional methods are tailored to their individual learning styles and needs.

*Diversity* is the inclusion of different types of students from different races and cultures in a group or organization.

*Elementary school* is defined as a public-school setting that provides for the educational needs of students enrolled in pre-K through fifth grade.

*School-level leader* is defined as the principal or assistant principal of the participating schools.

*Schoolwide Enrichment Model-Reading (SEM-R)* is defined as an approach to instruction that allows schools to take advantage of resources and appropriate decision-making opportunities to create meaningful, high-level, and creative opportunities for students to establish their individual strengths and talents (Renzulli & Pets, 2002).

*Student Learning Target (SLT)* is formulated at the beginning of each school year. LDOE (2021) explains that these SLTs are used by teachers to set goals for their students and to establish a vision and framework for what students should know and be able to do by the end of the school year.

*Title I schools* are schools in which children from low-income families make up at least 40% of enrollment. According to the United States Department of Education (2020), these schools also receive federal funding.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Differentiated instruction is considered a key component of academic success in educational settings (Weber et al., 2013). This expectation has led researchers to study differentiated instruction to determine whether or not it positively impacts a student's academic performance in core subject areas. Educators have long strived to meet the needs of every student while struggling to find effective ways to do so in educational environments that are becoming increasingly divergent (Kronberg & York-Barr, 1997). According to Tomlinson (2017), one of the most important things to remember about differentiated instruction is to be proactive. The teacher recognizes students' varied readiness levels in a differentiated classroom and is trained and supported sufficiently to plan learning opportunities and tasks accordingly (Tomlinson, 2017).

According to Washburne (1953), differentiated instruction dates back to 1889. Washburne (1953) further maintained that before the creation of new instructional techniques, teachers were tasked with the same challenge of implementing instruction that met the needs of all students. He further indicated that educators have long struggled with the varied needs of students and how to address and adapt to student differences. Teachers were also tasked with finding creative methods to meet these needs. Educators attempted this through various means including the project model and ability groups (Washburne, 1953). The project model suggested that there should be no fixed

curriculum constraints or textbooks in a classroom, and teachers should be able to provide projects and activities for the instruction of their students. Students were either categorized as slow learners, fast learners, or enriched learners in ability grouping. Although differentiated instruction dates back to 1889 (Washburne, 1953), Tomlinson (2001) introduced differentiated instruction to educators as a theory that varied the delivery of information to students through different presentations and assessments designed to meet students' identified needs.

This literature review focused on the benefits of effective differentiated instruction, emphasizing what differentiated instruction may look like in an elementary school setting. The purpose of this literature review was to examine previous case studies and research conducted regarding the different types of differentiated instruction, teacher needs, and administrative perceptions.

Finally, Pozas et al. (2020) have identified six categories related to the taxonomy of differentiated instruction. These categories provide advice and a framework for teachers and school leaders to design and implement differentiated instruction. These six categories are tiered assignments, the intentional composition of student groups, tutoring systems, staggered non-verbal learning aids, mastery learning and monitoring student progress, and open autonomy (Pozas et al., 2020).

The first named category was tiered assignments. According to Pozas et al. (2020), tiered assignments include both qualitative and quantitative tasks. These tasks are tiered according to the level of complexity, the outcome, the product, and the process. The second category named was the intentional composition of student groups. Groups should be created based on the students' performance, readiness, and interests within the

groups (Pozas et al., 2020). Tutoring systems was the third defined category. In this category, students with high ability levels assume the role of teacher assistants and tutor low ability students (Pozas et al., 2020). The fourth category, staggered non-verbal learning aids, involves scaffolding supports that are offered to students. These aids contain the minimal information needed for students to overcome the challenge. If the student struggles with the task, then a second aid is provided. This process continues until the student is successful (Pozas et al., 2020).

Mastery learning and the monitoring of student progress was the fifth category described by Pozas et al. (2020). In this category, all instructional practices ensure that students achieve at least at the minimum standards (Pozas et al., 2020). Mastery towards the standard is constantly monitored during this category. The sixth and final category was open autonomy. Open autonomy allows students to be responsible for their learning. Students are given the autonomy to decide the materials that they wish to work on. Finally, Pozas et al. (2020) stated that all categories do not have to be implemented simultaneously, but factors should be considered to determine what practice to use and when to use it.

### **Teacher Resistance to Differentiated Instruction**

The demand for teachers to meet the needs of a diverse group of students has become increasingly critical over the past several decades. Research shows that teacher effectiveness lies firmly in the role of the teacher in delivering content to students in ways that they understand (Stronge et al., 2007). However, according to Wormeli (2005) and King-Shaver (2008), many teachers and administrators think negatively about differentiated instruction. According to Margolis and Nagel (2006), teachers are often



reluctant to implement new practices based on past experiences with failed administrative support during other implementation attempts. Some teachers also avoid implementing differentiation because they do not truly understand their responsibilities (Margolis & Nagel, 2006). Further, in a study published by *Educational Leadership*, many teachers misunderstand differentiated instruction as a strategy that “must-have” this or “must-have” that and, therefore, give up on the process (Westman, 2021). However, Westman (2021) reiterates that differentiated instruction simply means that there is an action taken that focuses on the needs of students, both academically and socially.

According to a report by the Fordham Institute (2014),

83 percent of teachers in the U.S. reported that differentiation is “somewhat” or “very” difficult to implement and to find resources and to plan ways to differentiate in classrooms that are often filled to the brim with students is just plain hard. (para. 2)

Studies also revealed the need for explicit teacher training on differentiation to build capacity for the concept and full implementation. According to Strickland (2009), differentiation only occurs and is sustained when support is at the school and district levels. Strickland (2009) also stressed the importance of professional development opportunities focused on differentiated practices.

Further, VanTassel-Baska (2012), reminds us that “it is only through the continued support of colleagues and supervisors that teachers will be able to pursue the goal of a differentiated classroom. Disconnected, isolated professional development will not support teachers’ implementation of differentiation” (p. 16). Leithwood et al. (2020) explicitly tell us that the effective implementation of differentiated instruction is directly

impacted by solid leadership. According to Leithwood et al. (2020), school leaders are ultimately responsible for providing support to teachers through mentors and coaches and aligning professional development opportunities to meet the needs of teachers.

Educator mindset is also a critical factor in how often differentiation occurs (Pozas et al., 2020). Additionally, educators with growth-centered mindsets about student learning and development willingly accept differentiated instruction and adjust their instruction to students' different interests, readiness levels, and learning profiles, as opposed to teachers who hold fixed mindsets (Gheysens et al., 2020). Finally, Kapusnick and Hauslein (2001) learned that teachers who had trouble implementing differentiated instruction often abandoned the approach because teachers must be comfortable with the framework for differentiation and confident in their abilities to manage the individual processes, content, and products of students. Overall, teachers report two significant roadblocks with the implementation of differentiation: lack of time, and insufficient resources or support (Kapusnick & Hauslein, 2001).

Through the literature review, two key methods of differentiated leadership were noted on several occasions and through a variety of research studies. Those leadership methods were the Schoolwide Enrichment Model-Reading (SEM-R) (Renzulli & Pets, 2002) and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). Both will be described in detail to understand the use and their implementation.

### **Schoolwide Enrichment Model-Reading (SEM-R)**

A differentiated or individualized instruction model is SEM-R. The SEM-R is a widely used instrument and is a three-phase approach originally derived from Renzulli's enrichment triad model and has been studied for over 30 years, emphasizing its

effectiveness (Reis et al., 2007). According to Reis et al. (2018), SEM-R's three phases included focusing on exposing students to books, incorporating differentiated instruction through specific reading strategies, and allowing students to self-select activities to enhance their learning.

The SEM-R suggests educators find ways to make school more engaging, inviting, and fun. It is a method that would focus on the full academic development of a student based on his/her individual needs. The SEM-R is defined as an approach to instruction that allows schools to take advantage of resources and appropriate decision-making opportunities to create meaningful, high-level, and creative opportunities for students to establish their strengths and talents (Renzulli & Pets, 2002).

Reis et al. (2018) stated that the goal of the SEM-R is to increase student reading fluency, comprehension, enjoyment, and self-regulation in those students who are at the most significant risk of developing reading deficits and in those who could become illiterate. The SEM-R is designed to meet the needs of all students and focuses on them as individual learners. This is important because the needs of all students are not considered when differentiated instruction is not utilized. After all, the focus is generally on those students who are struggling to perform rather than meeting the needs of all students (Firmender et al., 2012).

The SEM-R stresses the importance of first identifying the various learning styles of students and then determining where they are academically. After these two things are determined, it is then that materials and interventions are identified (Servilio, 2009). Researchers also expressed the importance of developing small groups using the SEM-R where students' needs are tailored and maximum results are achieved (Tobin & McInnes,

2008). Finally, Reis et al. (2021) reported that the SEM-R approach has effectively enriched pedagogy and increased student achievement in reading for almost a decade.

### **Response to Intervention (RTI)**

Another model of differentiated instruction is Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI groups are one of the most common ways that teachers attempt to meet the needs of their students. According to researchers, RTI groups are scaffolded instruction segments geared to specifically target and meet students' needs based on their current levels of achievement and their specific learning styles (Jones et al., 2012). The International Reading Association's Commission reported that the purposes of RTI instruction are to provide systematic assessments of student performances, opportunities to engage in differentiated instruction and provide high-quality professional development to teachers (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009).

RTI is a multi-tiered literacy intervention model that focuses on students where early literacy skills are identified as a weakness. Tier 1 of RTI includes a core reading program grounded in proven research, assessments and instructional needs tailored to students identified as high risk, and ongoing professional development and guidance that leaders can provide for teachers in developing tools to differentiate instruction for these students. Tier 2 RTI instruction supplements Tier 1 methods. Tier 2 involves classroom teachers, specialists, and even paraprofessionals who provide small group reading interventions to students with frequent feedback. Tier 2 interventions generally occur 3 to 5 days per week. Further, students who do not respond to Tiers 1 or 2 are then placed in Tier 3 interventions, which is an intervention that occurs daily for up to 1 hour (Otaiba et al., 2011).

## **Differentiated Instruction in Leadership Practice**

### **Qualitative Case Studies and Differentiated Instruction**

Weber et al. (2013) conducted a study of students in a private school. This group of students was selected because they performed above their grade level expectations. This study also focused on pushing students beyond their grade levels using differentiated instruction techniques. Weber et al. (2013) focused on answering three specific leadership questions: (a) What resources and support do teachers need to implement differentiated instruction effectively?, (b) How should a school develop a clear philosophy about differentiation?, and (c) What factors will support or deter differentiation and its implementation? Before the research began, it was essential for the researchers to determine the level of understanding among faculty regarding differentiated instruction. This was done by administering Heacox's Teacher Inventory on Differentiation Practices and Strategies (Heacox, 2009). By administering this test first, researchers could better understand faculty understanding of differentiated instruction and their specific need areas.

Through their case study, Weber et al. (2013) revealed at least one misconception due to the administered teacher inventory. While evaluating the inventory results, the researchers discovered that most teachers did not clearly understand the need for administering a pre-assessment to their students to determine the type of instruction that should be utilized. By conducting a pre-assessment, the authors maintained that information would be gained on students' prior knowledge for a given topic, and instruction could then be tailored accordingly. Weber et al. (2013) also noted that the first

course of action was to determine the pre-assessment tool and noted that differentiated instruction could not exist without one.

The pre-assessment was then administered with classroom observations to follow (Weber et al., 2013). Further, Weber et al. (2013) found that teachers lacked confidence and an understanding of implementing differentiated instruction and, therefore, avoided it. These researchers also found that these teachers lacked an understanding of the long-term commitment required of themselves, administrators, and a complete buy-in by all persons involved. The final component of this case study was the actual observation of classroom instruction. It was essential to the researchers that the teachers in the observed classrooms understood that they were there for assisting, modeling, and as a tool for helping to administer and understand differentiated instruction. While in the classroom, they discovered that differentiated instruction did not exist. There was a clear need for leadership assistance and an opportunity for professional development seminars to assist teachers in creating classroom environments where explicit differentiated instruction lived.

Through their case study research, Weber et al. (2013) found that the teachers of this particular school did not clearly understand differentiated instruction and how it should be implemented. These researchers thought it was critical to seek the leadership direction and advice of an expert to assist in leading this school in deepening their teachers' levels of understanding of differentiated instruction. Further, they found that those involved in their research would need to clearly understand the long-term commitment involved in leading differentiated instruction if they expected to succeed in this area. Additionally, Weber et al. (2013) solicited the support of a local university that

could provide the school with the administrative expertise and direction desperately needed to assist in this critical area. As a result of the university support, trust was created with the experts, and a safe dialogue was established. These two actions allowed for establishing a designated time to meet with divisions, teams, and departments to allow for total commitment to implementing differentiated instruction (Weber et al., 2013). Similar to Weber et al. (2013), Kronberg and York-Barr (1997) agreed that the first step to implementing and guiding differentiated instruction was understanding that differentiated instruction involves a great deal of commitment by teachers and active leadership support from their administrators.

In another study conducted by Reis et al. (2018), 11 school sites, consisting of both elementary and middle school sites that were geographically diverse were selected for the study. According to Reis et al. (2018), the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the SEM-R in 11 elementary and middle schools across the country in which local teachers or reading coaches provided support for colleagues implementing this differentiated reading enrichment approach. Further, the study examined the implementation led by school-level coaches rather than implementation by research teams (Reis et al., 2018). The following research questions guided this study of leadership practices:

- (1) What elements characterize SEM-R implementation and treatment fidelity in classrooms for which support is provided through local professional development and coaching?
- (2) What are teachers' attitudes toward the implementation of SEM-R? What has worked best and what has been most challenging? and

(3) How have teachers and students changed their reading practices while using SEM-R?” (Reis et al., 2018, p. 67)

Findings from this study indicated that teachers had positive attitudes about implementing SEM-R. Teachers also acknowledged the challenges and concerns related to this new way of teaching reading that required the most support from their administrators. In addition, teachers adjusted to new administrative support that altered two things: the ways they taught reading and the way students changed as they read while using SEM-R. Through this procedural change, 90% of teachers implemented the SEM-R with fidelity. As a result, students in all 11 schools reported an increase in their reading enjoyment (Reis et al., 2018).

