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Elementary Reading Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiating Reading Instruction for Low-Socioeconomic Students

Edwina Jones
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

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Edwina Tatu Freeman Jones

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Elementary Reading Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiating Reading Instruction for
Low-Socioeconomic Students

by

Edwina Tatu Freeman Jones

MS, Walden University, 2013

BS, Morgan State University, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2021

Abstract

Differentiated instruction (DI) is recognized as a factor that could improve the reading disparity among students despite diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Few studies have been conducted that document elementary public school reading teachers' perspectives on differentiating reading instruction and selecting DI strategies for low-performing, low-socioeconomic (LP-LSES) students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies effectively. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Tomlinson's DI model and Vygotsky's social constructivism theory. The research questions focused on the perspectives of third- through fifth-grade reading teachers regarding their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies that increase the reading achievement of their LP-LSES students. Purposeful sampling was used to select 12 elementary reading teachers to participate in semistructured interviews. Emergent themes were identified through thematic analysis, including in vivo coding. The findings were developed and checked for trustworthiness through member checking and thick descriptions. The results showed that: (a) teachers' effectiveness in DI was perceived through years of teaching and training, (b) time was the main challenge, (c) students' self-confidence was a factor in their achievement, and (d) tiered assignments in small groups were the most effective DI strategy. The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing teachers and administrators with a deeper understanding of teachers' knowledge and ability to implement the DI model and identify DI strategies needed to increase the reading achievement of LP-LSES students within school districts.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my three children, Essence, Sianni, and Christopher Jr. Every advancement I make is to show them all that it is possible. I do this to show them that circumstances do not dictate who you are and what you are capable of accomplishing. Hard work, commitment, dedication, determination, and perseverance will keep you moving in the right direction. It was not an easy journey. They were with me and saw how much time I spent working through it. I thank them for allowing me the space to work without too many distractions. I guess you could say “we” did it!

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I want to acknowledge my chair, Dr. Ellen Scales, who practically rescued me during a time when I started to feel that I would never see the end of this study. Because of her willingness to add me to her list of doctoral candidates and her supportive nature from the prospectus to final study, I made it to the end! Thank you. I am beyond grateful and blessed.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge the participants, all 12 of you, who willingly volunteered during a time when education, teaching, and health became all too complicated. You did not have to provide your already crowded and depleted time to my study, but you did. Because of you, I am here today. Thank you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

A reading achievement disparity exists between different socioeconomic groups of students. This disparity is higher among students with low-socioeconomic status (LSES) compared to the national overall student population (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2017). Kena et al. (2015) proposed that low performance could indicate that teachers have trouble identifying appropriate differentiated teaching strategies to assist struggling readers. Differentiated instruction (DI) is known to effectively meet the diverse needs of students, which leads to students' academic achievement (Kotob & Abadi, 2019; Roose et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2001a). In many countries, including the United States, education legislation has recommended or required DI as an approach to teaching and assessing in diverse classrooms at all levels of education (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014; Mills et al., 2014; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Wan, 2016). However, whether and how teachers use DI to address the needs of students is not well understood.

In this study, I focused on understanding the perspectives of elementary reading teachers in public school districts. For this study, *perspective* was defined as “a particular way of thinking about something, especially one that is influenced by one’s beliefs or experiences” (Collins, 2020, p. 1). I explored teachers’ abilities to effectively differentiate reading instructions and provide DI strategies to increase their low-performing, low-socioeconomic (LP-LSES) students’ reading performance. This study may contribute to positive social change by identifying teachers’ knowledge and ability to effectively differentiate reading instructions and strategies to meet the needs of LP-

LSES elementary public-school students (De Jager, 2017; Tomlinson, 2001a). Identifying teachers' perspectives may increase the effectiveness of implementing DI in districts with high populations of LP-LSES students. The study's findings may also reveal challenges teachers encounter as they work with students who struggle with reading and are identified as LP-LSES.

In Chapter 1, I align the study's components, including the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions, and the conceptual framework (Tomlinson, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). The DI model (Tomlinson, 1999), implementation, and strategies are the focus of each section. I also present the research design and methodology, along with the scope and the delimitations of the study.

Background

Public schools all over the United States continuously face the challenge of implementing new mandates based on state and national standards (Dolph, 2017; Miranda et al., 2018). Educators are tasked with ensuring all students meet the learning outcomes and standards despite differing student levels and abilities. Since the inception of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, teachers have been required to create learning activities that prompt higher-level thinking and literacy skills so that students are adequately prepared for college and careers (National Governors Association [NGA], 2010). Reading achievement is acknowledged as a critical influence in school success (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2018; Banerjee, 2016; Kessinger, 2013). However, a lack of improvement in current reading assessment results has raised concerns about reading achievement in the United States (Snyder et al., 2018). Socioeconomic status is

one aspect that is aiding in shaping children's educational opportunities and success (Reardon et al., 2016). National data show that 80% of students from LSES backgrounds are not acquiring proficient reading skills (Guernsey et al., 2016). By the end of the fourth grade, LSES students may be 2 years behind their predominately middle-class peers in reading and math (USDE, 2015). Public school districts with large enrollments of LSES students are greatly affected (USDE, 2017). In a northeastern public-school district, one of the districts where this study occurred, over 50% of the student population is considered LSES. Less than 20% of those students score proficient or above on state and national reading assessments.

DI is credited as one factor that could improve students' reading achievement gap despite socioeconomic backgrounds (Tomlinson, 2001a). Many school administrators consider differentiated approaches to learning and instruction to prevent school failure and maximize student potential instruction (Preston et al., 2016). Although DI strategies have been available to educators for over 15 years, there is little literature about teachers' experiences implementing them (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Additionally, little is known about whether public school teachers are implementing DI and DI strategies or their abilities to implement them effectively to improve the reading achievement of LP-LSES students. In this study, I investigated public school elementary reading teachers' perspectives about their abilities to differentiate reading instruction and implement DI strategies for their LP-LSES students.

Problem Statement

The problem that compelled this study is a gap in research with few studies conducted that document elementary public schools' reading teachers' perspectives regarding their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies for LP-LSES students. In much of the research, researchers have focused on teachers' perspectives of DI for all students in general or students with learning disabilities (Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Rachmawati et al., 2016; Roose et al., 2019). DI is known to effectively meet the diverse needs of students, which leads to students' academic achievement (Kotob & Abadi, 2019; Roose et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2001a). According to Tomlinson (2014), teachers should use various instructional strategies to address children's needs from all backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses. Pham (2012) posited a gap in the literature regarding teacher perceptions toward DI and strategies that influence effective and regular use among elementary school teachers. Through this basic qualitative study, I investigated elementary reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies intended to increase their LP-LSES students' reading achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies to increase the reading achievement of their LP-LSES students. In this study, I focused on 12 third- through fifth-grade reading teachers in LP-LSES public school districts in the northeastern and northwestern areas of the United

States. I used semistructured interviews to collect data to understand teachers' perspectives on differentiation and the strategies they select to increase the reading achievement of LP-LSES students (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Participants' perspectives may also inform the larger literacy field of how teachers meet their LP-LSES students' reading needs.

Research Questions

In this basic qualitative study, I addressed third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives regarding their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies for LP-LSES students. Teachers' perspectives play a significant role in students' learning development (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2017). Teachers' perspectives could explain how they implement DI and how they choose effective DI strategies to meet their students' needs. I used the following research questions to guide this study:

RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework was Tomlinson's (1999) DI model, supported by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism. Tomlinson introduced four components of DI: content, process, product, and the learning environment. Teachers

who implement these components daily develop and demonstrate how skills and concepts can be adjusted to meet all students' needs (Tomlinson, 1999). The DI model relates to this qualitative study approach. My research questions focused on reading teachers' perspectives and their abilities to differentiate reading instruction and DI strategies to increase the achievement of their LP-LSES students. Teachers' responses to the questions revealed their knowledge of DI, including applying the four components when differentiating instruction and strategies.

Differentiated instruction has its foundation in the social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory lies in the social interactional relationship between teacher and student (Lunsford, 2017; Stubeck, 2015). Social constructivism supports the importance of teachers' abilities to guide student growth in constructing new knowledge—the DI components help teachers guide students' growth. Tomlinson uses Vygotsky's (1978) approaches, such as the zone of proximal development and scaffolding, as strategies to aid differentiation. Through the theory of social constructivism and DI implementation, teachers are facilitators and help create collaborative learning environments that directly expose students to materials to meet their individual learning needs. The idea of students learning through social interaction with the teacher and the application of Tomlinson's DI model to meet students' needs supported this study's approach. I also constructed new knowledge from data collected through semistructured interviews with participating teachers.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a basic qualitative research design. Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people view, approach, and make meaning of their experiences and specific phenomena in the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This approach was consistent with my primary focus: to understand third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives of their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies to increase LP-LSES students' achievement. In this qualitative study, I focused on elementary reading teachers in LP-LSES public-school districts in the northeastern and northwestern parts of the United States. I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews with 12 third- through fifth-grade reading teachers from public school districts. This qualitative study's findings may help researchers understand which strategies teachers perceive increase their students' reading achievement. The findings may also help teachers gain confidence in their abilities to meet the reading needs of LP-LSES students.

Definitions

Achievement gap: The disparity in academic achievement between varying demographic and ethnic groups of students (Reardon, 2013).

Differentiated instruction (DI): An instructional model that includes designed lesson plans and groupings based on students' learning styles, shared interests, needs, and readiness (Tomlinson, 2002).

Differentiation: A way of thinking about teaching and learning that values the individual and can be translated into classroom practice in various ways (Tomlinson, 1999).

Low-socioeconomic status (LSES): Minimal access to financial, social, cultural, and human capital resources (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Reading achievement: A student's ability to demonstrate growth on the state and district assessments in reading (USDE, 2015).

Social constructivism: A process that fosters collaboration and knowledge construction through social interactions among peers in their learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

Assumptions

I assumed that all elementary reading teachers would share their perceptions about their abilities to effectively implement DI and strategies they use to meet their LP-LSES students' needs. I assumed that teachers' willingness to participate would not be based on any other motives than a sincere interest in this study. I assumed that teachers' participation would not be influenced by intimidation or coercion from the researcher. I assumed a basic qualitative research design was the best method to solve the research problem and answer the research questions.

Scope and Delimitations

This study's scope consisted of investigating the perceptions of elementary reading teachers and their abilities to differentiate reading instructions and DI strategies to increase their LP-LSES students' reading achievement. For years, LSES students have

scored below the proficiency level on state and national reading assessments compared to their middle- and high-socioeconomic peers. DI is identified as a factor to aid in closing the achievement gap (Tomlinson, 2001a).

Delimitations are within a researcher's control and restrict the study's questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Wargo, 2015). Delimiting factors for this study included choosing the research problem, population, and the conceptual framework. The research problem helped me understand teachers' abilities to differentiate reading instruction and DI strategies for LP-LSES students effectively. Elementary and secondary LSES students are identified as performing low on reading assessments. In this study, I focused on investigating the implementation of DI only at the elementary level, Grades 3 to 5. DI is grounded in constructivism, a significant component in differentiated classrooms to facilitate the learning process.

Limitations

I acknowledge that this study does have limitations. Because I conducted this study with participants in two public-school districts, it does not represent the perceptions of all public-school elementary reading teachers state or nationwide. Teachers in identical teaching situations may have different perceptions and may answer differently. Therefore, this study's findings and conclusions were limited to the context in which this study was conducted.

