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Teachers' Challenges With Implementing Differentiated Instructional Strategies in Grade 5 through 8 Classrooms

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Walden University

College of Education

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Sharda Massey

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Teachers' Challenges With Implementing Differentiated Instructional Strategies in Grade

5 through 8 Classrooms

by

Sharda Massey

EDS, Piedmont College, 2019

MA, Brenau University, 2016

BS, Georgia Southern University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Walden University

February 2025

Abstract

The research problem addressed in this study was that general education teachers in Grades 5 through 8 face challenges when implementing differentiated instruction (DI) in classrooms across the United States. With the increasing adoption of DI, understanding these challenges is essential to provide effective support. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. Guided by Tomlinson's DI approach, a basic qualitative design was used and semistructured interviews were conducted with eight teachers, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their experiences and obstacles with DI. Thematic analysis using open coding revealed six themes: recognition of students' responses to DI, the use of instructional tools for DI, assessing students understanding of DI, challenges during the implementation of DI, professional development (PD), and the need for adequate resources. Based on the findings, three recommendations were made for future research including examining class size and DI, PD needed for DI, and strategies for DI involving specific student subgroups. Two recommendations were made for future practice focusing on continued PD, coaching, collaborative time, and increased classroom support. This study may contribute to positive social change by fostering a deeper understanding of the obstacles teachers encounter during the implementation of DI, enabling school leaders to offer sufficient support to teachers.

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Dedication

To my greatest supporter and unwavering source of strength,

This work is dedicated to you, my steadfast partner, whose love and encouragement have been the cornerstone of this journey. Your belief in me never wavered, even when my own faith faltered. Your patience, understanding, and quiet sacrifices allowed me to pursue my goals, and for that, I am endlessly grateful.

You have been my anchor in moments of uncertainty, my cheerleader in times of triumph, and my refuge during challenges. Every step of this journey has been made lighter because of your presence, and every word of this dissertation carries the imprint of your support.

Though your name remains unspoken here, your influence is deeply felt in every achievement this work represents. This accomplishment is not mine alone—it is a shared testament to your love, strength, and unwavering partnership.

With all my gratitude and love, I dedicate this to you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Differentiated instruction (DI) has been a focal point of discussions in education for numerous years. As a result, diverse interpretations and definitions of DI have emerged. According to Shareefa and Moosa (2020), DI is an educational methodology grounded in the belief that teaching approaches should be flexible and adjusted to accommodate students' individual needs, uniqueness, and diversity within a classroom setting. Put differently, DI is an instructional strategy where educators purposefully adjust curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to cater to the varied needs of individual students (Shareefa, 2020). In short, differentiation is essentially the alignment of curriculum and learning experiences with the unique needs of learners (Julia et al., 2023).

A teacher at ease and proficient in employing diverse instructional methods is more apt to effectively engage a wide range of students than a teacher who relies on a singular approach to teaching and learning (Bogen et al., 2019). Tomlinson (2014) delineated five components of a differentiated classroom: (a) establishing a nurturing learning atmosphere; (b) adaptably overseeing the classroom; (c) crafting a high-quality curriculum; (d) employing continuous assessment to gauge student alignment with clearly defined objectives; and (e) adjusting instruction, including modifying content practice formats, and student outputs, to proactively address variations in learner needs, such as differences in readiness or interest. Individualized instruction benefits every learner, irrespective of gender, and uniformly enhances the learning environments for students. The approach to differentiation maintains elevated standards for all students, ensuring

equitable access to the curriculum. The personalized education strategy enhances the performance of diverse individuals, rendering it suitable for all students (Grain et al., 2022).

Understanding DI and addressing the challenges teachers face during its implementation can support teachers and provide educational institutions with valuable insights to help overcome these challenges. The current study examines the challenges encountered by teachers in the implementation of DI. This study could offer educational institutions valuable insights into the procedures involved in implementing DI and the methodologies employed during the implementation of DI. The study might also contribute to positive social change in teachers' educational experiences by offering a comprehensive overview of DI and the challenges encountered in its implementation. In the first chapter, I delve into the study's background, outline the research problem, articulate the research questions, clarify the conceptual framework and the study's nature, and provide definitions crucial to understanding. The chapter ends with discussions on assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study.

Background

Teachers are incorporating DI in classrooms; however, barriers in the implementation process surface (Pozas et al., 2019). Effective DI, as outlined by Stien and Madelker (2023), involves teachers making informed decisions based on assessments from both the teacher and students, intentional integration into each lesson, collaborative efforts between teacher and student to ensure student input in their learning, and differentiation's subtle nature aimed at supporting meaningful learning. Adhering to

Lindner and Schwab's (2020) perspective, implementing differentiation in classrooms for the benefit of all students emphasizes collaborative teaching practices, incorporating diverse instructional techniques within lessons, employing strategic grouping to address individual student needs, and adapting content, process, and the learning environment. In Tomlinson's (2014) vision, differentiation in a classroom is characterized by an actively supportive learning environment, teachers proactively addressing student differences, an organized curriculum supporting student learning, inseparable assessment and instruction, modification of content, process and products based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile, collaborative learning between teachers and students, a balanced approach to group and individual norms, and flexible collaboration between teachers and students.

Studies have underscored the importance of DI because it provides a crucial platform for all teachers of inclusive classrooms to create opportunities for success for all students through the adjustment of instructional strategies (Bondie et al., 2019; Lang, 2019; Williams, 2023). However, creating classrooms that effectively address student similarities and differences is a complex task, as noted by Tomlinson (2014). Educators highlight challenges in implementing DI stemming from insufficient time, resources, knowledge, and training, as Ziernwald et al. (2022) reported. Educators also face challenges related to administrative support and the implementation of DI within a curriculum that may lack adequate tools for such purposes (Bogen et al., 2019; Ziernwald et al., 2022).

The present study was intended to fill the existing gap in practice by examining the challenges teachers encounter in implementing DI. Teachers often encounter challenges in seamlessly integrating DI strategies into their daily lessons, hindering the realization of differentiation's full potential. Additionally, varying levels of teacher preparedness and professional development (PD) opportunities contribute to the widening gap. Further knowledge is needed about the challenges that teachers face during the implementation process and the support required for them to overcome these challenges. This study is essential for gaining a deeper comprehension of the obstacles encountered, enabling schools and educational institutions to offer sufficient support to teachers.

Problem Statement

The research problem for this study is that teachers of Grades 5–8 in the United States face challenges when implementing differentiated instructional strategies in classrooms. Teachers have identified various challenges associated with implementing DI, as documented in existing literature (Lavania & Nor, 2020). These challenges, including insufficient knowledge, limited time for planning and implementation, and scarce resources, have been extensively explored. Whitley's (2019) study examined teachers' understanding and practices related to DI, revealing a significant demand for additional professional support, dedicated planning time, improvements in teaching practices, enhanced skills, and a transformative shift in their perceptions of DI.

The research data collectively underscored the crucial need for equipping teachers with requisite resources and preparation to effectively implement DI (Whitley et al., 2021). Whereas the importance of DI for personalized and effective teaching is widely

acknowledged, mastering this complex skill poses a significant challenge for many educators, leaving them feeling unprepared for the task (Van Geel et al., 2018). Further insights from Benjamin and Panesar-Aguilar's (2020) interviews with 10 teachers in Grades 6–8 implementing DI shed light on practical challenges such as insufficient preparation time, teacher readiness, varied student levels, and resource inadequacy. These findings collectively provided a comprehensive view of the multifaceted hurdles encountered by teachers in the practical application of DI.

Support systems are crucial for the successful implementation of DI, providing educators with essential tools and training to meet diverse student needs. To aid in the idea of providing support for implementation, Alansa Scott et al. (2021) conducted a study involving 15 teachers teaching Grades 5 or 6 who completed virtual interviews about DI. The researchers highlighted that educators identified the lack of time, the mental challenges associated with differentiating every lesson, and the need for support in the classroom as challenges to implement DI effectively. The need for training and support underscored a gap in current teaching practices, as it indicates that teachers are seeking further support and resources to overcome the obstacles they encounter when implementing DI. Consequently, addressing these identified barriers and providing teachers with the necessary training and resources is essential for successfully implementing DI.

