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## General Education Curriculum and Students with Disabilities in Inclusive, Personalized Learning Classrooms

Kelly Sharpe Stalcup  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kelly Stalcup

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
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Walden University

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Abstract

General Education Curriculum and Students with Disabilities in Inclusive, Personalized  
Learning Classrooms

by

Kelly Sharpe Stalcup

MA, University of Memphis, 1996

BS, Clemson University, 1988

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

Walden University

November, 2021

## Abstract

Findings from previous studies indicate that general educators are rarely proficient in providing students with disabilities (SWD) opportunities to access the general education curriculum. This may be due to a lack of personalized learning instructional strategies in classrooms. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. Concepts in Bloom's mastery learning theory—flexible pacing, differentiation and feedback—framed the study. A qualitative descriptive case study was used to investigate the research questions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight general educators and a review of the lesson plans provided by participants. Inclusion criteria required that participants used personalized learning strategies during the 2018 through 2021 school years with SWD in an elementary school. Descriptive coding and *a priori* coding were used to analyze data. A review of lesson plans showed the common instructional strategies planned across the classrooms. Participants noted the importance of differentiation, providing SWD time to reach mastery, and using data to drive instruction. Participants also identified barriers with administrative expectations. The results of this study can contribute to positive social change for SWD by identifying the instructional strategies used to give SWD access to the general education curriculum. As SWD have access to the same curriculum as their peers, opportunities for SWD may open as they leave the K–12 system and enter the community.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family, my teachers, and my colleagues. I want to thank my son, Jack, for putting up with my long hours on the computer. I want to thank my daddy who said, "Education is always worth it." He instilled in me a love of learning, and I am forever grateful. I want to thank my sister, Lou, for being my cheerleader and encouraging me every step of the way. I want to thank my grandmother, Frances Ella Rast, my aunt Margaret, and my cousin Francis for showing me how to be an educator. I want to thank my mama for being my biggest fan and believing I could accomplish this goal.

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Finally, I must thank my colleagues. You teach me each day how to become a better educator. I am humbled and grateful I can be a small part of your educational career.

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## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....                         | 1  |
| Background.....   | 3  |
| Problem Statement.....  | 4  |
| Problem in State and Local Setting.....                           | 7  |
| Purpose of the Study.....   | 8  |
| Research Questions.....   | 9  |
| Conceptual Framework.....   | 10 |
| The Nature of the Study.....                                      | 15 |
| Definitions.....  | 17 |
| Assumptions.....  | 18 |
| Scope and Delimitations.....                                      | 18 |
| Limitations.....  | 19 |
| Significance.....   | 20 |
| Summary.....  | 22 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review.....                                 | 23 |
| Literature Search Strategy.....                                   | 24 |
| Conceptual Framework.....   | 26 |
| Literature Review Related to Key Concepts.....                    | 31 |
| Legal Mandate for SWD Access to General Education Curriculum..... | 34 |
| SWD Learner Outcomes in Inclusive Classrooms.....                 | 35 |
| Adaptation of Length of Time to Reach Proficiency.....            | 37 |



|  |    |
|--|----|
| Differentiation, Adaptations, and Instruction .....                  | 38 |
| Feedback .....   | 41 |
| Literature Related to the Method .....                               | 43 |
| Summary and Conclusions .....  | 45 |
| Chapter 3: Research Method.....                                      | 47 |
| Research Design and Rationale .....                                  | 47 |
| Role of the Researcher .....   | 50 |
| Methodology .....  | 52 |
| Instrumentation .....  | 54 |
| Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection ..... | 55 |
| Data Analysis Plan .....   | 57 |
| Issues of Trustworthiness.....                                       | 59 |
| Ethical Procedures .....   | 60 |
| Summary .....  | 61 |
| Chapter 4: Results .....   | 63 |
| Setting 64   |    |
| Data Collection .....  | 66 |
| Participant Selection .....  | 67 |
| Interviews.....  | 68 |
| Data Analysis .....  | 69 |
| Discrepant Data.....   | 72 |
| Results 73   |    |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Theme 1: Differentiation Is Needed .....                          | 73  |
| Theme 2: Flexible Pacing Is Needed, But Not Always Possible ..... | 80  |
| Theme 3: Data is Used to Inform Instruction .....                 | 82  |
| Research Question 2 .....   | 84  |
| Discrepant Data.....  | 85  |
| Evidence of Trustworthiness.....                                  | 86  |
| Summary .....   | 89  |
| Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....      | 91  |
| Interpretation of the Findings.....                               | 92  |
| Differentiation Is Needed.....                                    | 92  |
| Flexible Pacing Is Needed, But Not Always Possible .....          | 94  |
| Data Used to Inform Instruction .....                             | 95  |
| Conceptual Framework.....   | 99  |
| Limitations of the Study.....                                     | 100 |
| Recommendations.....  | 102 |
| Implications.....   | 104 |
| Conclusion .....  | 106 |
| References.....   | 107 |
| Dear (insert name of administrator),.....                         | 127 |
| Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....                              | 128 |
| Appendix C: Criteria for Participation.....                       | 132 |

List of Tables

Table 1. Literacy Gap ..... 8

Table 2. Demographics of Participants ..... 66

Table 3. Descriptors by Question for First Coding Cycle ..... 70

Table 4. Instructional Strategies: Frequency of Codes ..... 71

Table 5. Frequency of Differentiation, Flexible Pacing, and Data-Informed Feedback in  
Lesson Plans..... 72

Table 6. Frequency of Differentiated Instructional Strategies..... 75

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), general educators have a legal mandate to provide students with disabilities (SWD) instruction aligned to the general education curriculum. However, general educators have reported feeling ill-equipped and possessing insufficient strategies to meet the mandate (Hintz et al., 2015; Paju et al., 2016). The problem addressed in this study is that general educators who do not plan for or use personalized learning instructional strategies in their classrooms find it challenging to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. I will investigate the perspectives of general educators who use a personalized learning model.

Strogilos et al. (2017) found that general educators do not have the knowledge of instructional strategies necessary to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. Without access to the general education curriculum, SWD learning outcomes are limited (ESSA, 2015; IDEA, 2004). The findings of this study will provide a description of the personalized instructional strategies the participants use to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. These in turn may be replicated by other general educators to possibly increase learning outcomes for SWD (Pane et al., 2015). The findings of this study may increase understanding of how to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum as mandated by IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015).

The results of this study could equip educators with the knowledge needed to promote social change for SWD by providing a description of the instructional strategies

used for personalized learning in inclusive classrooms to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. By describing the perspectives of general educators on personalized learning in inclusive classrooms, an understanding of strengths of, and barriers to, using the instructional strategies may be developed. That understanding may lead to building on those strengths to provide SWD with more access to the general education curriculum and possible solutions to existing barriers. Inclusive practices may expand as general educators experience a feeling of success with instructing SWD in an inclusive setting (Thompson & Jocius, 2017).

Chapter 1 includes background information to understand the history of the problem. The problem statement and purpose of the study are supported by current research and the need for the study at a macro level and at the local agency. The problem addressed in this study is that many general educators who do not plan for or use personalized learning instructional strategies in their classrooms find it challenging to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. The problem statement is aligned with the conceptual framework of Bloom's mastery learning theory; all students can learn to at least the level of proficiency given the needed accommodations. The research questions align with the same framework; the answers are sought to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives general educators have of using personalized learning practices for SWD in inclusive classrooms. The nature of the study is described and includes a brief discussion and rationale of its design. Definitions of terms related to the phenomenon are listed. Assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations are all

identified in this chapter. Finally, the significance of the study and the potential for positive social change are explained.

### **Background**

Prior to 1975, SWD learned in segregated classrooms (Brock, 2018). With the passage of Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), public schools had to provide SWD an education. Over time, the law has been reauthorized under different names: Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Individuals with Disabilities Act Improvement Act (IDEIA). IDEA defines a SWD in section 300.8 as

A child evaluated in accordance with §§ 300.304 through 300.311 as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services

In addition to requiring public schools to educate SWD and defining a SWD, another major tenant of legislation was the least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate. The purpose of LRE is to educate SWD with their non-disabled peers to the fullest extent possible. Brock (2018) examined trends over a 40-year period and found the most progress with including SWD in general education classrooms was during the 1990s. The highest percentage of SWD was during the years between 2007 and 2014. Brock also found during the span of the past 40 years, 55.3% to 73.1% SWD, specifically students

with intellectual disabilities, spent most to all their day in a self-contained setting. Brock argues individualized education teams need to have a general education setting as the default placement. From the default position, the team should determine services and supports based on the student's individual needs.

Alongside legislation passed specifically to provide SWD the rights to be educated in the LRE, education laws which apply to all students have been passed including the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The purpose of NCLB (2002) was to guarantee all students access to a high-quality education as evidenced by proficient performance on high-stakes assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). However, for SWD, NCLB (2002) has not fulfilled its purpose (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016; Elliott, 2015; Koyama & Kania, 2014; Stelitano et al., 2020). The achievement gap between SWD and their non-disabled peers has not closed. Gilmour et al. (2019) found a gap in reading of approximately 3 years between SWD and their non-disabled peers. Compounding the concern of the identified are the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2017). The NAEP assessment results indicated 60% of fourth- and eighth-grade students without disabilities are below grade level in reading.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in this study is that general educators who do not plan for or use personalized learning instructional strategies in their classrooms find it challenging to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Traditional instructional practices have not been successful in closing the gap between SWD and

their nondisabled peers. Students' schedules have included restrictive, remedial test-prep classes intended to increase proficiency on assessments (Pazey et al., 2015). Pazey et al. (2015) found that SWD feel isolated from peers when they are placed in environments of restrictive remediation and view the remedial classes as a punishment. According to Pazey, et al. (2015), restrictive remediation efforts result in few significant gains in state assessments.

General educators are expected to use classroom assessment data to differentiate instruction to close the achievement gap between SWD and peers (Wachen et al., 2018). However, Wachen et al. (2018) found teachers who reported using feedback from classroom assessments to inform instruction made few adjustments to instruction based on the assessment data. Wachen et al. noted educators used data to build a relationship with the students and to know their weaknesses and strengths but not to change materials or the presentation of curriculum to meet the needs of individual students. In fact, teachers have used little differentiated instruction in their classrooms (Bray et al., 2014; Strogilos et al., 2017).

Personalized learning is an educational model intended to meet all students' needs (Miliband, 2004). The instructional practices of flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and continuous data-informed feedback are part of a personalized learning model (Patrick et al., 2013). However, there is limited research on the use of personalized learning models (Bingham & Dimandja, 2017). The research available suggests that teachers in an inclusive, personalized classroom tend to note difficulties in implementation due to barriers embedded in the educational system rather than a lack of knowledge of



instructional strategies. Unlike their general education peers in traditional classrooms who do note the lack of knowledge to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum (Cameron, 2014; Gül & Vuran, 2015; Meynert, 2014; Strogilos et al., 2017).

Gross and DeArmond (2018) found, on first applying a personalized learning model, that the systems and structures of schools and districts conflicted with the principles of personalized learning, and the abstract goals of personalized learning were difficult for teachers to put into practice in the classroom. Teachers excited about the personalized learning model were isolated and left to plan instruction with little to no collaboration from peers, which diminished enthusiasm (Gross & DeArmond, 2018). Pane et al. (2017a) found that teachers identified obstacles to applying personalized learning practices. First, they noted the lack of time to plan and structure meaningful, purposeful tasks for students. Second, teachers described the conflict between the grade-level standards and expectations with students moving through the curriculum at their own pace based on formative data (Bingham et al., 2018; Gross & DeArmond, 2018). A gap in practice exists between the expectation of general educators in traditional classrooms to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum and some general educators' unfamiliarity with how to do so when compared to peers in inclusive, personalized learning classrooms. The results of this study may provide instructional strategies that can be used in inclusive personalized learning classrooms to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum, and which can be replicated in traditional general education classrooms.

## **Problem in State and Local Setting**

Teachers in traditional classrooms report being unfamiliar with how to provide instruction that gives access to the general education curriculum while still meeting the needs of students with individualized education programs (IEPs). In the state and local setting, a primary cause of SWD having lower reading scores on assessments than their nondisabled peers has been limited access to the general education curriculum (State Department of Education, 2015). At the district level, meeting notes from a faculty senate meeting revealed that teachers were using iPads to keep SWD in the class quiet and working until the students were pulled for special education services (Moody, 2018). Teachers were not engaging SWD in the instruction, but rather were using technology to engage students (meeting minutes from school-based senate faculty meeting, February 2018). The assistant director of exceptional Needs of the local school district also noted the discomfort of general educators with providing instruction to SWD (assistant director of the Office of Exceptional Children, personal communication, October 16, 2017). The assistant director further noted that SWD were not showing academic growth at the rate of their nondisabled peers.

The problem addressed in this study is that many general educators who neither plan for nor use personalized learning instructional strategies in their classrooms find it challenging to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum in a large, diverse district in the Southeast United States. Without access to the general education curriculum, the gap in achievement between SWD and their non-disabled peers will likely continue to widen (Elliott, 2015). Statewide data from the 2013–2014 state

assessment in literacy shows the gap between SWD and nondisabled peers (Spearman, 2017). Data from a report from the state’s superintendent of education for 2017 is presented in Table 1 to illustrate the literacy gap.

**Table 1**

*Literacy Gap*

| Subgroup                             | Grade 3 | Grade 4 | Grade 5 | Grade 6 | Grade 7 | Grade 8 |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| All students                         | 78.9    | 76.6    | 80.1    | 69.3    | 68.1    | 67.3    |
| African American students            | 67.3    | 62.1    | 67.4    | 51.9    | 51.6    | 51.3    |
| Hispanic students                    | 71.4    | 69.8    | 76.1    | 62.3    | 62.3    | 62.7    |
| Native American students             | 73.8    | 71.9    | 78.9    | 64      | 70.1    | 62.9    |
| Students with subsidized meals       | 71.4    | 67.4    | 72.2    | 58      | 57      | 56      |
| Limited English proficiency students | 70.7    | 68.4    | 75.7    | 61.2    | 58.6    | 56.3    |
| Migrant students                     | 40.5    | 48.6    | 60.7    | 37      | 43.5    | 45.5    |
| Disabled students                    | 44.2    | 37.7    | 46.6    | 27.5    | 26.6    | 23.8    |

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. The exploration of general educators’ perspectives provides an understanding of the instructional practices used by general educators who have employed a personalized learning model for one or more years in an inclusive classroom. I investigated the phenomenon of personalized learning in an inclusive classroom using a constructivist paradigm, because the intent of the study was to give an in-depth description of the participants’ perspectives on instructing SWD in a personalized learning, inclusive classroom. The constructivist paradigm assumes there is

no single truth, but rather that truth and meaning are created through lived, shared experiences and interactions with others (Burkholder et al., 2016). Merriam (1998) stated that “reality is not reality; rather there are multiple interpretations of reality,” (p. 22). The experience of each participant’s application of a personalized learning model creates their reality of the phenomenon. By giving a rich description of general educators’ perspectives on the phenomenon, their experiences with personalized learning in an inclusive classroom can be better understood (Merriam, 1998).

### **Research Questions**

Many general educators at the local agency are unfamiliar with how to provide SWD instruction that allows SWD to successfully access the general education curriculum (assistant executive director of the Office of Exceptional Children, personal communication, October 16, 2017; Cameron, 2014; Gül & Vuran, 2015; Meynert, 2014; Strogilos et al., 2017). Teachers report being unfamiliar with how to provide instruction that gives access to the general education curriculum while still meeting the needs of students with IEPs. Concepts in Bloom’s mastery learning theory provided a lens to frame the study: flexible pacing, differentiation, and feedback. The research questions were designed to investigate the perspectives of general educators to generate understanding of the instructional strategies they find effective in giving SWD access to the general education curriculum. Specifically, the personalized learning instructional strategies used for flexible pacing, differentiation of instruction and data-informed feedback when teaching the general education curriculum to SWD are described and identified. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms on personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

RQ2: How do the lesson plans of general educators reflect the use of personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework grounds the research and creates the lens through which to view all elements of the study (Burkholder et al., 2016). For this study, the conceptual framework included Bloom's mastery learning theory. Bloom's concepts of flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback guided the study to investigate the perspectives of general educators using personalized learning to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. Bloom theorized that it was an educator's responsibility to differentiate instruction to meet the learning needs of the students in the classroom (Bloom, 1968). Bloom (1968) believed that with flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback, mastery of content for all students was possible.