Significance

This study is significant for its contribution to reading research. The study documents teachers' perspectives and the strategies and approaches used to differentiate

reading lessons for meeting LP-SES students' needs. This study's findings may potentially generate social change in the educational community by identifying teachers' knowledge and ability to effectively differentiate reading instructions and strategies to meet LP-LSES students' needs in elementary public schools (De Jager, 2017; Tomlinson, 2001a). Identifying teachers' perspectives on effective strategies may lead to a broader knowledge base for learner-centered instruction. This research may provide information regarding how teachers can use DI effectively in their elementary classrooms and learn about teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and concerns about implementing DI. It may also help school and district leaders become aware of DI as a possible tool to address reading needs in elementary school classrooms (Deason, 2014).

Summary

The problem that compelled this study was that little is known about elementary public school reading teachers' perspectives regarding their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies for LP-LSES students. The conceptual framework of Tomlinson's (1999) DI model and Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism was used to guide this basic qualitative study to explore teachers' perspectives. Semistructured interviews were conducted to understand and construct knowledge of teachers' perspectives. Positive social change implications include awareness of teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and concerns about implementing DI and school leaders acknowledging DI as a possible tool to address the elementary school reading achievement gap.

In Chapter 2, I review and describe the literature that supported the need for this study. I also explain the search strategy used to conduct the literature review. The literature review includes a review of the existing research on the reading achievement gap and connections to socioeconomic status and researchers who have already contributed to the current literature about DI. The review also provides historical and contemporary perspectives on the implementation and use of DI and DI strategies that can be used with LP-LSES students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem I addressed in this study is a gap in research regarding elementary reading teachers' perspectives and their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instructions and DI strategies to increase their LP-LSES students' achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on effectively differentiating reading instruction and selecting DI strategies to increase the reading achievement of their LP-LSES students. In this chapter, I review the existing literature on the achievement gap, SES, DI, DI strategies, learning approaches, and teachers' perspectives to provide a grounding for the current research. First, I describe the search strategy used to conduct this review of the literature. Next, I present the conceptual framework grounding this study, followed by a literature review on the achievement gap, LSES students reading achievements, the DI model and strategies, learning approaches that implement DI, and teachers' perspectives regarding DI. I conclude the chapter by discussing strategies for implementing DI for LP-LSES students and a chapter summary.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched literature related to reading achievement, LSES, and DI using the Walden University Library and the Google Scholar search engine. Databases accessed through the Walden University Library included Academic Search Complete, EBSCO, Education Research Complete, Education Resources Information Center, SAGE, ProQuest Central, and Walden Dissertations. Keywords used for the initial search included *differentiated instruction, differentiation, achievement gap, socioeconomic*

status and education, low-income students, poverty and students' achievement, and teachers' perceptions. Additional searches included *reading achievement* and *socioeconomic status, differentiated reading instruction, teacher quality, qualitative study,* and other topics. Resources used to explore the topic of differentiation, reading achievement gap, and socioeconomic status included scholarly journals, books, dissertations, and other print and electronic materials. Most of the literature review consisted of literature published within the past 5 years; however, literature that extended over 30 years was also included because it contributed to this study's foundation.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework was Tomlinson's (1999) DI model and Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism. I used the conceptual framework to develop the research questions' alignment with the basic qualitative research design and study methods. A constructivist view helps teachers construct new knowledge and understand how they perceive their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instructions and DI strategies to increase their LP-LSES students' reading achievement. This view also allows teachers to construct new knowledge of the DI model and implementation within public school districts.

The term *DI* has various meanings and concepts for different researchers and educators. Within the practice of DI are also multiple interpretations of its usage. For the sake of this qualitative study, the definition and description of DI are based solely on Tomlinson's (1999) DI model approach. Subban (2006) referred to Tomlinson's approach as a working definition that conveys Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of teacher

and student relationships. Tomlinson's (2017) conceptualization of DI is not individual learning but rather a proactive, collaborative attempt to engage and challenge a wide range of learners. Understanding how teachers perceive DI to address various student needs adds new knowledge to the existing field of education so that other teachers may consider the benefits of implementing and using DI (Tomlinson, 2014).

Tomlinson introduced four components of DI: content, process, product, and the learning environment. Teachers who implement these components daily develop and demonstrate how skills and concepts can be adjusted to meet all students' needs (Tomlinson, 1999). Tomlinson stated that differentiation is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that values the individual and can be translated into classroom practice in many ways. DI relates to this qualitative study's approach because I seek to understand the perspectives of reading teachers and their abilities to differentiate reading instruction and DI strategies to increase their LP-LSES students' achievement.

DI has its foundation in the constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Researchers define *constructivism* as a theory based on the idea that students actively create their knowledge (Bada, 2015). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that knowledge is co-constructed in social environments through social interaction, and both individual and group learning occur socially. This theory lies in the social interactional relationship between teacher and student (Lunsford, 2017; Stubeck, 2015). Social constructivism supports the importance of teachers' abilities to guide student growth in constructing new knowledge. Teachers are facilitators and help create collaborative learning environments that directly expose students to materials to meet their individual learning needs.

Constructivist-based differentiation in the elementary classroom can take many shapes and forms: interest-based grouping; project-based learning, formative assessments that help the teacher gauge individual student knowledge and progress, technology integration to help students work at their own pace on some concepts, small-group instruction for specific skills at ability levels, allowing students choices in what they read, student-led discussion groups or literature circles, and providing a variety of assessment options (Eller et al., 2019; Levy, 2008; Tomlinson, 2014; Wu, 2014).

The idea of learning through social interaction and the application of Tomlinson's DI model to meet students' needs supported this study's approach. Effective differentiation requires teachers to teach differently (Gibson, 2011). Teachers change how teaching and learning happen to improve student performance, including increasing academic achievement. DI is regarded as a complex teaching skill (Deunk et al., 2018). Although teachers continue to familiarize themselves with students' needs, they also acknowledge their need for a greater understanding of DI and its implementation.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

This literature review was driven by the research questions to identify how elementary reading teachers perceive their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and implement DI strategies to meet LP-LSES students' needs. I focused on the achievement gap, socioeconomic status, student achievement, and research regarding the multiple approaches to DI to improve reading skills and DI strategies for LP-LSES students.

Achievement Gap

Achievement gaps are a metric of fundamental importance to U.S. education practice and policy (Soland, 2018). Gap estimates are often used to measure the effectiveness and fairness of the education system at a given point in time, over decades, and children's progress through school. Achievement among groups often differs based on various factors such as low-income status, gender, ethnicity, and race (Hung et al., 2020). Achievement gaps can often be understood by identifying the differences in resources (e.g., financial or academic opportunities) among groups. Valant and Newark's (2016) research findings revealed consistent and robust evidence that the American public is more concerned about wealth-based test score gaps than race- or ethnicity-based gaps. For example, 64% of U.S. adults say it is essential or a high priority to close the poor-wealthy test score gap (Valant & Newark, 2016). In contrast, only 36% and 31% say the same about the Black-White gap and the Hispanic-White gap, respectively (Valant & Newark, 2016).

Socioeconomic Status and Student Achievement

Student achievement measures how much a student masters or learns academic content in a fixed amount of time (Kotob & Abadi, 2019). There are two primary levels of student achievement: low achievers and high achievers. *High achievers* are students who attain high marks or grades by proficiently doing their work or task, whereas *low achievers*, also known as *underachievers* or *slow learners*, are students who fail in arriving at the expected level of performance or do not perform as expected (Kotob & Abadi, 2019). The positive outcomes associated with high achievement are extensive, as

it opens doors to numerous opportunities and experiences that may not otherwise be available or easily accessible to some individuals because of their sociodemographic background (Gordon & Cui, 2018).

The achievement gap between socioeconomic classes in the United States remains as wide as it was in 1966 (Hanushek et al., 2019). In recent studies, researchers have suggested that ongoing socioeconomic differences are at the root of the achievement gap (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018; Robinson, 2016). According to Reardon (2013), one in four students in the United States are poor. Children growing up in poor, lower-income, or LSES households and communities are at higher risk of traumatic stress and other medical problems that can affect brain development (Gordon & Cui, 2018; Hanushek et al., 2019). Higher-income or high socioeconomic status families have access to more enriching schooling environments and medical benefits (Gordon & Cui, 2018; Hanushek et al., 2019). By the end of the fourth grade, LSES students are 2 years behind their predominately middle-class peers in reading and math (USDE, 2015).

Within the nation's large, urban public school districts, the most significant challenges of the achievement gap exist (Reardon, 2013; USDE, 2017). More students are entering public schools from impoverished and low-income families (Blankstein & Noguera, 2012). Owens et al. (2016) estimated that from 1990 to 2010, between-district socioeconomic status segregation in large metropolitan areas increased by approximately 15%, while within-district segregation increased by over 40%. States with the highest levels of between-district segregation also have the highest level of variation in

achievement between districts (Fahle & Reardon, 2018), which shows that recent trends may widen socioeconomic achievement gaps.

Differentiated Instruction

Early researchers found that effective education matters most for underachieving students, i.e., students with less advantaged background characteristics such as LSES or English language learners (Campbell et al., 2004; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). Hidalgo-Cabrillana and Lopez-Mayan (2018) found that, unlike teacher characteristics, instructional practices are significantly related to student reading achievement. Characteristics of quality instructional practice include management of time in the classroom, sensitivity to children's developmental needs, assessment of the classroom's emotional climate, use of ability grouping, and the provision of explicit instructional support (Palacios, 2017). DI is identified as one such instructional practice that can improve student achievement.

Differentiation is a combination of careful progress monitoring and adapting instruction in response (Heitink et al., 2016; Prast et al., 2015). According to Tomlinson et al. (2003), it is,

an approach to teaching in which teachers proactively modify curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address the diverse needs of individual students and small groups of students to maximize the learning opportunity for each student in a classroom. (p. 120)

Birnie (2015) defined differentiation as a process-oriented approach most suitable to classrooms where students have a wide range of ability levels. Heacox (2017) described it

as modifying the content according to individual students' needs, learning styles, or interests. With adequate preparation and support, differentiation can be successful in every classroom regardless of ability.

There is evidence of numerous positive effects of DI implementation in the literature. Valiandes (2015) conducted a quasi-experimental study and created written tests that assessed students' literacy and comprehension levels. Students in classrooms where teachers implemented DI performed better than those who did not receive DI (Valiandes, 2015). Tulbure (2011) explored the effects of DI on preservice teachers' academic achievement and found that DI implementation results in higher academic scores for students. Beloshitskii and Dushkin (2005) and Johnson (2003) stated that DI resulted in better overall performance than a traditional teaching style, higher student engagement, interest, and satisfaction. McAdamis (2001) found that students who engage in DI are more motivated and enthusiastic learners. Wilujeng (2012) found that DI helped maximize student potential.

DI implementation results in significant reading progress (Firmender et al., 2013) and positively impacts student literacy (Tobin & McInnes, 2008). Reis et al. (2011) and Baumgartner et al. (2003) reported positive effects of DI on students' achievement, specifically their reading fluency and comprehension. Bradfield (2012) studied the effect of DI on struggling readers' reading achievement in first grade in a low-performing school. The results showed that the use of DI best practices improved students' reading skills.

Teachers who use DI regularly in their classrooms find it useful and efficient (Tomlinson, 2014). According to Dack (2018), teachers who differentiate learning recognize that students come from various backgrounds and enter learning experiences at different starting points. Teachers recognize that students benefit from a variety of options to access information and demonstrate learning. However, teachers' implementation of DI in their daily teaching practice remains critical (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Although DI is not new, the extent to which it can be effective and how it is most effective are still being learned as more teachers attempt to implement it within their classrooms.