### **Quantitative Research and Differentiated Instruction**

Reis et al. (2007) investigated the outcomes of an enriched reading program on a group of third through sixth grade students. The study incorporated a cluster-randomized assignment to groups. Thirty-seven classrooms received treatment conditions while 33 received control conditions.

In this study, one of the most critical questions that Reis et al. (2007) attempted to answer was whether or not the implementation of an enriched reading program affected student performance on a state achievement reading fluency test. Students were randomly placed in two different experimental groups. The first group of students received additional reading interventions from certified teachers. The other group did not receive these same interventions. The authors used SEM-R (Renzulli & Pets, 2002) as their intervention method. The SEM-R intervention started in all five schools within the first 2 weeks of the fall academic school year and continued for 5 months. All participating



schools had a 2-hour block each day dedicated strictly to reading and language arts instruction.

The teachers randomly selected to participate in the treatment group spent 1-hour teaching language arts using their mandated curriculum. In the other hour, these teachers used SEM-R methods, where instructional methods were tailored to the needs of students. Teachers could replace their whole group instruction and primary basal instruction with individualized instruction in the SEM-R group. Teachers were randomly selected and placed in the control group to continue providing education for 2-hours using the mandated curriculum across all grade levels (Reis et al., 2007).

To determine the effects of implementing differentiated instruction in these school settings, several instruments were used. First, Reis et al. (2007) administered the Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) to assess reading fluency. This test was used to measure the speed, accuracy, and efficiency to which the students read a specific text. A pretest and posttest were administered. Students were administered the Iowa Test of Basic Skills ITBS (1990) to measure reading comprehension. This test measured student achievement in 15 skill areas, emphasizing how students derived meaning from what they read. After students read a passage, four to seven multiple-choice questions were asked, requiring students to recall facts, generalize, and draw inferences.

Finally, teachers in both the treatment and control groups completed the Teaching and Reading: Attitudes and Practices Survey (TRAPS) (Reis et al., 2007) at the beginning and end of the study. This instrument assessed the relationship between a school site's engagement in reading practices and its relation to improved classroom practices. The data collected from TRAPS was used to determine the degree to which the control group

administrators and the treatment group teachers were similar in their attitudes and experiences. The TRAPS instrument also gathered demographic details from administrators and teachers related to gender, years of experience, and highest degree obtained. Observations of both the treatment group practices and control group practices were also conducted at least two times per month. The researchers found a significant difference between the practices and control groups in fluency and attitudes towards reading. The findings also revealed that changes involving the treatment group generally outperformed regarding the lack of changes to the control group on post-test measuring reading fluency, reading comprehension, and attitudes towards reading (Reis et al., 2007).

Reis et al. (2007) also found statistically significant mean differences in post-intervention oral reading fluency scores that favored the SEM-R intervention group. According to Reis et al. (2007), the results of their study demonstrated a significantly higher score in reading fluency and a more positive attitude towards reading in those students who participated in SEM-R. Further, they suggested that an enriched, interest-based reading opportunity could help in the declining attitudes of students towards reading (Reis et al., 2007).

Beecher and Sweeny (2008) studied a group of third through fifth grade students to evaluate the efficacy of a differentiated reading program. The researchers assessed data from an 8-year program in an elementary school setting in this study. The classrooms in the study were from a diverse population with limited background knowledge and minimal expressive language skills. The data and information collected for this study were obtained from administrative meeting agendas, notes about the administration of professional development, and test score data from state standardized tests.

According to Beecher and Sweeny (2008), a schoolwide enrichment team was responsible for collecting and analyzing the collected data. The enrichment team's primary focus was to develop enriched leadership practices. This team also focused on providing appropriate and well-developed staff-development training to enhance understanding of differentiated instruction and techniques among administrators and teachers. This team was also responsible for ensuring that differentiation of instruction became the focus of administrative efforts and that challenging and engaging instruction was embedded in all leadership practices.

Beecher and Sweeny (2008) also reported the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli & Pets, 2002) was used as a tool to assist teachers in infusing enrichment activities into their daily activities and curriculum. According to the researchers, this model is composed of three different types of instructional-leadership enrichment: experiences and activities that expose classrooms to a variety of topics that are not generally covered, instructional methods that promote creative thinking and learning how to learn, and engaging instructional activities where students engage in activities as practicing professionals.

Beecher and Sweeny (2008) reported that instructional progress was measured daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly over the 8 years to collect data. Rubrics were also used to measure classroom results. Beecher and Sweeny (2008) found a significant difference in academic achievement scores when differentiated instruction was utilized. Further, the study showed improvement in all subject areas and proficiency levels. Finally, the study reflected a decrease in the gaps between schoolwide achievements from

various socioeconomic statuses when school administrators and teachers implemented differentiated instruction.

Gettinger and Stoiber (2012) studied the effects of differentiated instruction in a group of preschool students. The study included 300 students enrolled in 15 Head Start programs. Head Start programs considered for this study serve over 1,500 low-income and primarily African American families living in large urban areas of the midwest. In this study, a panel was used to determine the effects of the positive intervention of instructional leadership. Classrooms are arranged into various activity centers geared to smaller and more individualized instructional practices. The administrators and teachers from these classrooms participated in ongoing professional development seminars to enhance their understanding of differentiated instruction (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a significant difference in academic achievement between at-risk preschoolers who received RTI and those who did not receive the structured intervention. A key component of this study was pre-test, post-test, and progress monitoring to determine student progress from beginning to end. These preschool students' reading comprehension and fluency growth rates were collected from four different data assessment tools: Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III, Get Ready to Read, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening-Prekindergarten, and Story and Print Concepts Task. A second component of the study was to factor in the professional development of teachers in conjunction with the services that students received (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2012). Gettinger and Stoiber (2012) hypothesized that students would show significant gains in academic performance when provided with intensive

RTI instruction. The researchers were correct in their hypothesis as students showed substantial gains in oral language, reading comprehension, and fluency.

Another example of the positive effects of differentiated instruction was a study conducted on a group of first-grade students. Connor et al. (2010) studied student achievement effects when individualized instruction was implemented using a cluster randomized control design. The researchers sought to answer the following research questions: (a) Do teachers in the individualized self-regulated instruction (ISI) groups demonstrate stronger classroom management skills where more time is spent in instruction and small group settings with fewer disruptions? and (b) What is the effect of ISI intervention on student growth and self-regulation? The sample size of this study included 40 teachers and 445 first grade students from 10 different schools.

Students placed in the treatment group received intense individualized instruction through self-regulation (Connor et al., 2010). Connor et al. (2010) hypothesized that instruction that is structured to the students' learning styles would reflect academic gains and promote students' self-regulation. The researchers further hypothesized that teaching, leadership planning, and organizing independent and small group instruction would increase student performance. Data were collected through classroom observations and subsequent coding. Teachers also used Assessment-to-Instruction (A2i) software to plan and measure individualized instruction.

The data collected resulted in the validation of their hypothesis. Connor et al. (2010) found that students in classrooms where their teachers implemented ISI and used A2i to a greater extent yielded more significant gains in self-regulation than students who did not receive these same interventions and instructional methods.

Otaiba et al. (2011) conducted a cluster-randomized control field study on a group of kindergarten students. The purpose of their research was to study the extent to which a group of kindergarten teachers could tailor reading instruction for their students in ways that were differentiated based on the students' needs and ongoing assessments. The study focused on differentiated instruction with a group of very young students. The researchers focused on whether or not the use of differentiated instruction positively influenced kindergarten reading instruction. They determined the following two research questions to be appropriate for the study: (a) Is there variability in the implementation of literacy instruction and individualized instruction within an ISI-K classroom? and (b) Would students in the treatment classroom demonstrate more substantial reading outcomes than students in the control group?

The study included 14 schools, 305 students, and 14 teachers. According to Otaiba et al. (2011), their participants were from schools that were both economically and ethnically diverse. Six of the participating schools were Title I schools, and 4.5% of students were identified as limited English proficient. Data sources included: (a) parent surveys, (b) individually administered child assessments of a predetermined set of skills, and (c) audio and video recordings of classroom interactions and teacher-led instruction (Otaiba et al., 2011). They concluded that differentiated instruction was vital to the success of all students, no matter how young. Finally, hierarchical multivariate linear modeling revealed that students who received individualized instruction outperformed those who did not receive the same individualized instruction (Otaiba et al., 2011). The correlations among the fidelity measures were solid and significant.

## **School Administrators and Instructional Leadership**

Based upon these studies, differentiated instruction is successful in enhancing student performance. It cannot succeed without advocacy and support from school leadership. School administrators are responsible to all stakeholders for leading and guiding instructional implementations within their schools (Brolund, 2016). When school administrators accept their role as the instructional leader, teachers respond, and the outcome of student achievement is positive (Rigby, 2013). Brolund (2016) also acknowledged that teachers need a leader who is motivating and knowledgeable. Additionally, school administrators who are instructional leaders seek ways to support their teachers to fully implement new strategies, techniques, and practices (Salo et al., 2015). These leaders also work to ensure that teachers receive the proper coaching, mentoring, and professional development to ensure their teachers are adequately prepared to deliver instruction effectively and in a way that meets the needs of each student (Salo et al., 2015). Finally, instructional leadership provides support for teachers' core work. When teachers and their instructional practice are supported by their principal and peers, it will build their confidence and capacities to increase student achievement (Boyd et al., 2011).

The expectation of school administrators to be instructional leaders on their campuses brings its own set of challenges (Salo et al., 2015). According to Salo et al. (2015), school leaders report very little time to focus on instructional tasks due to their additional responsibilities associated with leading their schools. Principals need time in their schedules to practice and study instructional leadership. Additionally, some leaders lack the knowledge and capacity to lead teachers' in their practice (Salo et al., 2015).

A study completed by researchers Taufik and Istiarsono (2020) focused on the challenges of school leaders to improve learning systems. Attention was explicitly given to the challenges and obstacles that school leaders experience (Taufik & Istiarsono, 2020). Taufik and Istiarsono (2020) completed a qualitative case study with eight participants, all school leaders. In this research, participants were asked one question: “How do you overcome the challenges in developing a learning system in your school?” (p. 603). The results of this study revealed the six specific challenges that participants identified: (a) poor management of school organizations, (b) inharmonious relations between school leaders and their staff/teachers, (c) lack of education supporting facilities, (d) leaders who lack mastery of their job duties, (e) leaders who experience personal problems that carry over in formal assignments, and (f) lack of a harmonious relationship between leaders and policymakers (Taufik & Istiarsono, 2020).

Taufik and Istiarsono (2020) concluded that leadership is vital to the development of learning systems. School leaders are essentially the policymakers of their schools. Poor leadership within the learning system will impact student achievement (Taufik & Istiarsono, 2020). Further, Taufik and Istiarsono (2020) recognized the role of the teacher in developing the learning system in schools. According to these researchers, teachers are the closest partner to school leadership in managing the school and classroom. Finally, Taufik and Istiarsono (2020) concluded that it is the responsibility of both the school leader and the teacher to be knowledgeable in their teaching skills and practices to lead and impact the learning system positively.

Barrett and Breyer (2014) conducted a study where the primary focus was to determine how principals influence teacher implementation of new strategies and



promote greater student engagement through effective leadership. The questions at the heart of this research asked how school principals can retain relevance, instill passion, and provide effective leadership that motivates teachers through such challenging times, and how administrators can achieve a positive stable environment where teachers view principals as competent leaders and cooperative partners in the education process through modeling effective pedagogical strategies and tools (Barrett & Breyer, 2014). The research of Barrett and Breyer (2014) took place in an elementary school setting with an enrollment of 645 students from grades pre-K to fifth grade. The selected school employed 41 classroom teachers, 12 teacher assistants, 1 principal, 1 assistant principal, and 1 literacy coach. Further, the school served a diverse population of students, including 70% Caucasian, 14% African American, and 15% Hispanic (Barrett & Breyer, 2014). Additionally, 60% of the student population qualified for free or reduced lunch (Barrett & Breyer, 2014).

For this research, the principal and assistant principal agreed to implement active engagement strategies during faculty meetings over 6 weeks to model for teachers how to effectively implement engagement strategies in individual classrooms. The school leaders also implemented pedagogical training. Over the 6 weeks, data were collected by observing and documenting the frequency of implementation of the new strategies. An anonymous survey was administered and explicitly focused on how teachers valued activities, presentations, and perceptions of leadership. Because the survey was anonymous, it provided an opportunity for open discourse and perceptions by teachers. After the 6 weeks, data were collected and analyzed for emerging results (Barrett & Breyer, 2014).

As a result of their research, through teacher observations and survey results, a positive relationship through the use of modeling by administrators had a positive effect on teacher motivation and implementation of effective teaching strategies in the classroom. Through examining survey results and walk-through data, a conclusion was drawn that teachers need an opportunity to see teaching strategies effectively implemented by their school leaders. The researchers also concluded that a more substantial buy-in existed because teachers were given the opportunity to observe their school leaders implement strategies (Barrett & Breyer, 2014). One teacher's response noted that "it was a big help to see the different strategies being used and implemented because I am a visual learner, and I would never have been able to implement these strategies by just reading about them" (Barrett & Breyer, 2014, p. 7).

Additionally, and after examining all evidence from the data collected concluded that modeling effective teaching strategies during faculty meetings extended beyond professional development and seemed to be an essential aspect of retaining relevancy, boosting morale, and providing effective leadership that motivates teachers. Finally, the results of this study support the concept that effective leadership guides teaching and learning through the modeling of effective strategies and practices (Barrett & Breyer, 2014).