The current study addressed a gap in the current literature by investigating the challenges teachers face during implementing DI. Emphasizing the significance of DI, various studies highlight its crucial role as a platform for inclusive classroom teachers to

foster opportunities for success among all students through the adaptation of instructional strategies (Bondie et al., 2019; Lang, 2019; Williams, 2023). In recent literature, researchers have investigated the obstacles teachers face when implementing curricula by interviewing them to gather their opinions (Warman et al., 2021). This study by Warman et al. (2021) revealed that teachers struggled with executing lesson plans, comprehending the content structure, applying the curriculum, addressing diverse student abilities, and conducting evaluations. Furthermore, in a qualitative study, Northup et al. (2022) examined challenges faced by teachers in implementing a new curriculum for computer science. The results found by the authors highlighted teacher challenges with the confidence in required pedagogy, difficulty for coding for students, administration approval, and the safety of using the curriculum for student. Similarly, Braskén et al. (2019) interviewed 13 teachers who shared their experiences with the challenges of implementing curriculum. These teachers' challenges, highlighted by the authors, were the shift in teacher roles, developing assessment tools, and the lack of ownership within the curriculum.

Although studies have been conducted focusing on the challenges of implementing curriculum, specific obstacles educators encounter in the implementation process of DI are unknown due to the limited research focusing on implementation challenges (Lavana & Nor, 2020). It is crucial to emphasize that there remains an insufficient number of studies addressing the challenges encountered by teachers in implementing DI because of the multitude of factors that could impact the nature of challenges faced by teachers (Lavana & Nor, 2020). This study will address the gap in

literature by exploring teachers' experiences with implementing DI, challenges faced during implementation and support needed for better implementation in Grades 5–8.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. Educators possess a fundamental grasp of DI concepts but encounter challenges during the implementation phase (Porta et al., 2022; Whitley et al., 2019; Williams, 2023). Educators teaching in Grades 5–8 encounter obstacles including time constraints for implementing DI, resource scarcity, and a deficit in expertise regarding differentiation techniques. Students in the intermediate grades (Grades 5–8) require DI to cater to their individual needs and enhance their learning development, thereby better equipping them for success in secondary education. These grade levels serve as a transition period between elementary and high school, necessitating DI to prepare them for the increased academic demands in high school. Implementing DI during these grade levels will equip students with the skills they need to succeed. The challenges faced by educators during the implementation process highlight the apparent necessity for PD (House et al., 2022; Lang, 2019). Comprehending the obstacles teachers encounter is crucial for leaders and educational institutions to offer support in overcoming perceived challenges.

Research Questions

The research problem for this study is that teachers of Grades 5–8 in the United States face challenges when implementing differentiated instructional strategies in classrooms. The purpose of this research was to identify and analyze challenges

experienced by teachers during the implementation of DI strategies. Within this investigation, I explored teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. Identifying teachers' experiences with DI was achieved by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' experiences in Grades 5–8 with implementing differentiated instructional strategies?
2. What do teachers report in Grades 5–8 is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Tomlinson's (2017) DI approach. Tomlinson's (1999, 2014) model of DI, also known as differentiation, stands out as the most frequently referenced and prominent approach in this movement. According to Dack (2018), the effort to adapt teaching methods within the regular education setting to accommodate diverse student needs has been growing in popularity, both in the United States and worldwide. DI embodies an educational philosophy based on the principles that academic diversity is a natural and beneficial aspect, every student should have equal access to high-quality teaching, and the primary goal of education is to optimize each student's potential (Dack, 2017).

As indicated by Tomlinson et al. (2008), teachers must develop an alternative approach to instructional planning to make differentiation work or teaching and learning work. To do this, teachers must proactively recognize and plan for student differences. DI focuses on qualitative changes in assignments, tailoring the nature of tasks to student

needs. Assessment is integral, occurring before, during, and after instruction to set, monitor, and evaluate goals. DI is student-centered, offering appropriately challenging experiences for all. It involves a blend of whole class, small group, and individual learning, promoting collaborative and individualized approaches.

The logical connection, further explained in Chapter 2, between the framework presented and the current study is that Tomlinson's (1999) differentiation approach focuses on teachers giving equal access and high-quality teaching by accommodating the diverse needs of students. This concept focuses on the teacher's ability to optimize students' potential by differentiating their learning experience. The differentiation approach refers to adapting instruction to meet the diverse needs of students in a classroom. It acknowledges that students have different learning abilities and backgrounds, so teaching should be tailored to these individual differences. The notion of differentiation offers a framework that contrasts with the one-size-fits-all teaching method, proving to be the most effective approach in addressing the diverse needs of students. The differentiation approach is relevant to the study because it necessitates adapting instruction to meet diverse student needs. This requirement introduces complexities such as determining appropriate strategies, managing diverse learners, and ensuring equitable outcomes, all of which can present significant hurdles for teachers in Grades 5–8.

The framework offers a comprehensive overview of the strategies required for effective DI implementation. Given the complexity of the strategies required for DI implementation, it is essential to seek teachers' perspectives on the strategies employed

and the challenges they encounter during implementation. Considering the necessity to uncover teachers' perspectives in Grades 5–8 on their challenges and the PD required for effective DI implementation, a qualitative study emerged as the most appropriate approach. The qualitative approach allowed in-depth exploration of the teachers' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Participants conveyed their experiences with DI through interviews derived from components of the differentiation approach. These interview questions were crafted from the research questions, which center on experiences with DI and the necessary support for its implementation. The participants' responses were then analyzed to comprehend teachers' challenges and identify the necessary support for successful implementation.

Nature of the Study

I employed a basic qualitative approach to explore how participants engage with DI, identify potential challenges in its implementation, and explore the necessary support for improving the implementation of DI. The qualitative research approach investigates how discussion members perceive a particular social issue (Tumen & Ahmed, 2021). All qualitative approaches share two common elements. Firstly, they prioritize studying phenomena that occur in natural settings, reflecting the real world. Secondly, these approaches involve examining these phenomena intricately (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019). Qualitative researchers opt for this research methodology to explore a particular phenomenon and interpret or derive meaning from an individual's perspective. Through language, they effectively communicate the experiences of individuals, potentially

transforming policies and directives by anchoring them in the lived experiences of the affected individuals (Danford, 2023).

Researchers employ various methods for data collection in primary qualitative research. In the current study, I used semistructured interviews to reveal multiple experiences of differentiation implementation. Interviews serve to acquire insights into an individual's subjective experiences, opinions, and motivations, contrasting with examining facts or behaviors (Busetto et al., 2020). I planned to conduct semistructured interviews in person and via Zoom, as necessary. The suitable participants for this study were general education teachers in Grades 5–8, specifically those who deliver instruction in academic content areas. These teachers were chosen because their teaching responsibilities involve working with diverse groups of students and necessitate the differentiation of instruction to address the needs of all students. I used NVivo for the organization and categorization of data. This involved highlighting texts, identifying codes, and ultimately discovering themes within the data.

Definitions

Terms are defined in this section to establish a shared understanding of essential concepts.

Co-teaching: Teachers collaborating in planning, instruction, and assessment to address the needs of K-12 students. Through leveraging the expertise of each teacher and strategically applying it in planning, teaching, and evaluating, co-teachers enhance support for struggling students, implement diverse scaffolding techniques, and tailor instruction. This collaborative approach enables co-teachers to reflect on shared

experiences, fostering professional growth through collaboration and facilitating the development of critical reflection skills (Guise et al., 2021).

Curriculum: A systematically organized set of desired learning results. It encompasses what students encounter during their educational journey and is adaptable and comprehensive. Pedagogy and teaching strategies must consider both the methods employed and the ultimate objectives. The curriculum should highlight connections, as concepts and overarching ideas are interlinked rather than isolated (Huck, 2022).

Differentiation (or differentiated instruction, DI): A learner-centered approach, tailors teaching to meet each student's unique needs, maximizing their learning potential. By providing varied options, teachers acknowledge the individuality of each student's learning journey, aiming for profound and efficient learning experiences (Tomlinson, 2005).

Preservice teachers: College students who gain practical experience in kindergarten through twelfth grade settings to learn how to apply instructional approaches effectively. These experiences expose them to diverse student populations and help them connect theory to practice. Through field experiences, preservice teachers develop the skills needed to design effective lessons and support student learning. Research shows positive outcomes, including increased self-efficacy and knowledge of instructional strategies, as well as improved ability to work with diverse learners (Torres et al., 2023).

Professional development: Enhancing teaching practices and student outcomes involving engaging in various activities such as inquiry in science, problem-solving in

mathematics, analyzing student work, and participating in PD workshops and online resources. These tasks aim to develop individuals' abilities and understanding, ultimately leading to improved teaching effectiveness and student learning. (El Islami et al., 2022).

Professional learning communities (PLCs): A continuous endeavor where educators join forces in repeated cycles of shared exploration and action-based research to enhance student outcomes. By forming collaborative groups known as PLCs, teachers break free from isolation within school walls and classrooms, prioritizing student learning through teamwork (Pilotti et al., 2023).

Teacher preparation programs: Distinctive programs with design elements and attributes such as curriculum, course sequencing, structure, and clinical placements that are crafted to enhance teacher candidate learning and efficacy to prepare entryway into teaching (Bardelli et al., 2022).