DI relates to teacher professionalism (Tomlinson, 1999). When teachers reach out to an individual or small group of students to create the best learning experience possible, that is differentiation. Expert teachers are attentive to students' varied learning needs (Danielson, 1996); to differentiate instruction, then, is to become a more competent, creative, and professional educator. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) proposed that teachers must attend to four specific elements for the quality of learning to be maximized: (a) the students, (b) classroom, (c) content, and (d) instruction. Teachers should differentiate according to each student's readiness, interest, and learning style (Tomlinson, 1999).

The effectiveness and knowledge of instructional strategies in implementing a differentiated classroom remain a concern, often resulting in DI becoming too broad a term that lacks articulation between strategies (Anderson, 2007). Tomlinson (1999) sought to clarify this problem and has shown that it is possible to identify the components

and principles of DI. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) and Tomlinson (2014) identified the elements that should be differentiated and which student characteristics must be considered in this differentiation process. DI strategies can be grouped into four classroom components: content, process, product, and learning environments. These four concepts are the anchor for the practical application of DI.

Differentiating by Content

Content means the knowledge, understanding, and skills (KUD) students need to learn (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Differentiating content implies that teachers can vary the level of complexity (Taylor, 2015). Teachers adapt or modify what is taught in the lesson and how students access the materials they want students to learn (Tomlinson, 2001b). Teachers can differentiate reading content at the elementary level by meeting with small groups of students to re-teach skills, put reading materials on tape, vary vocabulary lists based on students' readiness levels, and assign reading buddies (Tomlinson, 1999).

Differentiating by Process

Tomlinson (2001b) stated that *process* is how the learners process or understand the concepts or skills being introduced. Differentiating the process means that teachers can vary the learning activities based on students' interests or learning styles (Taylor, 2015; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). The process is differentiated by how the teachers deliver the instruction and the strategies students use to explore the content (Tomlinson, 2001b). When teachers differentiate the process, it permits students to deliver the same output or product in various ways (Kotob & Abadi, 2019). Teachers can differentiate the

process or activities at the elementary level by using tiered activities where all learners work with the same essential understandings and skills but proceed with additional support, challenge, or complexity. Teachers can also provide interest centers that encourage students to explore topics of interest. Additionally, teachers can vary the length of time to provide additional support for struggling learners (Tomlinson, 2000).

Differentiating by Product

Differentiating *product* means that students choose how they demonstrate what they have learned (Taylor, 2015). This phase of differentiating is known as *evaluation* (Tomlinson et al., 2003). When differentiating products, teachers follow the same principles (skills or concepts) for each student; however, they give their students multiple ways to express their knowledge or mastery of content (IRIS Center, 2018). An example of differentiating products at the elementary level that teachers can implement is giving students the option to express required learning. Teachers can use rubrics that match students' skill levels. They can also allow students to work alone or in a small group to complete their product (Tomlinson, 2000). Draeger and Wilson (2016) stated that providing students with choices can be motivating and empowering.

Differentiating by Learning Environment

Learning environments refer to a safe and non-threatening environment that promotes student learning (Gaitas & Martins, 2017). Teachers in differentiated classrooms have high expectations for all learners. The learning environment includes the physical space and the routines and procedures used to guide the learning (Tomlinson, 2014). Student success is dependent on teachers' abilities to develop learning

environments that allow every child to access the necessary educational supports (Graves, 2016). Examples of differentiating learning environment at the elementary level include: making sure there are places in the room to work quietly and without distraction, as well as places that invite student collaboration; providing materials that reflect a variety of cultures and home settings; or setting out clear guidelines for independent work that matches individual needs (Tomlinson, 2000).

Differentiated Instructional Strategies

Differentiation refers to the practice of implementing a variety of instructional techniques, strategies, and lesson adaptations to meet the diverse learning needs of all students in the classroom, allowing students to construct knowledge in ways that work for them. The most critical factor in differentiation that helps students achieve more is what teachers differentiate: high-quality curriculum and instruction (Tomlinson, 2000). To implement DI effectively to meet students' needs, teachers must have an in-depth knowledge of the curriculum and understand the instruction's essential questions (Callahan et al., 2015). The goal of DI strategies is to ensure that all students are engaged in the learning process by providing tasks that match their individual needs (Eller et al., 2019). Taylor (2015) posited that when students are taught at their readiness level using appropriate instructional strategies, there is an increase in student achievement.

Teachers can differentiate instruction in a variety of ways. Kane (2017) suggested that the most effective strategies for implementing DI in classrooms are: established learning agendas and contracts, centers, tiered instruction, complex instruction, and point-of-entry assignments. Heacox (2017) suggested reading a specific passage and answering

questions that are grounded within the text. Taylor (2015) recommended that teachers begin each school year by reviewing students' profiles and identifying students' learning strengths and weaknesses. Then, use the information from the learning profiles to implement DI strategies within their lesson plans.

Tomlinson (2000) posited that there is no recipe for differentiation. However, the following broad principles and characteristics help establish a defensible differentiated classroom: ongoing assessment tightly linked to instruction; teachers working hard to ensure “respectful activities” for all students; and flexible grouping being a hallmark of the class. The following DI strategies were explored in detail as they pertain to LP-LSES students: flexible grouping and tiered instruction.

Flexible Grouping

Flexible grouping was defined by Radencich et al. (1995) as “grouping that is not static, where members of the reading group change frequently” (p. 11). The authors stated that when teachers plan for flexible grouping, they consider each grouping approach's strengths and weaknesses and then put them together to allow the teacher to meet the needs of the classroom best. The groups are formed and dissolved as needs change to allow for maximum flexibility. Flexible grouping provides opportunities for students with similar learning abilities to work together (Cox, 2018). It may consist of small groups, partners, student- or teacher-led groups.

Many researchers identified the benefits of flexible grouping for reading achievement. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) recommended using flexible grouping for reading instruction because it allows teachers to provide instruction in students' specific

skills. Skindrud and Gersten (2006) analyzed the effectiveness of reading programs at LSES schools. They found that scores on standardized tests reflected a preference for flexible grouping over the more traditional ability grouping. Schlag (2009) and Jecks (2011) both determined that flexible grouping effectively increases elementary school students' reading performance compared to other grouping formats. Perry (2012) identified flexible grouping as an approach that builds skills and attitudes to prepare students to work effectively in a global society.

Tiered Instruction

The *tiered instruction*, or multi-tiered system of support approach, provides prevention and intervention using ongoing assessment and instructional support that range in intensity and strive to support students with reading difficulties (Jimerson et al., 2016). This DI approach sorts students by their current understanding of content but varies the process and product based on their readiness. One type of tiered instruction is Campbell's (2009) three-tiered model, called To-With-By. In this model, students move from whole group instruction to independent or individualized instruction. Throughout the stages, which occur sequentially, teachers conduct formative assessments to identify and address students' learning needs. At the Tier I stage, students receive direct instruction, and the teacher performs screening procedures and uses formative assessment to identify the needs of individual learners. At the Tier II stage, students work in flexible groups, and the teacher conducts a rigorous formative assessment to understand the learner's strengths and develop further plans for DI (Coleman & Hughes, 2009). Students are offered more individualized instruction at the Tier III stage based on their needs and

abilities. More assessments may be conducted at this stage to determine if students need further services outside of the general classroom.

Another form of tiered instruction is Preszler's (2006) approach and is related to adjusting tasks to meet learners' needs. This approach is linked to Bloom's Taxonomy, where Tier I is understanding and remembering, Tier II is application and analysis, and Tier III is evaluation and creativity (Aitbayeva & Olzhayeva, 2018). With this model, students must master the lower-level skills before moving to a higher tier stage.

Numerous studies on differentiation support the use of tiered instruction in the classroom and saw many benefits, including its ability to enhance learners' engagement and achievement (Aitbayeva & Olzhayeva, 2018). Richards and Omdal (2007) investigated the impact of tiered instruction on lower and higher achieving learners. They concluded that differentiated methods, especially differentiation by content and process, increased the academic achievement of low-achieving learners. Stoiber and Gettinger (2016) found that tiered instructions eliminate students having to exhibit low achievement before services are provided. Fien et al. (2010) stated that utilizing a multi-tiered approach as early intervention increases students' oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. Hancock (2010) linked increases in the academic achievement of students in all subjects to tiered instructions.

Learning Approaches with DI Implementation

Learner-Centered Approach

McCombs (1997) defined a learner-centered (LC) approach as a foundation for clarifying what is needed to create positive learning contexts to increase the likelihood

that more students will experience success. The LC approach was offered as a model for countering classroom challenges because of its capability for meeting diverse needs with specific emphasis on low-performing learners (Brown, 2003). The LC approach puts students at the center of classroom organization and respects their learning needs, strategies, and styles. Within an LC approach, a teacher's responsibility is to motivate and support individual students in their learning. Teachers engage students in metacognitive activities and work collaboratively to promote student self-reflection and mastery of learning concepts (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Cullen et al. (2012) defined LC practices in three domains: (a) creation of community, (b) sharing of power, and (c) use of assessment for continuous improvement. Community building is a critical component of an LC curriculum and is essential for students to learn from one another, collaborate, and feel safe in the learning environment. Students and teachers share power in the freedom of choice in the process, believing the activity has value and deciding they can conquer the challenges. Ongoing assessment is carefully crafted to track learning progress and provide feedback on whether the learning environment has the intended effect.

In the LC environment, teachers participate in professional development to learn how to differentiate instruction. With the LC approach, teachers bring content knowledge and design flexibility for learners to construct their learning. The emphasis is on engaging students in learning to understand and think before knowledge of facts and skills (Brown, 2003).

Personalized Learning Approach

Personalized learning provides quality instruction that meets students' needs by activating higher-order thinking in a collaborative learning environment (Rutledge et al., 2015). The characteristics of personalized learning are (a) student voice and ownership, (b) co-creation of personalized learning plans, (c) social construction through flexible pathways, and (d) self-discovery through a competency-based system of accountability (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017; Olofson et al., 2018). Teachers identify the student's needs, modify the learning to meet the needs, and encourage student involvement by listening to their voice and choice of content in which they are personally interested (Olofson et al., 2018). Teachers and students create personalized learning plans, which include steps to obtaining the product's desired results or performance (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Students create goals and self-assess their learning based on their current strengths and growth (Hanover Research, 2015). Teachers meet with students weekly to provide ongoing and progressive feedback on learning goals (Basham et al., 2016).

Inquiry-Based Learning Approach

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is a student-centered approach that occurs through the inquiry process (Condliffe et al., 2016). IBL is often referred to as learning through doing, where students are engaged in sense-making through knowledge construction (Buchanan et al., 2016). IBL is known to foster deep and transferable learning and develop higher-order thinking skills as students go through the inquiry process (Leggett & Harrington, 2019). Students sort through complex issues from diverse perspectives,

draw their conclusions and construct knowledge for themselves and their audience (Partnership for 21st Century Schools, 2013).

Project-Based Learning Approach

Project-based learning (PBL) is another instructional approach that derives from IBL. PBL is described as a teaching practice where students are engaged as active participants in their learning (Buchanan et al., 2016). Herron et al. (2008) defined PBL as an individual or group activity that proceeds over time, resulting in a product, presentation, or performance. PBL uses in-depth projects to promote children's intellectual development by engaging their minds in observing and investigating selected aspects of their experience and environment (Catapano & Gray, 2015). The teacher's role through the PBL inquiry process is that of a facilitator. Teachers provide feedback to assist the students' construction of knowledge, allowing students to construct their understanding through the process (Buchanan et al., 2016; Condliffe et al., 2016).