Goddard et al. (2019) completed a study that was twofold. First, instructional leadership influences teachers' use of differentiated instruction, and second, higher differentiated instruction levels positively predict student achievement. Data for this study were collected through teacher surveys from 95 high poverty schools in Michigan and from student data of 4,229 students from the state standardized test administered to

students (Goddard et al., 2019). According to Goddard et al. (2019), they first subjected participants to a 6-item scale assessing dimensions of teachers' reports of differentiated instruction to rigorous testing using confirmatory factor analysis. The researchers then examined the relationship between instructional leadership and differentiated instruction. Finally, Goddard et al. (2019) investigated how teachers' reports of differentiating instruction predicted differences among schools in student achievement.

Instructional leadership in this study was operationalized with 14 Likert-type items to which teachers responded. Further, to garner teachers' perspectives relative to their use of differentiated instruction, a survey was administered with 6 Likert-type items. The items were worded to ask teachers whether or not their schools engaged in specific practices, thus indicating the extent to which differentiated instruction existed. The questions were designed to assess principals' leadership, knowledge of and involvement in curriculum, assessment, instruction, flexibility, visibility, and culture (Goddard et al., 2019).

Goddard et al. (2019) hypothesized that instructional leadership would be a significant and positive predictor of schoolwide differentiated instruction. Their second hypothesis was that differentiated instruction would result in increased student achievement. According to Goddard et al. (2019), both hypotheses were confirmed. The researchers found that instructional leadership emerged as the strongest predictor of schoolwide differentiated instruction. Finally, Goddard et al. (2019) reported that their models show both statistically and substantively that leadership matters in predicting differentiated instruction throughout a school. Goddard et al. (2019) concluded that the study adds to evidence that school climates influence instructional practices that matter to

student learning. Most importantly, instructional leaders can support the challenging work that teachers engage in and thus indirectly impact student achievement (Goddard et al., 2019).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Theory of Multiple Intelligences**

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) is widely used across today's educational systems, not only for student learning, but also for administration and leadership practices. Gardner first proposed this theory in 1983 in his book, *Frames of Mind*, to understand how the mind works, not as a learning theory. Gardner's theory attests that all people think in different ways, which in turn guides our various behaviors; therefore, differentiated leadership in school settings addresses needs to accommodate various and fluctuating institutional needs. According to McClellan and Conti (2008), this application of MI explains how individualized leadership styles could be identified and subsequently used to facilitate specific school success.

Howard Gardner's Theory of MI originally included seven intelligences. An eighth intelligence was later added. These intelligences are: (a) linguistic, (b) logical-mathematical, (c) musical, (d) bodily-kinesthetic, (e) spatial, (f) interpersonal, (g) intrapersonal, and (h) naturalistic (Gardner, 1983). It is the linguistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal sections that most benefit leadership research because Gardner stressed that individuals possess various interactive strengths and weaknesses; therefore, understanding each person's thinking styles can be utilized to elicit the best possible scenario for team building and leading. Using MI as a guide, customized assessments would allow school administrators and teachers to make informed collective decisions

because understanding that strengths and challenges vary among people provides opportunities for educators to structure school settings in adaptive ways, leading to effective differentiated instruction. Gardner's theory of MI guides school leaders in understanding how each faculty member best performs, thus leading to an administrative ability to reach teachers effectively so that teachers can, in turn, reach students.

### **Organizational Change Theory**

Armenakis' Organizational Change Theory was used as the theoretical framework to examine resistance to change. This theory examines an individual's readiness for change in a three-phase process. According to Armenakis and Harris (2002), the first phase involves the organization members preparing for the change. The second phase is adoption. In this phase, the change is implemented. Institutionalization is the third and final phase. In this phase, efforts are made to substantiate the change to ensure complete adoption and internalization. With the introduction and implementation of any new idea, resistance can sometimes occur (Armenakis et al., 2007).

In an attempt to investigate and understand why change resistance occurs in an organization, Organizational Change Theory will be utilized. According to Armenakis et al. (2007), Organizational Change Theory provides a framework for understanding reactions to change. According to the authors, Organizational Change Theory comprises five essential change readiness sentiments. The five change readiness sentiments are identified as: (a) discrepancy, (b) appropriateness, (c) efficacy, (d) principle support, and (e) valence (Armenakis et al., 2007).

According to the researchers, the discrepancy is the first of the five sentiments. The discrepancy is used to identify the need for change. In other words, is change

completely necessary? The next sentiment identified was appropriateness.

Appropriateness is the belief that the change being implemented will address the discrepancy. Efficacy is recognized as the fifth sentiment. Efficacy is described as the confidence the organization has that its organization can effectively implement the change (Armenakis et al., 2007). The fourth sentiment is principle support. Armenakis et al. (2007) defined principle support as the belief that the organizational leaders are responsible for implementing the change, are motivating, and have the stamina needed to facilitate, encourage and support the shift until effective implementation occurs. The final sentiment is valence. Valence refers to the perceived personal benefit and the attractiveness of the outcome that one reasonably believes will result from embracing the change. The authors maintained that these five sentiments provide a valuable framework for coding interview responses to determine and measure an organization's resistance to change (Armenakis et al., 2007).

### **Summary**

School administrators and teachers are responsible for implementing effective instructional strategies to increase student achievement (Barrett & Breyer, 2014). School administrators must be equipped with the tools and knowledge to guide their teachers in appropriate and relevant instructional practices (Goddard et al., 2019).

Understanding Howard Gardner's Theory of MI makes it evident that everyone thinks in various ways (McClellan & Conti, 2008). According to McClellan and Conti (2008), this validates the need for understanding and implementing effective differentiated leadership techniques that will lead to customized and responsive approaches to student success. The qualitative and quantitative studies included in this

literature review provided valuable information and insight relative to the need for understanding and implementing differentiated leadership and instruction on school campuses.

The need to strengthen this implementation through leadership research exists because, while research does exist related to the successful use of differentiated instruction from a student's perspective, there is limited research on teacher perspectives that will lead to enhanced leadership of differentiated instruction. Viewing differentiated instruction through the focal point of a school administrator, research-based guidance is limited regarding the success of school administrators to ensure that their teachers understand the increasing need for customized, adaptive, and responsive educational practices. Ultimately, school administrators and teachers need to understand their role and responsibility in ensuring that recognizing student specifics and providing differentiation exists on their campuses (VanTassel-Baska, 2012). Additionally, school administrators must accept that they are the culture-building leaders of their campus and should support teachers through resources and professional development to ensure that customized and responsive instruction occurs (Leithwood et al., 2020).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative case study interviewed principals' and teachers' to reveal their perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction. The goal of this study is to promote and foster successful leadership of differentiated instruction in public schools. The study focused on the role of school administrators and teachers to ensure that differentiated instruction exists on their campuses by identifying potential roadblocks and challenges faced in implementing this practice. Attention was also given to why time and effort should be devoted to promoting and implementing a school environment of differentiated instruction. Qualitative data for this study were collected through interviews, surveys, and classroom observations to determine the perceptions and needs of today's classroom teachers and the challenges faced by school leaders. The study also addressed emerging themes through interviews with teachers, and interviews with school leaders, triangulated through classroom observations. Finally, the study addressed what teachers need from their administrators to implement differentiated instruction effectively.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

In recent years, studies have focused on studying the effects of differentiated instruction on a student's academic performance. To better understand the term and use



of differentiated instruction, Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) defined differentiated instruction as instruction that allows students the same access to curriculum but uses a variety of tasks and methods of instruction based on individual learning styles. According to Connor et al. (2010), differentiated instruction, specifically through small group instruction, encompasses most teaching areas and creates a positive, productive, and one of the most effective learning environment possible for students.

Although teachers and administrators may receive training on the use of differentiated instruction, they are faced with both positive and negative aspects when tasked with leadership and implementation of the practice (Dee, 2011). Because of these considerations, differentiated instruction is often administered and led inconsistently, infrequently, and incorrectly. This study also offers a glimpse into the minds of educators who do and do not use differentiated instruction and also provides information to school leaders on the needs of current and prospective teachers. An increased leadership investment in understanding the needs of both school administrators and teachers when implementing differentiated instruction will result in increased understanding of this instructional strategy resulting in the increased academic success of schools through differentiated instruction.

### **Research Questions**

Teacher and school principal perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction were studied to inform school administrators of teacher strengths and challenges. Further, the study investigated the assistance teachers need from their school leaders to customize overall student success by implementing differentiated instruction effectively. Additionally, the study provides information related

to the roadblocks and challenges school leaders face in ensuring their campuses are rich in the use of responsive, differentiated instruction. The research questions to be examined are:

1. What is the level of understanding of differentiated instruction by today's classroom teachers?
2. What support and resources do teachers need to assist them in implementing differentiated instruction on a consistent basis?
3. What challenges do school leaders face when implementing and encouraging the use of differentiated instruction on their campuses?
4. What makes teachers and school leaders reluctant to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques and tools?
5. What can school leaders do to affect and encourage change?

### **Research Design**

This qualitative case study examined teacher and principal perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction. The study also examined the challenges faced by administrators and educational leaders when attempting to ensure that differentiated instruction occurs on their campuses. This case study explored the experiences and perceptions of school principals and classroom teachers and the challenges faced by educational leaders. According to Yin (2009), the benefit of a case study is that it allows the researcher to obtain detailed information in a real-life situation. Yin (2009) maintained that case study research is a method frequently used when other methods are not appropriate. Further, according to Stake (1995),

During observation, the qualitative case study researcher keeps a good record of events to provide a relatively incontestable description for further analysis and ultimate reporting. He or she lets the occasion tell its story, the situation, the problem, resolution or irresolution of the problem. (p. 62)

Finally, Merriam (2009) describes a single case study as one that provides a rich, thick, description of a phenomenon under study. A case study provides as many variables as possible to portray an interaction and to give an exact account of what is learned and observed (Merriam, 2009). Although several research methods were considered for this study, a case study design was selected as being the most appropriate.

### **Participants**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), purposive sampling occurs when participants are chosen based on a specific set of criteria. Because this study required that participants be from a specific educational population fitting a particular set of standards, purposive sampling was most appropriate. To protect the identity of the participants, each was given a pseudonym for identity reference.

Participants were selected from three elementary schools in a specified parish of northwest Louisiana. Three school site principals and eight classroom teachers were selected for the purpose of this study. After the three schools were selected, teachers within those three schools were included if they had a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience and were rated as effective or highly effective on the Compass evaluation instrument (LDOE, 2021). Principals were included in the study *ex officio* because they were assigned to the three schools selected.

Table 1 includes pseudonyms and biographical information for the 11 participants.

**Table 1**

*Participants*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Years of Experience</u>
Anna	Teacher	20+
Diann	Teacher	6
Heather	Teacher	12
Jessica	Teacher	13
Josh	Teacher	8
Rhea	Teacher	3
Samantha	Teacher	16
Sarah	Teacher	3
Janice	Principal	17
Tonia	Principal	11
Vicki	Principal	20+

### **Data Collection Procedures**

One method of data collection used was semi-structured interviews with the teachers and their school leaders. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain that interviews are used to gather descriptive data from the subjects in their own words. This allows the researcher to obtain the participant's viewpoint on a particular subject or topic. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) also explain that semi-structured interviews ask the same general questions to each participant. This type of questioning is most appropriate because it offers a glimpse into the participant's experiences and perceptions. When these teachers and school-site leaders are asked the same general questions, a comparison of responses can be compared, and themes will emerge.

First, the researcher gained approval from the Human Use Committee at Louisiana Tech University. Because participants were sought from elementary schools within a specified school district, the next step was to contact the district's administrative offices for permission to enter the school sites. Initial communication with classroom teachers and school principals who participated in this study was through an email message outlining the study's purpose, nature, and details. The participants verified their understanding of the study and willingness to participate by signing informed consent forms (Appendix I). Participants also signed that they understood they would be deidentified and that withdrawal from participating in the study could occur at any time without penalty.

All participants in this study were interviewed using the questions identified in Chapter 3. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed using NoNotes. Data collected from this survey were collected and analyzed using Qualtrics data analysis software. Before using the inventory instrument created by Diane Heacox (2009), permission was granted by the publisher and author (Appendix E). Classroom observation data were collected using the Differentiated Classroom Observation form (Appendix J) provided to all educators by the National Staff Development Council. Permission is not required for use. Through observation field notes, survey results, and transcripts of the interviews, this research process looked at varying categories that have emerged as they pertain to evidence, knowledge, perceptions, and challenges experienced by school principals and teachers relating to sustainable leadership of differentiated instruction.

The interviews began with “small talk” to build rapport with the participants. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), this allows the researcher to develop common ground with the participant, which creates a deeper conversation later in the interview. The principals and teachers participating were informed of the purpose and nature of the study. These interviews with participants were entirely voluntary. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for a detailed account of question responses. Interviews were conducted on an individual and confidential basis. Subsequent interviews were conducted to gain clarity and additional information based on the participant’s initial responses. There was no predetermined number of interviews. Discussions evolved and continued as necessary for complete transparency and understanding.

A second data collection method, which also provided for triangulation, was observation. According to Vernon-Dotson (2013), observations provide objective data and clearly indicate whether or not what a teacher says is being done is actually occurring. Therefore, classroom observations were appropriate to triangulate interviews in this study. No predetermined number of observations were determined but instead guided by the outcome of the interviews. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that a minimum of two observations were completed for each teacher participant. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested that observations be limited to 1 hour or less; therefore, observations for this study were limited to 1 hour or less. The researcher refrained from conversations with teachers during classroom observations and only made notes and gathered information pertaining to the implementation and practice of differentiated instruction. As the researcher, field notes were used to collect explicit

information. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that field notes provide a written account of what is observed, heard, and experienced during the observation.