School leadership: Principals and their designated teams operating within a global economic context that shapes the educational agenda. Leaders are tasked with delivering an inclusive educational experience that respects the diversity of the school community, all while complying with mandated policies and professional standards (Lumus et al., 2022).

Remote learning (or virtual learning): A reactive and responsive approach, utilizing real-time, paced synchronous sessions to fill in for face-to-face disruptions. It presents instructors with the challenge of finding ways to support and guide students who may have limited access to technology and applications. In this context, instructors are

responsible for conducting or facilitating learning experiences (Kuntz & Manokore, 2022).

Assumptions

This study incorporated certain assumptions. One underlying assumption was that participants will candidly and truthfully communicate their experiences with DI. Another assumption was that, through the interview data, valuable insights were gained into how teachers execute differentiation and the essential support for its implementation. I also assumed that teachers are actively employing DI and encountering challenges in its implementation. Awareness of these assumptions was crucial to upholding the validity of the study.

Scope and Delimitations

This research encompassed teachers' encounters in Grades 5–8 and their challenges while incorporating DI. It also emphasized the support necessary for teachers during the implementation process. I decided to undertake this research due to my background as a general education teacher, team lead, and mentor teacher, where differentiation was a mandatory practice for teachers but proved challenging to implement.

The study was delimited to general education teachers who employ DI in their instructional practices. These participants were suitable for this study as they work with diverse groups of students where differentiation is applied. The results of this study have relevance for U.S. educators in Grades 5–8 who implement differentiation.

Transferability pertains to whether an intervention's degree of effectiveness (or perceptions and experiences) in a particular setting or population will align with the observed level of effectiveness (or perceptions and experiences) identified in a systematic review (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2019). Despite the outlined limitations, researchers can use the study results for different classroom environments. I provided thorough notes and detailed descriptions of the collected data to facilitate comparisons for other researchers. This documentation saves them from the need to replicate the entire study.

Limitations

Limitations may arise during the execution of this study. One potential limitation could be the sample size, where an insufficient number of participants may hinder the representation of general education teachers and their experiences with DI. To overcome this limitation, participants were selected using purposive sampling to guarantee adequate representation of teachers in the study.

An additional limitation may arise from potential researcher bias due to my background and past experiences as a general education teacher implementing DI. To address this limitation, I established transparent data collection and analysis criteria. Additionally, I incorporated self-reflection methods to minimize potential biases. Finally, a limitation of this study could be time constraints. Interviews, although time-consuming as a data collection tool, prove effective in capturing teachers' experiences with implementation. To mitigate this limitation, I informed teachers about the estimated time required for the interview and provided incentives to encourage their participation.

Significance

In Grades 5–8, educators employ DI strategies in their class settings yet encounter obstacles during its execution. This current study will fill a gap in practice by examining educators' encounters with applying DI and identifying the support required for successful implementation in Grades 5–8. Implementing DI is crucial for ensuring learners access diverse learning opportunities, allowing them to maximize their learning potential (Lavania & Nor, 2020). Furthermore, DI suggests that teachers actively adjust curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, or student product requirements to suit individual learning needs better (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

Instruction for DI encompasses a robust curriculum structured around essential concepts and defined learning objectives; continuous formative assessment to shape DI; adaptable, purposeful grouping strategies; engaging tasks suitable for all students; and a supportive learning atmosphere where educators prioritize individual progress and cultivate respectful interactions (Sharp et al., 2018). Despite its effectiveness, educators encounter obstacles such as insufficient knowledge and resources, the need for PD, and time constraints when incorporating DI (House et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2022; Whitley et al., 2019).

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the challenges teachers encounter when implementing DI. By identifying and examining these challenges, the research sheds light on the hurdles educators face and serves as a crucial resource for schools and teachers seeking practical solutions. The objective of this study was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles associated with DI

implementation, offering valuable insights that can guide educators in overcoming these challenges. Ultimately, the findings of this research may empower schools and educators with the knowledge needed to proactively address these issues and implement DI more seamlessly, fostering an environment that maximizes the benefits of differentiated learning strategies. Exploring the challenges of differentiation will foster social change by identifying barriers to inclusive education, empowering educators, and driving systemic reforms to ensure equitable access to quality learning for all students.

Summary

The background of the study focused on teachers striving to integrate DI in classrooms, facing obstacles such as insufficient resources, time, and training, hindering implementation, and highlighting the need for further research to understand and address these challenges effectively. The research problem prompting this study is that teachers in Grades 5–8 face challenges when implementing differentiation. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in Tomlinson's (2017) DI approach, which emphasizes equal access to high-quality teaching, tailoring instruction to diverse student needs, and optimizing each student's potential, necessitating a qualitative exploration of teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing effective differentiation strategies to ensure equitable outcomes. The nature of the study involves employing a basic qualitative approach to explore participants' engagement with DI, identify implementation challenges, and explore necessary support for general education teachers

in Grades 5–8. The relevant terms associated with the study are *differentiated instruction* and *professional development*. This study was grounded on the assumptions that participants would honestly convey their experiences with DI, that interview data would yield valuable insights into teachers' execution of differentiation and required support, and that teachers are actively employing and facing challenges in implementing DI. This study was delimited to general education teachers who employ DI in their instructional practices.

Limitations include potential issues with the sample size, where inadequate representation of general education teachers and their experiences with DI may occur, addressed through purposive sampling methods, alongside potential researcher bias stemming from my background as a general education teacher implementing differentiation. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the challenges teachers encounter when implementing DI, aiming to provide valuable insights into these hurdles and serve as a crucial resource for schools and educators seeking practical solutions. The current study was based on a basic qualitative approach involving gathering data through semistructured interviews with educators in Grades 5–8 who use the DI approach.

This study is valuable to educators and educational leaders as it offers insights into teachers' challenges during implementation. By identifying these challenges, school leaders can better understand the necessary steps to provide adequate support for implementation. The findings from this study could drive social change by ensuring that the diverse learning needs of all students are effectively addressed. In Chapter 2, I present

an in-depth overview of the conceptual framework, provide a comprehensive examination of existing literature about the subject matter, and consolidate the critical themes derived from the literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was addressed in this study is that teachers of Grades 5–8 in the United States face challenges when implementing differentiated instructional strategies in classrooms. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. DI is a deliberate approach by educators to strategize modifications aimed at enhancing students' learning during lessons. It involves considering the unique needs of individual students and providing tailored learning opportunities for each student, which is like individualization (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Ziernwald et al., 2022). The model promotes teachers to customize the lesson by adapting any or all the three components of the curriculum: content, process, and product. Content differentiation involves altering what students learn; process differentiation focuses on the methods students use to learn skills, strategies, and concepts; and product differentiation involves how students demonstrate their comprehension of skills, strategies, and concepts (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Puzio et al., 2020). Although the strategies of DI offer potential benefits for enhancing student learning, many teachers find it challenging to embrace change and adopt this innovation. Teachers have described several barriers to implementing DI, such as a lack of professional and paraprofessional support, inadequate time for planning, instruction, and assessment, and limited resources (House et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2022; Moosa & Shareefa, 2019; Whitley et al., 2019).

This section provides an overview of the professional literature concerning the implementation of DI and the necessary support for its effective implementation. This

includes eight topics linked with the problem examined in the study: (a) teacher preparation and training, (b) classroom techniques and teaching methods, (c) curriculum and instructional design, (d) assessment and evaluation, (e) supporting diverse learners, (f) teacher beliefs and attitudes, (g) leadership support, and (h) student engagement and motivation. Additionally, this chapter will include summaries of the literature search strategy used to gather relevant literature for the study.

Literature Search Strategy

To locate current literature pertinent to my research problem, I conducted searches across a range of databases accessible through the Walden University Library, as well as utilizing the search engine Google Scholar. The databases accessible for my research purposes were Education Source, ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, and Academic Search Complete. To gather articles relevant to the study, I employed search criteria specifying peer-reviewed articles conducted in the United States and published between 2019 and 2024. I selected these criteria to ensure that the literature found directly aligns with the population and setting of my study.

I used the following keywords to search for literature relevant to the challenges teachers encounter when implementing DI in general education classrooms for Grades 5–8: *differentiation, differentiated learning, implementation, teacher preparation, professional development, classroom management, curriculum, assessment, diverse learners, teacher beliefs and perspectives, support, and school leadership*. After finding various articles and studies, I downloaded the relevant ones and began taking notes. I organized the information from these articles into a synthesis matrix to track key findings

related to implementing DI. Once I had enough articles meeting my criteria, I started writing the literature review.