The modern iteration of mastery learning has roots dating back to the early 1920s. Two school superintendents and researchers, Washburne (1922) and Morrison (1926), studied the possible effect of flexible pacing and instruction. Washburne and Morrison believed that time should be manipulated to meet the needs of the students and worked to make the shift to flexible pacing of lessons in schools. Morrison further argued that instruction should be adapted to meet the needs of students based on preassessments and

formative assessments. Carroll (1963) and Skinner (1964) published findings supporting the manipulation of time for students to reach mastery. Carroll (1963) found that learning was negatively affected when students were not provided the time needed to learn. Carroll stated that aptitude equaled the amount of time a student required to reach mastery; therefore, aptitude is not a fixed construct, but rather a function of time.

Bloom (1968) built upon the work of previous researchers and contemporaries to develop concepts in his mastery learning theory. Bloom concluded that assessments were not a function of aptitude, but rather a predictor of the time required for a student to reach mastery. Extending Carroll's research, Bloom (1974) stated that learning was not simply a matter of a fixed amount of time, but of elapsed time. Elapsed time is the amount of time a student requires from the introduction of a concept to the mastery of it (Bloom, 1974). If given the time needed, a student will master the content. Bloom (1974) theorized that if an educator presented information in sequential units, the difference in elapsed time would decrease with each unit of study. Providing students with the amount of time required for mastery versus a fixed amount of time based on a planned unit or a scope and sequence is needed for students of varying learning rates to achieve mastery (Bloom, 1974).

Bloom (1968) also theorized that if educators differentiated instruction and provided students with the instructional strategies and materials they needed, mastery of a concept was possible. According to Bloom, quality instruction is not measured by the effects on a group of learners, but rather the effects on individual learners. The needs of the learners dictate the instructional strategy to be used (Bloom, 1968). Bloom argued

that educators teach to the middle ability level of a class, neglecting the students at the high and low ends of perceived ability. Bloom further argued that educators teach to students who are at or near grade level out of habit and, therefore, ignore the possibility of reaching all students. Given professional development and materials, teachers can differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students (Bloom, 1968).

Lastly, Bloom (1974) believed that data-informed feedback provides data for the educator to better ensure all students are successful. Formative assessments give educators information on which skills individual students have mastered and where students are weak. Teachers address the weaknesses through individual assistance and differentiated instructional strategies (Bloom, 1974). Formative assessments also allow educators to ensure students have the prerequisite skills needed to reach proficiency in future units of study (Bloom, 1982). Formative assessments give educators the ability to fill in the gaps in students' knowledge to increase the rate of learning with new standards (Bloom, 1982). Without the feedback from frequent formative assessments, an educator does not know which individual students need additional instruction or exactly where the holes in learning are.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. The mastery learning theory supports the belief that all students can learn using strategies designed specifically to meet the needs of each student. Researchers exploring student achievement found that when the mastery

learning construct of flexible pacing is used, student outcomes improve (Ee et al., 2018; Geeslin, 2001; Hovgaard, 2016; Patrick & Ryan, 2008; Rollins, 1983). Adeniji et al. (2018) also discovered an increase in learner outcomes when teachers use a combination of flexible pacing of lessons, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback. Goksoy (2018) found that teachers' beliefs in the ability of all students to learn is crucial when using the elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory. Teaching behaviors change depending on how the teacher expects the student to perform (Goksoy, 2018). Goksoy's findings suggest it is crucial for general educators teaching in inclusive, personalized learning classrooms to believe that all students can learn, to set high expectations and to use instructional practices designed to meet the needs of all learners.

Bloom believed all students could learn if the theoretical elements were present (Bloom, 1968). Personalized learning is a promising model for making Bloom's belief closer to a reality (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Practices in a personalized model identified by educators include flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback (Patrick et al., 2013). In personalized learning classrooms, these practices are present and can occur at different times and independently of each other (Patrick et al., 2013). The practices teachers identified (Patrick et al., 2013) are elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory. Chapter 2 includes a more detailed explanation of each of the identified practices.

Investigating the perspectives of general educators allows an understanding of how the elements in Bloom's mastery learning theory are put into practice in personalized learning, inclusive classrooms. The open-ended questions included in the



interview protocol were designed to develop an understanding of the perspectives of these elements based on the analysis of the lesson plans. The interview protocol was developed based on the relevant constructs of the conceptual framework. The protocol included interview questions related to all three elements of the mastery learning theory. The research questions in this study were formulated using the connection of the elements of the theory and the identified practices in personalized learning, with the findings having the potential to make a positive social change for SWD possible. Bloom (1968) identified flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback as necessary for all students to reach mastery. Educators teaching in a personalized learning classroom use the three instructional practices identified by Bloom.

Adeniji et al. (2018) found that the instructional strategies from the mastery learning theory improved student performance in a secondary mathematics course. However, the researchers did not identify which instructional strategies were effective in improving student performances, nor did they investigate the perspectives of the educators. Adeniji et al. also did not examine the effects of mastery learning on SWD. They did find mastery learning had promise to close the achievement gaps from low, middle and high learners. In this study, I furthered the work of Adeniji et al. by investigating the perspectives of general educators to generate understanding of the instructional strategies they find effective in giving SWD access to the general education curriculum. Themes and patterns in the responses of the general educators on instructional practices in personalized learning, inclusive classrooms emerged during the data analysis process. Responses relating to flexible pacing, differentiation and

continuous data-informed feedback were coded using a priori coding. A priori coding gives the researcher the ability to predetermine topics to identify in the responses of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Using a priori coding allowed me to analyze the data for general educators' perspectives on specific elements in the conceptual framework put into practice in personalized learning in inclusive classrooms (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

### **The Nature of the Study**

A qualitative descriptive case study was used to investigate general educators' perspectives on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. A case study method was used to discover the how, why and results of an implemented phenomenon (Schramm, 1971). A case study allowed the phenomenon to be investigated in depth in a real-world context (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2014). A descriptive case study approach provided a detailed description of general educators' perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Yin (2018) stated that if the intent of the research is to give a thick description of a phenomenon, a case study is an appropriate approach. Merriam (1998) stated that a rich description of the phenomenon creates an opportunity for a deeper understanding. This study provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through a rich description of the perspectives of the participants, which aligns with the purpose of a descriptive study as stated by Yin and Merriam. Other qualitative and quantitative methods were not found to align with the purpose and research questions of this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews provided a means for a more complete description of the phenomenon. Interviews allowed for a rich and detailed understanding of general educators' perspectives on personalized learning instructional strategies and providing SWD with access to the general education curriculum (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Participants using personalized learning practices in the current school year or in the past two school years were selected from two to five elementary schools in a large, diverse Southeastern district in the United States. Elementary general education teachers were selected for two reasons. First, state legislation (2014) requires students who are not reading on grade level in the third grade to be retained. Although the law does allow for a good cause exemption for SWD who have reading goals on their IEPs, SWD are included in the identification process and are not excluded if there are no reading goals on the student's IEP (Read to Succeed, 2014). Therefore, SWD may still be vulnerable to retention. Second, there are more elementary schools in the local agency than any other grade band (local agency website, 2018). The number of elementary schools increased the likelihood of having the needed number of participants. Data from the interviews were coded using a priori coding and a thematic analysis was used to determine emerging patterns and themes.

In 2012, the local school district received a Race to the Top grant to implement personalized learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The implementation plan included ongoing professional development for teachers in the 19 participating schools and embedded personalized learning coaches in each school. The purpose was to improve learner outcomes and decrease achievement gaps, including the gap between SWD and

non-disabled peers, in the local district through personalized learning implementation (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). A review of publicly available documents included a list of the instructional practices and outlined an overall view of the personalized learning model used in the local district. I requested 2 weeks of lesson plans to analyze for the inclusion of personalized learning instructional strategies.

### **Definitions**

The following terms were identified as necessary for a complete understanding of the various elements of the study.

*Access:* The legal requirement to give SWD the same opportunity to be taught using the same curriculum as students without disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

*Differentiation:* Instructional strategies used to respond to the needs of students (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

*Data-informed feedback:* Data from pre- and post-assessments used by educators to inform instructional decisions for individual students or groups of students (Bloom, 1968). The data allow educators to determine if instruction is effective or if different instructional strategies are needed (Bloom, 1968).

*General education curriculum:* The guiding plan for instruction adopted by a state, district or school (Hitchcock et al., 2002).

*Inclusion:* SWD in general education classrooms with participation in the general education curriculum using personalized learning instructional strategies to improve learner outcomes (Friend & Bursuck, 2019).

*Personalized learning:* A model encompassing multiple practices including flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The pace of learning, instructional strategies and sequencing of the general education curriculum may vary depending on the needs of the learners.

*Time (flexible pacing):* In the context of this study, time is not a fixed variable (Bloom, 1968). Time is the amount of time needed for a student to reach mastery of a standard or set of standards (Bloom, 1968).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that participants in the study would offer truthful responses concerning their perspectives on personalized learning in providing SWD access to the general education curriculum. A second assumption was that participants would not feel coerced into a specific direction with their responses. Honest and open responses were necessary to provide true and accurate determinations of the perspectives of the participants. I also assumed that the participants in the study implement the instructional strategies identified in their lesson plans and in their responses to interview questions. Participants would only know if the instructional strategies were useful if they saw the benefits in their own classrooms.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study included eight elementary general educators from preschool to fifth grade who have applied personalized learning in inclusive classrooms in a large, diverse district in the Southeastern United States. Delimitations are characteristics determined by the researcher when designing the study (Simon & Goes,

2018). Delimitations included the selection criteria as determined by me for participants in the study. All participants taught in an elementary school, used personalized learning practices in their classrooms and provided instruction to SWD in an inclusive classroom setting.

Transferability refers to the applicability of the study or elements of the study to other settings and people (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The question asked by Lincoln and Guba (1985) helps to explain transferability in qualitative studies: “How can one determine the degree to which the findings of an inquiry may have applicability in other contexts or with other respondents?” (p. 218). To answer the question, an in-depth description of the elements of the study permitted their possible application to different contexts (Creswell, 2014; Malterud, 2001; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

### **Limitations**

Limitations are weaknesses in a study that include the researcher’s personal biases as well as constraints outside the researcher’s control (Simon & Goes, 2018). One limitation to the study was the availability of the general educators to be interviewed. Most elementary general educators have one 40-minute planning period per day, leaving little time during the workday for an interview. Given the constraint of how little free time remained in the school day after addressing family needs and after-school activities, finding a convenient time for the participants was difficult. To address this limitation, I offered an option to conduct the interview virtually using Skype, Google Hangouts, or other online application-

The biases of the researcher are also limitations. I have worked in a school in the district using personalized learning practices. My experience with personalized learning practices may have influenced my perceptions of participants' responses. To address this limitation, I first acknowledged my own biases. Using a relational approach to the process allowed me to maintain attention on the participants' perspectives instead of my biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Being an active listener and observer of body language assisted in supporting an accurate and credible interpretation of participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Significance**

In this study I addressed the gap in practice between the expectation of general educators in traditional classrooms to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum and some general educators' unfamiliarity with how to do so compared with their peers in personalized learning classrooms. As SWD continue to spend more time in general education settings, general educators will have greater responsibility in providing effective instruction to this population (McLeskey et al., 2014). At the foundation of a personalized learning model is meeting the students at their level and giving instruction based on their experiences (Prain et al., 2013).

Mandates from IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) require SWD have access to the same curriculum as their nondisabled peers; however, general educators continue to struggle to provide access to SWD (Cameron, 2014; Gül & Vuran, 2015; Meynert, 2014; Strogilos et al., 2017). By describing the perspectives of general educators in an inclusive classroom offering personalized learning, other teachers may better understand the

benefits, rewards, and barriers to using the practices in their own classrooms. Through the perspectives of other teachers concerning flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback, general educators may begin to think about how the instructional practices can be used in their own settings to meet the needs of SWD. Hammonds (2017) found that the characteristics of a teacher effective in meeting the needs of all students included the use of differentiation of instruction based on student data and use of standards. A better understanding of the practices embedded in a personalized learning model may lead to general educators using them in their own classrooms to meet the needs of SWD and provide those students with access to the general education curriculum. If teachers in an inclusive classroom feel empowered to provide needed instruction to all students using practices in a personalized learning model, the positive social effects increase opportunities for SWD and ripple throughout the community (Thompson & Jocius, 2017).

General educators have consistently stated that they understand the benefits of including SWD in the general education classroom (Carrington et al., 2016); however, many educators do not feel they have the necessary tools to instruct SWD (Hintz et al., 2015; Paju et al., 2016). Investigating the perspectives of general educators in an inclusive classroom offering personalized learning helps to uncover the needs, successes, and challenges of instructing SWD. If the needs and challenges are known, district personnel and leadership teams can work with all educators to provide the needed resources. Solutions to the challenges can also be found so that general educators in a traditional classroom feel equipped to meet the needs of SWD. One possible barrier is the



conflict between personalized learning models and district, state, and federal processes (Gross & DeArmond, 2018). Another barrier is the amount of time required to plan meaningful and purposeful instruction to meet the needs of all students (Pane et al., 2017b). If the needs of general educators are met and challenges removed, instruction to meet the needs of SWD using the general education curriculum may become a reality in more classrooms.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 included an introduction and rationale for the current study. The problem was identified and the purpose was stated. Research is needed to investigate general educators' perspectives on instructional strategies to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. The research questions in this study allowed a detailed description of the perceptions of general educators using a personalized learning model on adapting the length of instructional units, differentiating the process and product, and using the feedback process to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. The study was designed to provide analysis of general educators' perceptions of personalized learning strategies and to inform potential future research.

The study includes five chapters. Each chapter aligns to the problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, and conceptual framework found in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I explore the literature related to the key variables and concepts of the research problem, methodology and conceptual framework identified in Chapter 1.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature centered on the elements of the problem addressed in this study, which is that many general educators who do not plan for or use personalized learning instructional strategies in their classrooms find it challenging to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. ESSA (2015) mandates that SWD are provided education using the same standards as their nondisabled peers. Personalized learning has the potential to allow educators to fulfill the mandate (Basham et al., 2016; Pane et al., 2017b; Patrick et al., 2013; Rhim & Lancet, 2018). Student outcomes for both SWD and nondisabled peers improve in personalized learning environments (Basham et al., 2016; Pane et al., 2017b; Patrick et al., 2013; Rhim & Lancet, 2018).