PBL is stated to positively impact academic achievement, both when comparing against standardized achievement tests and a student's ability to demonstrate their depth of understanding content (Leggett & Harrington, 2019). Cervantes et al. (2015) conducted a causal-comparative research design. They found that seventh and eighth graders had more significant gains in the state standardized test for reading and math when using a PBL approach than the control group who did not learn through PBL. Wekesa and Ongunya (2016) concluded their empirical evidence that not only did PBL lead to better academic results, but students who were exposed to PBL demonstrated a sophisticated ability to construct knowledge. The twenty-first-century skills were

enhanced when a PBL approach was employed to teach LSES students (Holmes & Hwang, 2016).

Teachers' Beliefs and Perspectives

Studies suggest that teachers directly contribute to student achievement (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2017; Kane, 2017; Protik et al., 2015). Teachers believe that how they teach is significant to students' learning process (Logan, 2014). Teachers' perceptions are constructed as they experience implementing instruction (Adams & Martray, 1981). Yeh (2019) used a value-added modeling approach to validate and confirm that estimates of teacher contributions to student achievement predict actual gains in student achievement. Teachers are the primary sources for implementing DI as it applies to various student backgrounds and cultures (Lauria, 2010; Prince, 2011). Vanlaar et al. (2016) found a more considerable teacher effect variance in low-SES schools than high-SES schools.

Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiated Instruction

Tomlinson (1995, 1999, 2000) conducted numerous studies on how teachers perceive DI and suggested teachers' perceptions as important in determining the level, regularity, and effectiveness in which they differentiate instruction. Some teachers perceived DI as a difficult concept to implement, while others welcomed change and leaned toward adopting differentiation (Tomlinson, 1995). Teachers perceived barriers to implementation due to lack of time, training, and resources (Lunsford, 2017; Varajic, 2017). Teachers were more likely to continue with differentiation if they had previously experienced success (Tomlinson, 1995).

Fullan (2007) suggested four factors that affect how teachers modify their practices, ideas, selection of instructional materials, and learning outcomes to effect change: need, clarity, complexity, quality, and punctuality. Teachers' perception must continue to be that differentiation is addressing real needs and that teachers are making progress toward making it happen (Fullan, 2007). Teachers must have clarity on what they are supposed to be doing differently to combat issues (Paladina, 2015). Teachers must understand the degree of difficulty needed to make a change (Fullan, 2007). Teachers must understand the change as having real, tangible benefits and usefulness to them and their students (Fullan, 2007).

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 contained a review of the literature regarding research on the achievement gap in reading at the elementary level. In this section I also examined the correlation of the achievement gap to the socioeconomic status of students. The literature review showed evidence that many studies have been conducted focusing on the effectiveness of DI to increase academic performance. The literature indicated that many teachers from all education levels struggle with DI implementation due to a lack of knowledge, time, and resources. There were notable gaps in the literature regarding the use of DI, specifically in reading classrooms with LP-LSES students. There were also gaps in the literature regarding elementary reading teachers' perspectives and experience with effectively implementing the DI model and DI strategies. The literature provided much quantitative data but few qualitative. With this basic qualitative study, I contributed to understanding the literature gaps associated with elementary school reading teachers'

ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and implement DI strategies effectively for their LP-LSES students.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies to increase the reading achievement of their LP-LSES students. In this chapter, I present the plans I followed in conducting the research, a description of my role as the researcher, and how I identified and selected the study participants. In the next sections of the chapter, I describe the interview protocol I employed in the study, details and justification of the data collection procedures, and an outline of the process for analyzing the collected data. In the final sections of this chapter, I present the means to establish the findings' trustworthiness and a description of the procedures I employed to meet appropriate ethical standards for participants' protection and safety.

Research Design and Rationale

In this study, I addressed 12 third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives regarding their ability to effectively differentiate reading instructions and select DI strategies for LP-LSES students. Two research questions were used to guide the study:

RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

I used a basic qualitative research method and design for this study. Qualitative research incorporates multiple perspectives. Van Manen (1990) defined *qualitative* as “an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring” (p. 520). Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people view, approach, and make meaning of their experiences and specific phenomena within the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This approach was consistent with this doctoral study’s primary focus: to understand third- through fifth-grade reading teachers’ perspectives of their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies to increase LP-LSES students’ achievement.

In a basic qualitative study, the researcher is a primary instrument for data collection and data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative design provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena in their contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) and allows researchers to generate in-depth data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research incorporates methods such as interviews and field observations. A qualitative research design has a flexible structure as it can be constructed and reconstructed (Maxwell, 1992). Therefore, the participants have enough freedom to determine what is consistent (Flick, 1998).

In quantitative studies, researchers attempt to investigate the answers to questions starting with how many, how much, and to what extent (Rasinger, 2013). The outcomes of quantitative studies are based on generalizations obtained from data and involve testing a theory according to a hypothesis (Yin, 2014). The method lays heavy stress on

measuring variables and leaves out the common meanings of social phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Quantitative research is conducted to focus on social behavior aspects that can be quantified and patterned rather than interpreting the meanings people bring to their actions (Rahman, 2017).

Having reviewed the two paradigms, I selected a basic qualitative design for this study. With a basic qualitative design, I generated in-depth data about participants' experiences and their perspectives. I also collected a detailed description of the participants' feelings and opinions and interpreted the meanings of their actions. This design provided me with a deeper understanding of elementary reading teachers' perspectives about their ability to effectively differentiate reading instructions and DI strategies for their LP-LSES students.

Role of the Researcher

I used qualitative research procedures and practices to understand elementary reading teachers' perspectives about their ability to effectively differentiate reading instructions and DI strategies for their LP-LSES students. According to Hatch (2002), the primary data for qualitative research are gathered directly by the researcher. I was the sole person responsible for collecting and analyzing data and conducting interviews with participants. Therefore, my role as a researcher also included data collector, analyzer, and interpreter throughout this study.

As a data collector, I scheduled and conducted interviews. When using qualitative methods to collect data, ethical issues may arise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, I was responsible for ensuring and maintaining participants' comfort, privacy, and

confidentiality throughout the study. Participants were reminded that the study was voluntary, and they were permitted to end their participation at any time. Participants who agreed to conduct interviews were briefed on the study's purpose, how the data would be collected, and how their information would be stored during and after the study. Once data were collected, my role as analyzer and interpreter commenced. The recordings from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

Merriam and Grenier (2019) stated that in a qualitative study, the researcher might have some biases about the topic being studied; therefore, the researcher needs to consider the possibilities that the bias could affect the data's trustworthiness. I am a reading teacher in a public school district and may have had a collegial relationship with potential participants. However, I do not serve as a leader or administrator in any capacity. Therefore, I had no position of authority over the participants.

Methodology

Participant Selection

I used purposeful sampling for this study. *Purposeful sampling* is a procedure used in qualitative research where a researcher intentionally chooses participants to gather information about a phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is not used to obtain a large amount of data but to select specific participants who would best provide information to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2009). It is best to select knowledgeable and experienced participants on the topic to build credibility for the study (Creswell, 2012). The criteria for participant selection were as follows: (a) be employed as an elementary reading teacher at an LP-

LSES public school district; (b) be a third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade reading teacher; and (c) have at least 3 years of experience as an elementary reading teacher within an LP-LSES public school.

This study's sampling size was 12 third- through fifth-grade reading teachers in an LP-LSES public school district in the northeastern and northwestern areas of the United States. The sampling size was informed by the research objective, research questions, and the research design (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The number of people required to make an adequate sample for qualitative research can vary from one to 100 or more (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). However, the suggested size to reach in-depth saturation is 12 (Adler & Adler, 1987; Guest et al., 2006).

Before identifying, contacting, and recruiting participants, I gained approval from Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct my study. Once approval was granted (approval number: 01-07-21-0337067), I used social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to post my invitation flyers and recruit participants. I also used snowball sampling (Marcus et al., 2017), which entailed participants sharing the invitation with their personal and professional network.

Instrumentation

Researchers conducting qualitative studies have used interviews to explore teachers' perceptions and practices (Bobis et al., 2016; McClintic & Petty, 2015; Sanchez et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2015). Interviews are the most common method of qualitative data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing in qualitative research allows researchers to consider another person's perceptions of the topic of interest (Patton,

2002). The primary method for data collection in this basic qualitative study was semistructured interviews. *Semistructured interviews* incorporate a mix of more or less structured questions, which can be used flexibly to build rapport and collect data from each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using semistructured interviews helps capture the perspectives, experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs of a research phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

I used a self-developed semistructured interview protocol (Appendix A) that introduced and explained the purpose of the study and the interview, along with a list of questions to use as a guide (Lodico et al., 2010). A series of questions were developed in alignment with the research questions. The questions focused on addressing elementary reading teachers' perspectives regarding their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and DI strategies to meet their LP-LSES students' needs. The questions during the semistructured interviews were open-ended. Open-ended questions provide more in-depth responses from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Yin, 2014). In-depth responses from semistructured interviews ensure the sufficiency of data collection to answer the research questions.

The dangers to internal validity were minimized by a random selection of elementary reading teachers from public school districts. The data collected were analyzed as soon as they were collected. The literature review minimized threats to external validity as it builds on previous studies related to teachers' perceptions regarding DI. The findings of this study were compared to existing studies in the literature. I also

tried to identify how this study's results could be generalized to teachers' perspectives before and after third to fifth grade regarding DI and DI strategies.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The procedures for recruitment began once Walden University granted IRB approval. Upon approval, an invitation flyer was posted on all social media platforms to recruit elementary public-school teachers. Once teachers responded with interest to volunteer, a copy of the informed consent form was sent to their personal emails. A description of the study and requirements for participation was also attached to the consent form. Potential participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) employed as an elementary reading teacher at an LP-LSES public school district; (b) a third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade reading teacher; and (c) had at least 3 years of experience as an elementary reading teacher within an LP-LSES public school. Teachers acknowledged that they met the criteria by self-selecting to participate in the study voluntarily and replied with the statement, "I consent," from their personal emails. All subsequent communication was conducted using participants' personal emails. After informed consent was obtained, arrangements were made via personal emails with each eligible participant to set up a date and time for the interview.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and audio-recorded for later transcription. *Zoom* is a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service offering features including online meetings, group messaging services, and secure recording of sessions (Archibald et al., 2019; Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). Interviews were scheduled at a time that was convenient for each participant and lasted

approximately 45 minutes. After the interview, participants were offered the opportunity to schedule a brief 15–20 minutes follow-up meeting to discuss any post-interview questions, thoughts, and clarifications. Each interview participant was identified with a numeric pseudonym (Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3) to protect participants' identities and facilitate data coding. Debriefing procedures regarding participants' rights to withdraw their data from the study or exit the study at any time were outlined in the informed consent and reviewed before the start and conclusion of each participants' interview session.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis is the process of converting raw interview data into evidence-based interpretations for published reports (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Data analysis is an essential process for all studies and provides the researcher with an in-depth understanding of the data (Yin, 2014). This study was conducted to understand elementary reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies to meet the LP-LSES students' needs. To better understand their perspectives, I used the qualitative research method of semistructured interviews. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

First, I invited potential participants through social media platforms. Interested potential participants messaged me. I selected participants using purposeful sampling from two public school districts in the northeastern and northwestern areas of the United States. Purposeful sampling is a procedure used in qualitative research to deliberately choose participants to gather information about a phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I chose 12 elementary reading teachers from school districts in the northeastern and northwestern areas of the United States as participants.