Conceptual Framework

Tomlinson's (2014) theory on differentiation served as the foundational conceptual framework for the study at hand. Tomlinson's theory of differentiation focuses on the idea that teachers should tailor instruction to meet the diverse needs of students in their classrooms where students are afforded chances to engage in deep learning and receive the highest quality instruction possible. In differentiated classrooms, educators embrace the principle that they must be prepared to engage students through diverse learning approaches, tapping into a variety of interests, and employing varied pacing and complexity levels alongside different support structures. Within these classrooms, teachers prioritize individual student progress and development over inter-student competition, consistently striving toward—and often surpassing—established content objectives. To effectively cater to diverse learners, educators in differentiated classrooms begin with a firm grasp of what is impactful curriculum and captivating instruction. Subsequently, they inquire about the adjustments needed to tailor that curriculum and instruction to ensure that every learner acquires the knowledge, comprehension, and skills essential for progressing to the subsequent crucial stage of learning (Tomlinson, 2014).

DI is not individualized instruction. Although it is accurate that DI can provide numerous paths to learning and emphasizes attending to students as individuals, it does not assume a distinct assignment for each learner (Tomlinson, 2017). Differentiation is

not synonymous with chaos. Well-differentiated classrooms incorporate deliberate student movement and occasional purposeful student discourse, yet they maintain order and discipline. Differentiation is more than just another method for homogenous grouping. Instead, a defining characteristic of a successful differentiated classroom is the implementation of flexible grouping, which caters to students' strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others (Tomlinson, 2017). Finally, differentiation extends beyond addressing outliers. Although students with identified learning challenges such as autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, intellectual disabilities, visual impairment, and others may require consistent scaffolding for academic growth, those who learn rapidly and deeply, or who are acquiring a new language, will need ongoing advanced challenges and language support. Nevertheless, within any classroom, there are also students in the middle who may face moderate struggles with various aspects of learning, necessitating individualized attention, encouragement, and support from their teacher to ensure their success (Tomlinson, 2017).

Previous researchers have used Tomlinson's theory of differentiation recognizing it as the most effective approach for accommodating the diverse learning styles, cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and socioeconomic disparities present in inclusive classroom settings (D'Intino & Wang, 2021). In their review of studies, D'Intino and Wang (2021), found that DI theory is commonly incorporated into teacher education programs through dedicated coursework and curriculum modules, where educators explore principles and strategies related to accommodating diverse student needs. In addition, Puzio (2020) applied Tomlinson's differentiation theory to review studies showing improvement in

student literacy achievement when teachers received support to tailor their literacy instruction. Also, Gibbs and Beamish (2021) employed Tomlinson's differentiation theory to describes the perspectives of certain teachers and school administrators regarding the implementation of DI in their secondary school campus to cater to diverse abilities and needs. Likewise, Lavania and Nor (2020) identified the challenges encountered by teachers when implementing the strategies of differentiation outlined in Tomlinson's theory. Like previous researchers, I used Tomlinson's theory as a framework to analyze the findings from this study, aiming to investigate and comprehend participants' experiences in implementing DI, along with the challenges they encounter during the process. Through this approach, I aimed to gain insights into the perspectives of general education teachers in Grades 5–8 regarding factors that they believe will support the implementation process.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

PD for Educators

In recent literature, there has been considerable focus on PD for educators to enhance teaching practices and student outcomes. PD programs have been recognized as instrumental in shaping educator practice (Brunsek et al., 2020). For instance, PD initiatives were introduced to in-service teachers to enhance their effectiveness and student achievement in reading (Cantrell et al., 2020). The teachers took part in a 4-day summit supplemented by follow-up sessions and coaching, finding that educators who engaged in PD demonstrated increased implementation of pedagogical skills as well as student growth by 2 points on the MAP assessment. Through this PD initiative, insight

was gained about the importance of PD in equipping teachers with essential skills (Cantrell et al., 2020). In addition, a meta-analysis of literature from 2000 to 2020 was conducted to give clarity on the importance of PD programs in DI for preschool and K-12 teachers (Kahmann et al., 2022). From the meta-analysis, the inclusion of subject specificity as a feature in PD is vital for the effectiveness of teacher practice for the implementation of DI. This meta-analysis supports the crucial role of well-designed PD initiatives in improving overall student learning experiences by enhancing teachers' abilities to implement DI effectively (Kahmann et al., 2022).

Collaborative PD is vital as it relates to inclusive education. In the United States, 32 schools were provided targeted PD to promote inclusive teaching practices (Gheysens et al., 2020). From the tailored training sessions provided, positive outcomes such as increased reflection on teaching practices, and heightened awareness of student diversity portrayed the importance of collaborative PD (Gheysens et al. 2020). Collectively the research by Cantrell et al. (2020), Gheysens et al. (2020), and Kahmann et al. (2022) contribute to the broader discussion surrounding PD for DI by providing insights into effective strategies, program design, and characteristics of successful PD initiatives. Due to the significance of PD for DI, it is imperative to ensure implementation of effective PD programs.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities (PLCs) serve as dynamic collaborative spaces in which teachers can engage in ongoing learning. In support of implementing PLCs, teachers in 57 schools across the United States were surveyed to determine perceptions of

PLCs and the effects of PLCs on self-efficacy and collective efficacy (Anderson & Olivier, 2022). Positive correlations were found between PLCs and teacher self-efficacy, emphasizing the pivotal role of PLCs in fostering a supportive environment conducive to professional growth and collaboration among educators. As a result of fostering professional growth and collaboration, PLCs strengthen teachers' belief in their own abilities and their effectiveness as a group within schools (Anderson & Olivier, 2022). Complementing this perspective, educators' perceptions of professional growth plans within the framework of PLCs is important. Educators in middle schools in the United States who were surveyed revealed how PLCs provide a structured platform for educators to engage in goal setting, reflective practice, and collaborative inquiry, ultimately facilitating ongoing PD and enhancing instructional effectiveness (Caniglia et al., 2023).

With a focus on instructional effectiveness, a direct correlation between PLC implementation and student achievement has been investigated by introducing 10 teachers to the PLC PD model (Mariani-Petroze, 2023). The PLC model was implemented once per month establishing a method conducive to faculty's needs, aiming to foster trust and alleviate tension while promoting data accountability, particularly emphasizing the transformative influence of PLCs in enhancing instructional practices and fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. As a result of implementation, teachers noted that PLCs provide ongoing, job-embedded learning that is active, collaborative, and reflective as well as positive student growth results (Mariani-Petroze, 2023). Moreover, PLCs play a role in cultivating teacher leadership for inclusive education. By examining the ripple effect of coaches within PLCs, Fair (2023) found that

collaborative PLCs serve as catalysts for promoting teacher leadership and advancing inclusive educational practices (Fair, 2023). Amidst a global emphasis on enhanced teaching as fundamental to better student outcomes, the challenge lies in building capacity for school improvement across entire institutions and the teaching workforce (Gore & Rosser, 2020).

Diverse Learners

DI aims to address the needs of diverse learners. To achieve this goal, teachers require effective PD focusing on the needs of English language learners (ELLs), students with disabilities, and gifted students. With a focus on ELLs, an inquiry into mainstream K-12 teachers' instruction for ELLs was conducted focusing on their knowledge of differentiating (Stairs-Davenport, 2021). Through survey data teachers assessed their readiness to differentiate instruction for ELLs and reported the support needed for targeted PD to address gaps in teachers' understanding and implementation of instructional strategies tailored to the needs of ELLs. The data analysis indicated that educators in this district are typically ill-equipped to instruct ELLs (Stairs-Davenport, 2021).

Furthermore, a PD program was designed specifically for prospective teachers, aiming to enhance their ability to enact DI strategies for ELLs (Hinojosa, 2022). Surveys and case studies were used to gather data on participants' preparedness and learning needs, to assess the PD program content, and to examine prospective teachers' involvement in a PD program aimed at enhancing their ability to differentiate instruction for ELLs in general education. Based on the implementation of the PD program, offering

aspiring teachers' chances to grasp instructional techniques for DI through practical demonstrations for ELLs is vital (Hinojosa, 2022). Providing teachers with PD opportunities that equip them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to effectively support ELLs through DI strategies in the classroom is vital.

Research offers insights pertaining to the PD of teachers educating students with disabilities. For example, a meta-analysis was conducted on PD effects for in-service teachers, and its effect on inclusive education in four areas: understanding, skills, attitudes, and behavior management (Donath et al., 2023). Based on the review of literature, intensive PD positively affects teachers' knowledge, skills, beliefs, and student behavior and should incorporate active learning and encourage teachers to consider specific students they aim to support for improved outcomes (Donath et al., 2023). Moreover, exploration into the training, perceptions, and classroom practices of inclusive middle-school content teachers, focusing specifically on writing instruction has been conducted revealing the PD experiences of teachers and the influence of their perceptions and classroom practices (Mason et al., 2022). Through questionnaires, and one-to-one interviews, teachers commonly express the need for more instructional support in integrating writing into content lessons for inclusive education for students with disabilities (Mason et al., 2022). It is important that teachers receive PD focusing on equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to effectively support students with disabilities in various instructional domains.