Throughout the history of inclusive practices, most educators have expressed a positive attitude toward inclusion (Carrington et al., 2016), but have been unsure how to instruct SWD in the inclusive classroom (Hintz et al., 2015; Paju et al., 2016). With more SWD spending a larger portion of their day in inclusive classrooms, general educators require instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2016). Personalized learning models have the potential to give general educators the strategies needed to increase learner outcomes for all students (Pane et al., 2015). Chapter 2 includes an

overview of the strategies and key words used to locate information for the literature review. In the chapter, I also use the literature to delve into the conceptual framework and conduct a historical and practical exploration of personalized learning. Also included is a review of the legal underpinnings of providing SWD with access to the general education curriculum, and general educators' perspectives and practices surrounding inclusion.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I searched various databases for journal articles and other supporting documents. The databases included Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis Online, PsychARTICLES, PsychINFO, Primary Search, Research Starters-Education, and Teacher Reference Center. To find journal articles and other documents, I used the Walden Library, Research Gate, the local public library system, and the Google Scholar search engine. Most of the searches used the Education Source database. Filters were selected to include only peer reviewed article published after 2013 except for searches for the chosen conceptual framework, NCLB, ESSA, and Race to the Top Grant. Keywords and search terms included *inclusion, inclusive practices, differentiated instruction, mastery learning, mastery learning + inclusion, mastery learning + instruction, mastery learning + achievement, personalized learning, competency-based learning, blended learning, personalized learning + differentiation, differentiation + students with disabilities + opinions, differentiation + students with disabilities + parents, personalized learning + inclusion, special education + inclusion, special education + inclusion + general educators, general education + students with disabilities, general educators + students with disabilities + curriculum, general educators + students with disabilities + barriers,*

*students with disabilities + curriculum + access, general education curriculum + inclusion, general education curriculum + access + inclusion, No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act, visible learning, feedback + instruction, feedback + personalized learning, time + instruction, Benjamin Bloom, sampling, discrepant data, qualitative + methods, qualitative + conceptual framework, qualitative + data analysis, and qualitative + coding, opportunity to learn, opportunity to learn + students with disabilities, achievement gap + students with disabilities.*

Searches for difficult to find topics, as well as where saturation of the literature was critical, included all data bases previously named. These topics were *Benjamin Bloom, personalized learning, qualitative + data analysis, discrepant data, differentiated instruction, personalized learning, competency-based learning, general educators + differentiated instruction, general educators + differentiated instruction + students with disabilities, general educators + personalized learning, general education + personalized learning + inclusion, general educators + inclusion, general educators + inclusion + curriculum, and personalized learning + general educators + inclusion*. For topics where additional information was needed after exhausting databases, I used the Google Scholar search engine. Information on mastery learning theory was limited in the data bases. The Google Scholar engine allowed me to locate information, as well as additional sources cited in articles. Also, for topics where information was difficult to find, I searched the Walden dissertation data base and searched for key words in the dissertations. Then I looked at the reference list to identify possible articles related to my own study.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study includes Bloom's mastery learning theory. Bloom's mastery learning theory enabled the conceptualization of the phenomenon in this study; little is understood about general educators' perspectives on instructional strategies in a personalized learning model for SWD in an inclusive classroom. This theory provided a relational connection between educator practices and student learning.

Bloom's mastery learning theory is made up of three variables: (a) cognitive early behaviors, (b) affective-entry characteristics, and (c) quality of instruction (Bloom, 1982). Cognitive early behaviors are the history of early learning and development (Bloom, 1982). Bloom believed previous experiences and learning determine how a child approaches a new learning task; therefore, variations in learning occur because children have different experiences (Bloom, 1968). Bloom also believed affective early characteristics influence the learning process (Bloom, 1982). Affective early characteristics are defined as the motivation of a student to engage in learning (Bloom, 1982). Bloom thought that a student's interests, attitudes, and self-concept play an important role in that student's motivation to learn (Bloom, 1968). The last variable is the quality of instruction, identified by Bloom as the one variable where educators can affect the learning process for all students. Quality of instruction includes adapting instruction to meet the needs of the individual learner, providing flexible pacing for students to reach mastery, and using specific feedback to identify areas of weakness for students (Bloom, 1968).

A personalized learning model includes the practices of flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback. Flexible pacing is defined as the adjustment of the time individual students require to reach mastery (Bloom, 1968). Initial studies on the flexible pacing found that it allowed all students the opportunity to reach mastery (Carroll, 1963; Corcoran, 1927; Jackman, 1920; Skinner, 1964). Basham et al. (2016) and Grace (2017) identified flexible pacing through curriculum as beneficial to students.

According to Bloom (1968), the quality of instruction is affected by adapting instruction to meet the needs of individual students. Differentiated instruction is used by educators in today's classrooms to adapt instruction and is a key element in giving SWD access to the general education curriculum (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Elliott et al., 2017; Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Hintz et al., 2015; Meynert, 2014; Tomlinson, 2000; Valiandes, 2015). Weiss et al. (2018) found that the ability to differentiate instruction and adapt the materials used to learn the curriculum was needed to effectively to engage SWD with grade-level curriculum and the learning process. Magableh and Abdullah (2020) found that differentiated instruction had a positive effect on student achievement and reduced the achievement gap between low-performing and high-performing students. However, it is difficult for educators to put differentiated instruction into practice (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Hintz et al., 2015). Dunn and Darlington (2016) noted that the biggest barrier to differentiated instruction was time. The teachers felt they did not have the time needed to plan effective differentiation and to create the materials needed (Dunn & Darlington, 2016).

Tomlinson (2000) defined differentiated instruction as the teacher's response to the varied learning needs of students in a classroom. The content, process, products and learning environment can be differentiated to meet the needs of all students (Tomlinson, 2000). *Content* refers to material the student needs to learn (Tomlinson, 2000).

Tomlinson (2017) noted that there are two ways to adapt content: according to the 'what' and the 'how'. The first is to adapt *what* students learn or *what* content is taught. The second is to adapt *how* teachers provide access to what students learn or what is taught. The *process* is the tasks students perform to reach proficiency (Tomlinson, 2000).

Tomlinson (2017) described differentiation as a sense-making process, a task intentionally created to assist students in moving from their current understanding to a deeper understanding of a concept. The shift to a deeper understanding is easier for students when the task interests them; requires higher thinking skills; and requires them to use current knowledge, skills, and understandings to form connections (Tomlinson, 2017).

In Tomlinson's (2000) differentiated instruction process, the *product* is the format in which the student demonstrates proficiency: test, essay, project, etc. The product is produced by the student at the end of a learning unit (Tomlinson, 2017). Products may be worked on in groups, pairs, or individually. The products designed require students to demonstrate proficiency in the content they learn (Tomlinson, 2017). Finally, products students produce draw on students' interests, require time, and require students to think deeply and more broadly than a process-designed task (Tomlinson, 2017). The learning environment includes the structures and procedures of a classroom as well as the feel of a

classroom (Tomlinson, 2000). Tomlinson (2017) described the learning environment as a place where students feel welcome and make others feel welcome. Tomlinson noted the importance of the visibility of student work and flexible seating in a welcoming learning environment. A sense of belonging for students and others who enter the classroom is part of a positive learning environment. Safety, mutual respect, expectation of growth and teaching for the success of all students are elements needed in a differentiated learning environment (Tomlinson, 2017).

Data-informed feedback is part of the cyclical process of using formative assessments to give the educator and student data on what the student has learned and what the student still needs to learn with a quick reteaching response (Bloom, 1982). Researchers have found a positive correlation between formative assessments and student outcomes (Andersson & Palm, 2017; Ozan & Kincal, 2018; Vogelzang & Admiraal, 2017).

Bloom believed that a paradigm shift was needed in how educators view equal opportunity for students (Bloom, 1982). A personalized learning model is part of current school reforms designed to give equal opportunities for all students through more inclusive settings and increased learner outcomes (Miliband, 2004; U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2017). Bloom (1968) advocated the use of the flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback to provide all students the opportunity to reach proficiency. Bloom's mastery learning theory is applicable to students in a personalized learning classroom because a personalized learning model encourages students to learn at their own pace through data-informed



instruction designed specifically to meet their needs (Patrick et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2017). However, Basham et al. (2016) found no consistent definition of *personalized learning*.

The elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory provided the focus for the current study and guided the research questions and data analysis. The conceptual framework gave a focus for the study and situate the study within its context (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Merriam (2009) stated the purpose of the conceptual framework is to "generate the problem, research questions, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings" (p. 67). The conceptual framework for this study narrowed the focus of the problem to those personalized learning model instructional strategies that will be investigated to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. The research questions were crafted from the conceptual framework to allow participants to describe the instructional strategies used in their personalized learning, inclusive classrooms. The interview protocol was developed, in part, using the relevant elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory.

The data analysis plan was reflective of the conceptual framework (Merriam, 2009). The choices I made to analyze and interpret the data were influenced by the conceptual framework. The data analysis used a priori coding based on the instructional strategies found in the conceptual framework. A priori coding gives a researcher the ability to have predetermined categories to analyze participants' responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The conceptual framework is the lens for a study that determines how a researcher sees the whole of the study and makes decisions about each of its parts. The framework influences the decisions made throughout the study, including the framing of the problem statement, the design of the research questions and the choices made during data analysis. Each section of the research process is a snapshot brought into focus through the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework is used to determine what is investigated and what may not be investigated (Merriam, 2009). This study assisted in a deeper understanding of how general educators perceive personalized learning in an inclusive setting to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

Personalized learning in its current iteration has roots in the Winnetka Plan (Corcoran, 1927) and the Dalton Plan (Jackman, 1920). The Winnetka Plan allowed students to progress through curricula at their own pace without receiving a grade for the work (Corcoran, 1927). The Dalton Plan allowed students to study topics of interests, to progress at their own pace, to receive individualized instruction and to engage in collaborative groups (Jackman, 1920). Hoz coined the phrase *personalized learning* in 1970 (Microsoft in Education, 2014). Hoz stated that learning should be in the hands of the student and the environment should reflect the learner's development across cognitive, affective, and social-emotional domains (Microsoft in Education, 2014). Growing from the work of Hoz, personalized learning grew in popularity across the globe (Microsoft in Education, 2014). Miliband (2004), Minister of State for School Standards, gave a speech at the North of England Education Conference explaining the promise of

personalized learning in England. Miliband (2004) stated that the key to improving schools was to have the students at the center of the learning, with educators knowing each student's learning style and needs, and setting goals linked to formative assessments. The U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology (2017) defined personalized learning as

Instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each learner. Based on the needs of learners, the learning targets, instructional strategies, and the sequencing of content may differ for students including SWD. In addition, learning activities are meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests, and often self-initiated. (para. 4)

However, Patrick et al. (2013) defined personalized learning as “tailoring learning for each student's strengths, needs, and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when, and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure master of the highest standards possible” (p. 4). Basham et al. (2016) and Maguire et al. (2013) noted a lack of consistent understanding of what personalized learning is, which has implications for understanding how to implement and structure a personalized learning model in a classroom, school, or district. Maguire et al. discovered that general educators adapted instruction for low-achieving students and high-achieving students but not for all students. Basham et al. (2016) observed personalized learning classrooms and interviewed teachers, and noted that several elements were consistently present. The elements included students moving through the curriculum at their own pace, on-going

and continuous feedback, and the availability of multiple paths to learning standards. The students, rather than the teachers, were in control of their learning (Basham et al., 2016).

Personalized learning gained popularity in the United States as Race to the Top grants designed to improve instructional practices and learner outcomes for all students became available (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Schulte et al. (2016) found that the achievement gap between SWD and their non-disabled peers was not closing.

Personalized learning has the potential to begin to close the persistent achievement gap and to provide all students with access to grade level standards mandated by ESSA (Basham et al., 2016; ESSA, 2015; Pane et al., 2017b; Patrick et al., 2013; Rhim & Lancet, 2018). Several studies have examined the outcomes of personalized learning. Pane et al. (2015) conducted a study to examine the effects of personalized learning across multiple indicators. The student achievement findings showed positive effects on mathematics and reading achievement over a two-year period for most schools, with students having the lowest achievement data demonstrating greater growth than their peers (Pane et al., 2015). Choi and Ma (2015) found that low-achieving students using a personalized vocabulary system demonstrated positive outcomes in retaining meanings. The studies point to the potential of a personalized learning model; however, a deep understanding of personalized learning elements is needed for learner outcomes to increase (Basham et al., 2016).

Some teachers find the demands of personalized learning difficult (Bingham & Dimandja, 2017; Warner & Palmer, 2015). Bingham and Dimandja (2017), as well as Warner and Palmer (2015), found that teachers had difficulty managing the workload of a

personalized learning classroom. Teachers found tracking students' individual progress through coursework to be overwhelming and not feasible (Bingham & Dimandja, 2017). Bingham et al. (2018) discovered that one challenge in applying a personalized learning model was a lack of professional development around instructional strategies. Because the instructional strategies were unclear, the teachers felt that the workload was too high (Bingham et al., 2018). However, as Rickabaugh (2016) noted, a personalized learning model applied to teacher learning is as beneficial to teachers as it is to students. Teachers need flexibility and control over their own learning to meet their individual needs (Rickabaugh, 2016). By contrast, students have a positive view of personalized learning (Rickabaugh, 2016; Warner & Palmer, 2015). Students were more engaged when they had a clear purpose for their learning, set learning goals, received feedback, and collaborated with their teacher and peers (Rickabaugh, 2016; Warner & Palmer, 2015).

### **Legal Mandate for SWD Access to General Education Curriculum**

There are two laws that mandate that SWD be provided access to the same standards as their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive environment: IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015). IDEA (2004) required students with disabilities be included with non-disabled peers and to participate in state and district assessments to the fullest extent appropriate. ESSA (2015) strengthened the mandate in IDEA by stating that all students must be provided access to the same high-quality standards. Given the mandates of IDEA (2004) and ESSA, the number of SWD spending more time in the general education classroom has continued to increase since 2005 (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2016). The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative

Services found that 72.4% of third-grade SWD, 70% of fourth-grade SWD and 69.5% of fifth-grade SWD participated in regular reading assessments with and without accommodations in the school year 2013-2014. The data show that only 32.1% of third-grade SWD, 29% of fourth-grade SWD and 29.1% of fifth-grade SWD achieved proficiency on the reading assessment (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2016). IDEA (2004) and the data reported by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services signify the importance of SWD receiving high-quality instruction and access to the same standards as nondisabled students in inclusive classrooms.

### **SWD Learner Outcomes in Inclusive Classrooms**

Several studies noted the importance of SWD being instructed with the same standards using adapted instruction and flexible pacing in general education to increase learner outcomes. Cosier et al. (2013) found a positive relationship between SWD achievement in reading and math and the time SWD spent in an inclusive classroom. However, various studies found that there are multiple factors leading to the success of SWD in a general education classroom, including the opportunity to learn, access to the general education curriculum and instruction adapted to the needs of the learner. Blank and Smithson (2014) conducted a study on the opportunity to learn in classrooms across three states. The findings suggested, for most classrooms in Grades 4–8, that the instruction for SWD and nondisabled students did not align with the standards. However, in classrooms where alignment was present, alignment had a positive relationship to achievement for SWD and nondisabled students. Elliott et al. (2017) also examined the

construct of ‘opportunity to learn’ for SWD using the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers. Their findings suggested that the time required of the opportunity to learn did not vary between SWD and non-disabled students. However, the achievement gap between SWD and non-disabled students remained constant over the course of the study. One implication of the study was that instructional practices needed to adapt to the needs of the learners to provide access to the general education curriculum (Elliott et al., 2017).

Roden et al. (2013) found that SWD in an inclusive environment met expectations on the state assessment. They noted that the mandate for SWD to have access to the general education curriculum may be one of the factors increasing SWD learner outcomes (Roden et al., 2013). However, a study conducted by Lauen and Gaddis (2016) found that as the rigor of standards increased due to the mandates imposed by NCLB (2002), achievement levels for the average and low-average students decreased, creating a wider achievement gap. The effects were the greatest on low-performing schools, creating a large percentage of students who did not achieve proficiency on state assessments. Lauen and Gaddis (2016) did not examine the effects of instruction on learner outcomes. They examined a quantitative analysis of student scores.

Elliott (2015) also found that SWD had less opportunity to learn grade-level standards when compared to the students without disabilities in the same classroom. As with Lauen and Gaddis, Elliott did not examine the instructional strategies used in the classroom. If SWD are provided access to the general education classroom with instruction designed to meet their specific learning needs, achievement should increase (Elliott et al., 2017).

### **Adaptation of Length of Time to Reach Proficiency**

Bloom (1974) discussed the idea of elapsed time, which he defined as “the amount of time spent from the beginning of a learning unit until the completion of the unit at the criterion level of mastery” (p. 684). A personalized learning model includes flexible pacing for all students, including SWD, to provide them the opportunity to reach mastery (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). However, research on flexible pacing is limited. Tincani and DeMers (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 13 studies on flexible pacing. In 11 of the 13 studies, they found that adjusting instructional pacing had a positive effect on learner outcomes. Basham et al. (2016) conducted a study to determine the effects of the elements of personalized learning when practiced. The study found that flexibly pacing learning through individualized learning pathways had beneficial effects for all students including SWD (Basham et al., 2016). Netcoh and Bishop (2017) conducted an exploratory case study to understand middle school educators’ perceptions of a personalized learning class. Their findings suggested that personalized learning strategies had a positive effect on student and teacher relationships. However, educators had difficulty with the flexible pacing element. Educators felt the students needed more structure and deadlines for their work. Other difficulties for educators included the differing deadlines, the various scaffolds students needed, and multiple student expectations (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017).