The Differentiated Classroom Observation form (Appendix J) was used during classroom observations to identify the level of differentiated instruction practiced in the classroom as realistically compared to information gathered during principal and teacher interviews. To guide the triangulation process, the observation instrument focused on several specific criteria, including look-for guidance such as: lessons and tasks are adjusted based on the range of student needs, there is evidence of proactive planning for differing student needs, student readiness is observed, there is evidence of differentiated delivery of content, the teacher uses best practices, and instructional strategies are appropriate and aligned to the lesson objectives and standards. In terms of the classroom environment, teacher behavior, and student engagement, the instrument offers questions for guiding the observation: What does the classroom look/feel like?, How are teachers and students interacting with one another?, What are the expectations for growth and success?, Is there a level of mutual respect?, Does the classroom feel fair and safe?, Do students exhibit on-task behavior while working alone?, and Do students work effectively in small groups?

The third data collection method was the administration of Heacox's Teacher Inventory on Differentiation Practices and Strategies (Appendix D) to participants to gather demographic information and understand the teachers' actual experiences with differentiated instruction as compared to the experience they discussed during interviews. This inventory included 24 questions and used a Likert scale to measure the responses of teachers in areas of differentiated instruction in terms of (a) curriculum, (b) instructional

planning, (c) flexible instruction, and (d) teacher beliefs. The survey was administered after the interviews and observations were completed. Responses were collected and analyzed using Qualtrics data analysis software for descriptive statistics.

### **Role of the Researcher**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research involves the researcher interacting with subjects naturally and unobtrusively. This study involved the researcher engaging in interviews with school principals and teachers, and classroom observations. All the interviews and observations were intentionally structured by the researcher to be natural and comfortable to the participants in order to achieve the goals of being natural and unobtrusive as established by Bogdan and Biklen.

The researcher established relationships with the participants where trust was created and interviews flowed freely. It was made clear to the participants that the researcher had no decisive authority and that their positions would not be jeopardized in any way as a result of their willingness to participate in the study.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

A qualitative study encompasses multiple steps for data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). With that in mind, while reading through the collected data, this research gave attention to repeated words, phrases, patterns of behavior, and ways of thinking (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The process of identifying thinking patterns was semi-structured according to Gardner's Theory of MI as discussed in Chapter 2. After identifying these four items, the data analysis process selected words or phrases that were



used to develop a coding system. Data were then sorted into codes according to repeatable themes that emerged.

Process coding, values coding, and in vivo coding were utilized to discern emerging themes within the study. Data collected received several views, beginning in the first cycle with process coding.

Process coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies (Saldana, 2009) and is utilized to identify data actions. Participant statements were given a process code tagged with a verb ending in “ing.” These process codes were then placed on a self-generated Excel spreadsheet to compare themes that emerged from all data sources. These process codes included but were not limited to: challenging, supporting, accommodating, observing, and considering.

The second cycle of coding was in vivo coding. In vivo coding has also been labeled “literal” or “verbatim” coding (Saldana, 2009). These codes referred to a specific word or phrase heard during the interview and observation phases and allowed for explicit representations and a detailed account of what was seen and heard.

The third and final cycle of coding was values coding. Values coding is used in qualitative studies and case studies to explore the participants’ values, beliefs, attitudes, and lived experiences (Saldana, 2009). Further, value codes signify the importance one gives to another person, thing, or idea.

When the three-cycle coding process was completed, keywords were identified, and a search for all keyword instances were conducted on all data sources. Each time the specified keywords or phrases were found, they were documented to identify emerging

themes. After the similarities and emerging themes were identified, a narrative account of the findings was constructed based on those themes.

These data collections and coding methods resulting from the interviews helped provide an organized and descriptive account of the classroom teacher and school principal perceptions relating to differentiated instruction. The data gathered from administrator and teacher interviews were triangulated through classroom observations to verify and substantiate the themes identified during the interviews.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to (1) investigate teacher perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction; (2) determine the role school leaders play in ensuring that successful differentiated instruction exists on their campuses; and (3) identify the challenges that school leaders and teachers face with implementing differentiated instruction. Qualitative data for this study were collected through interviews, surveys, and classroom observations. Chapter 4 provides the results of the qualitative case study, categorized by the following sections: research questions, presentation of results, emerging themes, and connecting the themes and research questions. The emergent themes included basic understanding of differentiated instruction, teacher support, and training, planning for diverse learners, identifying the learning targets, and the challenges faced when implementing differentiated instruction. In order to guide the research for this study, five research questions were examined.

#### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of understanding of differentiated instruction by today's classroom teachers?

2. What support and resources do teachers need to assist them in implementing differentiated instruction on a consistent basis?
3. What challenges do school leaders face when implementing and encouraging the use of differentiated instruction on their campuses?
4. What makes teachers and school leaders reluctant to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques and tools?
5. What can school leaders do to affect and encourage change?

## **Presentation of Results**

### **Emergent Themes**

#### ***Theme 1: Basic Definition of Differentiated Instruction Exists***

One of the first themes to emerge was that both school principals and teachers had discovered a basic definition of differentiated instruction. Through the coding of interviews and the review of survey data, it was clear that the participants knew a “textbook definition” of differentiated instruction. For example, in her interview, Heather defined differentiated instruction as “considering student readiness, preferences, and interests, and modifying instruction accordingly.” Anna stated in her interview, “differentiating instruction means that you are providing the opportunity for students to learn in a way that suits their needs.” Additionally, Rhea, a novice teacher described differentiation as “providing students access to grade level curricula but using different strategies to support students and their needs. Further, Samantha stated in her interview: “Differentiated instruction means that you provide all students access to the same content and curriculum but offer different support to struggling students.”

The definitions expressed by the participants during their interviews suggest that they do have basic, working definitions of differentiated instruction. These definitions appear to be simply that. Although the participants could provide well-rehearsed explanations, their clear understandings of differentiation seemed to be limited. This was evident through the classroom observations as well as through the survey results.

Josh and Jessica specifically mentioned understanding the coined term, differentiated instruction, but said they only understand it fairly well and have a lot of room to grow. During her interview, Samantha described her limited knowledge of differentiated instruction and indicated that she might be more effective if given the opportunity for more specialized training through mentor teacher training focused on supporting diverse learners. Samantha also reported in her interview:

I have probably had the opportunity to engage in more training than most. I feel confident that my experiences through mentor teacher training have allowed me to understand better how to support my students based on where they are struggling. However, just because I may understand it better does not mean that I implement it effectively. I have work to do in this area.

Anna, who has been in education for over 20 years, reported in her interview that differentiated instruction has been around for a very long time and that it is not something new. In her opinion, differentiated instruction is more prominent in schools today because of the learning gaps revealed in recent years. During her interview, Anna further acknowledged that she has been surrounded by this professional practice for many years and states that differentiation is “easy to understand but often difficult to implement.”

Additionally, at least half of the participants interviewed admitted they have room to grow in identifying and using differentiated strategies to support their students. This can be supported by their survey responses in which participants rated their response to the statement, “I use a variety of choice formats with my students including such activities as tic-tac-toe boards, cubing, and RAFTS.” To this statement, 50% of participants responded that they “frequently and consistently” use these strategies, 25% answered “sometimes,” and 25% responded “seldom.”

During their interviews, principals were also able to provide textbook definitions of differentiated instruction but with a deeper understanding of the instructional practice. For example, when asked to describe differentiated instruction during her interview, Vicki responded:

I would describe it as instruction that meets the student where they are. It’s not watering down the rigor, but it’s getting them to the foundation that they need to be. So, from there, you can build them up to sort of scaffolding because not every student starts at the same readiness level.

Janice, a school principal, provided a similar response in her interview with, “Differentiated instruction means that you meet students where they are and not teach them as a whole group.” Janice further described differentiated instruction as “scaffolding instruction and support based on students’ needs as all students are usually not at the same level.” When asked how well they believed teachers understood differentiated instruction, Vicki stated, “I don’t know that a lot of teachers get it to the level that I think they need to. Now, that being said, I think when you have a strong RTI place, a program

with some concrete parameters in place, I think teachers will begin to see more of what differentiated instruction looks like.” Janice stated in her interview:

I believe that my teachers understand differentiated instruction to an extent.

However, my veteran teachers are set in their ways and don’t necessarily see the benefits of differentiated instruction planning. My new teachers are open to new ideas and practices and are excited to support students at all costs, but they seem to lack the knowledge and understanding of what differentiated instruction looks like in practice. As a principal, I find that this is one of my greatest challenges.

Regardless of the educational level or title of the participant, it was evident that all participants were aware of differentiated instruction to some extent. At most, some participants only know it as an academic vocabulary term that they have learned. Most participants believe that they understand what differentiated instruction should look and sound like in practice but need so much more support to support students and their diverse needs.

### ***Theme 2: Teachers Need Administrative Support and Training***

The need for teacher support and training by their school administrators was another theme that emerged during the interviews. During the interview process, each of the eight teacher participants verbalized a desire for further training. For example, Josh stated during his interview, “I would benefit from the opportunity to observe other teachers who are doing differentiated instruction well in their classroom through RTI and other methods.” According to Samantha, “Training and knowledge on how to perfect my practice with differentiated instruction are desperately needed.” Tori echoed, “Additional

content-specific training with knowledge of embedded and diverse learner supports is something that I know I could personally benefit from.”

This lack of training is also evident in the survey results where participants responded to the statement, “I use a variety of ways to group my students.” Only half of the participants indicated that they consider learning preferences and readiness to group students. These responses directly relate to a lack of training and experience with differentiated instruction and how to implement and group students based on their ability levels effectively.

During the interview process, another desire expressed by participants was the ability to observe a classroom teacher or an administrator who is modeling differentiated instruction “well.” Six of the eight teachers interviewed agreed that they would benefit from seeing a peer teacher or someone from their administrative team implementing differentiated instruction effectively. The overall consensus of participants is that this opportunity would be highly beneficial to observe how other teachers plan, structure their schedules, and incorporate strategies effectively. All eight participants vocalized a need for on-the-job training by their administrators or by members of their leadership teams. Tori stated in her interview:

It is one thing to read about differentiation and see it on paper, but I feel like it would be a completely different and meaningful experience if I could see the theory in practice. I feel like I would learn so much from this experience if granted the opportunity.

Interview and survey responses aligned with classroom observations. One of the first observations conducted reflected a strong use of differentiated instruction. This



observation occurred in a third-grade English language arts classroom where students were engaged in a Guidebook, culminating in a writing task. Differentiated instruction was evident during this classroom observation. During this observation, students were in the beginning stages of writing. At the end of each Guidebook unit, students are expected to complete a multi-paragraph essay to respond to a prompt related to their unit reading. This task proves difficult for most students. While students were engaged in the process, the observer circulated the room to observe what they were using to move toward their writing goals.

Evidence of differentiation was observed as students used visual and graphic organizers created during previous class periods. It was also evident that students had engaged in buddy reading with note-taking organizers. This collaboration allowed students to immerse themselves in other ideas to support their understanding. The teacher was also observed working with a small group of English language learners. During this classroom observation, the researcher observed the teacher using sentence stems to guide and support these students in the writing process.

Each of the classroom observations included a lesson plan with a differentiation component, but the actual observations of each class did not include clear evidence of this in action. Of the 16 observations conducted, only five had structures, procedures, and strategies that reflected differentiation in practice as determined using the classroom observation tool. In both the classroom observations of Sarah and Diann, differentiation was attempted but appeared to be unsuccessful. These teachers had planned for differentiation in both classrooms; however, it did not appear to be tailored to students and their individual needs. The observation notes gathered using the classroom

observation tool of both Sarah and Diann provided “little or no evidence” within the instructional strategy domain. Both teachers were missing clear criteria or common factors for why students were grouped for support. In some cases, students worked in a small group with Diann yet did not need the help. These students were observed using manipulatives to support them during math instruction. Some of these students were able to complete the task without the need for individualized support. While the small group was working with Diann, the remaining students worked in pairs to complete their assigned tasks. Some of these students appeared to need additional support but were not included in the small group and were not given support in other ways. Diann did not share how she planned this activity.

The same can be said about the observation of Sarah’s classroom. In Sarah’s classroom, all students were provided with the same support. Students were completing a graphic organizer together on a topic that was being retaught. During this activity, some students seemed bored and were working ahead on their writing task or distracted others rather than following along with Sarah. Consequently, the observation notes for Sarah indicated a low rating for student engagement according to the classroom observation tool. Sarah used an identified support for diverse learners but applied it to the entire class.

Participants spoke of differentiated instruction as being an additional task. Six of the eight interviewed teacher participants stressed that one of their biggest challenges was finding time to differentiate their instruction. Participants did not connect differentiated instruction with the core curriculum or consider it an integrated activity with lesson planning. For example, during her interview, when asked what one of the challenges is with implementing differentiation, Jessica responded with “time to implement.” She also

stated, “Time to plan for differentiated instruction is limited.” While observing Jessica’s classroom and reviewing her lesson plans, it was interesting that she planned for differentiation, but there was no evidence of implementation or use. According to Jessica, guidance from her administrators is limited and she does what she thinks to be appropriate. Jessica documented ways she could support struggling students and enrich those who had already mastered the content yet, when observing her classroom, no evidence was observed.

To add to this finding, it is essential to note that all three interviewed school principals agreed that this is the norm for their campuses, among novice and veteran teachers. They each recognized that even though support should be embedded in the core instruction, it is crucial to provide a structured RTI time within their master schedules. During their interviews, each principal recognized that RTI and other support for struggling students would likely not occur without this designated time. Vicki, a school principal, recognized during her interview that she has created both types of schedules, one with a designated and structured time for RTI and one without. She reported that the success of her students was far more significant when everyone “walked to RTI,” during a specific time versus when teachers were to create the time within their classroom schedules.

Time and effective scheduling were other concerns expressed by the majority of participants. In the survey responses of 88% of participants, they felt that a designated time built into the master schedule of their schools would be beneficial and effective when ensuring that differentiated instruction occurred. Participants believe that a

structured time built into their day would not stress the time constraints related to core curriculum. In her interview, Samantha, a veteran teacher, stated:

I have benefited from experiencing both types of schedules, one with and one without a structured RTI time. I will admit that when time is built into a schedule, I was diligent and faithful in ensuring that I provided intensive support to my students. When there wasn't a specific time allocated, sometimes it happened and sometimes it didn't. I definitely feel like I hold myself more accountable when I know there is a time that I am responsible for providing RTI to my students. I also feel like when this time is embedded in the schedule that my principal holds me more accountable.