Research has also offered insights into professional learning for teachers in the context of gifted education. Supporting this idea, considerations for professional learning

supporting teachers in pedagogical content knowledge of the gifted have been investigated, providing guidance on how professional learning can effectively enhance teachers' knowledge and skills in delivering instruction tailored to the needs of gifted students (Weber & Mofield, 2023). Additionally, a reconceptualization of professional learning within the gifted education field through the *instruct to innovate* model has been implemented in a K-12 school in the Midwest (Spoon et al., 2020). Through the implementation of this model, the design principles facilitated teachers' PD while also demonstrating their positive impact on the academic, cognitive, and emotional development of gifted students, as observed by the teachers (Spoon et al., 2020). Educators and school leaders require focused PD. Specifically, teachers must grasp the traits of gifted learners, comprehend the impacts of grouping, and learn methods to tailor instruction for individual variances in content, pace, preferences, and surroundings, therefore supporting the need for ongoing PD for teachers in gifted education (Johnsen et al., 2020).

Curriculum and DI

Implementing DI alongside a mandated curriculum presents both potential advantages and challenges for educators across the United States. Typically, curriculum resources are designed to align with the requirements of the mandated curriculum. For instance, educators in New York implement and differentiate the ENGAGE NY ELA curricular resources to address the diverse needs of their students (Grecu, 2022). Interviews with educators revealed the benefits of lesson preparation for differentiation within the curriculum, including fostering relationships with students. However,

educators also face obstacles such as information overload, the requirement to adhere strictly to prescribed modules, time constraints, and limitations on their autonomy imposed by the modules (Grecu, 2022). Building on this, educators and administrators in New York also implement the Common Core curriculum while implementing DI (Swanson et al.,2020). According to interviews, educators and administrators observed that while Common Core aids teachers in differentiation, they often find themselves reverting to their conventional teaching methods. Challenges encountered include teachers prioritizing teaching to standardized tests, students potentially lacking developmental readiness for the curriculum, and the difficulty in adapting the curriculum to suit the diverse needs of students (Swanson et al., 2020).

Additionally, within the concept of DI standards-based grading practices as a part of the curriculum have been implemented in schools throughout the United States. For instance, in a public school where traditional grading practices were shifted to standards-based grading, teachers were interviewed to gain insight into their experiences with DI and standards-based grading (Williams, 2023). Teachers shared that while DI is vital and a need for students, there are challenges when implementing DI with standards-based grading. These challenges include struggling to meet the needs of students, developing a disservice to lower-level learners, pressure from external factors, and assessments (Williams, 2023). Collectively, the research conducted by Grecu (2022), Swanson et al. (2022), and Williams (2023) highlights that DI is crucial to meet the needs of students, but in doing so with a mandated curriculum, challenges arise.

Preservice Teachers and DI

When examining DI, it is crucial to emphasize the significance of preparedness programs for preservice teachers. Equipping preservice teachers to effectively cater to the diverse needs of students can pose significant challenges. For example, a study delved into the lesson plans and reflections of preservice teachers pursuing education degrees in the United States to assess their approaches to differentiation (Herner-Patnode & Lee, 2021). Analysis of unit lesson plans and reflective commentary spanning two years revealed that preservice teachers encounter difficulties in comprehending the various forms of differentiation and their practical implementation. Moreover, they struggle to bridge the gap between lesson planning and actual instructional delivery concerning differentiation. These findings expose the existing gaps in teacher preparation programs for preservice educators focusing on DI (Herner-Patnode & Lee, 2021). Expanding on this, researchers conducted interviews with college seniors majoring in education to assess their grasp of DI (Nepal et al., 2024). Following 35 days of practical teaching experience, these seniors observed that their comprehension of differentiation differed depending on the educator putting the practices into place. Their feedback also shed light on their struggle to fully grasp the methods of catering to diverse learners in the classroom, highlighting a deficiency in teacher training programs regarding instructional differentiation (Nepal et al., 2024).

Likewise, 25 prospective educators provided self-assessments and submitted videos showcasing their application of DI in their classroom experiences (Zaier & Maina, 2022). While these educators expressed satisfaction with their DI implementation,

researchers discovered that their understanding of DI was only at the surface level. As a result of this limited understanding, they exhibited limited use of best practices during implementation. The reports and videos highlighted the gap between the prospective educators' beliefs about DI and the actual execution of DI strategies (Zaier & Maina, 2022). Teacher preparation programs are one of the beginning sources to prepare teachers to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of all students. For prospective educators to attain comprehensive proficiency in DI, teacher preparation programs ought to incorporate demonstrations of DI, establish a structured framework for DI, and pair prospective educators with mentors who embrace DI with a positive outlook (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021).

DI Implementation

In recent scholarly works, the concept of DI has been a focal point in addressing students' diverse needs. Throughout the implementation process, it is crucial to understand teachers' comprehension of DI, strategies educators use for executing DI, and the obstacles they encounter in its application. Beginning with an exploration of teachers' understanding of DI, Dulfer et al. (2021) investigated eight educators' experiences and knowledge regarding DI through surveys, observations, discussions, and semi-structured interviews. Initially, these teachers confessed to having no prior understanding of DI and its application in classrooms. However, after participating in PD sessions focused on DI, they began to develop a shared language and understanding of DI. As a result, their grasp of DI improved, enabling them to identify DI strategies more effectively (Dulfer et al., 2021).

Likewise, in another study, four teachers participated in interviews aimed at gauging their comprehension of DI and the strategies implemented in its application (Porta & Todd, 2022). The interviews revealed varying levels of understanding among teachers regarding DI, with some using techniques such as group work and mixed ability grouping. Researchers observed a necessity for these educators to enhance their understanding of DI and strategies for implementation. Additionally, from the data collected, providing guidance on how to implement DI more effectively may be beneficial for educators (Porta & Todd, 2022). Overall, ensuring that educators establish a common and fundamental understanding grasp of DI may be crucial in shaping how teachers perceive and put into practice DI.

Approaches to implementing DI may differ among educators. This difference could lead to a variation of strategies used and challenges faced during implementation. For instance, five teachers were interviewed to share their strategies used when implementing DI and their perceptions of DI (Gibbs & Beamish, 2021). The teachers revealed that their implemented strategies were mainly centered around student activities, tailored to individual teachers' learning styles, resulting in minimal commonality among educators. From these experiences, several effective implementation strategies emerged, including creating sequenced lessons and activities, tailoring plans according to student needs and outcomes, providing scaffolding support, and modeling techniques to students (Gibbs & Beamish, 2021). Similarly, 10 educators from South Carolina were interviewed to share their experiences with implementing DI in inclusive classrooms (Benjamin & Panesar-Aguilar, 2020). Educators revealed that DI is not consistently applied in

inclusive classrooms but educators who implement DI use strategies such as graphic organizers, group activities, and tiered lessons. Educators acknowledged the importance of DI, but challenges arise during the implementation process. Teachers noted that the lack of knowledge, insufficient training, and limited preparation time are all challenges to effectively implement DI (Benjamin & Panesar-Aguilar, 2020).

Expanding upon the previously explored challenges, seven teachers engaged in semi-structured interviews to give insight into the obstacles encountered during the implementation of DI (Gibbs, 2022). These educators emphasized that constraints such as limited resources, student behavior, time constraints, inflexible curriculum, and large class sizes hindered the successful execution of DI (Gibbs, 2022). Drawing from the studies conducted by Gibbs and Beamish (2021), Benjamin and Panesar-Aguilar (2020), and Gibbs (2022), it becomes apparent that teachers' strategies for implementation vary widely, and challenges inevitably emerge during the process.

Beliefs, Attitudes, and Perception of DI

Beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions may influence the way teachers choose to implement DI. Insight into the implementation process of DI can be gained from understanding diverse attitudes and perceptions. Examining teacher perceptions of DI, five educators took part in semistructured interviews to discuss their self-efficacy and attitudes concerning DI (Porta et al., 2022). Throughout these interviews, teachers expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to implement DI effectively. They focused more on their familiarity with DI rather than their proficiency in differentiation. The researchers observed from the interviews that teachers perceive DI as time-consuming,

view it primarily as a strategy for individual students rather than a whole-class approach, and have frustrations towards DI due to difficulties in effective implementation, leading to a negative attitude towards DI (Porta et al., 2022). Expanding on these perceptions, novice, transitioning, and veteran educators took part in surveys to convey their perceptions of their capacity to implement DI (Unal et al., 2022). According to the survey findings, teachers generally found DI to be challenging. They suggested changing this perception by engaging in discussions with more experienced colleagues to learn about instructional strategies for DI, adapting lessons according to student needs, pursuing PD opportunities centered on DI, and engaging in conversations with instructional coaches and mentors (Unal et al., 2022).