Then, data were collected from individual semistructured interviews to address the research questions (see Appendix C for data collection timeline). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and saved in an electronic file. A log was kept for organizing the recordings and transcripts with dates and times. I listened to each recording and transcribed the contents verbatim. Participants were contacted for member checking of transcripts.

Next, data were analyzed through thematic analysis and coding that focused on the perspectives of participants. *Thematic analysis* involves noting relationships, similarities, and differences in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As part of the thematic analysis, transcripts were printed for coding. Data were initially coded using the In Vivo coding approach. I also applied the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which involves going through the data continuously, comparing each element of the data and creating categories to code. A second round of coding was employed using axial coding to identify patterns within the categories of codes. From the constant comparison and coding, I marked my data with codes to eventually emerge with themes

that captured and summarized the data's contents (Thomas, 2017). The thematic analysis revealed patterns, commonalities, and differences among participants' responses.

Throughout the analysis of data, I looked for evidence of discrepant cases. *Discrepant cases* are data that may dispute the findings or misalign with emerging themes (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Though most responses were similar and aligned with the emerging themes, there were two instances where further information had to be gathered from participants to clarify discrepancies. The discrepant cases are further explained in the study's results and findings.

Trustworthiness

To ensure reliability in qualitative research, an examination of trustworthiness is crucial (Golafshani, 2003). Trustworthiness, or validity, is an approach to assessing a study's rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers assess trustworthiness through four standards: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981).

Credibility

"Credibility is the researcher's ability to consider all of the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 188). Qualitative researchers attempt to establish credibility by implementing validity strategies such as triangulation, member checks, thick descriptions, discussing discrepant cases, or peer reviews. One way I ensured credibility within my study was through member checks. Member checks, or participant validation, are a strategy that researchers "check in" with participants about different aspects of the

research to gauge how they think and feel and verify the accuracy of statements and transcripts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checks the most critical validity measure used to establish credibility.

Transferability

“Transferability is how qualitative studies can be applicable, or transferable, to broader contexts while still maintaining their context-specific richness” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 189). Methods for achieving transferability include having thick descriptions of the data that may allow others to transfer aspects of the study design and findings. I used thick descriptions within my research to ensure transferability. Thick description means to thoroughly and clearly describe the study’s contextual factors, participants, and experiences to produce thick interpretations and findings (Guba, 1981).

Dependability

“Dependability” refers to the consistency and stability of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research studies are considered dependable when researchers can provide reasonable arguments for how and why data is collected. It entails triangulation methods or a well-articulated rationale to confirm that the appropriate data collection plan was created to answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure dependability within my study, I provided consistency within my data analysis process and identified themes and patterns from participants’ interviews. I also checked for discrepancies throughout to identify any inconsistencies within the study.

Confirmability

“Confirmability” considers the idea that “qualitative researchers do not claim to be objective” (Guba, 1981, p. 89). However, they seek confirmable data that is an objective representation of reality, not biased by the researcher’s subjective views (Kornbluh, 2015). To ensure confirmability within my study, I used member checks. Member checking allowed participants to confirm the accuracy of the data collection and interpretations.

Ethical Procedures

In all research studies, ethical issues must be considered. Ethical research must reflect the principles of ensuring all participants’ safety and protection and the study’s integrity. The first step to prevent ethical issues was to gain approval from Walden University’s IRB before conducting the study. Upon approval, the next step required all participants to provide informed consent to participate in the study. Informed consent involved full knowledge of the study, including its purpose, standard procedures, duration, ability to decline participation, and withdrawal from the study once it had begun. No participant was coerced to participate in the study further.

All efforts were made to ensure the research setting’s privacy and confidentiality to minimize the participants’ risk (Burkholder et al., 2016). I used pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities. Hard copies of the study data were kept locked and secured in a file cabinet at the researcher’s home. Electronic files were kept on a password-protected personal laptop. Only the researcher had access to all data. All data collected during the study will be kept confidential and secure for a minimum of 5 years after completing the

study and subsequently destroyed. I will destroy all hard copies of interview transcripts, video and audio recordings, flash drives, and any other storage devices used during the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a detailed description and justification of the research methods used to conduct a basic qualitative study of elementary reading teachers' perspectives about their abilities to differentiate reading instruction and DI strategies. A basic qualitative research design with semistructured interviews was selected as the appropriate method to collect data to address the research questions for this study. Using semistructured interviews is pivotal and intentional for collecting an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of differentiating reading instruction and implementing DI strategies. Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method to identify elementary reading teachers who work in classrooms with LP-LSES students within public-school districts. Careful consideration was given to prevent ethical issues. Interview data were analyzed to generate themes and meanings associated with teacher perspectives and knowledge of DI strategies and implementation.

The results of this study are addressed in Chapter 4. First, I describe the qualitative study setting, followed by details of the data collection, data analysis, and results. Lastly, I present evidence of trustworthiness, concluding with the chapter summary.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies to increase the reading achievement of their LP-LSES students. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

In Chapter 4, I present a detailed description of the data collection and data analysis procedures. This chapter also contains the process involved in ensuring the research study's trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with the findings, data that support the findings, and a summary of the chapter.

Setting

At the time of the participant selection for this study, teaching was no longer conducted in physical classrooms but at home remotely. A global pandemic, known as COVID-19, had spread throughout the world, forcing most school districts in the United States to close school buildings and switch to distance learning. Distance learning was a new way of teaching and learning for most teachers and students (Daniel, 2020). The selected organization for the study was no longer accepting new researchers to collect

data within their schools. Due to this change in circumstance, the participant recruitment process and selection criteria were expanded to include all elementary reading teachers from public school districts across the United States. The pandemic, however, did not affect my data collection tool, as teachers were well-acclimated to using the Zoom conference platform to teach and conduct meetings.

I used purposeful sampling to select specific participants who would best provide information to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2009). I recruited participants through social media platforms and snowball sampling. Twelve elementary reading teachers from across three public school districts consented to participate in the study. All participants met the established criteria of being currently employed in a public school district, teaching third- to fifth-grade reading, and had taught elementary reading for at least 3 years. Of the 12 teachers, only two participants had taught reading for 3 to 5 years. Most teachers had taught elementary reading for 5 or more years. Two participants had been teaching elementary reading for over 20 years. Nine of the participants had taught reading across a three or more grade span (See Table 1).

Table 1*Participants' Years of Teaching Reading and Grades*

| Participants | Years of teaching reading | Grade(s) |
|--------------|---------------------------|----------|
| Teacher 1 | 5 | 3rd–5th |
| Teacher 2 | 16 | 2nd–5th |
| Teacher 3 | 12 | K–4th |
| Teacher 4 | 12 | K–5th |
| Teacher 5 | 26 | 2nd–5th |
| Teacher 6 | 4 | 3rd–5th |
| Teacher 7 | 13 | 4th–5th |
| Teacher 8 | 16 | 1st–4th |
| Teacher 9 | 10 | 5th |
| Teacher 10 | 24 | 1st–4th |
| Teacher 11 | 4 | 3rd |
| Teacher 12 | 5 | 4th |

Data Collection

This study's data collection began after IRB approval on January 7, 2021 and ended on February 28, 2021. I collected interview data from 12 participants as part of a basic qualitative design to address the research questions. I uploaded my invitation flyer to social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, to recruit participants. Participants were also recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique in which the researcher accesses participants through other participants' contact information (Marcus et al., 2017; Noy, 2008). Participants were encouraged to share the invitation flyers through their personal and professional networks. Potential participants voluntarily emailed me if they were interested in participating.

Once potential participants responded to my invitation flyer, I emailed them my informed consent form to provide the study's background, confirm they met the selection criteria, and explain the study's voluntary nature and confidentiality. Upon participants' consent to proceed with the study, I discussed the interview process with them. All participants agreed to a one-on-one semistructured interview lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Participants also agreed to a follow-up call to review, confirm, and edit responses if necessary. All participants sent an email of consent and confirmation for a scheduled time.

Most interviews were conducted over the weekends. Three participants scheduled interview times during a weekday, after school hours. All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded via Zoom. Before the start of each interview, participants were informed that the interview would be audio-recorded. Participants were asked if they wished to proceed before the interview began. All interviews were completed during one session, lasting 30-45 minutes. Once interviews were completed, I uploaded the recordings to a transcription service called Otter.ai. The service automatically transcribed the recording verbatim. To check for transcription accuracy, I listened to the recording after it was transcribed and edited as needed.

Each participant was given a unique identifier (Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, etc.), and identifying information was removed from the transcripts to maintain confidentiality. Participants' responses were then downloaded and organized into a Microsoft Word document. Each participant was emailed a copy of their transcript for member-checking purposes. Participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy and were

encouraged to add additional comments if needed. All participants confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts and made no further comments.

Once all transcripts had been finalized and checked by members, I created a matrix to organize the interview responses under each question. For example, under the first research question, I created a roll for the first interview question. Each question included each participant's response to that question. Table 2 displays a sample of the matrix.

Table 2

Sample Matrix of Interview Data Organization

| |
|--|
| RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students? |
| R1Q1: How would you describe your experience with differentiation in the classroom? |
| T1: I would describe it as a journey. |
| T2: I would say that I'm well versed in it. |
| T3: I would say that I am pretty comfortable with differentiating in the classroom. |
| T4: I just feel like it takes a lot of planning and a lot of time to analyze data to figure out how, when you are teaching, how to differentiate instruction for students that may, you know, may need it. |

There were few variations and unusual circumstances encountered in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3. Due to the global pandemic, I was not able to access any professional organization to recruit participants. Instead, participants were recruited through the posting of my invitation flyer on social media platforms. I also used snowball sampling, which included participants sharing the invitation flyer with their network of teachers. Although the recruitment of participants changed, the selection

of participants remained intact. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, and all semistructured interviews were audio-recorded and conducted via Zoom. All participating teachers had been teaching online for one semester of the 2020 to 2021 school year when I conducted the interviews. Some teachers had just received notices from their district's administrators that they would be returning to in-person learning for the next semester.

Data Analysis

The process of data collection and analysis were integrative and iterative. The integrative approach involves “understanding how all aspects of the research process shape the nature, scope, and content of the data set and is vital to the data analysis process” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 223). Engaging in iterative data analysis means harnessing the various data sources and processes as vital parts of a meaning-making process to notice their refinement as emergent and responsive to what is being learned in real time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data were analyzed inductively to seek emerged themes using the coding process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves the process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The step-by-step approach for the data analysis process was completed through the following steps: (a) prepared data for analysis (interview transcription), (b) conducted a preliminary analysis of the data, (c) grouped preliminary codes into categories, and (d) grouped categories into themes.

Step 1: Preparation for Data Analysis

Step 1 of the data analysis process was preparing the data for analysis. I uploaded the audio recordings to the transcription service, Otter.ai, to create transcripts. I checked for accuracy by reading the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings and edited any misunderstood or misplaced words or phrases. I also began familiarizing myself with the data as I transcribed the interviews verbatim. I then downloaded them to Microsoft Word. I emailed each participant a copy of their transcript to confirm for accuracy and additional comments. Once each participant confirmed their transcript's accuracy, I created a matrix to organize participants' responses by research questions.

Step 2: Preliminary Analysis and Coding of Data

Step 2 of the data analysis process entailed a preliminary analysis of the data. First, I reread each participant's response to continue familiarizing myself with the data. Once the data were compiled and organized by research questions, I began disassembling the data through the process of coding. Coding is used in thematic analysis to identify similarities and differences in the data (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I began my initial coding process by using the In Vivo coding approach (Saldana, 2016). In Vivo coding uses the verbatim words or phrases from the participants' responses to describe the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I read through each response, highlighting frequently used words and significant phrases from participants' responses. I used one highlight color for the preliminary analysis of the data. Once the preliminary analysis was completed for all questions and participants' responses, I read through all highlighted responses looking for similarities and differences. Using the In Vivo coding approach, I derived initial codes

from each participant's literal words to capture the essence of what they were communicating (see Table 3).