Although not all participants have benefited from the experience of a designated RTI time, they all agree that it would be helpful. Only two of the teachers interviewed for this study worked at a school where there had been or currently is a designated RTI time. During their interviews, the principals of these campuses were passionate about the need for this specified time and were unwilling to waver in the structure of the schedules moving forward. They advised that they will always prioritize this type of schedule as they feel it is in their students' best interests and academic successes. Participants also agreed that this is the only way to guarantee that students receive the individualized support they need to grow academically.

### ***Theme 3: Planning for Diverse Learners***

During the interview process, teachers and principals expressed grave concern with the diversity of students and the desperate need to meet students' needs. Participants further agreed that they face students entering their classrooms at a varying degree of

readiness, making differentiated instruction all the more challenging. During her interview, Heather specifically stated, “I need time for planning and additional resources. Or at the least, ideas of where to find additional resources and ways to support struggling students.” Heather also expressed:

Time is critical. Planning for differentiation is vital and cannot be a last-minute decision. It would be greatly appreciated if my time as an educator was valued in such a way that my break time was honored. Oftentimes, these times that I would normally use for planning are not protected as I am called to IEP meetings, to cover classes, or for various other reasons. This takes away the time that I would normally use to plan for the diverse learners in my classroom. I feel like I have no time to plan in an intentional and meaningful way. This potentially affects my students and my ability to meet their needs as individual students.

During the interview phase, each participant indicated a concern about the lack of planning time available throughout the day. According to the participant interviews, they are often called away during their planning periods for IEPs, Collaborative Team Meetings (CTM), and to cover other classes. For example, Rhea and Josh reported that on average they miss their planning period at least two times per week. They admit that this sometimes interferes with their ability to attend valuable CTM’s. Rhea and Josh both admit that this impacts their planning for upcoming units, lessons, and support for students.

Although there were no interruptions to planning on the days that participants were observed, participants could provide dates, times, and examples of when these types of meetings had occurred. During the interviews with school principals, they admit that

situations arise that sometimes interfere with teacher planning time. They further reported that they try to protect this planning time, but some circumstances are beyond their control, leading to the loss of this planning time.

Other participants reported, during their interviews, they find it extremely difficult to plan because they are “singletons,” meaning they are the only content area teacher within their grade level. According to Anna, a veteran teacher, this is one of the most daunting challenges that she faces. An educator with over 20 years of experience, Anna reported in her interview:

Not having someone to plan and bounce ideas off of is extremely challenging for me. Even though I have several years of experience and many tools in my belt, sometimes I struggle and need new ideas. Sometimes what I am doing for a student just isn't working and I need input from someone else who might have a new and fresh idea. Not having someone in my same grade level and not teaching the same content makes this very challenging. I find myself having to go outside of my school to find ideas. For planning, it would be so much easier if there was someone I could plan with. I can't help but to think how much better of a teacher I would be if I had someone.

During participant interviews, several questions were asked related to how student needs are identified, how instruction is modified based on the identified needs of students, and what strategies are used to support struggling students. When comparing the interview responses, the survey results, and the classroom observations, there was little alignment between what was said to what was observed. Each lesson plan contained a differentiation component; however, there were no clearly defined or predetermined way

that differentiation was distinguished. A review of the participant survey responses was also completed. According to the survey results, all of the participants interviewed reported that they review their state academic standards 100% of the time before determining unit goals for the lesson. Further, 25% of participants said that when considering tasks and products that are clearly focused on learning goals, they only do so “sometimes.” The other 27% reported that they do so consistently. One of the most specific questions aligned to this study was, “I know my students’ learning preferences, multiple intelligences, and provide support accordingly.” According to the survey results, 37% do so “sometimes,” while 63% reported doing so “frequently.” Another survey question that lends information to this theme was, “I use a variety of instructional strategies in my teaching.” Seventy-five percent of participants reported that they use a variety of instructional strategies “frequently,” while 25% reported, “sometimes.”

According to the notes collected using the classroom observation tool, explicit and intentional planning was evident. Anna reported that seven of the eighteen students in her classroom are English Language Learners (ELLs) or special education students. One of the first examples of differentiation observed was using a graphic organizer. All students were provided a graphic organizer to gather and organize information. The use of a graphic organizer is a clear indicator of differentiation as aligned with the materials/resources domain of the classroom observation tool. The differentiation occurred when students were given a choice on how to complete this task. Students were encouraged to express their understanding and document the findings using illustrations, sentences, or keywords. Not all students were made to complete the document using the same method.

Another example of differentiated instruction in Anna's teaching was the evidence of small group instruction. While students were working independently, Anna pulled four of her ELL students to re-teach the lesson to them. Anna provided these students with individualized support to help them to complete their graphic organizers. Meanwhile, her other students worked independently on their assignments. During this time, Anna was heard asking students open-ended questions and providing them with conversation stems to frame their conversations with peers. These students were allowed to "turn and talk" to practice and discuss their answers to the graphic organizer. Before this classroom observation, Anna also reported having the ELL teacher "front load" information so that these ELL students were hearing information for the second or third time. Anna stated that this practice helps her students to feel "more comfortable and confident," leading to better classroom engagement.

#### ***Theme 4: Identifying Learning Objectives and Essential Standards***

When interviewing the school principals, they stressed the importance of having time for teachers to collaborate and plan for support. Each principal reported having a structured, common planning time built into their master schedules. One or two days of the week are used for CTMs. During these times, teachers are given the opportunity to plan for their upcoming units. These principals reported that their Instructional Coaches usually oversee these meetings with a content leader facilitator leading the discussions. Further, the principals admitted that these meetings come with their share of challenges depending on the content area. Some content teams are more robust than others leading to greater productivity.



Unfortunately, this time is often not protected. Almost all teachers reported in their interviews that they are often called away for IEPs, conferences and to cover classes. School-level leaders admitted that this sometimes happens but for reasons “beyond their control.” For example, Vicki reported during her interview the frustration with not having subs available to cover classes. She further said that she is often forced to call on teachers during their planning time to cover classes where teachers have called in sick. She admitted that this often takes teachers away from this planning time and minimizes their time to plan together with their peers to support students in their learning. Janice echoed these frustrations and stated, “I am lucky if my teachers have any time to plan together these days.” She reported that her teachers are diligent in planning but most do so after school. Janice stated in her interview that, “I recognize that this practice is not ideal, and I know that my teachers are growing tired of not having time to plan together during the day.”

When CTMs occur, participants report that the time spent together planning and training is invaluable. According to Tori, this is time that she “doesn’t take for granted.” Tori stated that when this allocated time happens, it gives her an opportunity to plan for upcoming units with her co-teachers. Even though they are not in the same grade level, being in the same content area helps in planning and determining effective ways to support students. Tori also stated in her interview:

This is the time that we sit together and plan. We have the opportunity to plan for diverse learners. We have time to look at the supports that are embedded in the curriculum and to call on each other to determine other strategies to support our students that may not already exist. In these meetings, we all bring something

different to the table. There are different experiences and years of teaching represented. We all learn from each other. One of my favorite things about these meetings is that we can plan with intention. I can develop higher-order thinking questions with teachers of the same content. I am also able to brainstorm ideas to extend or push my students who have already demonstrated mastery of the content as well as discover ideas to re-teach those students who may be struggling. As a new teacher, this is particularly helpful to me. The only thing I wish is that this time was protected and that these meetings were held as intended. I think this is what is most frustrating and challenging to me.

Rhea gave similar sentiments during her interview. When Rhea was interviewed, she stated that one of the things that she desperately needed was “time to plan” and “training.” Both would occur if collaborative time was protected through administrative support. According to Rhea, these meetings bring her “great knowledge and understanding of student-centered objectives.”

### ***Theme 5: Differentiation is Challenging***

Of all the participants interviewed, 100% admitted that they find differentiated instruction to be extremely challenging. Anna reported in her interview that the hardest thing for her is identifying how her students learn. Anna said that she finds it challenging to identify the best way her students learn due to a lack of time to administer an intelligence test. Although she understands the importance, she admitted that there are so many other assessments for her students to complete during the first few weeks of school that she just does not “have time for another.” Tori stated during her interview that the most challenging thing for her is “inexperience with differentiated instruction” and lack

of support from someone who does. Josh reported during his interview that the hardest thing for him is “time to effectively support students through RTI and small groups.” He also stated that he has “good intentions” in providing differentiated support but that there are so many other demands that he often gets distracted. Josh admitted that these supports often are neglected. The overall consensus of participants is that finding the time and support needed for differentiation are incredibly challenging, often leading to the decision not to differentiate at all.

Another challenge that was reported was a lack of resources. Of all the participants interviewed, at least six reported that they struggle with a lack of resources to support students. Rhea reported during her interview:

Because I teach in an upper elementary grade level, I don’t always receive the resources in the way of manipulatives, etc. as those teachers in the lower grades. The majority of my students come to my classroom with a lack of foundational skills and need support and manipulatives to move them from abstract to concrete. I wish that additional factors, not just the grade level of the student, were taken into consideration when determining what resources should be provided to classrooms. It’s hard buying things for my classroom on a teacher’s salary. But I do it because I know it’s what my students need.

Heather added to this challenge by saying:

I have much of what I need but not all. Most of the resources that I receive are geared to students who have similar struggles and needs. What I lack is resources for those students who are way below grade level and need support that moves them several grade levels. It is hard for me to provide for these students as they

are so far behind and I am not equipped with the knowledge, skills, or resources to provide for them what they need. This is by far my greatest challenge.

The results of the survey administered resulted in similar findings. Six of the eight participants interviewed reported that they “ensure that all students’ tasks and products focus on clearly stated learning goals.” This was inconsistent with the classroom observations. All eight of the participants answered that they frequently and consistently “review my state academic standards before I determine curriculum unit’s goals or the goals for a lesson” when administered Heacox’s survey. This is also inconsistent with the classroom observations and the lesson plans that were reviewed prior to the observations.

The information collected through interviews with school principals also revealed the same. These principals admit that their teachers often struggle with providing differentiation consistently. According to Vicki, the veteran of the school leaders interviewed, she finds that teachers “attempt to differentiate and meet student needs but often lose stamina which results in a lack of consistent differentiation.” Vicki continued this sentiment by saying, “I find that my teachers, both veteran and new, lack the ability to consistently implement and offer differentiation to students.” She blames this on the lack of training and support. Vicki further stated during her interview:

I don’t know whose responsibility it is to ensure that teachers are equipped with the proper training and tools to implement differentiated instruction effectively. I honestly believe that everyone has a fault. Teachers need to implement, but they also have to be equipped. Districts have the responsibility to ensure that school principals have the necessary means to train teachers, and schools have an obligation to ensure that they are good stewards of district support. There are so

many working pieces that should exist to make differentiation effective and evident. In my opinion, we are not doing a good job as leaders in equipping our teachers. If we want differentiation to occur with fidelity, we have to support our teachers every step of the way, both with time and resources. We owe it to our teachers but ultimately our students.

### **Connecting the Themes and the Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to (1) investigate teacher perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction; (2) the role school leaders play in ensuring that differentiated instruction exists on their campuses; (3) identify the roadblocks and challenges that school leaders and teachers face with implementing differentiated instruction. Participants were selected from three selected schools in a specified parish of northwest Louisiana. Eight teachers and three school principals participated. Further, the selected teachers had a minimum of three years of teaching experience and were rated as effective or highly effective on the Compass (LDOE, 2021) evaluation instrument. Data were collected through field observations, participant interviews, and the completion of a survey. After evaluation and analysis of the data, five themes emerged that addressed the five research questions of this case study. This section discusses the evidence that directly addresses the research questions.

#### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked about the level of understanding of differentiated instruction by classroom teachers. This question provided information on the emerged themes. The first theme addressed was the basic definition of differentiation. This theme provided meaningful information to support Research Question 1. By

responses to the question regarding how they define differentiated instruction, it was evident that the participants had working knowledge or determined definition of the term. Regardless of years of experience and educational level, all participants could provide a definition that was learned and/or memorized. Responses provided by participants and the misalignment between their definition and clear evidence of differentiation in classroom instruction were revealed. The findings suggest that school-level teams have a basic knowledge and understanding of the term “differentiated instruction” but lack clarity in understanding what it looks like in practice. At some point in their interviews, all participants acknowledged that they had basic understanding of differentiation based on information they had learned over the years. However, they lacked the knowledge, skills, and training to fully and effectively implement it. This lack of understanding and need for clarity was supported by the research of Kronberg and York-Barr (1997) where they acknowledged that teachers and school leadership teams have long strived to meet the needs of every student while struggling to find an effective means to do so.

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked participants about the support and resources they needed to implement differentiated instruction consistently. The responses generated from these questions specifically led to the emergence of Theme 2, support and training, and Theme 3, time and support to plan for diverse learners. It is important to recognize that all three of the interviewed school administrators agree that additional training is needed for teachers at the school and district levels.

For example, each of the participants interviewed expressed the need for additional and intentional training related to differentiated instruction. They each

expressed a concern with lack of training to classroom expectations. Responses indicated frustration. Frustration over the demands to meet the needs of all students without the administrative support, leadership, resources, time, and training to effectively do so. The survey results of participants also revealed the same level of frustration. One commonality related to training was the desire to observe other teachers and school leaders who are doing differentiation well. At least six participants expressed during their interviews the benefits of learning from their peers. Further, these responses directly led to theme three, time to plan for diverse learners.