Additional educators in Maryland were involved in a quantitative investigation using surveys to determine the correlation between their desire to implement DI and their real-world classroom implementation (Hersi & Bal, 2021). Through quantitative analysis, researchers discovered a notable variance between teachers' eagerness to implement DI and their practical application in the classroom. This variance indicates that although educators express a desire to adopt DI, they are not actively employing the instructional strategies (Hersi & Bal, 2021). On the other hand, student perspectives regarding their teachers' execution of DI have been examined using online surveys (Chandra Handa, 2020). According to the survey responses, students noted receiving fewer challenging assignments than teachers thought were assigned, limited opportunities for content-based learning, and fewer chances to participate in real-life learning experiences than teachers thought they implemented (Chandra Handa, 2020). Collectively, these studies showed

that teacher and students' perceptions and attitudes towards DI influence the implementation process.

School Leadership and DI

The success of implementing DI may significantly rely on the perceptions and ideas of school leaders during the process. Insight into the perspectives of school leaders was provided by Gibbs (2023), who provided valuable understanding of how DI is being implemented in schools. Two school leaders reported their perceptions of DI and the fundamental principles to which they expected teachers to adhere. According to interviews, these leaders viewed DI as a pedagogical philosophy that moves away from the one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. They also highlighted its benefits for both students and teachers, noting that proactive adjustment of teaching methods is effective DI implementation. Furthermore, these leaders articulated their expectations for DI implementation in the classroom, emphasizing the importance of proactive planning, adaptation of assessments, and a commitment to delivering clear, engaging, and relevant instruction (Gibbs, 2023). In contrast, interviews conducted with 17 administrators in a school district shed light on an alternative perspective of school leaders regarding DI (Whitley et al., 2021). These administrators expressed their belief that the implementation of DI varies depending on factors such as available resources, grade levels, and subjects taught. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of providing teachers with a diverse array of opportunities and strategies, as well as supporting them in integrating DI into the curriculum to ensure its effectiveness. Through the studies conducted by Gibbs (2023)

and Whitley et al. (2023), it is evident that school leaders perceive DI as valuable to meet the needs of students.

Given that school leaders serve as the instructional leaders within schools, their assessments of DI hold significant importance. For example, school leaders wrote reflections detailing the transformations witnessed by teachers as they embraced DI (Sharp et al., 2020). These reflections revealed a notable shift in teachers' perspectives, moving from solely focusing on students with special needs to embracing DI for the entire student cohort. Additionally, school leaders observed that as teachers continued to implement DI, misconceptions surrounding it began to fade, underscoring their pivotal role in guiding and supporting the implementation process (Sharp et al., 2020).

Elaborating on the involvement of school leaders in DI implementation, the decision-making approaches of eight administrators across different grade levels were explored (Chitpin, 2021). Through interviews, these administrators emphasized DI as a pivotal tool for addressing student needs, with benefits extending to both teachers and students.

Moreover, they highlighted their daily decision-making process, reiterating the constant pursuit of solutions to bridge achievement gaps among students. Furthermore, they stressed the importance of their role as administrators in advocating for DI implementation and making decisions informed by data. In summary, recent literature indicated the significance of school leaders comprehending their role during the implementation of DI (Chitpin, 2021; Shart et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2023).

Co-Teaching and DI

Co-teaching can be used as an effective model for DI to accommodate the diverse needs of students. Exploring the integration of co-teaching with DI offers valuable insights into co-teaching models their effectiveness in tailoring instruction to diverse needs. In a study examining co-teaching dynamics for gifted students, 16 general education teachers engaged in open-ended surveys to share the advantages of collaborating with co-teachers to address the needs of gifted learners (Moefield, 2020). Insights from the surveys revealed that general education teachers, through collaborative efforts, enhanced their understanding of the unique needs of gifted students and differentiated instructional strategies to cater to them. The surveys also highlighted a shift towards implementing high-level questioning, fostering critical and creative thinking, and gaining effectiveness in pacing lessons and delving deeper to meet the needs of gifted learners. In contrast, eight co-teachers engaged in observations and interviews aimed at identifying obstacles to co-teaching and collaborative practices (Alnasser, 2020). Upon observing these co-teachers in classroom settings, the researcher observed a lack of implementation of DI to address student needs. Co-teachers primarily relied on verbal instructions, whiteboard demonstrations, and repetitive directions. During interviews, these co-teachers expressed their perception of teachers as the primary instructional leaders, with their own role being mostly focused on differentiation. However, they expressed a need for additional PD on DI to effectively fulfill this role (Alnasser, 2020). Based on the current research, grasping the advantages and obstacles of co-teaching

throughout its implementation phase could offer insight into the future landscape of co-teaching within differentiated classrooms.

Assessment and Evaluation

During the execution stage of DI, the pivotal role of assessment and evaluation emerges in guiding teachers to address the varied requirements of students in their classrooms. These assessments include end-of-year evaluations (state testing) and classroom assessments administered throughout the academic year. Examining state testing, 87 teachers were interviewed to assess their classroom practices and their alignment to DI (Kenney et al., 2023). According to these interviews, teachers expressed that the emphasis on high-stakes testing leads them to prioritize students performing below grade level over those who are advanced. They also revealed that they veer away from DI for all students to focus on preparing below-level students for state testing. Teachers feel compelled to adhere to assessment schedules set by administrators who perceive test preparation as a top priority, resulting in an environment where they selectively differentiate instruction for specific student populations rather than for all students (Kenney et al., 2023). Similarly, 15 instructional coaches participated in interviews to provide their perspective on the challenges posed by standardized testing and the support required to enhance student achievement (Saclarides & Kane, 2022). Throughout the interviews, instructional coaches highlighted the continual reminders about state testing throughout the school year, which exerted pressure not only on them but also on teachers. They also mentioned taking on additional roles that hindered their ability to collaborate effectively with teachers, as the coaches were preoccupied with

analyzing test data, leaving little time for instructional support. Furthermore, instructional coaches attempted to introduce higher-level learning activities and conceptual thinking exercises for diverse learners in collaboration with teachers. However, these efforts were often met with resistance, as teachers were primarily focused on teaching to the test (Saclarides & Kane, 2022). Although state testing remains crucial in education, the stress associated with these assessments impedes teachers' ability to implement DI effectively.

State assessments are crucial for guiding instructional practices, yet classroom assessments offer equally valuable benefits for meeting student needs. For instance, 126 educators, directed by administrators to use assessment data for student learning decisions, were surveyed (Wherful et al., 2021). The findings revealed that teachers used classroom assessments for various purposes, including lesson planning, adapting instruction for diverse learners, collaborating with colleagues, and grouping students based on needs. Moreover, teachers used these assessments to gauge understanding, identify areas needing further instruction, set learning goals, and assess individual progress (Wherful et al., 2021). Building on DI implementation, interviews with 79 teachers in a U.S. school district to evaluate DI practices and resource needs were conducted (Johnsen et al., 2020). From the interviews, researchers found that most teachers implemented district curriculum and differentiated assessments. Although many teachers fostered a positive environment and employed diverse tasks, they expressed a need for principal flexibility in implementing DI characteristics, highlighting the necessity for supportive curricula (Johnsen et al., 2020). Integrating classroom assessments into daily instruction allows teachers to personalize learning experiences and

evaluating DI implementation can help identify successful integration and resource needs in school districts.

Content Areas

DI practices vary across educational contexts, particularly in different content areas. Examining how teachers implement DI across various subjects provides valuable insights for educators and leaders, shedding light on implementation strategies and areas for improvement. For instance, 18 teacher candidates participated in a social studies course, using interviews and observations to track the evolution of their DI implementation and teaching practices (Dack & Livy, 2021). Researchers observed that candidates' pedagogical skills developed as they transitioned into functioning as in-service teachers, with a shift from practical to conceptual tools. Interviews revealed that teachers emphasized the importance of DI, although the anticipated DI methods during their training did not materialize. Contextual factors were cited as barriers to DI implementation, particularly in ambitious social studies instruction. Despite challenges, teachers used strategies like tiered learning centers, creating supportive environments, and fostering a growth mindset during implementation (Dack & Livy, 2021). Similarly, Hubbard and Livy (2021) conducted a study to explore the skills and pedagogy necessary for differentiating math instruction. Data were collected through planning session observations at three schools, revealing that while teachers recognized the need to differentiate math instruction, they lacked a shared understanding of effective differentiation practices. A discrepancy was noted between teachers' theoretical understanding of DI for math and their practical implementation. This exploration

underscores the importance of supporting teachers in effectively differentiating instruction for various content areas, as while they may possess knowledge of DI, additional support may be necessary to tailor it effectively to their subject matter.