However, Nagle and Taylor (2017) discovered that the educators in their study embraced students setting goals and moving through the curriculum at different paces. Grace (2017) stated that when time for learning was flexible, it benefited students. Grace



furthered argued that allowing the variable 'time' to be dynamic instead of static could begin to close the gap between low-performing students and high-performing students. Although research is limited, Grace (2017) and Basham et al. (2016) found flexible pacing to be beneficial for low-performing students and SWD as they sought to achieve proficiency in the general education curriculum, making it a necessary practice in a personalized learning, inclusive classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

### **Differentiation, Adaptations, and Instruction**

Differentiated instruction is a necessary practice for SWD to access the general education curriculum in a personalized learning, inclusive classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Valiandes, 2015). Tomlinson (2017) defined differentiated instruction as providing learners multiple paths for learning information, processing information and thoughts, and demonstrating what they have learned. Adding to the definition, Tomlinson (2017) discussed differentiation in terms of the different paths and different times students take to arrive at proficiency. Weiss et al. (2018) identified differentiating instruction and adapting materials as key to instructing SWD. Bešić et al. (2016) found that educators' belief in a heterogeneous classroom composition is important in teaching. The educators in the study differentiated instruction through cooperative learning, learning stations, projects, peer pairings and collaboration (Bešić et al., 2016). Parsons, Dodman et al. (2013) stated that the definition of differentiation needs to expand to include the adapting of instruction as it occurs. They found that educators who successfully differentiate for students have three traits: they assessed students in various formats, had a deep understanding of how students learn, and reflected on their teaching

(Parsons et al., 2013). Parsons et al. (2013) argued that educators who possessed these traits were not only able to plan effective differentiation, but they were able to adapt instruction as it was being delivered to meet the needs of students. The literature indicates that teachers generally have a positive attitude toward inclusion; however, they are less positive in providing instruction to students with disabilities (Morgan, 2015). Goksoy (2018) found only four teachers in a sample size of 14 who believed that all students could learn the material taught.

Fyssa et al. (2014) found that pre-school general educators had a positive perception of inclusion, but they saw SWD as the responsibility of the special educator even when the special educator was not in the classroom. Fyssa et al. (2014) advocated a shift from a deficit perspective to “an inclusive pedagogical approach” (p. 234). High school general educators were found to have a positive attitude toward inclusion when appropriate supports were provided (Boyle et al., 2013). Boyle et al. (2013) also found that after teaching in an inclusive classroom for one year, general educators’ attitudes toward inclusion were negatively affected. General educators indicated a belief that inclusion increases the social climate of a school in studies (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Hintz et al., 2015). The findings of both studies also showed concerns about quality of instruction declining and a lack of skills needed to provide instruction when SWD were included in general education classrooms (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Meynert, 2014). The finding of the lack of skills needed to provide instruction to SWD (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Hintz et al., 2015) was consistent with the findings of Paju et al. (2016), and Day and Prunty (2015). However, Engelbrecht et al. (2015) stated that one barrier to

SWD in the general education classroom is the beliefs of the general educators themselves. General educators approached inclusion from a deficit mindset; therefore, they did not believe that SWD should be in the general education classroom. This belief led general educators to create dual classrooms inside one classroom: one for SWD and one for non-disabled students. However, Mackey (2014) found three general educators in a case study who were not only positive about SWD in the classroom, they adapted instruction to meet the needs of the students. The study was limited by having only three participants in a middle school classroom, which may account for the difference in the findings (Mackey, 2014). Supporting the study by Englebrecht et al., Karvonen (2013) found that even when SWD had access to the grade-level curriculum, the depth to which the standards were taught was not the same as for their non-disabled peers. Meynert (2014) made a counter argument to the beliefs found in the research of Englebrecht et al. and stated that every student needs differentiated instruction; therefore, it is a shift in instruction that is needed rather than the exclusion of SWD from the general education classroom and curriculum.

General educators responsive to SWD instructional needs engage in the following actions: they offer continuous formative assessment, reflect on their practice, know their students, and have a vision and long-term plan (Vaughn et al., 2015). Parsons and Vaughn (2013) identified strategies used by two teachers to adapt instruction to meet the needs of the learners. The strategies included common adaptations such as small group instruction, individual conferencing, clarification of student misunderstandings, and use of their knowledge of students to make instructional adjustments (Parsons & Vaughn,

2013). Valiandes (2015) found the following elements of effective instruction in a mixed-abilities classroom: instruction adapted to the needs of the learner, students working at their own pace, and continuous assessment and feedback.

However, Gül and Vuran (2015) and Cameron (2014) found that general educators did not apply differentiation strategies consistently to adapt instruction to meet the needs of SWD. Whole-group instruction was the most common mode of instruction, with limited small-group instruction noted (Gül & Vuran, 2015). Gaitas and Martins (2017) found that adapting instruction for students with disabilities was the most difficult practice for general educators in inclusive classrooms. The need for differentiated instructional strategies to meet the mandates in IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) was repeatedly cited in the literature (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Elliott et al., 2017; Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Hintz et al., 2015; Meynert, 2014). Since differentiated instruction is a necessary practice in a personalized learning, inclusive classroom, understanding the perspective of general educators is needed to better prepare teachers and to anticipate possible barriers to using instructional strategies to differentiate instruction.

### **Feedback**

Bloom (1982) defined the data-informed feedback process in terms of formative tests “used primarily for feedback purposes to inform the student and the teacher about what has been learned well and what still needs to be learned” (p. 7). Bloom believed that by using a series of formative assessments to adapt instruction to meet the individual needs of students, students grow more confident in their learning, are actively engaged in the learning, and gain the prerequisite skills needed for future learning. Data-informed

feedback, as described by Bloom, is needed in a personalized learning, inclusive classroom to adapt instruction to meet the needs of all students and to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Chan et al. (2014) identified three activities educators must do for data-informed feedback to be effective in increasing learner outcomes. First, educators need to have clear, explicit learning targets and a clear plan for demonstrating proficiency. By defining learning targets, the teacher and student measure progress toward the goal using known and understood criteria. The progress toward the learning goal drives instruction and the choice of instructional strategies. Second, educators need evidence of student learning that is reflective of their progress toward proficiency. A variety of formative assessments aligned to the learning target allow educators to monitor progress and adjust instruction as needed throughout the unit of study. Finally, students need to be engaged in learning tasks that are goal oriented. Setting goals for learning gives students the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning (Chan et al., 2014).

Andersson and Palm (2017), Ozan and Kincal (2018), and Vogelzang and Admiraal (2017) found that formative assessment had a positive effect on student learner outcomes. Andersson and Palm conducted a study to examine the effects of professional development on formative assessments. They stated that when educators changed practices around feedback and instructional practice based on formative assessments, student achievement increased (Andersson & Palm, 2017). Ozan and Kincal (2018) found that not only did student learner outcomes increase, but so did students' ability to monitor their own learning. Ozan and Kincal noted that the formative assessment cycle of

feedback and adapting instruction were especially useful for low-performing students. The goal was learning versus obtaining a grade (Ozan & Kincal, 2018). In the action research study conducted by Vogelzang and Admiraal (2017), data-informed feedback was crucial to the increase in student learner outcomes. Vogelzang and Admiraal found that data-informed feedback increased discussions centered on student understanding and learning strategies between the educator and the student, as well as between students. Chan et al. (2014) argued that educators who used data to assess progress toward a standard and adapted instruction to meet the needs of SWD accelerated the learning of SWD.

### **Literature Related to the Method**

The legal mandates to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum, and to be educated with their general education peers to the fullest extent possible, have caused districts, schools and educators to attempt new models. Personalized learning gained attention in the United States with the Race to the Top grant program (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The purpose of the Race to the Top grant program was to improve instruction to improve learner outcomes for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). There have been few studies that explore general educators' perspectives on instructional strategies for personalized learning and their role in meeting the legal mandates of providing SWD with access to the general education curriculum alongside their non-disabled peers (Li & Wong, 2021).

A qualitative descriptive case study will be the format used for this study. Yin (2014) stated that one of the reasons to conduct a qualitative study is to develop a deep

understanding of the phenomenon. Yin also contended that a case study is the best option when there is no manipulation of a variable and the phenomenon is current. This study does not manipulate a variable and the phenomenon investigated is current. A qualitative descriptive case study approach will allow a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that a case study is used when the aim of the research is to develop a rich description of the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth further stated that case studies best match the purpose of gaining a deep understanding. Based on the criteria set by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Yin (2014), and the methodology in the literature exploring perspectives of stakeholders, a descriptive case study approach will be used for the current study.

Wachen et al. (2018) and Sharma et al. (2017) used qualitative case studies for their research methodology. Wachen et al. conducted a qualitative case study to explore educators' reports of classroom practice. The researchers' intent was to describe educators' use of data in instructional practices through participants' responses in interviews and focus groups. Because the researchers did not include observations in their data collection process, the researchers could not compare the reported responses of educators and the actual practices in the classroom. The researchers were, however, able to provide a thick description of the phenomenon.

Sharma et al. (2017) explored the perspectives of stakeholders on the barriers and facilitators of inclusion through a qualitative study. The researchers used interviews and focus groups to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Only two interviews were conducted. One participant was from the Ministry of Education and Human Resources

and the other participant was from Human Resource Development in the Solomon Islands. Because no educators were interviewed, a limited perspective on inclusion was gained.

As with my study, both studies used interviews to provide a thick description of participants' perspectives. Wachen et al. (2018) noted that a delimitation was the decision to not observe behavior in classrooms, which applies to my study. To address this delimitation, I will look at lesson plans from the participants to note the instructional practices used. Sharma et al. (2017) interviewed only two stakeholders, which limited the perspectives gained; My study incorporated more participants, so saturation may be met.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The purpose of the qualitative descriptive case study is to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. A qualitative descriptive case study approach allowed a deeper understanding of general educators' perspectives through semi-structured interviews (Burkholder et al., 2016). Research on personalized learning with any population is limited (Bingham & Dimandja, 2017).

The literature showed a requirement for instructional strategies to adapt to the needs of the learner (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Elliott et al., 2017; Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Hintz et al., 2015; Meynert, 2014). The literature also showed that teachers in most general education classrooms are not adapting instructional strategies to meet the needs of SWD (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Cameron, 2014; Gül & Vuran, 2015; Hintz et al.,



2015). Personalized learning has the potential to increase learner outcomes for SWD and non-disabled students as well as provide general educators with the instructional strategies needed (Basham et al., 2016; Pane et al., 2017b; Patrick et al., 2013; Rhim & Lancet, 2018). The purpose of the study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators to generate understanding of the instructional strategies they find effective at giving SWD access to the general education curriculum. Few studies described general educators' perspectives of the instructional strategies in personalized learning when instructing SWD: flexible pacing, differentiation, and feedback (Li & Wong, 2021). This study extended the knowledge related to the possibilities of personalized learning by exploring the perspectives of general educators teaching in an inclusive classroom. Chapter 3 details the methodology used to investigate general educators' perspectives of the personalized learning instructional strategies.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of the qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale. The decision to use a qualitative descriptive case study design is explained, as well as the reasons why other methods were rejected. Included in this chapter is a description of the role of the researcher during the research phase of the study. The methodology of the research study is detailed in this chapter. A detailed description of how participants were selected and justification for the process is included. Identification of each data collection instrument is provided. Also included is a description of the steps taken to recruit participants for the study, the data collection process and the data analysis plan. Finally, a discussion about ensuring trustworthiness and ethical procedures is provided.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

In this study, I employed a qualitative descriptive case study design using semi-structured interviews and a document review of the participants' lesson plans. The decision to use a qualitative case study design derives logically from the research questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms on personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

RQ2: How do the lesson plans of general educators reflect the use of personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

Merriam and Tisdell (2009) defined qualitative research as the act of “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of the world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). Using Merriam’s definition of qualitative research, a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study. The aim of the study was to provide a better understanding of general educators’ perspectives on personalized learning instructional strategies used in an inclusive classroom to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Burkholder et al. (2016) stated that the purpose of qualitative research is to give a description of a phenomenon in the natural world. The purpose of a qualitative design aligned with the purpose of the study: to investigate the perspectives of general educators to generate understanding of the instructional strategies they find effective in giving SWD access to the general education curriculum.

The research questions and the qualitative descriptive case study design were intended to work in conjunction to investigate the phenomenon. The study structure allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the lens of the conceptual framework (Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Case study methods other than a descriptive case study were considered; however, they were found to be less effective and were rejected. A quantitative approach was considered, but was not appropriate for the research questions posed. A researcher uses a quantitative research design to prove or disprove hypotheses (Burkholder et al., 2016). Because I did not

design this study to prove or disprove hypotheses, a quantitative approach was not appropriate.

Burkholder et al. (2016) identified five approaches used in qualitative research: case studies, ethnography, phenomenology, narratives, and grounded theory. A case study provides a researcher with a deeper understanding of a phenomenon bounded by time and place (Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this study, I sought to better understand the current (time) perspectives of general educators on the use of a personalized learning model in an inclusive classroom in a specific local agency (place). A case study was appropriate for this study. An ethnographic approach was not considered as it does not match the purpose of the study. Ethnographic approaches are used to explore cultural groups and their relationship to a phenomenon over time (Burkholder et al., 2016). A phenomenological approach was considered, but the purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand the phenomenon itself through the lived experiences of the participants rather than understanding how the phenomenon functions in the world (Creswell, 2007). A narrative approach was not appropriate for this study as a narrative approach purposes to investigate general educators' perspectives of the phenomenon as they are used in the world (Burkholder et al., 2016). A grounded theory approach was not appropriate and not considered for this study because I did not seek to generate a specific theory (Creswell, 2007). A researcher uses grounded theory to identify a theory for an identified phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

I chose a descriptive case study approach because the purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning

environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. An explanatory case study was considered, but its purpose would have been to “explain how or why some condition came to be (e.g., how or why some sequence of events occurred or did not occur” (Yin, 2018, p. 286). A researcher uses an explanatory case study when the purpose is to explain the potential causes of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). I did not seek to provide a link between a personalized learning model and any potential cause; therefore, an explanatory case study approach was not appropriate. Finally, an exploratory case study approach was not chosen. Blackburn (2017) stated an exploratory case study is used “to initially explore a contemporary phenomenon that is inseparable from the context in which it exists” (p. 149). An exploratory case study was not appropriate for this study. The phenomenon of personalized learning can occur in various diverse contexts. The goal of an exploratory study is to understand a little-known phenomenon; such a study could be used for exploring personalized learning if the purpose were different (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). However, the purpose of a descriptive case study is “to describe the phenomenon (‘the case’) in its real-world context in which it occurs” (Yin, 2018, p. 286). Because this study was designed to investigate perspectives of general educators to develop a deeper understanding in the real-world context of a personalized learning, inclusive classroom, a descriptive study aligned more closely with my purpose.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the only researcher for this study, I was solely responsible for the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data. I used a relational approach to the research, which

allowed self-reflection throughout the process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A relational approach directed attention to the participants' expertise versus any personal bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Part of the relational approach requires a researcher to be a listener and observer. The researcher must actively listen and note participant behavior when using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A close observation of words and behavior supports a balanced, thorough, credible, and accurate interpretation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Hewitt (2007) noted the vulnerability to bias in qualitative research due to the attitudes of the researcher. In my role as inclusion facilitator for the local agency and as a former special education educator, I have observed different instructional strategies used to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. However, my personal beliefs point me toward the inclusion of SWD and their access to the general education curriculum. I have also held the role of an instructional coach in a school using a personalized learning model.