Table 3

In Vivo Coding

| RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students? | |
|---|---|
| In Vivo Codes | Sample Excerpts |
| Trial and error | <i>So it took a little while, I'd say the first two years of really trial and error, to figure out when I was teaching reading, what to do, how to effectively differentiate for my students, especially being that I teach upper elementary. (T1)</i> |
| Lack of Training/ Lack of Experience | <i>I would say my effectiveness has improved, as it was, you know, trial and error in the beginning because I did not have that experience. (T6) <i>I know I could probably use more training on the matter. And I welcome it. It's just never really offered. That's the problem. (T5)</i></i> |
| Get to know students | <i>Getting to know the students, that's the most important activity in my, in my opinion. (T5) I spend a lot of time getting to know my students (T7)</i> |
| Build students' confidence | <i>So you know, you have that confidence, and you have to be able to, to bring that up. And I you know, once kids are successful and can apply the strategies, then they can immediately start to grow. (T10)</i> |
| Time is a challenge | <i>Not having enough time to plan adequately for them. I think time is the biggest enemy of almost anything that we do. (T3)</i> |
| RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement? | |
| Leveled Text | <i>So I think understanding how to effectively run small group instruction so that students can be receiving instruction that's very much on their level, through level texts, in working on specific comprehension strategies to push them higher, was a big part of my developing my understanding of differentiation.(T11)</i> |
| Flexible grouping | <i>You know, of course, I work in flexible groupings. (T2)</i> |
| Small group instruction | <i>Looking at their skill level, and then providing them especially small group with a different text of the same topic. (T8)</i> |

Step 3: Grouping Codes to Categories

Once I completed the initial coding process, I grouped the codes by similarities and patterns. Then, I began the second round of coding. This second round of coding was explicitly focused on aspects of my research questions, study purpose, and conceptual framework. I used a series of colors to highlight the different components of the DI model (content, process, product, and learning environment) that teachers implemented during their reading instruction. I also looked for specific strategies, including social interaction used to improve the reading achievement of LP-LSES students.

I used the constant comparative method to go through my highlighted data, comparing each word, sentence, or phrase between each participant's response (Thomas, 2017). I noted patterns that appeared in the data and that related to my research questions. I categorized the main patterns, which resulted in nine categories. I analyzed and interpreted the categories for shared meanings between the participants and their relationships to my research questions.

Step 4: Grouping Categories into Themes

For Step 4, I used inductive reasoning and axial coding to refine, describe, and organize the categories into themes based on my research questions. Axial coding allowed for a more focused approach in determining how categories were related to each other (Saldana, 2016). I used excerpts from the interviews to build thick descriptions of the themes. Excerpts of participants' words were included in the categories. Four significant themes derived from thematic analysis and coding of the data that related to the research questions: (a) teachers' effectiveness in DI is perceived through years of

teaching experience and training, (b) teachers perceive time as the main challenge in being able to effectively differentiate reading instruction, (c) teachers perceive students' self-confidence and self-esteem as a factor in reading achievement, and (d) teachers perceive tiered assignments in small groups as most effective DI strategy for LP-LSES students. Table 4 shows the thematic analysis of the data from codes to themes aligned with each research question.

Table 4

Thematic Analysis of Data

| Research questions | Codes/categories | Themes |
|--|--|--|
| RQ1: What are third-through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trial and error • Lack of training • Effectiveness contingent on years of experience • Time is a challenge • Get to know students • Build confidence/self-esteem/motivation | <p><u>Theme 1:</u> Teachers' effectiveness in DI is perceived through years of teaching experience and training</p> <p><u>Theme 2:</u> Teachers perceive time as the main challenge in being able to differentiate reading effectively instruction</p> <p><u>Theme 3:</u> Teachers perceive students' self-confidence and self-esteem as a factor in reading achievement</p> |
| RQ2: What are third-through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveled text • Flexible grouping • Small group instruction • Effective in selecting strategies | <p><u>Theme 4:</u> Teachers perceive tiered assignments in small groups as the most effective DI strategy for LP-LSES students</p> |

Discrepant Cases

Throughout data collection and analysis, I looked for discrepant cases that did not fit the emerging patterns and challenged explanations that could have influenced the findings. Most participants shared similar experiences and perceptions. However, one participant's responses deflected away from a few interview questions. Through member checking, I verified the accuracy of the discrepancies with the participant and received clarifications. The participant stated:

Okay, I'm gonna be honest, because it's not my main jam. Like, I really like math. And I taught the first five years plus the years that I was substituting mostly math, you know, two years before I was officially a teacher, math, I have found some things I like about it, which makes it flow more easily for me.

The participant's response reflected better ease with teaching math than reading, which influenced how this teacher differentiated reading instructions and implemented strategies effectively for LP-LSES students.

Another discrepancy was all teachers' acknowledging students' self-confidence as a factor for increasing their reading achievement. Though teachers' responses steered away from their abilities as teachers, they did suggest that teachers can support students in building students' self-confidence. Teachers identified implementing DI within the classroom to increase students' confidence.

Results

The themes derived from the collected and coded data are reported and discussed in this section. The problem that prompted this study was a gap in research with few

studies that document the perspectives of elementary public schools' reading teachers regarding their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies for LP-LSES students. The following research questions guided the collection and analysis of data:

RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

I identified teachers' perspectives about their effectiveness in differentiating reading instruction and strategies by collecting and analyzing data from one-on-one semistructured interviews. Based on the analysis of data from all sources, categories of responses were identified. Four themes emerged that aligned with the first research question, and one theme emerged that aligned with the second research question.

RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

The first research question focused on how teachers differentiate their reading instruction to meet their students' needs. Three overarching themes emerged for RQ1: (a) Teachers' effectiveness in DI is perceived through years of teaching experience and training, (b) Teachers perceive time as the main challenge in being able to differentiate reading instruction effectively, and (c) Teachers perceive students' self-confidence and self-esteem as a factor in reading achievement.

Theme 1: Teachers' Effectiveness in DI Is Perceived Through Years of Teaching Experience and Training

When asked about their experience with differentiation within their classrooms, many teachers responded that it took several years of teaching to begin understanding the concept of differentiation. Most teachers mentioned not receiving any training before their teaching careers. Lack of training, knowledge, and confidence within themselves led to hesitation in differentiating reading instruction.

Teachers reflected on their experiences and often linked them to their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and strategies for LP-LSES students. Teacher 1, for example, spoke about the lack of information on differentiation during the teacher preparation program:

There's not a lot of time spent on that in your teacher preparation program, at least not your typical one. It's something that you kind of have to jump in and figure it out as you go, or at least that's been my experience. So it took a little while, I'd say the first two years of really trial and error.

Teacher 4 likewise stated, "I describe my experience as, I'm much better now. I've had about two and a half to three years' experience with differentiation." Some teachers collaborated with colleagues and used their experiences to build their knowledge. Teacher 11 credited other reading teachers for assisting with differentiation:

At the beginning, I definitely had a lot to learn with what goes into differentiating. I didn't know, honestly, very much, especially my first year. However, working

with other reading teachers, they really gave a lot of strategies to differentiate when it's whole group and small group.

Teacher 3 acknowledged that more training was needed in DI and voiced concern about the lack of training opportunities: "I know I could probably use more training on the matter. And I welcome it. It's just never really offered. That's the problem. Like they offer training on other stuff, but they never really offer that."

Some teachers saw themselves as effective based on years of teaching. Teacher 2, for example, stated:

Part of the reason I believe that I'm effective is that I've had the opportunity to teach across multiple different grade levels. So it gives me a better understanding of the skills that the students should be coming to me with.

Theme 2: Teachers Perceive Time as the Main Challenge in Being Able to Differentiate Reading Instruction Effectively

When asked the main challenge in differentiating reading instruction for LP-LSES students, all teachers quickly responded, "time." Their reasons for stating time varied. Some teachers based the challenge of time on their class sizes, district mandates, the extreme of students' deficiencies, and daily schedules. Teacher 1 acknowledged teaching in classrooms where students needed "heavy differentiation" based on reading levels. Teacher 1 stated, "It takes a long time to plan effective differentiated instruction that's going to meet all learners' needs. And sometimes, you know, those expectations are very difficult to meet with the demands of our own lives."

Teacher 9 also mentioned the amount of differentiation needed within one class by stating, “the biggest challenge is, every kid is different.” Teacher 8 added to the pressure of having many students with different needs and wanting to meet all students’ needs. “I think the biggest challenge is that I know their needs need to be dealt with daily. And not wanting to feel like I’m neglecting the needs of the other groups” (Teacher 8).

Some teachers conveyed the expectations, pacing of the curriculum, and district/administrators’ mandates as factors to time constraints. Teacher 2 stated, “I think it’s time because of the curriculum that we use in the district that I work.” Teacher 6 added, “so in following the curriculum, many times, it’s not enough time to really zoom in on those that would need that extra, which is the lower group.” Teacher 5 also mentioned the pressure from school leaders, adding, “So I usually will take the hit from my administrators for not being on pace with some of the things.” Teacher 11 conveyed similar concerns by stating, “just trying to keep on pace given limited time.”

Some teachers expressed schedules and teaching multiple subjects as added variations of the challenge of time. Teacher 3 responded:

The timepiece is the most important because you don’t want to get one group 20 minutes and give the other group 17 minutes because you have to switch classes or go to lunch or recess or whatever the demands of the day.

Some teachers mentioned teaching multiple subjects adds a layer to the challenge of time for differentiating. Teacher 4 stated, “Not having enough time to plan adequately for them. It’s very difficult because you’re not only focusing on, you know, that one particular subject, but you have to plan for all subjects.”

Teacher 5 mentioned scheduling, stating, “My schedule is so full. So much to complete within a short amount of time, that sometimes it makes it difficult to differentiate.” Some teachers mentioned insufficient time to plan for differentiation. Teacher 10 stated, “I think that teachers are not given adequate time. I mean, you have a planning time of 45 minutes, but, often during your time to plan, you’re dealing with students, parents, phone calls, staff meetings, professional learning communities.” Teacher 7 summed up the issue of time by stating, “I think the main challenge with almost anything that we do, is time. Time for planning, time for implementation, time for really analyzing data throughout, and making those shifts in the groupings.”

Theme 3: Teachers Perceive Students’ Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem as a Factor in Reading Achievement

Throughout interviews with teachers, they all mentioned at one point that getting to know their students and building LP-LSES students’ confidence and self-esteem was just as prevalent and significant in differentiating instructions. Many teachers saw students’ self-confidence as a factor in increasing their reading achievement. Many teachers told personal accounts of building a student’s confidence when asked about a successful experience of improving an LP-LSES student’s reading achievement using differentiation. Teacher 1 recalled an experience with a student, “The first thing, of course, that I did was build a personal relationship with that child so that she had a level of trust with me so that she felt safe in my classroom.” Teacher 7 recalled a successful experience with improving a student’s reading level and stated:

I think many times, you know, students with lower-level abilities or challenges, in many ways, face an uphill battle every day, and sometimes, they just don't feel like they can be successful. And just the added level of support and differentiation and belief from their teachers, I think they can gain back some of their self-confidence.

Teacher 8 shared a metaphor of students' confidence to a barren field, that if the soil is not suitable, nothing much can be planted or produced: "So I realized that very early with him that he didn't have the confidence which would be like the metaphor of the barren fields."