Technology and DI

In modern education, technology plays a pivotal role. Educators are integrating technology into their classrooms, engaging in virtual learning platforms, and embarking on blended learning approaches. Leveraging each of these elements helps to prioritize DI. As educators integrate technology into their classrooms, it is vital to explore how they use various technologies to cater to the diverse needs of learners. In a United States school district, eight special education teachers participated in interviews and observations to offer insights into implementing DI with technology (Anderson & Putman, 2020). Through observations, researchers observed varying degrees of confidence among teachers in using technology: some were adept and extensively used it, while others were less confident and used it sparingly. During interviews, teachers highlighted the advantages of incorporating technology to tailor instruction. They mentioned that technology enabled them to customize learning experiences based on individual student needs and interests, provide necessary accommodations, facilitate notetaking and access to learning materials through photography, and offer students autonomy in their learning process. Moreover, teachers could assess student comprehension of material and deliver personalized practice activities based on gathered data. Building on the use of technology, another group of researchers conducted a study on the efficacy of Achieve 3000, focusing on its implementation of DI practices for

advanced learners (Haymon & Wilson, 2020). In this study, 120 advanced learners used the program due to their stagnant progress. Analysis of the data revealed a notable increase in student lexile scores following the use of the Achieve 3000 program. This study reinforces the idea that computer-based learning is an effective method for tailoring learning experiences for students.

Virtual and blended learning has emerged as a significant aspect of technological integration in classrooms. Given its widespread adoption, it is crucial to examine how teachers apply differentiation in remote settings. To address this, 92 virtual educators participated in focus group interviews to elucidate their approaches to implementing DI and the instructional strategies employed (Beck & Beasley, 2021). Findings from these discussions revealed that teachers had a basic understanding of DI, with only a few exploring methods to adapt content, processes, or products in the virtual classroom. Additionally, researchers observed minimal use of grouping strategies by teachers, with teachers acknowledging this as an area needing improvement. Furthermore, teachers reported employing DI strategies like those used in face-to-face instruction, using assessments to gauge student comprehension and address individual learning needs (Beck & Beasley, 2021). Expanding to blended learning, 14 educators participated in PD sessions and shared their reflections on implementing blended learning to address student needs (Morgan & Spies, 2020). Through these reflections, researchers discovered the necessity of ongoing support for teachers to deepen their understanding of blended learning. Whereas teachers often integrated blended learning for technological purposes, they didn't consistently align it with meeting student needs. Morgan and Spies (2020)

emphasized the importance of providing PD opportunities focused on blended learning implementation. Additionally in their reflections, teachers shared that they required more support in integrating technology to enhance student learning and in connecting blended learning with diverse learners. The combined findings from studies by Beck and Beasley (2020), and Morgan and Spies (2020) underscore the significance of using technology to cater to student needs. These studies show the importance of better equipping teachers with the necessary support to achieve this goal.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, the literature review for this study addressed 12 topics. The 12 topics for this qualitative study were (1) PD for educators; (2) PLCs; (3) diverse learners; (4) curriculum and DI; (5) preservice teachers and DI; (6) DI implementation; (7) beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of DI; (8) school leadership and DI; (9) co-teaching and DI; (10) assessment and evaluation; (11) content areas; and (12) technology and DI. The research review concentrated on different approaches for implementing DI, methods to aid teachers during implementation, and additional factors influencing effective differentiation of instruction for students.

Throughout the implementation of DI, teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions may shape the process. The literature review revealed that certain educators lacked confidence in DI, harboring negative attitudes towards its implementation due to perceived challenges (Porta et al., 2020; Unal et al., 2022). Conversely, some teachers exhibited enthusiasm for DI implementation but faced difficulties in translating this eagerness into practice (Hersi & Bal, 2021). Teachers have trouble understanding what

DI is and how to use it effectively, leading to differences in practice during implementation. (Benjamin & Panesar-Aguilar, 2020; Dulfer et al., 2021; Porta & Todd, 2022). In practicing DI, teachers employ methods such as group work, mixed ability grouping, student-centered activities, personalized lesson plans, scaffolding, modeling, and graphic organizers to cater to diverse learners (Benjamin & Panesar-Aguilar, 2020; Gibbs & Beamish, 2022; Porta & Todd, 2021). However, challenges emerge during DI implementation, including inadequate training, limited preparation time, scarce resources, student behavior, rigid curriculum, and large class sizes (Benjamin & Panesar-Aguilar, 2020; Gibbs, 2022). When DI is implemented alongside a mandated curriculum, additional obstacles arise, such as overwhelming information, curriculum demands, time constraints, prioritization of standardized testing, inflexibility in curriculum, and difficulties in adapting it (Grecu, 2022; Swanson et al., 2021).

According to current literature, supporting teachers during DI implementation is crucial. Many teachers start their careers by completing teacher preparation programs. During these programs, aspiring teachers often struggle to grasp various forms and methods of DI; in addition that have difficulty bridging the gap between theory and practical application (Herner-Patnode & Lee, 2021; Nepal et al., 2024; Zaier & Maina, 2022). As teachers transition to implementing DI in their classrooms, PD becomes a key focus. Effective PD enhances teacher practice and provides the necessary skills for DI implementation (Cantrell et al., 2022; Kahmann et al., 2022). Participation in PD is essential for addressing the needs of diverse learners, as it influences teaching practices

(Mason et al., 2022; Stairs-Davenport, 2021). Recognizing the significance of PD is vital, as it guides leaders in supporting teachers during the implementation process.

In Chapter 3 of this qualitative study, I describe the rationale behind the methodology, research design, and approach that I employed in this study. I outline the criteria guiding participant selection and describe the methods I used to establish rapport between researcher and participants. Furthermore, I review the procedures for data collection aimed at comprehending teachers' experiences. Finally, I explain the coding choices I made and detail the measures I implemented to uphold accuracy and credibility.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. In this study, I investigated teachers' experiences in Grades 5–8 with implementing DI strategies and their challenges during implementation. I also investigated the support teachers need for better implementation of DI. In this chapter, I outline the research method for the study, detailing the research design along with its rationale, explaining my role as the researcher, and elaborating on the methodology to be used and the ethical procedures to be followed.

Research Design and Rationale

To thoroughly investigate the challenges and support aspects focusing on the implementation of DI, I addressed the subsequent research questions:

1. What are teachers' experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies?
2. What do teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies?

My research approach was grounded within the qualitative paradigm. Generally, qualitative research originates from a distinct paradigmatic perspective, necessitating unique criteria for evaluating research quality and the diverse contributions it can offer (Yadav, 2021). Qualitative research relies on the authentic environment as its primary data source, focusing on genuine, lived experiences and real-life situations as they naturally unfold in everyday circumstances (Muzari et al., 2022). Furthermore, Tümen

Akyildiz (2021) described a qualitative design as a research method that focuses on how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their perceptions within the social context they inhabit. I used a qualitative rather than quantitative paradigm because qualitative research frequently relies on observations, interviews, and existing literature, whereas quantitative approaches involve mathematical analysis, surveys, and practical experiments (Sardana et al., 2023). This design can employ various sampling techniques, but it frequently uses maximum variation sampling to gain comprehensive insight into the described phenomenon. Typically, data are gathered through semistructured interviews or focus groups, although other data sources like documents may also be incorporated (Kahlke, 2014).

I used the basic qualitative approach to gain deeper insight into teachers' strategies to implement DI, explore the obstacles they face, and identify the necessary support. Basic or generic approaches in qualitative research have become quite common, even though few and disparate guidelines for their implementation or evaluation have been proposed. There is no reason to believe that this trend toward generic studies will be reversed; rather, there are several indications that this is a growing trend (Caeli et al, 2003). In applied fields such as education, administration, health, social work, counseling, business, and others, the most prevalent approach to qualitative research is the basic, interpretive study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The rationale for using a basic qualitative approach in the current study is to understand teachers' experiences implementing DI through interviews. This approach enabled me to offer insights into individuals' experiences and the techniques used during implementation. In the present

study, employing a basic qualitative research design offered insights into teachers' encounters with DI and reveal the challenges encountered during its implementation.