Hewitt (2007) noted the importance of recognizing research bias to prevent it from hampering the data collection, analysis, and interpretation. As Yin (2014) recommended, I was aware of and open to perspectives that differ from my own as one way to protect against bias. I observed, listened, and dispassionately reflected on the data throughout the research process to provide protection against research bias. Creswell (2013) explained that the use of multiple sources of data in a qualitative study guard against research bias, so multiple data were gathered for this study to help prevent bias. General educators' lesson plans were reviewed to note the instructional strategies

planned. The lesson plans also offered a comparison between what was planned and what the participants stated they would apply in their inclusive classrooms. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The study was conducted in the local agency where I have been employed for 19 years. The participants were selected from schools where I do not work. I had worked with all the schools in the district as the inclusion facilitator; however, leadership and educators have changed since that time.

### **Methodology**

I used purposeful sampling to select participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful sampling allows participants to be chosen based on the boundaries of a case study and their ability to answer the research questions relevantly (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Vogt et al., 2012). The advantages of purposeful sampling are reduced time to identify and recruit participants and decreased costs for the researcher (Kothari, 2004). Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated that a researcher should interview people knowledgeable about the research topic. Therefore, participants were elementary general educators using personalized learning practices in an inclusive setting.

To allow me the possibility of interviewing 12 participants, I contacted five elementary schools using a personalized model in the local agency. I requested a list of the elementary schools known to be using personalized learning practices from the director of innovative and digital learning. After receiving the list, I contacted the principals of each school asking for permission to contact general educators teaching in

an inclusive classroom for the study (Appendix A). I then emailed general educators from the provided list, explaining the study and the study procedures. After eight educators agreed to participate, I scheduled and conducted the interviews. Merriam (2009) stated that no specific number is required for a sample size. Sample size depends on the elements of the study: research questions, data collection and analysis, and availability. Creswell (2013) suggested having four to five participants for case study research. To reach saturation on the topic, I conducted eight interviews. The sample size allowed for an exhaustion of themes and patterns. Given the information gathered from Merriam and Creswell, I determined that eight participants would be a manageable number and allow for saturation.

Interviews took place at a site chosen by each participant and virtual interviews were conducted using Skype or another agreed platform. Due to the schedules of the teachers and the differing dismissal times across the district, the participants were given the option of a virtual interview to increase participation. Because bias is present in purposeful sampling, I took the steps necessary to be impartial throughout the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes (Kothari, 2004). Ravitch and Carl (2016) stressed that continual reflection on the researcher's bias is critical to a qualitative study. To guard against my bias, I engaged in the reflective cycle recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2016) throughout the process. I recorded my biases and made notes reflecting on how they may influence my decisions. If I am aware of where my biases have the potential to influence the study, I am better able to guard against their potential influence. I continuously referred to the written biases and reflected to determine if they had



influenced a decision, a process, or findings. Through the use of this reflective cycle, I kept personal bias from influencing the study.

### **Instrumentation**

For this study, I collected and analyzed data from semi-structured interviews and participants' lesson plans. A document review of the lesson plans identified the instructional strategies in personalized learning models used by general educators. Lesson plans gave me an understanding of the implementation both of personalized learning in the district (including professional development) and instructional strategies. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that a review of documents relevant to a phenomenon is important to understand the context in which the research takes place. The first source of data was the general educators' lesson plans. After a review of lesson plans, I was better able to understand the participants' use of instructional strategies within personalized learning. The second data source was the participants' responses collected during the semi-structured interviews. Information obtained during the interviews allowed me to delve more deeply into the implementation of the instructional strategies as noted in the grant and in the lesson plans.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in one of two ways depending on participant preference: face-to-face or virtually. Alignment to the study's purpose and research questions was ensured by following the interview protocol (Appendix B). Following the protocol allowed me to take notes providing a backup if the recording devices failed (Creswell, 2007). The protocol also gave me a guide to stay on topic and organize the interview process (Creswell, 2007). A semi-structured format allowed me to

ask follow-up questions specific to the responses of each participant. I used two devices to record each interview to ensure an accurate record was maintained.

I used member checking to ensure and strengthen the trustworthiness of the collected responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Participants reviewed the findings to check the accuracy of the data analysis and quoted responses. Participants were offered the opportunity to clarify, correct and share additional perspectives through email communication. A copy of the final study will be made available to all participants.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Before starting data collection, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). No recruitment or data collection began until approval was obtained. Once I received approval from the IRB, I applied to the local agency to secure a letter of cooperation allowing me to conduct the research study in the local district.

After receiving IRB approval (#10-22-19-0586017), participants who were teaching or have taught in the past 2 years in an inclusive classroom applying a personalized learning model were identified from the local agency. The 2-year period was used to allow a larger potential population for the study, because it included general educators who no longer use personalized learning practices but may have done so in the previous two school years. After receiving district approval, I contacted the district point person for personalized learning and requested a list of elementary schools using personalized learning. I then sent an email to principals requesting permission to contact teachers for possible participation in the study. Finally, I sent an email to individual

teachers explaining the purpose of the study and the data collection process. A Criteria for Selection (Appendix C) was attached to the email for the potential participants to complete to ensure they met the needed requirements. If potential participants did not respond within 5 days, I sent a follow-up email that had a second checklist attached.

The general educators selected were asked to participate in one interview lasting 45 to 60 minutes and to email two to three weeks' worth of all lesson plans used to instruct SWD in an inclusive setting prior to the interview. The time allotted allowed a rapport to develop, as well as demonstrating that their time is valued. The participants and I were able to discuss the purpose of the study and the process to protect their identity. The participants asked questions to address any concerns and to clarify procedures. The initial discussion about the study provided time for participants to become comfortable with the interview process and with me as their interviewer. By limiting the time to 60 minutes, the participants did not feel obligated to spend a large amount of time participating. The participants chose between their school and an outside location mutually agreed upon for the interview. A virtual interview was included as an option. The transcripts from the interviews were used during the data analysis process to identify common themes and discrepant data.

The interviews were recorded using two devices after permission to record was received from each participant. The two devices helped to ensure that the interviews were recorded with quality sound. In case one device failed, there was a second recording to use to transcribe the interviews. The interview questions were reviewed by the writer of the Race to the Top grant for the local agency, as well as an instructional coach and an

administrator using personalized learning. Content validity refers to the extent to which the instrument used to collect data measures what it claims to measure (McGartland et al., 2003), and by having three individuals knowledgeable of personalized learning and the implementation plan in the local district examine my questions, I determined the content validity of the interviews.

Lesson plans were analyzed as an additional source of data for the personalized learning strategies used. The analysis of lesson plans served to develop a common vocabulary that I could share with the participants when conducting interviews. From the lesson plans, I identified instructional strategies and used the same terms for those strategies during the interview. I also asked for clarification of any terms I did not fully understand in the lesson plans. Analyzing the lesson plans provided prior knowledge on the general educators' use of instructional strategies, enabling me to craft interview questions that investigated the use of those strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Finally, analysis of the lesson plans made possible the development of follow-up questions for the semi-structured interviews. By identifying instructional strategies in the lesson plan prior to the interviews, I was able to ask follow-up questions when strategies in the lesson plans were not mentioned in the initial response to an interview question.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The analysis of data is an on-going process that includes a continual examination of the researcher's interpretations (Taylor et al., 2016). The first phase of the data analysis plan included transcribing the information from the taped interviews into a word

document. Each participant was given a number and names were not used. After I transcribed the interviews, I read and reread them along with any notes from the interviews. Creswell (2014) stated that data analysis begins with multiple readings of the interview transcripts and making notes of initial thoughts. After making notes of my initial thoughts, I began a two-cycle coding process with the data. Saldana (2016) discussed the importance of the alignment between the coding method and the answers the researcher is seeking. For the initial coding cycle, descriptive coding was used because it aligned with investigating the participants' perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the instructional strategies used to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum (Saldana, 2016). The use of descriptive coding allowed me to assign simple labels to the data. I further broke down the data into categories under each label to better understand the problem (Saldana, 2016). During the second coding cycle I was able to take the data from the first cycle and organize it into a smaller number of themes based on similarities in participants' responses addressing the elements of the conceptual framework: flexible pacing, differentiated instruction and data-informed feedback (Saldana, 2016). Because the study was specifically designed to investigate perspectives related to the elements of the conceptual framework, a priori coding was used to analyze the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A computer program, QDA Miner Lite, was used to code and organize the data. Finally, discrepant data (i.e. data that does not support the themes) was reported and analyzed (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a crucial element of a research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The standards to assess the trustworthiness of a study are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Credibility is to qualitative research what internal validity is to quantitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, for qualitative research, credibility is determined by the perception of the accuracy of findings according to those involved in the study: the participants, the researcher, and the reader (Creswell, 2014). To ensure the credibility of this study, I used member checking, multiple sources of data and reporting of discrepant data (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The use of member checking allowed participants to ensure the accuracy of their responses to the interview questions and occurred at the end of the data analysis. Multiple sources of data give the researcher multiple perspectives to justify found themes, which adds to the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2014). Discrepant data may include participants' negative descriptions of SWD and their ability to access general education curriculum, a belief that SWD cannot learn, or a belief that general educators are not responsible for instructing SWD. By including discrepant data, a full picture of the phenomenon was presented, adding to the validity of the study (Creswell, 2014). Participants were emailed the findings to check the authenticity of the statements they made during the interviews (Creswell, 2007). The triangulation of data allowed data to come from multiple sources, ensured common themes were supported and confirmed the accuracy of the data (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Transferability refers to the ability of the findings of a qualitative study to be transferred to different settings with different participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure that this study has transferability, I provided in-depth descriptions of the data and the context to allow comparisons to different settings (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The third standard, dependability, refers to the quality of methodology, including data collection and data analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure the dependability of the study, multiple sources of data were used and a detailed description of data collection procedures was provided.

The last standard is conformability, which relates to objectivity in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure conformability for this study, I needed to fully explain my biases and how they may influence the interpretation of data, as well as the steps I took to eliminate my influence (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I kept notes on my biases and reflected on how they may influence my interpretations of the data. I referenced the notes throughout the data analysis process as I needed to be reflective and acknowledge where my perceptions influenced the process (Creswell, 2014).

### **Ethical Procedures**

As a researcher, I have ethical responsibilities to the participants of a study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants (Burkholder et al., 2016). Each participant was given a description of the study included in the introductory e-mail.

A second ethical consideration is to do no harm to the participant (Burkholder et al., 2016). To ensure no harm was done to participants, I used the interview guide to stay

on topic and not ask personal questions. I developed a relationship with the participants to gain their trust and treated them respectfully and professionally.

Finally, I maintained the confidentiality and ensured the anonymity of the participants (Burkholder et al., 2016). I did not request information that could identify the participants. Each participant was assigned a number that was used during data collection and when writing. I stored data in a password-protected file that I will keep for 5 years. The notes and audio recordings are stored in a locked cabinet in my home. The notes will be shredded after 5 years. Because I grew up in the local setting and taught in the area for nearly 20 years, it was possible I may have known a participant. Therefore, I needed to take additional precautions to protect the confidentiality of the participants. I did not use any identifiers for any professional discussion, either written or verbal. I will not discuss the participants in any inappropriate setting. Recruitment and interview procedures remained consistent throughout the process to guard against participants agreeing to the interview because they knew me or knew of me.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the research design, the role of the researcher, and the methodology, trustworthiness and ethical procedures involved in the study. Each section provides a rationale for the decisions made and the procedures enacted to ensure the quality of the study. A qualitative descriptive case study is aligned with the purpose of the study. The procedures to safeguard transcripts and data were described and the precautions taken to negate my bias were listed. A discussion of trustworthiness described the steps to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability,



and confirmability of the study. Finally, I described the ethical procedures, including maintaining the confidentiality of the participants. A detailed description of the data analysis process and the findings follows in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. This chapter includes results from in-depth interviews with general educators who use personalized learning instructional strategies. Previous researchers have explored general educators' perspectives on inclusive practices (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Elliott et al., 2017; Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Hintz et al., 2015; Valiandes, 2015) and have examined the academic impact of personalized learning or inclusion on SWD (Basham et al., 2016; Choi & Ma, 2015). Few studies have involved an investigation of the perspectives of general educators in personalized learning, inclusive classrooms, or the strategies they find effective in providing SWD with access to the general education curriculum (Li & Wong, 2020). The purpose of this study informed the development of the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms on personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

RQ2: How do the lesson plans of general educators reflect the use of personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

For this study, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with general educators in January 2020. The participants also emailed me 2 weeks of lesson plans. Using semi-structured questions gave participants the opportunity to share

their perspectives openly and me the opportunity to ask follow-up questions for clarification and further explanation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Reviewing the lesson plans provided a blueprint of the instructional practices the participants use to provide SWD with access to the general education classroom. Participants met the following criteria:

- Currently use personalized learning strategies in the classroom or have used personalized learning in the classroom in the past 2 years;
- Have SWD in the general education classroom;
- Provide instruction to SWD in the general education classroom; and
- Teach at an elementary school.

Chapter 4 includes a description of the setting and the procedures for data analysis. The findings of the study, as they relate to each research question, are reported. Finally, a summary of the evidence of the trustworthiness of the study is provided, using the standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Setting**

The study was conducted in a large, diverse district in the southeast United States. The setting was selected because the district received a Race to the Top grant to use a personalized learning model (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The Race to the Top grant gave the district the opportunity to provide teachers with a deep understanding of personalized learning. Using the funds from the grant, the district invested in personalized learning coaches for each school included in the initial implementation plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). An outside consultant also provided schools and personalized learning coaches with professional development and next steps in the

implementation process (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The investment from the district in personalized learning implementation and teacher support were the reasons the district was selected. The amount of support received by schools and teachers should have deepened the understanding of personalized learning instructional strategies to provide all students with access to the general education curriculum. Seven elementary schools were selected to use personalized learning instructional strategies for the district's initial implementation.

The grant ended at the end of the 2017–2018 school year. However, even without the support of a coach, schools and teachers continued to use the personalized learning instructional strategies they learned. Emails were sent to seven principals asking for permission to contact teachers and request their consent to participate in the study. The eight general educators consenting to participate in the study were from two of the elementary schools included in the initial Race to the Top grant. The demographics relating to the study participants are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2***Demographics of Participants*

| Participant   | Number of years in education | Number of years in inclusive classrooms | Number of years in personalized learning, inclusive classrooms | Grade level taught              |
|---------------|------------------------------|---|--|---------------------------------|
| Participant 1 | 8                            | 8                                       | 5  | 3                               |
| Participant 2 | 14                           | 14                                      | 5  | Child development (4-year-olds) |
| Participant 3 | 39                           | 39                                      | 6  | Kindergarten                    |
| Participant 4 | 14                           | 14                                      | 8  | 4                               |
| Participant 5 | 12                           | 12                                      | 5  | 2                               |
| Participant 6 | 25                           | 25                                      | 6  | 1                               |
| Participant 7 | 15                           | 15                                      | 5  | 5                               |
| Participant 8 | 12                           | 12                                      | 7  | 1                               |

**Data Collection**

After receiving approval from the IRB and the local school district, the current director of the personalized learning initiative provided me with a list of schools using personalized learning strategies. I contacted the principals via email and requested permission to contact general educators in their buildings (Appendix A). General educators were sent an email asking them to consent to participate in the study. Of the teachers emailed, eight consented to participate in the study. The original plan was to obtain 12 general educator participants; however, only eight consented. Creswell (2013) suggested having four to five participants, while Merriam (2009) gave no specific number of participants needed for case study research. Saunders et al. (2018) proposed data saturation was determined by the degree to which the codes repeat themselves

during data collection. When no new data are revealed, data saturation has taken place. By contrast, Legard et al. (2003) argued that saturation occurs when the researcher understands the participants' perspectives. The participants answered the questions fully, and I felt I had a complete understanding of their perspectives. I did not identify new data after the eighth interview.

When analyzing the data for the instructional strategies identified by participants, all eight participants discussed the importance of small group instruction. Individual conferences were identified by seven participants. Technology and work menus were identified by four participants. After the eighth interview, no new instructional strategies were identified. The participants did not add any new data in their responses when discussing the three identified themes: (a) differentiation is needed, (b) flexible pacing is needed but not always possible, and (c) data are used to inform instruction. Therefore, data collection was completed with eight participants. While eight participants is too few to draw definitive conclusions, it is enough that the findings can be considered suggestive or even persuasive.