Time to plan for a diverse group of students was one of the most challenging things expressed by participants. This challenge led to the acknowledgment that participants need and value time to plan with their peers. All eight teacher participants indicated that a dedicated time for planning and preparing was critical and rarely protected by their administrators. The overall consensus of participants is that this opportunity would be highly beneficial to observe how other teachers plan, structure their schedules, and incorporate strategies effectively.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question evaluates the challenges that school leaders face when implementing and encouraging differentiated instruction by the teachers on their campus. The responses of teacher participants helped to determine the challenges that were named and unnamed through the interviews. One of the major challenges expressed was time and understanding. As revealed through the interviews and observations, teachers have a basic knowledge of differentiated instruction but mainly as a learned and memorized definition. Teachers admit they lack a proper understanding of differentiation that is

demonstrated in their practice. This lack of understanding is also one of the challenges expressed by school administrators. This realization led to the challenge and need to provide additional and intentional training for teachers as well as school administrators.

These findings added to the already emerged themes, that planning for diverse learners and differentiation is challenging. Planning for diverse learners was one of the greatest challenges expressed by teacher participants. This was also one of the challenges expressed by school administrators. Responses given by participants indicated that they did not clearly understand the relationship between what is already being taught and differentiation. Participants expressed differentiation as being something extra or additional and not something they should already be doing. Helping teachers understand the correlation and connection led to another challenge identified by administrators.

Additional challenges that emerged were a need for a structured and predetermined time for interventions built into the master schedule. Scheduling is challenging. However, all the participants interviewed recognize a need for allocated time to support students and provide for their individual needs. This need to support students' identified needs is supported in the literature by Weber et al. (2013). Weber et al. (2013) stated that differentiated instruction is considered a key component of academic success in educational settings and should be implemented to meet the diversity of students in the classroom. Considering the challenges faced by school leaders and teachers can help answer Research Question 4, why is their reluctance to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques?



#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth research question aimed to understand what makes educators reluctant to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques and tools, specifically differentiated instruction. Although this question was not specially asked, the answer can be inferred based on the response to other questions. For example, the challenges that both the teachers and administrators expressed indicate why reluctance in implementation exists. Based on participant challenges, it is inferred that teachers and school leaders are reluctant due to a lack of understanding, resources, and time.

One thing that all participants agreed on is the need and importance of differentiation. During her interview, Rhea even expressed her fear and reluctance with differentiation by saying,

Sometimes I'm afraid to try new strategies and support for fear of doing something wrong or implementing support or strategy that my students use as a crutch. I never want to provide so much support that I end up hurting my students and setting them up for failure.

Participants understand the "why" or efficacy. However, they lack a clear understanding of the appropriateness. To understand the reluctance, one can associate the elements above to Armenakis' Organizational Change Theory, which explains why change might not always be embraced.

#### **Research Question 5**

The fifth and final research question focused on what school leaders can do to affect and encourage change. As expressed by Vicki in her interview, one of the biggest challenges she faces as a school administrator is encouraging her teachers to implement

differentiation consistently. Vicki said that her teachers need to feel supported and valued in the process. Teachers need to think that their administrators clearly understand what differentiation looks like in practice to ensure that teachers develop their understanding. Teachers need to know the “why” behind something that they will be held accountable for. Teachers must understand that it is not a “one and done” situation and that knowing student needs is an ever-evolving and revealing process. As stated by Vicki in her interview, understanding by students is an ongoing process where both myself and my students have continued opportunities to learn in different ways. She further stated, “I need to build my knowledge through experiences.”

Allowing teachers to learn and grow builds their confidence in their practice, thus minimizing reluctance. Armenakis’ Organizational Change Theory supports building confidence, support, and efficacy. This theory focused on five critical sentiments that are essential to change and minimizing resistance. Each of these five sentiments is critical to change and embracing new ideas and could be directly related to the reluctance to implement and sustain differentiation in the classroom.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to (1) investigate teacher perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction; (2) determine the role school leaders play in ensuring that differentiated instruction exists on their campuses; and (3) identify the challenges that school leaders face when implementing differentiated instruction. Intentional and effective implementation of differentiated instruction by teachers and led by school leaders is essential and critical to students' academic success. According to Connor et al. (2010), differentiation encompasses most areas of instruction and creates a positive, productive, and one of the most effective learning environments possible. The ability of administrators and teachers to plan for and incorporate effective differentiation is of the most significant importance to the student and school community as a whole. When implemented effectively and consistently supported by school site administrators, differentiation can be one of the most dynamic tools in a teacher's toolbox (Tomlinson, 2017).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

In education today, school administrators and teachers are held accountable for the success and failures of their students. Administrators and teachers have long strived to

meet the needs of every student while struggling to find an effective way to do so (Kronberg & York-Barr, 1997). While the needs of students have remained relatively the same, meeting these needs has become more complex (Tomlinson, 2000). In a quest to assist educators, recent studies have focused on the effects of differentiated instruction on a student's academic performance (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Gettinger & Stoiber, 2012; Jones et al., 2012). To fill a leadership gap in research relating to the successful implementation of differentiated instruction, this qualitative case study aimed to address insufficient understanding and the training challenges school leaders face when facilitating and leading differentiated learning practices on their campuses.

The study was a single case study design that focused on the experiences and perceptions of classroom teachers and the challenges faced by school leaders. According to Yin (2009), the benefit of a case study is that it allows the researcher to obtain detailed information in a real-life situation. The data collection method included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and a 24-question survey.

The research questions that guided this qualitative case study were as follows:

(1) What is today's classroom teachers' level of understanding of differentiated instruction? (2) What support and resources do teachers need to implement differentiated instruction consistently? (3) What challenges do school leaders face when implementing and encouraging the use of differentiated instruction on their campuses? (4) What makes teachers and school leaders reluctant to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques and tools? (5) What can school leaders do to affect and encourage change?

Eleven participants participated in this study; eight were teachers, and three were school principals. Each participant was interviewed for this study. Due to COVID

concerns, participants could choose either a face-to-face interview or a virtual setting. Of the participants interviewed, three decided face-to-face, and eight chose to be interviewed virtually. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed using NoNotes and analyzed for emerging themes. Data for the Heacox survey (Heacox, 2009) were collected and analyzed using Qualtrics data analysis software. The data from the transcriptions were triangulated with the classroom field observations and the 24-question survey.

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to provide a summary of the conclusions of the qualitative case study while also providing a platform for discussion of the results and suggestions for future research. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the qualitative case study.

### **Discussion of Emergent Themes**

#### **A Basic but Insufficient Understanding of Differentiated Instruction Exists**

Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) define differentiation as instruction that allows all students to access the same curriculum while providing various methods to learn the information through different entry points and learning tasks. Subsequently, practices and strategies are tailored to academic success and school improvement. All 11 participants of this study were able to recall a definition similar to the one provided by Watts-Taffe et al. (2012), but, in most cases, this is where the overall knowledge appeared to stall.

All participants provided similar definitions of differentiation. For example, both Vicki and Janice, both principals, described their knowledge of differentiation as offering instruction to students that “meets them where they are.” Further, Heather and Samantha gave similar responses that differentiation allows students access to the same curriculum but utilizes different strategies and supports based on student needs. Given that

participants could recall well-articulated descriptions led to the assumption that differentiated instruction would exist in practice and be evident in the field observations. Although participants could remember an explanation of differentiation that they had learned, it was clear that this did not indicate what they truly know and do not know about differentiated instruction.

Although school principals and teacher participants could describe differentiated instruction, observable evidence of differentiation in practice in most cases failed to exist when analyzing notes gathered from the classroom observation tool. Generally speaking, support was provided to the whole group rather than individual students. Of the 16 field observations, only five had structures and procedures that reflected differentiation in practice as indicated on the classroom observation tool. Where differentiation did occur, the observations lacked clear evidence of how the students were grouped or how a determination was made on who needed support.

Additionally, according to classroom observation field notes, Diann and Sarah attempted to differentiate, but their efforts failed to demonstrate understanding or evidence on who they should be supporting and why. Both Diann and Sarah worked in small groups of students during these observations. When supports were provided, they were not targeted or individualized. Additionally, the supported students did not appear to require the support, while others that needed help did not receive assistance. Of all the participants involved in this study, both teachers and administrators believe they have a “basic” understanding of differentiated instruction but need additional support to support students and their diverse needs. These findings help to support the second theme to emerge; teachers and school leaders all need administrative support and training.

### **Administrators Need to Provide Teachers with Time and Training**

According to Kapusnick and Hauslein (2001), teachers reported two significant roadblocks with the implementation of differentiation: lack of time to prepare, and insufficient training resources. Further, Margolis and Nagel (2006) wrote that teachers are often reluctant to implement new practices based on past experiences with failed support during other implementation attempts. During the participant interviews, all spoke on the desire to have intentional and impactful training related to the implementation of differentiated instruction. The feeling by administrators was mutual. The principal and teacher participants further stressed the desire for intense training, coaching, and opportunities to witness and work with those campus leaders who have been successful with differentiation.

Further, nearly every educator who participated in this study expressed the desire to observe their school administrators or peers who effectively implement differentiation in their classrooms. Participants expressed a need to observe how others plan, structure their schedules, and incorporate strategies effectively. Participants desperately desire peer coaching and opportunities to observe other teachers as they put differentiation into practice. Administrators strongly agreed that this would benefit their teachers and expressed this as an effective way to support other teachers, especially novice ones.

Teacher participants also vocalized a solid and desperate need for time to provide individualized and targeted support for those students who had demonstrated a need for help. Strickland (2009) also stressed the importance of high leverage professional development opportunities focused on differentiated practices. The lack of training and support educators currently receive is evident in the results of the participant interviews,

which found that both teachers and school administrators desire explicit training and support with differentiated instruction. The idea that teachers could not support their definition of differentiation in practice was evident during the field observations. This could be attributed to a lack of professional development and support at the school and district levels. Administrators need to provide intentional and specific training for teachers that is focused strictly on supporting students through differentiation.

Evidence that teachers do not plan for the varied needs of their classrooms is also demonstrated in the survey results, which found that 50% of participants use pre-assessment data to understand instructional needs and plan their practices accordingly. Additionally, 25% of participants admitted using a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of their students. These results lend credibility to the fact that teachers do not have a clear understanding of differentiation and how to structure instruction according to the needs of their students and should receive support from their administrative leaders. The importance of tailoring support based on a student's identified needs is supported in the literature review of Kronberg and York-Barr (1997).

Another impactful finding is that all interviewed school leaders feel like there is insufficient support at the district level for both school administrators and school-level leaders. In their opinion, the current training is not impactful nor meaningful. More often than not, in-district training, teachers receive information but are not provided models or methods of practice. For example, Josh stated, "district training is often very broad and doesn't target a specific strategy or support for teachers." According to Josh, he has attended several district level and school level training that were unproductive and often



involved a speaker who delivered information but mostly on topics irrelevant to the areas where most teachers need support. Rhea echoed these sentiments:

As long as I've been in the district, I have never received specific training or leadership support in terms of differentiated instruction. My colleagues and I are expected to support students with differentiation, yet, I cannot remember a time where the district leaders nor school leaders provided training or support specifically related to differentiation.

According to Strickland (2009), differentiation only occurs and is sustained when support is at the school and district levels. "Disconnected, isolated professional development will not support teachers' implementation of differentiation" (VanTassel-Baska, 2012, p. 43). This need is supported in the research of VanTassel-Baska (2012) who reminds us that it is only through the continued support of colleagues and school leaders that teachers will be able to pursue the goal of a differentiated classroom, thus leading to the academic success of school campuses.

### **Administrators Need to Expect Planning for Diverse Learners through Identified Objectives**

All participants of this study expressed the need to plan for their student needs. Heather further supported this perception, "I need time for planning." Throughout this study, it was evident that teacher planning time is dedicated but often not protected. Heather continued by saying, "Time is critical...It would be greatly appreciated if my time as an educator was valued, especially by my principal." Teachers agreed that their time is not protected, and they are often pulled away for other things, such as covering for absent teachers or attending IEPs, etc. This was a frustration expressed by both teachers and administrators and an important concern voiced by all participants. Teachers

struggled with the question, how do we plan and prepare to meet the needs of students when there is no time to do so? Ultimately, when planning time is protected, teachers are productive and appreciative (VanTassel-Baska, 2012).

Heather's account reminded me of my interview with Rhea where she said, "When I can meet and plan with my team, I can gain more profound knowledge and understanding of student support and student-centered objectives." Tori also expressed how valuable this time is when it occurs. According to Tori, this is time that she does not take for granted and is something that she is extremely thankful for.

The need for administrators to preserve and value teacher planning appears to be a great concern at the school level. When teachers presented concern, administrators were questioned and provided a similar account. Administrators admit that they often have to pull their teachers during their planning time but have no idea how to avoid this situation. Janice even admitted, "I realize that my teachers are growing tired of not having their planning time." She further expressed frustration about not having the people or resources to protect this time.

Another concern for planning is that teachers cannot appropriately identify the needs of their students. Due to a lack of training and administrative support, it can be assumed that teachers do not understand how to identify and subsequently address the needs of their students. This finding directly relates to the need for teacher training and support. When teachers clearly understand differentiation, it could be impossible to plan to support students effectively (Strickland, 2009). Surprisingly, only 37% of study participants were dedicated to knowing their students' learning preferences and providing support accordingly. This, too, supports that teachers need help in planning for the

diversity of their students. While planning, teachers must consider learning objectives and essential standards; they must first understand how to accomplish this task (Strickland, 2009).

### **Administrators need to Identify Challenges to Overcome Challenges with Differentiation**

Of all the interviewed participants, 100% reported finding differentiation challenging. Classroom teachers have so many other demands that many participants admitted putting differentiation on the “back burner.” According to Josh, time to effectively support students through RTI, a structured form of differentiation (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009), is what he finds most challenging. Although he has “good intentions,” if time is not specifically allocated in his schedule to RTI, he often fails to provide this to his students because of all the other challenges they face. Dias-Lacy and Guirguis (2017) recognized teachers’ challenges, especially new teachers. Lack of leadership support, unrealistic expectations, and lack of mentors and training were just a few of the difficulties discussed (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). The most significant challenges reported were “lack of administrative support, inability to manage personal and professional expectations, limited teaching resources, lack of professional development, and difficulty handling behavioral problems in the classroom” (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017, p. 265). As Josh stated, these types of challenges prevent him from supporting his students with differentiation through RTI more often than not.