In other instances, when teachers were asked for additional comments and remarks on their views of differentiation, teachers mentioned building students' confidence. Teacher 6 stated, "Not only just helping them to read but focusing on their confidence as well. I think that that's been very important, their trust level and their confidence." Teacher 10 added, "I believe that these low readers have low self-esteem." Teacher 10 reiterated that once students' confidence increases, they succeed with instruction and reading achievements:

I found that by increasing their motivation and reading, by calling on them, and that positive praise that they're willing to share and willing to take that risk because I do think it's about taking a risk too.

Teachers continually mentioned when students' confidence was high, they raised their hands and participated more often. Teacher 12 stated when students were confident; they looked forward to coming to small groups to participate.

RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

The second research question was specific to the strategies teachers implement within their classrooms and which strategies they perceived were effective in increasing their LP-LSES students' reading achievement. There was one overarching theme for RQ2: teachers perceive tiered assignments in small groups as the most effective DI strategy for LP-LSES students.

Theme 4: Teachers Perceive Tiered Assignments in Small Groups as the Most Effective DI Strategy for LP-LSES Students

Most teachers' responses conveyed their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction through content compared to the other three components of differentiation: process, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson, 1999). To differentiate content means that teachers change the materials being learned by students. Many teachers stated that before they begin instruction, they provide students with diagnostic assessments to determine their readiness and reading levels. For example, Teacher 1 used the phrase "diagnose and decide" to determine students' readiness. Teacher 2 stated, "Normally, what I'll do is in the beginning of the year, I'll use an assessment, whether it's an I-Ready assessment or an assessment, that I have put together myself." Teacher 3 added, "the first thing I have to do is background information. It probably takes like two weeks for me to understand the students and see what their feelings are about reading."

Once diagnostic assessments determine students' readiness, all teachers formulate small groups to provide instruction based on students' needs. All teachers found small group instructions using tiered assignments, mainly leveled texts, as the most effective strategy for meeting LP-LSES students' needs. Teacher 4 replied, "once I get that data, I can form my groups." Teacher 5 used the results of exit tickets to form her groups and provide extra support. Teacher 6 specifically mentioned creating small groups and providing students with a "different text of the same topic" as the best strategy. Teachers 7 and 11 found differentiating graphic organizers within small groups to be most effective.

Teacher 10, however, mentioned that often some teachers are not aware of how to conduct small group instructions effectively. This remark was confirmed as I continued to probe participants about their small group instructions. Teacher 11 reflected on the experiences of differentiation and asserted:

So the first year, and kind of from the beginning, it was developing an understanding of how to differentiate during small group instruction. I think understanding how to effectively run small group instruction so that students can be receiving instruction that's very much on their level, through level texts, in working on specific comprehension strategies to push them higher, was a big part of me developing my understanding of differentiation.

When I questioned teachers on their social interaction with students and how students interact with one another, small groups seemed to be a time that allowed for most of the interaction between students and teachers. Some teachers spoke about

creating small group expectations and organizing small groups, running with or without teachers' presence. Teachers provided roles for group members, so students felt included and important. Teacher 2 proudly remarked, "I'm there to facilitate, I'm there to assist. But by the time we've had our third meeting, my students are leading the group." Teacher 6 stated, "I try to focus more on small groups, so they have an opportunity to be with me."

Teachers' perceptions revealed recognition of DI's importance in the classroom for all students, especially low performers. Teachers identified that DI is a significant factor that is necessary to meet the individual needs of students. However, participants' responses also revealed the inconsistencies and challenges of implementing DI with fidelity within public school classrooms.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure reliability in qualitative research, an examination of trustworthiness is crucial (Golafshani, 2003). *Trustworthiness*, or validity, is an approach to assessing a study's rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this study, trustworthiness was assessed through four standards: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. During data collection, interviews were automatically audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure data was accurate.

Credibility

To establish credibility, I used member checks. As mentioned in chapter 3, member checks, or participant validation, is a strategy in which researchers "check in" with participants about different aspects of the research to gauge how they think and feel

and to verify the accuracy of statements and transcripts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered member checks the most critical validity measure used to establish credibility. Member checking was appropriate for this study because it prevented researcher bias and assured the credibility of each participant's beliefs, experiences, and perspectives of DI.

During the review of informed consent, each participant was informed of the option of member checking by email or Zoom conference. After two weeks of each interview, participants were emailed a copy of the transcript to review for accuracy and to add additional information if they wished. All participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and did not add additional responses. Once all interviews were transcribed, data analysis began. I emailed a summary of the findings to each participant to check for accuracy and confirm. I also emailed three participants to clarify specific responses. Each participant responded with clarifications. I added the new responses to the transcripts and sent them back for confirmation. The participants confirmed the accuracy of their responses.

Transferability

To increase the potential for transferability of the findings to other educational settings, I provided thick descriptions of the setting, participants, and finding (Guba, 1981). I included direct quotations of participants' responses when discussing the results and findings. I also included the number of years and grades participants have taught. This information will assist researchers or readers in determining the similarities and applicability to their setting. I provided specific detail of the setting being public school

districts to increase the potential for applicability of the results and findings in other settings and contexts (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Dependability

Dependability determined the consistency and stability of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To establish dependability, I provided consistency within my data analysis process. I identified patterns and themes from interviews of participants in the study. I checked for discrepancies throughout the study to identify any inconsistencies. I kept a reflective journal during the research process to track my decisions, reasons, bias, analysis, and logistics of the study. I further established dependability by providing detailed data collection and analysis descriptions by audio recording the interviews and making the data available for participants' review.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures data is an objective representation of reality, not biased by the researcher's subjective views (Kornbluh, 2015). To ensure confirmability, I used member checks. Member checks allowed participants to confirm the accuracy of the data collected and my interpretations of the data. I captured the accuracy of participants' responses by including them within the results and findings. I also used a reflective journal to self-reflect on the interview responses' content and check for my bias—the reflective journal aided in my data analysis process.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided details about the study setting and participants, data collection and analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness. My analysis of the

interview data provided answers to the research questions posed in this study. Four overarching themes were identified from the data. Following is a summary of the themes by research questions.

RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

Theme 1 indicated that teachers perceived their DI's effectiveness based on their years of teaching and training. Teachers reflected on their experiences with DI in their classrooms and commented on the lack of training and preparedness for implementation. Many teachers remarked that it was a "trial and error" or "learn as you go" experience. Through observations and collaboration with other teachers, their knowledge and understanding of DI began to improve. For teachers that had been teaching for over 10 years, differentiating reading instruction was second nature. They grew to understand how to diagnose students at the beginning of the year to determine students' readiness and formulate small groups quickly. Teachers agreed that within small group instructions, they could reach their LP-LSES students' individual needs.

Theme 2 indicated that teachers perceived time to be the main challenge when implementing DI. All teachers understood the importance of differentiating reading instruction and saw it as necessary, especially for their LP-LSES students. However, some teachers felt it was never enough time. Their days were filled with many demands and expectations. Teachers spoke about the challenges of implementing DI with fidelity due to schedules, teaching multiple subjects, pressure from districts and administrators, and the curriculum's expectations.

Theme 3 indicated teachers perceived students' self-confidence and self-esteem as a factor in improving their reading achievement. Throughout teachers' responses, a consensus emerged that before providing instruction, it was imperative to get to know students individually and build their self-confidence along the way. Teachers felt that once students had confidence within themselves, they could participate more and meet the expectations of instructions with more ease. Teachers saw building self-confidence as part of differentiation and part of improving the reading achievement of LP-LSES students.

RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

Theme 4 indicated that teachers perceived tiered assignments within small groups as the most effective strategy for increasing the reading achievement of LP-LSES students. All teachers identified small groups as their mains of interacting and providing independent instruction to students. Within small groups, teachers used leveled texts, differentiated graphic organizers, and questioning strategies to meet learners' needs. Groupings were usually based on students' readiness or learning profiles.

In Chapter 5, I restate the purpose and nature of the study. I present a summary of the interpretation of the findings, describe the limitations, and provide recommendations for further research. I also include the implications for positive social change and conclude with insights that capture the study's key essence.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand elementary reading teachers' perspectives regarding their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies to increase the reading achievement of their LP-LSES students. The problem that prompted this study was a gap in research with few studies that documented the perspectives of elementary public-school reading teachers' effectiveness in implementing DI and DI strategies. There is also a gap in the literature regarding teacher perceptions toward DI and strategies that influence effective and regular use among elementary school teachers (Pham, 2012). As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how elementary public-school reading teachers perceive and implement DI effectively, specifically for LP-LSES students.

I conducted a basic qualitative study using one-on-one, semistructured interviews to identify the perspectives of third- through fifth-grade public-school reading teachers regarding DI and DI strategies that effectively increase the reading achievement of LP-LSES students. The study included elementary teachers from various public schools in the United States. I used purposeful sampling to select 12 participants to provide rich and knowledgeable responses to answer the research questions. This study's key findings were based on participants' words organized from codes to categories and emerging themes.

The study's key findings reveal that third- through fifth-grade public-school reading teachers' effectiveness in DI is perceived through their years of teaching

experience and training. Teachers perceived time as the main challenge in being able to differentiate reading instruction effectively. Teachers perceived students' self-confidence and self-esteem to be a factor in increasing their reading achievement. Teachers also perceived tiered assignments in small groups as the most effective DI strategy for LP-LSES students.

Interpretation of the Findings

In the following section, I analyze the findings compared with the conceptual framework and peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. The section is organized by the research questions.

Research Question 1

What are third-through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

This study's first finding was that teachers' effectiveness in DI is perceived through their years of teaching experience and training. This finding supports previous literature that concludes that teachers directly contribute to student achievement (Hicks et al.; Kane, 2017; Protik et al., 2015). Teachers believe that how they teach is significant to students' learning process (Logan, 2014). Participants who had been teaching reading for over 10 years spoke with confidence in their ability to quickly identify students' needs and begin formulating groups to meet students' individual needs. Teachers reflected on their early years of teaching being the most challenging as they navigated by learning what it meant to differentiate and implementing DI effectively with all learners.

Tomlinson (1995) stated that teachers were more likely to continue with differentiation if

they had previously experienced success. Tomlinson (2014) also stated that teachers who use DI regularly in their classrooms find it useful and efficient. Teachers' perceptions confirmed Tomlinson's statement as they acknowledged the need for DI within their classrooms. Teachers recognized that DI effectively increased LP-LSES students' reading achievement and often sought out or collaborated with other teachers to build their knowledge.

The second finding of this study was that teachers perceived time as the main challenge in effectively differentiating reading instruction. This finding reflects a conclusion of Tomlinson (1995) and other researchers that teachers perceive barriers to implementing DI due to lack of time, training, and resources (Lunsford, 2017; Varajic, 2017). Although teachers understood the importance of DI implementation and its effectiveness in increasing students' reading performance, they all voiced the lack of time during their school day that prevented them from being as effective as they would like to be. Teachers identified their daily schedules, the curriculum expectations, district mandates, and administrators as all factors that add to the lack of time and create the challenge. Teachers acknowledged the importance of reaching all learners, especially their LP-LSES students, but could not find solutions to decrease time constraints.

The third finding of this study was that teachers perceived students' self-confidence and self-esteem as a factor in increasing their reading achievement. This finding was unique and posed as a discrepant case due to its direction toward students' abilities. However, this finding supports McAdamis's (2001) theory that students who engage in DI are more motivated and enthusiastic learners. Wilujeng (2012) found that

DI helped maximize students' potential. Throughout their responses, teachers spoke about the importance of building students' self-confidence. Teachers emphasized the importance of getting to know their students through their learning profile and their interest in reading. This finding supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, suggesting that knowledge is co-constructed in social environments through social interaction, and both individual and group learning occur socially. Teachers took time to interact with their students to understand their needs and recognized that students' first need was self-confidence and belief that they could learn the reading materials.