### **Participant Selection**

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for the study. Purposeful sampling allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of general educators' perspectives by identifying general educators with knowledge of the personalized learning instructional strategies used in inclusive classrooms (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Vogt et al., 2012). All participants met the inclusion criteria for the study (Appendix C). No incentives were offered to participate in the study.

## **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either virtually or face-to-face depending on the preference of the participant. Prior to the interviews, participants sent 2 weeks' worth of lesson plans to me for review. Information from the review provided me with a deeper understanding of participants' responses to the interview questions. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at various private locations selected by participants. The interviews varied in length from 20 to 25 minutes. In an analysis review of 227 research studies using interviewing as a data collection method, Young et al. (2018) noted that interviews may last for short or long periods of time. The specific length of interviews was reported in 90% of the research studies reviewed and ranged from 3 minutes to 5 hours. Morris (2015) noted that researchers generally schedule an hour for an interview, but the actual length of interviews varies based on several factors: the knowledge of the participant, the depth of the responses even with probing questions, and the topic itself.

I used an interview protocol to provide consistency across all participants (Appendix B). The interview protocol was used to ensure that the same initial questions were asked of each participant. Follow-up questions varied depending on participant responses. Shaw (2020) advised allowing 1 to 3 minutes for participants to answer each question, which does not account for any follow-up questions. The interview protocol had a total of 14 questions. Given Shaw's advice, the interviews without follow-up questions should have lasted between 14 and 42 minutes. I calculated an additional 15 minutes for follow-up questions. Therefore, I estimated the interviews would last approximately 45

minutes given that the initial questions were designed to obtain basic information and to put participants at ease.

During the interview process, the participants answered the questions fully and provided additional detail when follow-up questions were asked. Follow-up questions allowed participants to expand or clarify initial responses. Interviews were audio recorded on two separate devices: a voice recorder and a tape recorder application on my cell phone. The two devices helped to ensure a clear recording was captured for transcription. With the participants' permission, I made observational notes on the interview protocol MS Word document on my personal computer. There were no video recordings of the interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and saved in an MS Word document. The transcripts were uploaded into QDA Miner Lite for data management and coding.

### **Data Analysis**

The first interview question asked the participants to identify the instructional strategies used in their classroom. I began the data analysis process by reading each transcript three times, allowing me to have a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2014). From the first coding cycle, participant interviews were coded using the transcripts for descriptive coding. (Saldana, 2016). During descriptive coding, the responses of the participants aligned to each question were highlighted. Using the highlighted data, descriptors were assigned used to categorize the data. Table 3 is a list of the descriptors for each question derived from the first coding cycle.



**Table 3***Descriptors by Question for First Coding Cycle*

| Question | Descriptors  |
|----------|--|
| Q4       | Goals, growth, success, community, scaffold, ability, readiness  |
| Q5       | Time, meeting the needs of all, engagement, limited scope, administration  |
| Q6       | Grouping, double/triple dosed, conference, technology, work menus, assessments, variety, meet the needs              |
| Q7       | Success, mastery, extra time, community<br>Disadvantage: Different, behind with standards/content                    |
| Q8       | Mastery, visuals, small group, extra adults, technology, stations  |
| Q9       | Advantage: Own pace, meeting needs, success, all students<br>Disadvantage: Time, none                                |
| Q10      | Formative assessments, create small groups, drives instruction, evidence   |
| Q11      | Drives instruction, identify need, meeting needs<br>Disadvantage: None, limited scope, time, assessment requirements |
| Q12      | Community, instructional design, technology, student centered  |
| Q13      | Time, buy in   |

I used the categories from the descriptive coding to organize the data, making the second coding cycle easier to manage and analyze across the eight transcripts. Transcripts were analyzed in a second coding cycle using a priori coding that allowed me to select predetermined codes of differentiation, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback, which align to the conceptual framework (Saldana, 2016). The most frequently coded instructional strategy during the second cycle was differentiation (Table 4). The

participants described the instructional strategies they use to differentiate instruction more than the instructional strategies for flexible pacing and data-informed feedback.

**Table 4**

*Instructional Strategies: Frequency of Codes*

| Code                   | Count | Percent of codes |
|------------------------|-------|------------------|
| Differentiation        | 52    | 25.0%            |
| Flexible pacing        | 30    | 14.4%            |
| Data-informed feedback | 36    | 17.3%            |

From the second coding cycle and the categories identified from the first coding cycle, I identified three themes: (a) differentiation is needed, (b) flexible pacing is needed, but not always possible, and (c) data are used to inform instruction. Because a priori coding was used in the second coding cycle, the themes center on the three codes: differentiation, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback.

In addition to analyzing the transcripts, participants were asked to send 2 weeks' worth of lesson plans to me via email. The lesson plans were analyzed for evidence of the use of personalized learning instructional strategies. I looked specifically for instructional strategies aligned to the a priori codes: differentiation, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback. Each lesson plan submitted included the use of small group and individual conferences as instructional strategies. Participants also identified the use of data to create small groups and to inform instruction during the interviews. Participant 1 stated, "I used that (data) to create my small groups to determine where we start and where the

end goal is going to be.” Participant 7 said, “I use that (data for) small group, MAP RIT bands, classroom assessments to really target each kid with what they need.” However, the analysis of lesson plans indicated no use of formative assessments to inform instruction during small group instruction. Participant 8 is the only participant for whom the use of flexible pacing and data-informed feedback could be observed in a lesson plan. Noted on the lesson plan is “sight word/ personal sight word list.” Table 5 shows the frequency of instructional strategies related to differentiation, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback found in lesson plans.

**Table 5**

*Frequency of Differentiation, Flexible Pacing and Data-Informed Feedback in Lesson Plans*

| A priori code          | Frequency | Participant                    | Percent of participants |
|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Differentiation        | 8         | P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8 | 100%                    |
| Flexible pacing        | 1         | P8                             | 12.5%                   |
| Data-informed feedback | 1         | P8                             | 12.5%                   |

### **Discrepant Data**

Responses that differed from the other participants’ responses represented discrepant data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). All participants, except one, noted “the time needed to plan” as a barrier to using personalized learning instructional strategies. The following response from Participant 7 was coded as discrepant data, “Honestly, I don’t put a lot into the planning part of it.” The discrepant data were identified and reported in

the results section. Discrepant data were also considered and analyzed to determine how they aligned with the themes. Participant 1 noted time as a barrier, however, in a different way to the other participants. She noted how she thought of time as a barrier throughout her career. “Earlier in my career, I would have told you that time was a barrier to planning. I would have told you that time was a barrier for planning. That newlywed, young family, um, sometimes working 2 jobs, and I would tell you early in my career that time was a barrier.” She further explained her current thinking around time as a barrier, “I would no longer say time’s a barrier, I would say effective use of time is a barrier.”

## **Results**

The first research question investigated was the following: what are the perspectives of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms on personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum? From the data analysis of the interview transcripts, three themes related to instructional strategies developed: (a) differentiation is needed, (b) flexible pacing is needed, but not always possible, and (c) data are used to inform instruction.

### **Theme 1: Differentiation Is Needed**

The analysis of participants’ responses revealed that participants believe differentiation is necessary to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum. Differentiated instruction is used to provide all students with the ability to access the curriculum through changes to the presentation of material, the products students produce to show mastery and the content of lessons (Tomlinson, 2017). Ginja and Chen (2020) found educators perceived an increase in students’ motivation and a benefit with

addressing the varied needs of students when using differentiated instructional strategies. Participants in the current study echoed the need for differentiated instructional strategies to reach the varied needs of students reported in the study by Ginja and Chen. They noted the feeling of success for students and the importance of meeting students where they are in their learning. Participants described the successes when using differentiated instruction in a personalized learning classroom.

Participant 8 noted the need to meet all students where they are: “you need to meet each learner where they are and give them access to high quality instruction. Students learn what it feels like to be successful.” Participant 1 echoed the statement of Participant 8, saying “we are to provide equity and access to grade level content to prepare to support students in their learning.” Participant 3 noted the feeling of success for SWD when differentiating instruction: “it allowed my children with special needs to be part of the classroom working at their own level and being successful and part of the classroom.” Participant 8 explained the importance of personalizing instruction using differentiation for SWD by explaining that “the best thing about personalized learning is that success is inevitable for each child but looks different for each child. Because I personalize goals, instruction and content each child is able to grow in their own way.” The participants voiced the feeling of success that differentiated instruction provided to students. Using different tasks, strategies, and materials during instruction of students allowed students to understand that everyone learns differently and needs different resources. Participants also noted the need to use differentiated instructional strategies to meet the needs of students and increase learner outcomes. Participant 1 stated that “it’s

the advantage every child deserves.” Analysis of the participants’ responses showed that differentiation gave SWD the opportunity to be successful and feel included in the class community.

### ***Instructional Strategies***

The participants identified several specific instructional strategies as necessary to differentiate instruction in an inclusive personalized learning classroom. Small group instruction, individual conferences, technology, and work menus were the most frequently used strategies by the participants. Table 6 shows the number of times participants identified the used of a specific differentiated instructional strategy.

**Table 6**

#### *Frequency of Differentiated Instructional Strategies*

| Strategy               | Frequency | Participant (P)                   | Percent of participants |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Small group            | 8         | P1, P2, P3, P4,<br>P5, P6, P7, P8 | 100%                    |
| Individual conferences | 7         | P1, P2, P3, P4,<br>P5, P6, P7     | 87.5%                   |
| Technology             | 4         | P3, P4, P5, P6                    | 50%                     |
| Work menus             | 4         | P1, P4, P5, P7                    | 50%                     |

**Small Group.** Small group instruction was named as an instructional strategy used in the classrooms by all participants. Participant 3 stated “small group instruction is huge.” Participant 1 added, when asked what her biggest success was in teaching in an inclusive, personalized learning classroom, “being able to see the student reach their personal goals based on the instruction we did in small group.” Small group instruction

gave participants the opportunity to go deeper into the standards addressed in the whole group setting and target specific skills. Participants 1 and 3 both used the term “double dipping/dosing” when describing small group instruction. When discussing small groups, Participant 3 said “I can focus on what they need.” Participants discussed small group instruction as necessary to teach specific skills needed by students to reach proficiency at the grade level standard.

**Individual Conferences.** An individual conference was the second most-used instructional strategy named by the participants. Participants used individual conferences for different purposes. Some participants used individual conferences to address an SWD’s specific need. Others used individual conferences to set goals and to check in on progress towards meeting goals. The participants using individual conferences noted the importance of being able to meet one-on-one with the student to check-in, correct errors and re-teach.

The following is a description of an individual conference Participant 3 had with a student. Participant 3 used individual conferences when she identified a specific issue a student encountered. The student demonstrated no mastery of a skill using adaptive technology that she was able to do with the teacher in small group verbally and with pencil and paper. The conference with the students gave the teacher the ability to find the error the student was making using adaptive technology and correct the error, allowing the student to move to a more difficult skill. Participant 3 noted that the time spent in a one-on-one conference gave her the time to sit with the child and figure out the mistake the student was making. Participant 3 stated that “pushing those things is messing her up.

I don't know what she's doing. Just do it on your fingers. So, having that time to just sit with them and figure it out.”

The seven participants who used individual conferencing, conferenced with students at least once per month to discuss progress towards goals, make new goals and identify students' needs. Participant 1 and Participant 7 used weekly individual conferences to check in with students about progress towards set reading goals. Participant 7 said “I conference with my kids every week about reading, what they are reading. How close they are to meeting their goal.” The seven participants noted the importance of using the conferences with students to better understand their learning needs based on the set goals.

**Technology.** Technology gave participants the ability to target learning to skills students needed to practice as they were leading small group lessons. Participants identified specific programs they use to differentiate instruction with technology: Khan Academy, Lexia and Dreambox. Participants used technology to address skill gaps students demonstrated during on-grade level instruction. For example, participant 4 said “so like we do Khan academy and some of the kids are working on skills below their grade level.” Participants also noted specific skills students practiced using technology. Participant 5 explained that “some kids, for example, might have sight words on their iPads that they had to practice and listen to. Whereas other kids didn't need to practice sight words. So, it was differentiated to whatever goals or skills they needed.” The participants used technology during differentiated stations or as part of their work menus when they were working with a small group.



**Work Menus.** Several participants used work menus to differentiate for each student in the class when they were working without teacher support. A work menu gives students a list of tasks to complete at their level to practice skills (Thompson, 2019). It provides students with some choice and voice in what work they decide to do in a day (Thompson, 2019). Students complete the work menu in a timeframe set by the teacher. Work menus provided participants with the ability to meet SWD where they are and provide independent practice to SWD. Participant 1 described how she used work menus in her classroom, saying “I would look at their ability level based on MAP scores and work I had given them the previous week. Then based on that, I would assign them work based on their personal levels.” She continued, “it was all included in that work menu. Then it was flexible. If they mastered work menu one, they could move on to work menu two even if students in the original group were not ready to move.”

Participant 5 called her work menus “must dos, may dos”. She explained how she used them with her students. “My kids had lists of must dos and may dos. So, they had a list of things they had to do. So, if they finished those, they could move to the may dos. They had those for every subject.” The work menus gave general educators the ability to meet SWD where they were with essential standards at their level, coupled with tasks to review and maintain acquired knowledge.

### ***Barriers to Differentiated Instruction***

Differentiated instruction was identified as necessary in an inclusive, personalized learning classroom. However, participants explained that barriers within the current educational system include high-stakes state testing, expectations to teach at grade level,

and a lack of time. The first barrier to differentiating instruction day-to-day in the classroom noted by participants was high-stakes state assessments. When discussing high-stakes state testing and differentiating instruction in the classroom for SWD, Participant 4 stated that “the biggest disadvantage is they have to take the state test on grade level standards.” Participant 4 continued to say it was not enough to meet students where they are and show the growth students make throughout the year; students need to perform at grade level on the high-stakes state assessments.

A second barrier identified by participants was the expectation set by their administration and district personnel regardless of prerequisites needed by SWD to understand grade level standards. The position of administrators and district personnel is consistent with the mandates in IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Participant 5 described the dilemma faced by general educators: “we’ve been kind of pushed on is that all kids need to be introduced to everything and so all kids need to see everything at least once and be presented with it.” Although the participants believe differentiation is needed, they also see it as a hindrance to addressing all the grade level standards throughout the school year.

### ***Time***

Time was the third barrier noted by the participants. Specifically, the time it takes to plan differentiated instruction. Participant 4 described “the amount of time it takes on both ends. Planning it. It takes a lot of time to plan it. And what all your different groups will be doing.” Participant 2 explained the disadvantage of differentiating instruction: “I would say the time it [differentiation] takes on the teacher’s part.” She continued to

discuss the difficulty of using differentiated instruction and fulfilling the mandates of all that should be done in a day. “Our day is pretty chopped up” she continued, adding “there are certain things we have to include like one hour center time and it’s hard to get everything in sometimes. Especially the one-on-one part of it.” Participant 7 acknowledged the time it takes to differentiate instruction, but also noted the benefits, saying “it’s [differentiation] a lot of frontloading, a lot of planning, but you are going to get your most results.”

### **Theme 2: Flexible Pacing Is Needed, But Not Always Possible**

All participants agreed that flexible pacing is needed to give SWD the opportunity to reach grade level expectations. Flexible pacing allows students to move through the general education curriculum at their own pace (Bloom, 1974). When flexible pacing is used in a classroom, students are allowed multiple opportunities and varied learning pathways to master a standard or group of standards (Pane et al., 2017). However, the participants considered the expectation of administration and district personnel to address all grade level standards as limiting the time students had to master a standard or group of standards. Pane et al. (2017) found that educators in their research had the same perception of limited time due to administrative and district demands when attempting to allow students the time needed to reach mastery.

Participant 2 said “I guess just having that extra time is good because they don’t always, the light bulb doesn’t always go off. The extra time for little ones is good.” Participant 5 noted the importance in giving SWD the time needed to master the standards and being able to apply the knowledge, saying “there’s more of a chance of

them mastering it and being able to apply it to other standards.” Participant 3 explained an additional benefit to flexible pacing: “well, I think the advantages are it builds their self-esteem. A lot of them haven’t had success at anything.” She went on to identify the potential of flexible pacing in encouraging SWD to continue to persevere, pointing out that “everyone can be successful at something. So, it helps them find what they can be successful at. We celebrate every little, tiny step. And building that confidence and having that support of their peers.”