The need for administrators to build a specified time into master schedules can also be supported by the experiences of the school principals who participated in this study, specifically Vicki. According to Vicki, she has created and used both types of schedules. One with a structured RTI time and one without. Vicki admits that when she

enforces a master schedule that includes an RTI time, she notices that both her veteran and novice teachers adhere to this time and try to support students who have demonstrated a need. When this time is not dedicated, her teachers often fail to meet students where they are. Through her experience, Vicki shared that student achievement often suffers when time is not allocated for RTI. Allocated and structured time is critical and invaluable when expecting differentiation to occur.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study increase the knowledge of the topic on what teachers know of differentiated instruction, how it is perceived, and the challenges both teachers and school administrators face. What follows is a comprehensive discussion of the findings and their implications as they relate to each research question.

#### **Research Question 1**

The following finding emerged from the data collection to answer Research Question 1 that teachers have a basic understanding of differentiation, and a simple explanation exists. This finding implies that teachers have some knowledge of differentiation, but their description does not clearly demonstrate what they know and do not know about differentiation. The data collected from the interviews showed that teachers explain differentiation but admit that their knowledge of effective implementation is limited. They also acknowledge they still have a lot to learn. This lack of understanding and need for clarity was supported in the literature by the research of Kronberg and York-Barr (1997). They acknowledged that educators have long strived to meet the needs of every student while struggling to find an effective means to do so. The

findings of this study revealed that there is no correlation between what teachers explain differentiation to be to what they truly understand and demonstrate in their classrooms.

### **Research Question 2**

Themes 2 and 3 emerged from the interviews with teachers that answered the second research question. Of the teachers interviewed, 100% percent acknowledged the need for time to implement differentiated instruction and time to plan for students of varied readiness levels. To add to this finding, it is crucial to recognize that all three interviewed school administrators agree that additional training is needed for teachers at the school and district levels. If teachers do not have opportunities to build capacity and understanding of differentiation through training and administrative guidance, they will fail to implement or sustain implementation (Strickland, 2009).

Not only do teachers need support, but so do school administrators. Of the school principals who participated in this study, 100% admitted they need district-level assistance in providing high quality and explicit professional development on differentiation to their teachers. Professional literature supports this finding. Kapusnick and Hauslein (2001) reported that teachers who had trouble implementing differentiated instruction often abandoned the approach because they felt uncomfortable with the framework and lacked confidence in their ability to provide for the individual needs of students based on their lack of knowledge related to differentiation.

Additionally, teachers need time for implementation through structured and allocated time for RTI and student support. At least one of the interviewed participants admitted that without time allocated for supporting students, he often fails to do so. Time for implementation has always been a concern for teachers when implementing new

strategies for instruction. If time is not reserved in the school day for structured support for students, teachers will not be invested in the implementation (Weber et al., 2013).

RTI is defined by Jones et al. (2012) as scaffolded instruction segments geared to specifically target and meet the needs of students based on their current level of achievement and their specific learning styles. The importance of a structured RTI program is supported by a study conducted by Gettinger and Stoiber (2012), who studied the effects of differentiated instruction on a group of three hundred students. In this study, a group of students were randomly selected to participate in a structured RTI program that focused on meeting the individual needs of identified students. The teachers of these classrooms participated in intense, ongoing training to enhance and ensure their understanding of differentiated instruction. The study revealed that an intense RTI structure led to substantial gains by participants (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2012). These findings lend credibility to the opinions of both the teacher and principals that RTI is a critical, needed, and an important method of providing differentiation to students.

### **Research Question 3**

Two findings emerged related to this research question: time to effectively support teachers in their practice and understanding of differentiated instruction. School administrators indicated that one of their greatest challenges with the implementation of differentiated instruction is a lack of knowledge among their teachers and themselves. Most of the participants expressed differentiation as being something extra or additional and not something they should already be doing. Margolis and Nagel (2006) remind us that teachers sometimes avoid implementing differentiation because they do not truly understand their responsibilities. If teachers lack an understanding of effective

implementation, they will likely forgo their efforts (Kapusnick & Hauslein, 2001).

Additionally, if school administrators lack knowledge of pedagogy and the skills to assist their teachers in practice, they will fail in supporting them in their practice and in the implementation of differentiated instruction (Kapusnick & Hauslein, 2001).

Helping teachers understand the correlation and connection led to another challenge identified by administrators is time. Time for differentiation to occur in classrooms. Structured and allocated time. As expressed by administrators, scheduling is challenging. However, both teachers and administrators interviewed recognize a need for the allotted time to support students and provide for their individual needs. The need to support students is firmly in the literature by Weber et al. (2013). According to Weber et al. (2013), differentiated instruction is a critical component of a school's academic success.

#### **Research Questions 4 and 5**

Research Questions 4 and 5 are associated with change and change theory. At least one participant expressed her reluctance to implement new strategies etc., due to her lack of understanding, fear of failure, and inability to fully understand the importance and relevance of the change and implementation. Members of any organization must be ready and able to embrace change and implement new strategies, processes, and ideas to ultimately be adopted and implemented (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Armenakis et al., 1999). As indicated by Armenakis' Organizational Change Theory (Armenakis et al., 1999), members of the organization must understand the difference, the reason for the change, and the change's relevance. Allowing teachers to learn and grow builds their confidence in the structure, thus minimizing reluctance. Armenakis' Organizational

Change Theory supports building confidence, support, and efficacy. The change will likely cease to occur if there is a failure to understand in each of these areas (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Armenakis et al., 1999).

### **Recommendations for Administrators**

The findings of this study revealed that both school leaders and teachers need administrative support, training, and time. This is evident in the findings that emerged from this study. Therefore, it is recommended that administrators create a professional development calendar that specifically details time allocated to the education and training of teachers and school leaders as it relates to differentiation. Administrators should also seek out professional opportunities to increase their capacity and understanding of leading differentiated instruction. Training consideration should be given to topics such as:

- differentiation in practice (i.e. what is seen, heard, observed)
- identifying student learning styles
- deconstruction of state standards and objectives, and planning for diverse learners
- identifying embedded supports

Participants of this study also expressed strong desire to observe and work with teachers or other leadership team members who implement and use differentiation effectively. Administrators should also consider creating a calendar that details peer observation schedules.

It is further recommended that administrators consider creating a master schedule with time strictly allocated to RTI. As reported by Vicki, a school administrator, teachers



will likely not provide intentional and targeted support to students due to the many other demands on their time if this time is not specifically allocated.

Finally, administrators should practice efforts to protect teacher planning time and create opportunities for peer-to-peer observations and collaboration. Teachers need time to plan and prepare for the diverse needs of students. When teachers are called away to cover classes or attend IEP meetings, they cannot effectively plan both independently and collaboratively. Therefore, planning time must and should be protected. Measures to preserve this time should be taken, even if it means soliciting district assistance to cover classes for training and these valuable observations.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this qualitative case study can be compared to those found in the study conducted by Weber et al. (2013). In this study, one of the significant findings was that teachers were concerned with not having time for implementation and not having a reserved time during the school day to provide structured support for students (Weber et al., 2013). Just as the study completed by Weber et al. (2013) found these to be significant concerns, so did the findings of this qualitative case study. Teachers and administrators for this study also expressed a strong desire and need for time to plan and time for implementation of support and differentiation. These two were most prominent and voiced by all participants in the findings. Another finding of Weber et al. (2013) supported through this qualitative case study was that if time is not reserved in the school day for structured support for students, teachers will not be invested in the implementation. Of the interviewed teachers and the observations conducted, it was clear and obvious that when teachers did not have time embedded to provide differentiation

through RTI, it did not exist. This finding was revealed through the lack of differentiation through observations and interviews where participants admitted to this finding.

Further, through the interviews with administrators, one administrator admitted that she had used both types of schedules, one with an embedded time and one without. When the time was not embedded, she found that RTI and differentiation did not exist. This finding is similar to that of Weber et al. (2013). Finally, Weber et al. (2013) found that the school they studied did not clearly understand differentiated instruction and its implementation. These same findings can be said about the participants of this qualitative case study.

The results of the qualitative case study could contribute to a greater understanding of the overall knowledge of differentiation by both school principals and teachers. The results also recognize the challenges and support needed by both teachers and administrators when ensuring a campus is dedicated to differentiated practices. Further, the findings revealed that both school principals and teachers need support. Additionally, school administrators and teachers need the opportunity to build their understanding of differentiated instruction and its best practices.

As Armenakis and Harris (2002) wrote, for a change to occur, one must first understand the difference the change could make, be prepared for the change, feel the change is appropriate, and ultimately feel supported in the transition. All members of the school organization must work together to ensure that time and effective professional development is provided to teachers by their school leaders to ensure that they are equipped to meet the needs of students in the best way possible. With the implementation of change and new strategies, challenges will likely occur.

In recent years, COVID-19, a global pandemic, has stricken our country, dramatically impacting student academic achievement and growth. Students across America have suffered some length of time of lost learning and in some way been affected (Atteberry & McEachin, 2020). Today, perhaps more than ever, school administrators and teachers are faced with the challenges of meeting the needs of students from a diverse set of circumstances and readiness levels. Therefore, it is gravely important to understand the diversity of students, recognize their needs, and prioritize time and planning to ensure that these needs are met.

Additionally, findings from this qualitative case study will be helpful in providing school leaders with an account of the knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and challenges relevant to teachers and differentiated instruction. The study results can guide administrators and appropriate authorities to consider and tailor professional development opportunities to address problems teachers may face in differentiating instruction. Based on the study results, plans to assist in meeting the needs of teachers as they seek to understand and implement differentiation consistently could be made. Further, administrators may also consider findings from the study as they evaluate teachers in the process of implementing differentiated practices. When valued, understood, and prioritized by both school leaders and teachers, differentiation has the potential to impact student achievement and ultimately change the trajectory of student performance and success (Tomlinson, 2000).

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**APPENDIX A**

**HUMAN USE APPROVAL LETTER**



LOUISIANA TECH  
UNIVERSITY  
MEMORANDUM

OFFICE OF SPONSORED PROJECTS

TO: Ms. Natalie Pope and Dr. Richard Shrubb

FROM: Dr. Richard Kordal, Director of Intellectual Property & Commercialization  
(OIPC)  
*CRK*  
[rkordal@latech.edu](mailto:rkordal@latech.edu)

SUBJECT: HUMAN USE COMMITTEE REVIEW

DATE: May 24, 2021

In order to facilitate your project, an EXPEDITED REVIEW has been done for your proposed study entitled:

**“Guiding Differentiated Instruction as a School Leader:  
A Qualitative Case Study”**

**HUC 21-104**

The proposed study's revised procedures were found to provide reasonable and adequate safeguards against possible risks involving human subjects. The information to be collected may be personal in nature or implication. Therefore, diligent care needs to be taken to protect the privacy of the participants and to assure that the data are kept confidential. Informed consent is a critical part of the research process. The subjects must be informed that their participation is voluntary. It is important that consent materials be presented in a language understandable to every participant. If you have participants in your study whose first language is not English, be sure that informed consent materials are adequately explained or translated. Since your reviewed project appears to do no damage to the participants, the Human Use Committee grants approval of the involvement of human subjects as outlined.

Projects should be renewed annually. *This approval was finalized on May 24, 2021 and this project will need to receive a continuation review by the IRB if the project continues beyond May 24, 2022. ANY CHANGES* to your protocol procedures, including minor changes, should be reported immediately to the IRB for approval before implementation. Projects involving NIH funds require annual education training to be documented. For more information regarding this, contact the Office of Sponsored Projects.

You are requested to maintain written records of your procedures, data collected, and subjects involved. These records will need to be available upon request during the conduct of the study and retained by the university for three years after the conclusion of the study. If changes occur in recruiting of subjects, informed consent process or in your research protocol, or if unanticipated problems should arise it is the Researchers responsibility to notify the Office of Sponsored Projects or IRB in writing. The project should be discontinued until modifications can be reviewed and approved.

**APPENDIX B**

**PARTICIPANT TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS  
WITH CONNECTIONS TO LITERATURE**

## Participant Teacher Interview Questions and Connections to Literature

<u>Interview Question</u>	<u>Purpose of the Question</u>	<u>Connection to Literature</u>
Describe your level of understanding of differentiated instruction.	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1)	Weber et al. (2013).
Describe your definition of differentiated instruction.	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1)	Watts-Taffe et al. (2012)
Describe the challenges do you face when attempting to implement differentiated instruction on a consistent basis.	To determine the challenges participants (teachers) face and the supports needed to implement differentiated instruction. (RQ2)	Dee, A.L. (2011). Kronberg, R., & York-Barr, J. (1997). Tomlinson, C.A. (2000).
Describe how you identify the specific needs of the students in your classroom.	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1)	Tomlinson, C.A. (2001). Weber et al. (2013).
Describe how you tailor instruction based on these identified needs?	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1) To determine the challenges participants (teachers) face and the supports needed to implement differentiated instruction. (RQ2)	Gardner, H. (1983). Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) Weber et al. (2013).
In your opinion, how important is differentiated instruction?	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1)	Beecher, M. & Sweeny, S.M. (2008). Gettinger, M., & Stoiber, K.C. (2012). Jones, R.E., Ysselm N., & Grant, C. (2012).
Describe the level of support you feel the building level school leaders of your school play in supporting differentiated instruction. What tools and resources do they provide?	To determine the challenges participants (teachers) face and the supports needed to implement differentiated instruction. (RQ2)	Kapusnick, R. A., & Hauslein, C. M. (2001). Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. E. (2003).