Research Question 2

What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their abilities to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

This study's fourth finding was that teachers perceived tiered assignments in small groups as the most effective DI strategy for LP-LSES students. When teachers were asked about their effectiveness in selecting DI strategies, all teachers perceived themselves as effective due to grouping students by ability and providing tiered assignments. *Tiered assignments* are tasks provided to small groups of students based on similar readiness levels (EL Education, 2021). These assignments are developed using varied levels of complexity of the task.

Teachers' responses reflected Eller et al.'s (2019) review that the goal of DI strategies is to ensure that all students are engaged in the learning process by providing

tasks that match their individual needs. Teachers stated that they met with students in small groups and provided instructions based on their needs. Taylor (2015) posited that when students are taught at their readiness level using appropriate instructional strategies, there is an increase in student achievement. Teachers mainly grouped students by their readiness and used leveled text, graphic organizers, and curriculum materials as strategies to improve students' reading performance. Teachers' process of differentiating coincided with Campbell's (2009) three-tiered model, called To-With-By. In this model, students move from whole group instruction to small group and eventually to independent or individualized instruction.

This finding also supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism as teachers confirmed that interaction with students in small groups proved to meet their needs effectively. Teachers also saw small groups where students could interact with one another through discussions and roles and responsibilities. Students, therefore, constructed knowledge not only with the teacher but through peer collaboration and interaction.

Limitations of the Study

I acknowledge that this study has limitations. In Chapter 1, I considered teachers' recruitment from one public school district as a possible limitation. However, due to the global pandemic closing schools, I expanded my recruitment to all public-school teachers in the United States. Participants of this study consisted of teachers from two public school districts, one located in the United States' northeastern area and one located in the United States' northwestern area. Though the recruitment was widened to include more

participants nationwide, it still consisted of a limited representation from public-school districts nationwide.

Although I did not mention the sampling size in Chapter 1, this study's sampling size contributes to the limitations. The sample size was 12 participants. For a basic qualitative study, 12 is sufficient to reach in-depth saturation (Adler & Adler, 1987; Guest et al., 2006). Participants provided rich responses to the interview questions so that data saturation was reached. However, the sample size only reflects the perspectives of third- through fifth-grade elementary reading teachers from two public school districts in the United States. Findings may not be generalizable to the larger population of public-school elementary reading teachers. The limitation of only third- to fifth-grade reading teachers could also affect the transferability of the findings. Interviewing all elementary teachers or secondary teachers could render different results.

Another consideration of possible limitation though not reflected in Chapter 1, but significant to acknowledge is researcher bias. Because I am currently a reading teacher in a public school district, there was the potential for researcher bias. To help alleviate bias concerns, I used an interview protocol to obtain thick descriptions from participants. Participants were not coerced to share any specific response but were encouraged to share freely of their choosing. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to provide the most accurate representation of each participant's response. Participants were provided a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy and confirm their responses.

Recommendations

To extend the findings of this study, I offer three recommendations. First, I recommend further research of teacher's training with DI before teaching. This study revealed that teachers' knowledge of DI was a process through trial and error, years of teaching, or collaboration with other reading teachers or reading specialists. A lack of training was voiced and was a concern, especially for teaching LP-LSES students. Teachers welcomed more training and workshops on DI but stated they were not always provided as options during professional developments. Tomlinson (1999) states that DI relates to teacher professionalism, which shows that DI training should be a priority in teacher's professional training before teaching and ongoing throughout the school year. Paladina (2015) reiterates that teachers must have clarity on what they are supposed to be doing differently to combat issues. If teachers are provided DI training before teaching, they could begin their teaching career equipped with the knowledge necessary to begin differentiating reading instruction for students sooner than later.

Second, I recommend further research into the implementation of DI strategies that are effective for LP-LSES. Though teachers mentioned small groups and tiered assignments as the most effective DI strategies for LP-LSES, their responses lacked knowledge of strategies beyond leveled texts and students' grouping. Teachers' responses showed a need for further understanding of strategies that could be implemented. For example, Kane (2017) suggested that the most effective strategies for implementing DI in classrooms are: established learning agendas and contracts, centers, tiered instruction, complex instruction, and point-of-entry assignments. Teachers made no mention of any

of those strategies. Further research could reveal why teachers' responses were limited with selecting strategies.

Finally, I recommend further research to identify teachers' effectiveness in conducting small groups. Although Tomlinson (2000) posits that there is no recipe for differentiation, she mentions flexible grouping as a hallmark of the class. Radencich et al. (1995) defined flexible group as "grouping that is not static, where members of the reading group change frequently" (p.11). Teachers mentioned small groups, but only two emphasized that their groups were flexible. It is unknown how knowledgeable teachers are about forming groups and how to conduct small groups effectively.

Implications

This study's results offer potential implications for positive social change with students, teachers, administrators, and district leaders. A social change could occur by using the results from this study to assist third- through fifth-grade reading teachers in planning reading instruction that effectively improves their LP-LSES students' achievement. Reading teachers could also use this study's results to determine effective DI strategies to implement within their classrooms. Also, teachers could reflect on their knowledge of DI and determine ways to improve their instructional practices.

This study's results could provide information that may help administrators and district leaders understand the need for professional development around DI and DI strategies for teachers. Due to teachers' response to lack of DI training, district leaders could use this study's results to improve teacher training programs. Teachers' perspectives on effective strategies may lead to a broader knowledge base for learner-

centered instruction in public schools. The findings may also have implications for identifying challenges with implementing DI with fidelity and assisting leaders in finding ways to alleviate teachers' challenges.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand third- through fifth-grade teachers' perspectives regarding their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction and select DI strategies for LP-LSES students. The findings from this study were identified in four themes: a) teachers effectiveness in DI is perceived through years of teaching experience and training, b) teachers perceive time as the main challenge in being able to differentiate reading instruction effectively, c) teachers perceive students' self-confidence and self-esteem as a factor in reading achievement, and d) teachers perceive tiered assignments in small groups as the most effective DI strategy for LP-LSES students. The themes were developed during data analysis from 12 participants in public-school districts.

The conceptual framework of Tomlinson's DI model (1999) and Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism were used to define DI and provide the structure and guidance for answering the research questions. The study's data aligned and extended current research regarding teachers' perspectives of differentiating reading instruction and selecting DI strategies. Teachers understand the importance of using DI to improve the performance of their students. Teachers' responses, however, varied with instruction and strategies used, which revealed an inconsistency of knowledge and implementation. The results of this study suggest the need for ongoing professional

development and training on DI and DI strategies in public-school districts. When teachers are fully equipped with the knowledge and implementation of DI and DI strategies, they have the potential to increase the reading achievement of LP-LSES students more effectively.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Title of Study: Elementary Reading Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiating Reading

Instruction for Low-Socioeconomic Students

Date:

Time of Interview:

Interviewer: Edwina Jones

Interviewee (alphabetic pseudonyms):

Greeting:

“Thank you for your time and for agreeing to participate in this interview session for my doctoral study. My name is Edwina Jones, and I will be conducting this interview. I am currently an elementary reading teacher in a public-school district. By participating in the interview, you will provide me with the opportunity to collect information associated with my study. You were invited to participate in this study because you have at least three years teaching reading and have experiences and viewpoints that may be beneficial to my study about elementary reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to differentiate reading instruction and strategies. Please remember that your participation in this study is confidential and voluntary. Your name and all personal information will remain private. Please also remember you may withdraw consent at any time during the process, and I will immediately destroy all of your information and properly discard it. The duration of this interview will be 30-45 minutes, and with your consent, it will be audio-recorded. By recording the interview session, I will be able to effectively transcribe the exact words that are spoken, thereby assuring greater accuracy of capturing your responses. To ensure that responses are recorded appropriately, please speak in a voice tone that is loud and clear during the interview. Do you have any questions or concerns about this study or any information I have provided before I begin to record?”

Checklist:

____ Participant submitted consent via personal email.

____ Participant is interested in moving forward with study participation. (If not, stop here, thanks participant, and follow procedures to destroy participant information.)

Interview Norms:

Speak from the I perspective.

Please refrain from disclosing others' personal information, including their names and roles at the school.

Please ask clarification if a question does not make sense to you.

Please remember you may cease participation in this study at any time.

“Do you have any questions before we proceed? Do you wish to proceed?”

Background/Purpose:

“This interview is designed to help me gain a better understanding of your thoughts, ideas, and perspectives about differentiating reading instruction and strategies for your low-performing, low-socioeconomic students. I encourage you to share freely, providing as many details as you can. I will be taking notes and this interview will be recorded so I don't miss anything. I will be reading questions I prepared ahead of time. However, I might also ask follow-up questions if I need you to clarify a point or want more information.”

“Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to proceed with this interview and recording?”

General Questions:

How long have you been an educator?

How long have you taught elementary reading in public schools? What grades?

Interview questions to address RQ1: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction for LP-LSES students?

How would you describe your experience with differentiation in the classroom?

What examples can you provide of how you differentiate reading instruction based on content, process, product, and learning environment?

How would you describe a successful experience in improving low-performing, low-socioeconomic students' reading outcomes using differentiated instruction?

1. How do you provide opportunities for students to interact with you and one another during reading instruction?

What do you perceive as the main challenges to providing differentiated instruction in the classroom?

What is your perception(s) regarding your effectiveness in planning and implementing differentiated reading lessons that are effective for low-performing, low-socioeconomic students?

Interview questions to address RQ2: What are third- through fifth-grade reading teachers' perspectives on their ability to effectively select DI strategies that increase LP-LSES students' reading achievement?

What are the differentiated instructional strategies that you implement in your class?

Which strategies are effective in increasing the reading performance of your low-performing, low socioeconomic students?

What are your perceptions regarding your effectiveness in selecting differentiated instructional strategies for low-performing, low-socioeconomic students?

Closing Questions:

Is there any additional information that you would like to share with me to assist in helping me to understand further your perception of differentiating reading instruction and strategies for low-performing, low-socioeconomic students?

Is there anything you want me to explain to you about this research before we close out this interview session?

Closing:

“Thank you so much, again, for your time today. I appreciate you participating in this study and providing me with your open and honest feedback. I want to remind you that your responses will be kept confidential, and you may still withdraw participation at any time. I will follow up with you within a week to review my notes and transcription so you may review them for accuracy. This may be a 20 minutes call. Do I have your permission to contact you for a follow up/debrief call? If you know any other teachers that would be interested in participating in this study, please feel free to share the invitation flyer so they contact me. Thank you again and have a wonderful day!”

Appendix B: Data Collection Timeline

Data Collection Timeline

| Timeframe | Data Collection Task |
|-----------|---|
| Weeks 1-2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of study participants with an online invitation and consent form emailed to grades 3-5 elementary reading teachers |
| Week 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collection of informed consent forms and scheduling of interviews Possible continuation of recruitment of study participants |
| Weeks 4-6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial interview via Zoom |
| Week 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data analysis to inform, support, and extend the development of follow-up interview questions Possible initial interview meetings |
| Weeks 8-9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible follow-up interviews via Zoom |
| Week 10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Debriefing and closure with participants reminding each of data privacy, anonymous participation in the research analysis and reporting, and security of all documents with the shredding of all data collection after completion Data analysis; member checks |
| Weeks 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data analysis; member checks |