Although all participants believe flexible pacing is needed for SWD to access the general education curriculum, participants discussed the daily reality in a classroom, as well as administration and district personnel expectations. Participants identified the expectation to present all the grade level standards to every student as a barrier to providing SWD the time needed to gain proficiency. Participants found that they were not able to introduce all grade level standards to some students, which may widen learning gaps in future grade levels if students are not allowed the time needed to become proficient with each grade level standard. Participants voiced the concern of not presenting grade level standards, which may be detrimental to SWD success in the next grade level if flexible pacing is used for each standard presented. Participant 5 described the dilemma when using flexible pacing and the expectation of presenting all grade level standards to every student by stating that teachers are “risking them getting behind and not getting all they need throughout the school year.” Participant 6 also noted this concern with flexible pacing: “the disadvantage is that something has to give. They’re going to lose something somewhere along the way.”

### **Theme 3: Data is Used to Inform Instruction**

Data to inform instruction were mentioned by each participant as being necessary to meet the needs of SWD and to provide SWD with access to grade-level standards. Hazelbaker and Stewart (2020) found that student achievement increased when educators used data from formative assessments to target the specific skills the students needed. Participants in the current study echoed the findings of Hazelbaker and Stewart. They noted the importance of using data from informal and formal assessments to determine the needs of each student and to tailor instruction to address them.

Participant 1 explained the importance of data feedback, saying “I used that to create my small groups to determine where we start and where the end goal is going to be based on their ability level.” Participant 7 explained how she used data to provide SWD the needed prerequisite knowledge to access grade level standards.

I use the 5th grade standard as the baseline, but some of the kids don’t even know the 3rd and 4th grade standards. So, I kind of use the fifth grade as a baseline and whether it’s a special ed kid or not, I try and stay in that standard, but also go back a couple of standards to fill that gap to get them to what they need to know.

When asked about using data to inform instruction, Participant 7 said “well I think everything needs to be data driven. Not just for kids with disabilities but for every kid.” Participant 7 found data to be the driver of her instruction to meet the needs of all her students. All participants noted the need for data to provide instruction with prerequisite skills needed to meet the demands of grade level standards. Data were used to create small groups and tasks for all students.

### *Types of Data*

Participant 8 also noted the importance of having different types of data to inform instruction and adjust instruction, saying “most of my instructional decisions are based on data. This can be assessment data or observational data. To me, data should drive instruction to determine what does and does not work.” Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) is a formative assessment administered three times per year. Participants stated that they used MAP to form small groups and determine what standards students are ready to learn. Of the participants interviewed, six stated that they used MAP to inform instruction. No participant mentioned the use of the high-stakes state assessment data to inform instruction.

### *Data Binders*

In addition to using data to inform instruction, six out of eight participants use data binders for students to track their progress and for parents to understand where students are in relation to grade level standards. Participants also discussed how the data binders help students take ownership of the learning. Participant 1 explained that “the kids have ownership in it and also it’s more language-friendly for parents. And able to see exactly what they need to work on.” Participant 3 also described the value of a data binder during parent conferences, explaining that “they [students] would sit with me and they would talk to their parents at a first-grade level about what they were doing. It was very powerful for the children to verbalize what they were doing and why.” The data binders were also used in individual conferences with students to monitor progress towards proficiency in grade level standards. Data trackers included in data binders were

used by three participants. Data trackers gave all students a visual to see which standards they had mastered and which standards they needed to continue working towards mastery.

### ***Barriers to Using Data to Inform Instruction***

Participants identified some potential barriers to using data to inform instruction. Participant 3 stated that “it’s a lot of work.” Participant 6 identified the assessments themselves as a barrier, saying that “the only disadvantage is that you are limited to the scope of your assessment. And the assessment - and you know, unfortunately, in education, the way it works, most of the stuff within your curriculum strand.” Participant 5 discussed the need to know your students in addition to knowing what the data identify as strengths and weaknesses. She explained that “the data isn’t going to show everything. So you have to know kids and you use your data combined to inform your instruction.”

### **Research Question 2**

RQ2 explored how the lesson plans of general educators reflected the use of personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum. All participants submitted lesson plans. Participants noted the differentiated instructional strategies of small groups, individual conferences, work menus and technology on their lesson plans. Classroom assessments, to be administered during the week, were also listed on the lesson plans. However, the specific assessments listed were not daily formative assessments, but rather summative assessments based on material covered. Tasks such as cold reads, as noted on Participant 4’s lesson plans, may be used as a data point to inform instruction, but the purpose of the cold read was not explicitly

written in the lesson plans. Participant 5 listed mid-year sight word checks on her lesson plans but did not indicate any other daily assessments. However, her objective on her weekly lesson plans stated: “To meet each individual student where they are and take them as far as we can socially, emotionally and intellectually in 180 days.” She also noted that “our goals are directly related to the South Carolina state standards.” The objective aligns with the statements she made during her interview relating to teaching standards and meeting all students’ needs. Participant 8 noted the types of assessments she used weekly, but the assessments are not tied to a specific standard or student. Assessments on Participant 8’s lesson plans included: observation, oral or written discussion, participation, independent practice, projects, graphic organizer, formal assessment, and teacher-created assessment.

There was no indication of the use of flexible pacing on any participant’s lesson plans. Participants listed tasks and a general overview of each subject for the week. The standards covered were listed for each subject in all the lesson plans. The lesson plans indicate the use of differentiated instructional strategies. However, there is no explicit indication of the instructional strategies for data to inform instruction or flexible pacing. The use of data to inform instruction and flexible pacing was only found in the transcriptions from the interviews.

### **Discrepant Data**

Yin (2014) noted that a skeptical mind leads to a stronger research study. Therefore, I completed a deliberate and diligent search to find data that presented a different perspective. Each participant has experience in teaching in an inclusive,



personalized learning classroom and using data to inform instruction. However, one participant's perspective on data differed from the identified theme of "data were used to inform instruction." Participant 7 stated that "you are limited to the scope of your assessment." For this participant, the district's formal assessments and the math curriculum assessments did not provide him with all the information he felt was needed to provide rigorous instruction. However, Participant 7 noted the use of a new math curriculum, which limited his ability to go beyond the formal assessments when instructing students. Because the purpose of the study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in an inclusive, personalized learning classroom, the limiting parameters of a specific curriculum were not appropriate to include with the identified themes.

A second piece of discrepant data was Participant 2's response to Question 14. Participant 2 was the only participant to note the lack of a special educator to support her young students. When asked if there was anything she wanted to add, Participant 2 asked how I would suggest working with special education students in the child development classroom. I referred her to resources she has at school to assist and possibly some professional development offered by her school district. She was the only participant to note any type of concern in providing instruction to SWD. This concern did not surface in the questions asked throughout the interview.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential when conducting a research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure trustworthiness, the standards of credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability need to be addressed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility is determined by the perceived accuracy of findings according to those

involved in the study: the participants, the researcher, and the reader (Creswell, 2014).

Member checking, multiple data and reporting of discrepant data needed to be included.

The data included the coded verbatim transcripts of the eight interviews conducted and

the analysis of the lesson plans provided by all participants. The findings were sent to the

participants via email to check for accuracy. The participants were from two different

elementary schools and represented grade levels from pre-K through fifth grade. Each

participant teaches, or has taught in the past 2 years, in an inclusive, personalized

learning classroom. Quotes from participants were used to support findings. Finally,

discrepant data were reported.

To further support credibility of the study, I focused on creating an interview environment in which the participants felt comfortable responding openly and honestly to the interview questions. The participants chose where and when they wished to complete the interview. The first three questions were crafted to put the participants at ease. By asking follow-up questions, I encouraged participants to elaborate on their initial responses to create a more in-depth description of their experiences.

Finally, to ensure credibility, I needed to fully keep my own biases in mind throughout the process. I made a record of them and kept them beside me during interviews and the data analysis process.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that confirmability refers to the objectivity shown in a qualitative study, while Dodgson (2019) describes the importance of reflexivity.

Dodgson stated the importance of indicating the experiences the researcher may have shared with the participants as part of reflexivity. Because of this, it was important that I noted my own experiences with personalized learning and my personal beliefs within the pages of the dissertations. Therefore, I performed a continuous reflection on my own biases. Discrepant data was also identified. Initially, I made notes of potential personal bias. I referred to the notes as I conducted data analysis to ensure I was not selecting responses that aligned with my own opinion of the phenomenon.

Transferability is met when the findings of a study can be transferred to different settings with different participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Creswell (2014) and Ravitch and Carl (2016) also noted the importance of rich descriptions of the setting and data analysis to allow comparisons to be made to different settings, helping to ensure that transferability is met. To address the standard of transferability, the study included a detailed description of the local setting, while the procedures used during data analysis provide an opportunity for comparisons to different settings to be made.

Dependability refers to the quality and consistency of the methodology including data collection and data analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Notes taken during the research process and records of the decisions made need to be maintained so they can be reviewed. My reflective notes also need to be kept for review. By keeping notes, a trail can be followed and allows transparency. Audio recording was used to provide an accurate transcript of the interviews conducted. The transcripts allowed a verbatim account of the interview where direct quotes from the participants informed the findings. A semi-structured interview was conducted to allow a comparison

of responses from participants. Follow-up questions related to specific responses from participants and allowed a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives. A detailed description of the data collection procedures was also provided. By keeping research notes and audio recordings, and providing detailed descriptions of procedures, a trail is created to ensure the dependability of the study.

Confirmability is the last standard to ensure trustworthiness. Korstjens and Moser (2018) define confirmability as "the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers" (p. 121). Elo et al. (2014) describe conformability as the possibility of two or more persons agreeing about the accuracy of the data. To ensure confirmability, I provided a detailed description of the 2-cycle coding process and how the themes were determined. I used the participants' verbatim responses to support the findings (Ellis, 2019). Discrepant cases were identified and reported.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Chapter 4 described the setting and the procedures used for the study. The findings were derived by analyzing the transcripts of the audio recordings of the participants' interviews using both descriptive and a priori coding. The responses of the participants provided me with a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives on providing SWD with access to the general education curriculum.

Research question 1 pertained to the perspectives of general educators on the personalized learning instructional strategies used to give SWD access to the general education curriculum. All participants identified differentiation as being necessary for providing SWD access to the general education curriculum. Small group instruction, independent conferences, technology, and work menus were the instructional strategies identified by the participants. Participants also identified the importance of data feedback to inform instruction, while flexible pacing was reported as necessary for SWD to access the general education curriculum.

Research question 2 related to how the lesson plans of general educators reflect the use of personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum. The lesson plans of the participants reflected the differentiated instructional strategies of small groups, individual conferences, technology, and work menus. However, there was no explicit association with assessments used to inform instruction or flexible pacing.

The last section of the chapter identified the processes used to ensure trustworthiness. The steps taken to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were described. Chapter 5 continues with a discussion of the interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, and recommendations. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the social change implications of the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Providing SWD with access to the general education curriculum, as mandated by IDEA (2004) and ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), has proven to be difficult for educators. General educators have reported that they do not have the knowledge needed to adapt instruction to meet the needs of SWD and provide access to the general education curriculum (Cameron, 2014; Day & Prunty, 2015; Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2016; Gül & Vuran, 2015; Hintz et al., 2015; Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017; Meynert, 2014; Paju et al., 2016; Strogilos et al., 2017). Personalized learning developed as a potential collection of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students in the general education classroom (Basham et al., 2016; Pane et al., 2017b; Patrick et al., 2013; Rhim & Lancet, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In few studies have researchers investigated the perspectives of general educators concerning the instructional strategies used in an inclusive, personalized learning classroom (Li & Wong, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum to assist in improving access to the general education curriculum for SWD in traditional classrooms. A qualitative case study allowed a deeper understanding of the perspectives of general educators in an inclusive, personalized learning classroom. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms on personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

RQ2: How do the lesson plans of general educators reflect the use of personalized learning instructional strategies to give SWD access to the general education curriculum?

In this chapter, I present the interpretation of the findings and a discussion of the limitations of the study. Also included are recommendations future research. Finally, the implications of the study for social change and recommendations for practice are discussed.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Included in Chapter 4 was a detailed description of the perspectives of the general educators interviewed and the personalized instructional strategies found in the lesson plans, as well as those absent from lesson plans. From the data analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions for RQ1, three themes emerged: (a) differentiation is needed, (b) flexible pacing is needed but not always possible, and (c) data are used to inform instruction.

#### **Differentiation Is Needed**

Participants identified differentiation as a necessary personalized learning instructional strategy to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. One implication from Elliott et al. (2017) was that SWD need instruction adapted to provide access to the general education curriculum. The findings are consistent with the data gathered from the participants in the current study. The findings of the current study

suggest that general educators need to use various strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Unlike the participants in a study conducted by Englebrecht et al. (2015), the findings of the current study suggest the participants approach learning with a strength-based perspective versus a deficit mindset. The findings also suggest that participants believe SWD should be included in the general education classroom, and it is their responsibility to differentiate instruction to meet their needs. Participants identified small groups, individual conferences, technology, and work menus as the most used instructional practices to differentiate instruction. An analysis of the interview transcripts showed that 100% of the participants used small group instruction, 87.5% used individual conferences, 50% used technology and 50% used work menus (see Table 4). The findings suggest that small group instruction is the most common personalized learning instructional strategy implemented to meet the needs of SWD. Participants noted that small group instruction allows general educators to meet the needs of SWD and to address the prerequisites needed to reach proficiency with grade-level curriculum.

Unlike previous studies (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Day & Prunty, 2015; Hintz et al., 2015; Paju et al., 2016), the participants in the current study did not express that they lack the skills to meet the needs of SWD. The responses indicated that participants are comfortable with their ability to meet the needs of students and differentiate instruction. The findings show that participants identify differentiation as essential to the success of SWD in the general education classroom. Participant 5 stated, “I just think differentiation is just the way to go.” Participant 7 noted the benefit of differentiation: “The advantage is



you are going to have more success with your students.” The findings of the current study may differ from previous studies because of the support provided by the local school district. Participant 3 discussed the role of the personalized learning coach. While Participant 3 did not clearly define the role of the personalized learning coach, they did indicate that the coach was instrumental in how they thought about instruction in the classroom.

Participant 8 discussed the process of unpacking the grade-level standards in student-friendly language. The personalized learning instructional coaches helped Participant 8 see the importance of students understanding why they are learning something. The added layer of a personalized learning instructional coach supporting teachers may have influenced the participants’ view on providing access to SWD.

### **Flexible Pacing Is Needed, But Not Always Possible**

The findings indicate that the participants understand the need for SWD to learn at their own pace. The findings of the current study differ from the findings of Netcoh and Bishop (2017), who stated that educators found it difficult to manage the differing paces of student learning, scaffolding to adapt instruction, and meeting the needs of all students. However, the participants in the current study noted several instructional strategies used to provide SWD time to reach proficiency with grade-level standards: work menus, small group instruction, technology, and individual conferencing. Basham et al. (2016) and Grace (2017) noted the benefit of flexible pacing for students. Although the participants understood the importance of flexible pacing, the findings suggest there are barriers in the educational system. The findings revealed that the participants felt the

need to introduce and teach grade-level standards regardless of whether SWD have the prerequisite knowledge to learn the grade-level standard. Participants noted the pressure to ensure students are exposed to the general education curriculum at grade level because of the high-stakes that testing that begins in third grade. This finding is consistent with other studies (Bingham et al., 2018; Gross & DeArmond, 2018).

The state high-stakes assessment questions are designed to assess proficiency with grade-level standards, including reading level. Therefore, participants felt the need to move forward, even if students were not ready, with the hope of spiraling back to continue instruction with the needed prerequisite knowledge. The findings imply the participants believe flexible pacing is needed for SWD to have the time needed to reach proficiency. However, participants also indicated they feel pressured to present all grade-level standards regardless of student mastery of prerequisite needed for proficiency of grade-level standards.