**APPENDIX C**

**PARTICIPANT ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS  
WITH CONNECTIONS TO LITERATURE**

## Participant Administrator Interview Questions and Connections to Literature

<u>Interview Question</u>	<u>Purpose Of The Question</u>	<u>Connection To Literature</u>
How would you describe differentiated instruction?	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1)	Gardner, H. (1983)  Weber et al. (2013).
In your opinion, how important is differentiated instruction?	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1)	Watts-Taffe et al. (2012)
How well do you think your teachers understand differentiated instruction?	To determine the participants level of understanding of differentiated instruction. (RQ1)	Weber et al. (2013).
What support do teachers need to assist them in implementing differentiated instruction on a consistent basis?	To determine the challenges participants (teachers) face and the supports needed to implement differentiated instruction. (RQ2)	Kapusnick, R. A., & Hauslein, C. M. (2001).  Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004).  Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. E. (2003).
What challenges have you experienced in helping teachers adopt differentiated instruction?	To determine the challenges participants (teachers) face and the supports needed to implement differentiated instruction. (RQ2)	Dee, A.L. (2011).  Kronberg, R., & York-Barr, J. (1997).  Tomlinson, C.A. (2000).
Does your school building currently have a structured RTI plan/schedule in place?	To determine what school leaders can do to effect and encourage change? (RQ5)	Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2013).
What supports and resources do you need from district leaders in order to effectively support your teachers?	To determine the challenges that school leaders face when implementing and encouraging the use of differentiated instruction on their campuses? (RQ3) To determine why teachers and school leaders are reluctant to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques and tools? (RQ4) To determine what school leaders can do to effect and encourage change? (RQ5)	Armenakis, A., Harris, S., & Field, H. (1999).  Armenakis, A., & Harris, S. (2002).

**APPENDIX D**

**HUMAN SUBJECTS CONSENT FORM**

## **HUMAN SUBJECTS CONSENT FORM**

The following is a brief summary of the project in which you are asked to participate. Please read this information before signing the statement below. You must be of legal age or must be co- signed by parent or guardian to participate in this study.

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** Guiding Differentiated Instruction as a School Leader: A Qualitative Case Study

**PURPOSE OF STUDY/PROJECT:**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate teacher perceptions, attitudes, and overall understanding of differentiated instruction. The study will also focus on the role of school leaders in ensuring that differentiated instruction exists on their campuses as well as identifying any road blocks or challenges that school leaders face in bringing about this change and shift to differentiated classrooms.

**SUBJECTS:**

Participants will be selected from three randomly selected, public elementary schools, grades kindergarten through fifth grades, in the specified parish in Northwest Louisiana. It is anticipated that between eight to twelve participants will be selected for the purpose of this study. Selected teachers must have a minimum of three years teaching experience and be rated as effective or highly effective on the COMPASS evaluation rubric. The study will also include, at a minimum, two teachers who have been alternatively certified through an alternative certification process.

**PROCEDURE:**

Qualitative data for this study will be collected through semi-structured interviews, survey, and classroom observations.

Both the teacher and school leader's participants selected for the study will receive an email outlining the purpose, nature, and details of the study as well as any potential risk associated with their participation. The participants will verify their understanding of the risk and nature of the study by signing an informed consent. Participants will also understand that they may withdrawal from participating in the study at any time.

The method of data collection will include semi-structured interviews with teachers and their administrators as well as through classroom observations. Interviews and conversations with participants will be strictly voluntary. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed to ensure an exact account of questions responses. Interviews will be conducted on an individual and private basis.

Written data for classroom observations will be recorded using an observation protocol. Observations will either be conducted in-person or virtually depending on preference of the selected participant. Both the interviews and observations will be scheduled based on the availability and schedule of the participants. However, the interview will be completed before the observations are conducted.

**BENEFITS/COMPENSATION:**

No benefits or compensation associated with participation in this study.

**RISKS, DISCOMFORTS, ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS:**

No risks, discomforts, or alternative treatments have been identified.

**SAFEGUARDS OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING:**

Both the teacher and school leader's participants selected for the study will receive an email outlining the purpose, nature, and details of the study as well as any potential risk associated with their participation. The participants will verify their understanding of the risk and nature of the study by signing an informed consent. Participants will also understand that they may withdrawal from participating in the study at any time.

All interviews and observations will follow state, local, and school COVID guidelines.

Participants will be also be offered a virtual option for interviews and observations (e.g., Zoom) if they prefer.

|

**APPENDIX E**

**TEACHER INVENTORY ON DIFFERENTIATED PRACTICES  
AND STRATEGIES**

## TEACHER INVENTORY ON DIFFERENTIATION PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

Check the level at which you teach.

Grades K–2

Grades 3–5

Grades 6–8

Grades 9–12

Read each statement below. Circle the response that most closely describes the extent to which you use the practice in your classroom. Use the following scale:

1 = never/almost never

2 = seldom

3 = sometimes

4 = frequently, consistently

Differentiation Practices and Strategies	Level of Usage
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	
1. I review my state/province's academic standards before I determine a curriculum unit's goals (KUDo's) or the goals for a lesson.	1   2   3   4
2. I determine the assessments that I will use before I plan my unit activities so that there is alignment between curriculum, assessment, and instruction.	1   2   3   4
3. I ensure that all student tasks and products focus on clearly stated learning goals (KUDo's).	1   2   3   4
<b>INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING</b>	
4. I preassess students to determine their readiness for each new unit or series of lessons.	1   2   3   4
5. I use ongoing (formative) assessment to adjust my instructional plans to respond to differing learning needs.	1   2   3   4
6. I use assessment data provided by my state or province or school to inform my instructional planning.	1   2   3   4
7. I gather information about my students' interests in curriculum topics.	1   2   3   4
8. I know my students' learning preferences. (Multiple Intelligences)	1   2   3   4
<b>FLEXIBLE INSTRUCTION</b>	
9. I use a variety of instructional strategies in my teaching.	1   2   3   4
10. I engage all my students in challenging learning experiences based on their specific needs.	1   2   3   4
11. I adjust the pace of instruction to students' learning needs, not everyone is doing the same thing on the same day every day.	1   2   3   4
12. I provide additional time, instruction, and support (e.g., scaffolding) to students based on their specific needs.	1   2   3   4

CONTINUED ➡

## TEACHER INVENTORY ON DIFFERENTIATION PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES (CONTINUED)

### FLEXIBLE INSTRUCTION CONTINUED

13. I adjust curriculum topics and learning tasks to best meet my students' needs and ensure a challenging learning experience.	1	2	3	4
14. I match resources to my students' reading-readiness levels (e.g., Lexile scores).	1	2	3	4
15. I match resources to my students' level of knowledge about a curricular topic.	1	2	3	4
16. I use choice in topics, processes, or products to motivate my students.	1	2	3	4
17. I use a variety of choice formats with my students including such activities as tic-tac-toe boards, cubing, and RAFTS (Role/Audience/Format/Topics).	1	2	3	4
18. I use tiered assignments to match students with "just right, right now" tasks based on their learning needs.	1	2	3	4
19. I offer tasks reflecting my students' interests.	1	2	3	4
20. I design tasks based on student readiness; some students need more time, instruction, practice; others are "there" early.	1	2	3	4
21. I design tasks reflecting different learning preferences. (Multiple Intelligences)	1	2	3	4
22. If I use centers or stations, I either assign particular students to particular centers or match students with particular activities in each center based on their learning needs.	1	2	3	4
23. I plan and use flexible grouping in my classroom to organize students by their instructional needs.	1	2	3	4
24. I use a variety of ways to group my students (e.g., by interest, readiness, learning preference).	1	2	3	4

### MY NEXT STEPS IN DIFFERENTIATION

Differentiation strategies I most frequently use:

Strategies I rarely or never use:

Circle two strategies from the bottom list that you are committed to try out in your classroom. Number them in the order you will implement them.



**APPENDIX F**

**PERMISSION TO USE HEACOX'S TEACHER INVENTORY OF  
DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION PRACTICES**

RE: Site Contact Request [Other] External Block



**Terri DesLaurier** <deslaurier@freespirit.com>

Mon, Jan 4, 10:11 PM Star Reply More

to me

Hi Natabe,

Thank you for your request. You may use Dr. **Hesselt**'s survey instrument for your dissertation. Unfortunately, none of us know of any additional resources. However, I will forward your email to Dr. **Hesselt** so that she may contact you if she knows of anything that would help.

Best regards,

Terri

**Terri DesLaurier**

Publishing Administrative Assistant | Free Spirit Publishing

P 612-746-6843 | E [deslaurier@freespirit.com](mailto:deslaurier@freespirit.com)

W [freespirit.com](http://freespirit.com)



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**From:** [natabe.wood@freespiritchildren.org](mailto:natabe.wood@freespiritchildren.org) <[natabe.wood@freespiritchildren.org](mailto:natabe.wood@freespiritchildren.org)>

**Sent:** Monday, January 04, 2021 11:05 AM

**To:** help4kids <[help4kids@freespirit.com](mailto:help4kids@freespirit.com)>

**Subject:** Site Contact Request [Other]

Name

\*\*\*\*\*

**APPENDIX G**

**PRINCIPAL LETTER REQUEST**

Dear Principal:

My name is Natalie Pope. I am currently pursuing my doctorate through Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana. As a doctoral student, it is my desire to investigate teachers' knowledge in differentiated instruction.

At this time, I am requesting permission to send your teachers information introducing my research topic and to invite the teachers to participate in the research by first completing a consent form agreeing to participate in the research and secondly by completing a survey that will be available to them. The goal of the research study is to obtain information that will assist in answering the following research questions:

1. What is the level of understanding of differentiated instruction by today's classroom teachers?
2. What support and resources do teachers need to assist them in implementing differentiated instruction on a consistent basis?
3. What challenges do school leaders face when implementing and encouraging the use of differentiated instruction on their campuses?
4. Why are teachers and school leaders reluctant to embrace change and implement new instructional techniques and tools?
5. What can school leaders do to effect and encourage change?

This study aims to identify teacher's knowledge and confidence with differentiated instruction and the supports teachers need to be successful in differentiating instruction. This study will also aim to provide information and guidance to school leaders on how to guide effective differentiated on their campuses.

I am the sole researcher in this project and will be the only one contacting the teacher or yourself about this study. Teacher participation is voluntary and their identity will be anonymous. Teachers will not be identified in this dissertation by name.

If you have any questions concerning my request, please do not hesitate to contact me at 318-517-0806. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,  
Natalie Pope

  
nataliepope80 

**APPENDIX H**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE LETTER FOR TEACHERS**

Dear Teacher:

My name is Natalie Pope. I am currently pursuing my doctorate through Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana. As a doctoral student, it is my desire to investigate teachers' knowledge in differentiated instruction.

I am interested in collecting a one-time survey to be completed by elementary teachers who are using differentiated instruction as a strategy to meet the needs of their students. I am also interested in conducting classroom observations and engaged in a one-time, face-to-face interview.

The data collected will be reviewed only by me. The data will be kept confidential in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed after three years. Your participation and willingness to share information about differentiated instruction will add valuable data to the research.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate or to withdraw from completing the survey.

You are free to ask questions about the study before you participate. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. Your name will not be associated with the research in any way and will be known only to me.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. Please sign your consent form to participate, indicating that you have full knowledge of the purpose of the study.

My contact information is provided below.

Natalie Pope

318-517-██████

nataliepoppe80██████

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

**APPENDIX I**

**CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH**

**Guiding Differentiated Instruction as a School Leader:  
A Qualitative Case Study**

Consent to take part in research

- I, \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves completing a series of interviews, observations, and a survey.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated with confidentiality.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research that my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by my identity being assigned a letter/number combination. I understand that my identity and the identity of the people I speak about will be kept anonymous.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interviews could be quoted in the process of the dissertation and its presentation as required.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may report this to relevant authorities-they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a password secured file until such time that the dissertation committee and its affiliates confirm the results of the dissertation for which this research is being conducted.



- I understand that a transcript of my interview(s) in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained in a password secured file until such time that the dissertation committee and its affiliates confirm the results of the dissertation for which this research is being conducted.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

---

Signature of participant

---

Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

---

Signature of researcher

---

Date

**APPENDIX J**

**CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TOOL**

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ | Grade Level/Subject Area: \_\_\_\_\_ | Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ | Date: \_\_\_\_\_

	Evidence of implementation			COMMENTS
	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	LITTLE OR NO	
<b>PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT</b>				
Presents an inviting, relaxed environment for learning.				
Provides comfortable desks and work areas.				
Contains individual, designated personal spaces for extra books and other items.				
Is designed for quick and easy groupings of tables and chairs.				
Is arranged for teacher and student movement during work sessions.				
Provides work areas for individual needs, including knowledge/ability levels.				
Reflects current content or skills through student displays and artifacts.				
<b>TEACHER BEHAVIORS</b>				
Work with total groups, individuals, and small groups.				
Monitor individuals and small groups.				
Use a variety of ongoing assessment tools such as checklists, surveys, and anecdotal records.				
Apply assessment information to guide instruction.				
Address academic, emotional, social, and physical student needs.				
Provide time for students to actively process information.				
Give specific feedback to individuals and/or small groups.				
<b>STUDENT ENGAGEMENT</b>				
Exhibits on-task behavior while working alone.				
Works effectively in small groups.				
Works on their individual knowledge or ability levels.				
Uses materials/resources on the student's own level of success.				
Feels respected and emotionally safe.				
Uses self-discipline.				
	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	LITTLE OR NO	COMMENTS
<b>MATERIALS/RESOURCES</b>				
Include a variety of reading levels that are related to the subject or topic.				
Are accessible to students.				
Support the standards and topic.				
Are age-appropriate.				
Are up-to-date.				
Are available in an adequate number for the class size.				
Include appropriate reference sources and materials.				
<b>INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES</b>				
Use a variety of assessment tools before, during, and after learning.				
Use a variety of instructional strategies and activities to teach standards.				
Meet the diverse needs of learners.				
Engage students in various flexible grouping designs.				
Use centers and/or stations for individual and small group instruction.				
Engage students with projects and/or problems-solving activities.				
Present students with choices in learning activities.				