### **Data Used to Inform Instruction**

Bloom (1982) stated that data-informed feedback from formative assessments is needed to indicate what the student has mastered and what the student needs to learn. The findings suggest that participants use data-informed feedback to inform their instruction and to encourage student ownership of learning. Participants indicated that they use data from formative assessments to inform small group instruction, tasks on individual work menus, and entry points into various computer-based applications. Participants indicated that they believe data are essential to planning effective instruction for individual students. Participants use data binders and individual conferencing to track the progress

of students with specific standard strands. The data binders also provide a visual way for students to see their progress and share it with parents, which gives students ownership of their learning.

The findings of the current study support the findings of Ozan and Kincal (2018) and Vogelzang and Admirral (2017). Ozan and Kincal found that when educators use formative data to adapt instruction, students take more ownership of their learning. Vogelzang and Admirral found that discussions on student understanding and learning strategies increased with the use of data-informed feedback. The participants' discussion of the use of data binders in student conferences and parent conferences revealed the participants' beliefs in the importance of students understanding and expressing their progress and learning. The participants identified that time to effectively plan small group instruction, work menu tasks and whole group instruction using data from formative assessments is limited and a barrier to implementing personalized learning instructional strategies.

Wachen et al. (2018) found that few to no adjustments to instruction were made based on teachers reporting using feedback from assessments to adjust instruction. Unlike the findings of Wachen's study, each participant in this study not only noted the importance of using data to inform instructional decisions, but also described how they used the data to adjust instruction. Participants indicated that they use data to form small groups, adaptive technology entry points, goals, and one-to-one conferences with students. Vogelzang and Admiraal (2017) found that data-informed feedback was useful in teacher-to-student and student-to-student discussions. Participants noted the

importance of conferencing with students to set goals, check progress toward goals and close learning gaps. According to Vogelzang and Admiraal (2017), data-informed feedback is crucial to an increase in student learner outcomes. Data-informed feedback increased discussions centered on student understanding and learning strategies between the educator and the student, as well as between students (Vogelzang & Admiraal, 2017).

RQ2 was designed to determine if participants' lesson plans reflected the use of personalized learning instructional strategies. An analysis of the participants' lesson plans showed consistency between responses and planned instructional strategies such as small group instruction and individual conferencing. Lesson plans from Participant 8 and Participant 5 listed the use of text levels and just right books to reach the varied reading needs of students. Additionally, lesson plans from Participant 8 showed a specific time in the day to celebrate students meeting personalized learning targets including moving up in text levels. Participant 8's lesson plans listed the use of conferences in writing and reading. Participant 5's lesson plans listed the various adaptive digital content, such as Dreambox, used with students to meet their needs. The beginning of Participant 5's lesson plan contained the following statement: "To meet each individual student where they are and take them as far as we can, social, emotionally, and intellectually in 180 days." The statement could be interpreted as Participant 5's commitment to a personalized learning approach to ensure the needs of each student are met. However, there were no instructional strategies explicitly noted on lesson plans for flexible pacing or the use of data to inform instruction, which was inconsistent with participants' interview responses.

According to the literature, a gap in practice exists between the expectation of general educators in traditional classrooms to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum and some general educators' unfamiliarity with how to do so in inclusive, personalized learning classrooms. However, the findings of this study revealed that the participants believe SWD can access the general education curriculum with the needed supports. The findings revealed that the participants consider the personalized instructional strategies of differentiated instruction, flexible pacing, and data-based instruction to be needed to provide SWD with access to the general education classroom.

Previous studies' findings noted that general educators found it difficult to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum (Cameron, 2014; Day & Prunty, 2015; Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2016; Gül & Vuran, 2015; Hintz et al., 2015; Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017; Meynert, 2014; Paju et al., 2016; Strogilos et al., 2017). However, in the current study, general educators indicated that they do not find it difficult to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Only one participant identified that it was challenging to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. Participant 2 stated

It can be frustrating because I feel like I'm not equipped to be a special education teacher. It's a lot when you are trying to collect data and do all the intervention. It is difficult when you don't have the knowledge and materials to do it. It's difficult.

Other participants noted barriers within the current education system: high-stakes assessments at grade level, lack of time to plan, and the requirement to introduce all

grade-level standards. The barriers identified in the current study are consistent with other studies (Cameron, 2014; Day & Prunty, 2015; Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2016; Gül & Vuran, 2015; Hintz et al., 2015; Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017; Meynert, 2014; Paju et al., 2016; Pane et al., 2017a; Strogilos et al., 2017). The barriers of time to plan and time to allow SWD to reach proficiency with grade-level standards were identified by seven of the eight participants. The participants also noted a barrier embedded in the educational system itself: mandated high-stakes testing on grade-level standards.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Bloom's mastery learning theory. Personalized learning instructional strategies grew, in part, from Bloom's mastery learning theory (Patrick et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2017). Bloom (1968) believed that all students learn if educators use the instructional practices of differentiating instruction, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback, which are found in personalized learning instructional practices (Patrick et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2017). Goksoy (2018) furthered Bloom's work and found that teachers' belief in the ability of all students to learn in conjunction with the instructional practices in Bloom's master learning theory were necessary for students to reach proficiency. The findings of the current study revealed that the participants believed SWD can learn the general education curriculum using the instructional practices of differentiated instruction, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback. To assist teachers in implementing personalized learning instructional strategies, the district hired personalized learning coaches to support

implementation in the schools. Participant 3 noted the important role the personalized learning coach played in her understanding of instructional strategies to use inside her classroom, saying “I had coaches. Unbelievable personalized learning instructional coaches.” Perhaps this layered approach to implementation of personalized learning provided the general educators in the current study with more knowledge, support, and confidence in providing SWD access to the general education curriculum.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations to the study included, but were not limited to, the brevity of the lesson plans submitted by the participants, the number of participants, the length of the interviews, and potential researcher bias. The first limitation of the study was the brevity of the lesson plans. Wiggins and McTighe (2011) described the importance of planning intentional learning experiences centered on an essential question relevant to the students. Planning should begin with the standard, then move to the assessment, and conclude with the learning experiences for the students. Planning allows teachers to determine the best instructional strategies that align with the needs and interests of students (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Because the lesson plans submitted lacked the depth recommended by Wiggins and McTighe, it was difficult to determine the purpose of the instructional strategies and assessments listed. The teachers did not provide detailed lesson plans showing the instructional practices discussed in the interview. Specifically, instructional strategies used for flexible pacing were not noted on the plans.

Assessments were listed, but the use of the data from the assessments was not explicitly stated on the lesson plans. For example, some teachers may use data from

assessments to identify learning gaps and use small group instruction to close those gaps (Heritage, 2020). Although participants did list standards to be covered during the week, the participants did not state what standard(s) were being assessed and whether all students were being assessed using the same assessment on the same standard(s).

Teachers were not asked to modify the plans they give to their administrators weekly.

Therefore, the plans were a general outline or list of the day's tasks versus a detailed plan for instruction.

A second limitation to the study was the number of participants. The initial plan was that 12 general educators would be interviewed; however, only 8 general educators participated in the study. Additional attempts were made to reach 12 participants. I sent follow-up emails to teachers identified by administrators. I also reached out to the program director a second time to see if she knew of any teachers who may have moved schools. I then reached out to those administrators. After approval from the administrators, I then reached out to the teachers with follow-up emails. Only 8 educators responded affirmatively to the emails. Three educators declined through email and there was no response from the other identified possible candidates for participation. Kvale (2007) stated that most qualitative studies using interviews as a data collection method have 10 to 15 participants. It is possible that the number of participants did not provide enough data to reach saturation.

The length of the interviews is a limitation to the study. Schostak (2002) stated that it takes 30 minutes for an interview to provide a full description of the phenomenon being researched. The interviews in the study lasted between 22 and 27 minutes. The



interview protocol was used in each of the interviews. Based on the participants' responses, follow-up questions were also asked. Although follow-up questions were asked and I believe participants provided full and complete responses, it is possible that the length of the interviews did not provide enough opportunity to gain the information necessary to give an in-depth description of the phenomenon.

The last limitation was the potential for researcher bias. To protect against research bias, I continuously reflected on my own biases throughout the process. I kept a list of my biases to ensure my personal thoughts and ideas did not influence the research process and findings (Dodgson, 2019). Potential biases included my inclination to believe that personalized learning can benefit SWD access the general education curriculum. I worked in a school that implemented personalized learning as a literacy. Although I did not have a direct role in the implementation, I did need to be aware of the instructional strategies used to support teachers during literacy instruction. By acknowledging my bias and continuously reflecting on its potential influence, I was able to guard against my own biases influencing the study.

### **Recommendations**

The review of the literature for this study indicated that general educators are unfamiliar with instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. The findings of the current study are inconsistent with the studies in the literature. This study was limited to the perspectives of general educators from two elementary school in a large, diverse district in the southeastern United States. A larger sample with varied participants from multiple schools in multiple districts would provide

a more complete understanding of the perspectives of general educators teaching in an inclusive, personalized learning classroom. A larger sample size would also provide more in-depth data, resulting in more definitive findings and increasing the scope of the research.

This qualitative study focused on two schools in the southeastern United States. A quantitative study may indicate if the instructional strategies identified by the participants do improve learner outcomes for SWD at the elementary level. A longitudinal mixed-methods study may indicate if an inclusive, personalized learning classroom potentially increases graduation rates, identify what career path SWD take after graduation, and explore the perspectives of general educators at various levels of the K–12 system.

Additionally, the participants noted barriers to using personalized learning strategies in inclusive classrooms. Given the findings from the research indicating that personalized learning may minimize the gap between SWD and their non-disabled peers (Basham et al., 2016; Pane et al., 2017b; Patrick et al., 2013; Rhim & Lancet, 2018) and that identifiable barriers exist in the education system (Bingham et al., 2018; Gross & DeArmond, 2018), further research is needed to investigate how the educational system needs to adjust. The findings of this study and studies from the literature (Pane et al., 2015) show that personalized learning may increase learner outcomes for all students. Possible future research questions include:

1. How do educational leaders decrease the inherent barriers to personalized instructional strategies?

2. How do educational leaders shift their own perspectives around traditional planning to provide general educators with the time needed to plan differentiated instruction, flexible pacing, and data-informed instruction?

### **Implications**

An implication for social change arising from this study is the identification of the instructional strategies the participants used to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. The findings of the current study suggest that the participants found differentiation, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback necessary to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. They identified the specific instructional strategies of small groups, individual conferences, technology, and work menus as being needed in inclusive, personalized learning classrooms. The findings provide a better understanding of the practices embedded in personalized learning classrooms, which may lead other general educators to use the strategies in their own classrooms to give SWD access to the general education curriculum, resulting in increased learner outcomes. Thompson and Jocius (2017) found that if opportunities increase for SWD, the community benefits.

A second implication for social change may include reducing the barriers to using personalized learning instructional strategies in inclusive general education classrooms. Time to plan meaningful and purposeful instruction is limited. The conflict between students learning at their own pace and the pressure to move through grade level standards to prepare for high-stakes testing is felt by the general educators, as indicated by the study. The results of the study highlight the need for national, state, district, and

school-based leaders to rethink traditional perceptions of planning time and assessment of students to show growth and proficiency. If the barriers can be minimized, general educators may implement the identified instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum, which may lead to a positive social change for SWD by giving them more options after their K-12 schooling.

The achievement gap between SWD and their non-disabled peers continues to grow in the local setting (state superintendent of education, 2017). The findings of the current study indicate that general educators find personalized instructional strategies necessary to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. However, given the continuing achievement gap, it may be advantageous to determine if an inclusive, personalized learning classroom increases SWD performance on the high-stakes end-of-year test.

The findings of the study indicate that differentiated instruction, flexible pacing and data-informed feedback are needed in an inclusive, personalized learning classroom. Based on the findings, several recommendations for practice are provided. First, general educators may consider working in professional learning communities to improve their instructional practices. A professional learning community provides general educators with a time to collaborate and solve problems (Dogan & Adams, 2018). District leaders and school leaders may want to consider innovative methods and master schedules to provide general educators with the time needed to plan meaningful and purposeful data-informed instruction. Finally, it is recommended that general educators closely monitor

the access to the standards SWD are receiving and adjust instructional practices as needed.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the current study indicate the need for personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. IDEA (2004) and ESSA (ESSA; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) mandate that SWD have access to the general education curriculum. Bloom's mastery learning theory guided this study and the elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory include differentiated instruction, flexible pacing, and data-informed feedback (Bloom, 1968). The findings suggest the participants find the elements of Bloom's master learning theory important in providing SWD with access to the general education curriculum. However, they identify barriers to using the instructional strategies to differentiate instruction, provide flexible pacing and use data-informed feedback. A lack of sufficient planning time and inherent processes in the educational system impede the instruction in the classroom.

Findings indicate that the participants believe the elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory used in personalized learning classrooms are needed to provide SWD with access to the general education curriculum. The participants also believe in each student's ability to learn. Goksoy (2018) found that the belief in an SWD's ability to learn is needed in an inclusive classroom. If general educators in traditional classrooms use personalized instructional strategies, believe SWD can learn, are provided layered supports (such as an instructional coach) and are able to remove some institutional barriers, SWD may have more opportunities opened to them beyond the K-12 system.

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### Appendix A: Introduction Letter to Administrators

Dear (insert name of administrator),

My name is Kelly Sharpe Stalcup and I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University seeking my degree in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. I am seeking to participants for my study, Perspectives of General Educators in an Inclusive, Personalized Learning. The purpose of the qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate the perspectives of general educators in inclusive, personalized learning environments on planning and using personalized learning instructional strategies to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum.

I am asking for your permission to contact teachers currently teaching, or have taught in the past two years, in an inclusive classroom implementing personalized learning instructional strategies. If a teacher agrees to participate, I will conduct a 45 to 60-minute interview at a time and location convenient for the participant. A virtual option will also be available using Skype or Google Hangouts. I have received approval for the study Charleston County School District. I will follow up via email or phone call in the next week to answer any questions or concerns.

Thank you again,

Kelly Sharpe Stalcup

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Hi. Thank you for participating in this study. How are you today? The interview should take between 45 minutes and an hour to complete. Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond with your honest perspectives and feelings.

I will be tape recording the conversation. The purpose of the recording is to ensure I accurately capture your responses and to be able to actively attend to the conversation. After I transcribe the conversation, I will send you a copy. You will have the opportunity to clarify, change, or add to your responses.

I sent you a consent form via email for you to review. Before we start, do you have any questions about the consent form, the interview process, or the study? Would you take a moment to please sign the consent form? I will scan the signed consent form and email a copy to you.

If you are ready, we will begin the interview.

How long have you been in education?

How long have you been practicing personalized learning strategies in your classroom?

How many years have you taught in an inclusive classroom?

What is your biggest success teaching in a personalized learning, inclusive classroom?

Observation notes:

What is your biggest concern teaching in a personalized learning, inclusive classroom?

Observation notes:

What instructional strategies do you use to give SWD the time they need to access the general education curriculum?

Observation notes:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of giving SWD extended time to access general education standards?

Observation notes:

What instructional strategies do you use to differentiate or adapt instruction for SWD to access the general education standards?

Observation notes:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of differentiating or adapting instruction for SWD to access the general education standards?

Observation notes:

How do you use data-informed feedback from formative assessments, data collection, and data analysis to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum?

Observation notes:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the data informed feedback to provide SWD access to the general education standards?

Observation notes:

Are there personalized instructional strategies we have not discussed which you practice to provide SWD time needed to access the general education curriculum, differentiate or adapt instruction, or to use feedback to inform instruction for SWD?

Observation notes:

What are the biggest barriers to providing SWD access to the general education curriculum?

Observation notes:

How do you perceive your role in providing SWD access to the general education curriculum?

Observation notes:

### Appendix C: Criteria for Participation

- I am currently using personalized learning strategies in my classroom, or I have used personalized learning strategies in my classroom in the past 2 years.
- I have students with disabilities in my classroom.
- I instruct students with disabilities in my classroom.
- I teach at an elementary school.