Psychological aspects such as subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs or experiences concerning phenomena in the external world defy measurement in the statistical sense, necessitating qualitative methods. Alternative, more specialized approaches (such as ethnography, case study, grounded theory, or phenomenology) may not be suitable for various reasons (Percy et al., 2015). One of these designs is qualitative case studies, which are a thorough depiction and examination of a confined system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design may not be optimal for the study because my aim was to generalize findings to a wide audience rather than focusing on specific cases. Another design to consider is phenomenology which aims to comprehend the fundamental nature and inherent structure of a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design was not ideal for the study due to the focus of lived experiences rather than focusing on the instructional methods and strategies employed in teaching and learning. Lastly, ethnography is a design to consider for study. Ethnography aims to comprehend how individuals interact with others within the cultural or societal contexts they inhabit (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethnography was not ideal for this study because it emphasizes understanding cultural norms, beliefs, and social interactions within a particular group or community. Although educational settings have their cultural contexts, the primary focus of differentiation is on instructional practices and strategies tailored to individual student needs.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I served as the principal tool for collecting and analyzing data in this qualitative study. Given that the objective of this research is comprehension, the human agent, capable of immediate responsiveness and adaptability, appears to be the optimal method for data collection and analysis. Biases and subjectivity may arise; therefore, it is preferable for researchers to clearly articulate their roles and relationships with participants (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In this research, I served as an observer, gathering data on teachers' encounters with DI and identifying the necessary support for enhanced implementation.

Throughout this research study, I had the professional role of an assistant principal. This responsibility entails overseeing teachers and aiding the principal in fulfilling the school's vision. My background includes roles as an early childhood education teacher, content expert, mentor teacher, and team leader. I have accumulated 11 years of teaching experience in early childhood education, spanning from second grade to fifth grade. Additionally, I have 10 years of experience as a team leader and one year as a content expert.

While conducting this type of study, personal and professional relationships with potential participants may be present. This study encompassed teachers of Grades 5–8 in the United States, which means teachers from my current county and neighboring counties may have participated. I have personal relationships with several teachers in those areas, which could create conflicts when conducting the study. To alleviate

potential conflicts, as the researcher, I excluded teachers from my current school from the study.

It is crucial to acknowledge and address potential biases that may arise during this study. My perspective on the study may be influenced by my background as a classroom teacher who has implemented differentiated instructional strategies, as well as my role as a content expert with a strong focus on classroom instruction. Having experience in both roles provides me with a valuable advantage, as I possess pedagogical knowledge gained from implementing DI in the classroom, which is highly relevant to this study. With this knowledge, I can identify key themes from participants' responses and formulate appropriate questions to delve into teachers' experiences.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study adhered to a basic qualitative design approach. I conducted semistructured interviews with eight teachers teaching in Grades 5–8, who are actively integrating differentiated instructional strategies into their classrooms. By interviewing this number of teachers, I gathered varied insights into their experiences with implementation. As the researcher, I developed an interview protocol and ensured its alignment with the study's purpose and research questions. The interview data were analyzed and coded to identify categories and themes within the transcripts of the participants' interviews. In this section, I will outline the procedures for participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment, participation, and data collection.

Participant Selection

For this study, I sought the participation of eight teachers from Grades 5–8 in the United States to provide comprehensive insights into their experiences with implementing DI. This number of teachers allowed data saturation to be reached. Participants were sourced from the Walden University participation pool, and social media platforms.

For this study, I used purposive sampling guided by the following criteria, enabling me to select participants who possess experience with implementing DI in Grades 5–8 and enhancing the likelihood of participants having a shared experience. Participants had to presently be educators in Grades 5–8 within the United States and possess a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience. Participants also had to be actively implementing DI in their classroom settings. This sampling strategy enabled the exploration and acquiring of insights from participants who possess specific experiences with implementing DI.

Instrumentation

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was formulated according to the research questions. At the start of the interview, I inquired about participants' demographic information to gather relevant data. After collecting demographic data and to ensure ample data collection, I incorporated a series of questions aimed at understanding participants' experiences with DI implementation and identifying the support they require to enhance their implementation of DI. During the interview process, challenges faced by teachers during implementation emerged. Employing interviews

afforded participants the opportunity to articulate their experiences, enabling me as the researcher to solicit examples and seek clarification when necessary. Productive interviews pose open-ended questions that prompt substantive and detailed responses, often taking the form of narratives (Butin, 2010). I utilized open-ended questions to deepen my understanding of the phenomenon of the study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Procedures for Recruitment

Participants for this study were sourced through the Walden participant pool and various social media platforms. In all recruitment posts aimed at soliciting participants, I ensured that I included relevant details regarding the study alongside the eligibility criteria for participation. In addition to use of those platforms, I also encouraged already recruited participants to refer others to participate in the study, therefore employing a snowball sampling approach.

Procedures for Participation

Before the selected teachers participated in the study, I provided them with necessary information, via email, detailing the purpose of the study and what they could anticipate by participating in it. This entailed participating in an interview either via Zoom or face-to-face, depending on the participant's location. Additionally, participants could expect follow-up communication after the interview was completed. Participants had the opportunity to ask any questions related to their participation in the study before providing their consent to participate. Once participants agreed to participate in the study,

I proceeded to schedule interviews via email, considering their availability. To prevent any scheduling overlaps, I meticulously recorded all scheduled interviews in a calendar.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom. Zoom is an ideal option for conducting interviews for this study, particularly because participants may be located in different geographical locations. Zoom facilitates online videoconferencing without requiring participants to have an account, simplifying the process. Invitations with live links can be sent to participants for easy access. Screen sharing functionality enables participants to view interview questions during the session. Additionally, the ability to password-protect recordings ensures the security and confidentiality of the data captured during interviews (Gray et al., 2020).

Procedures for Data Collection

The main tool used for the study was semistructured interviews. I gathered data by using the recording function on Zoom for interviews that necessitate remote communication. The initial interview with participants used the time needed for participants to express their experiences with DI. Follow-up interviews were conducted for the purpose of member checking. The interview protocol that I employed incorporated a combination of predetermined questions along with the flexibility to modify or adapt questions, thus adopting a semistructured interview approach. This approach was ideal as it enabled me, as the researcher, to respond to the specific context, the evolving perspective of the respondent, and any fresh insights or ideas pertaining to the topic at hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis Plan

Organizing and analyzing the data was pivotal for the success of the study. To organize the data obtained from the interviews, I created digital files containing scanned interview notes, transcripts, and recordings for each participant. This method of organization greatly facilitated the data analysis process during the study. Data analysis encompasses several crucial steps, including the preparation of data, reading and reflecting on the gathered information, coding and categorizing the data, and finally, developing themes, conceptual models, or theories based on the analyzed data (Ravindran, 2019). Each of these steps played a significant role in deriving meaningful insights and conclusions from the collected data on teachers' experiences with DI.

Member checking is a crucial method in qualitative research, ensuring the accuracy and validity of findings by allowing participants to review and confirm the researcher's interpretations. At the conclusion of the interviews, I used the Zoom transcripts to transcribe the recorded interviews. The transcripts streamlined the process and ensured accurate documentation of the interview content. The transcripts, alongside interview notes, provided a comprehensive understanding of participants' responses and experiences and were compiled into a one- to two-page summary of the findings. I then emailed the summary to participants for review. At this time, participants were asked to participate in a brief second interview to discuss the findings. This ensured that their perspectives are accurately represented and enhanced the credibility of the research findings.

For this research, I employed a thematic analysis approach. This method aims to discover what is similar, different, and connected within the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). With this approach, I was able to extract themes from the data concerning teachers' experiences with implementing DI and the support required for improved implementation. To analyze the data, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. I started by familiarizing myself with the data, which involved reading transcripts and noting initial ideas. Next, I initiated the coding process using NVivo software. NVivo helps researchers organize, review, code, and annotate data efficiently. It offers tools for recording ideas, searching data, and exploring patterns (Azeem & Dozar, 2012). Using NVivo ensures a systematic organization of interview themes, codes, and categories. I then began to identify themes. I carefully reviewed the notes and transcripts from the interviews to uncover valuable insights and key ideas. Next, I examined the themes to ensure they aligned with the coded extracts and the entirety of the dataset. Afterwards, I continued analyzing the data to refine the details of each theme and the overarching narrative it conveyed. This process involved generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Lastly, I created a scholarly report summarizing the analysis. During the research, it was possible for instances of discrepant cases to emerge. Categories may contradict most of the findings or challenge the prevailing assumptions or interpretations. It was important as the researcher, to identify and analyze the cases because they offered valuable insights, exceptions to the rule, or alternative perspectives that enrich the understanding of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Validity hinges on both the quantity and quality of evidence available to support the interpretations researchers aim to draw from the collected data (Fraenkel et al., 2012). To enhance the validity of the instrument, my committee members reviewed the interview protocol and offered feedback on its contents. I integrated the feedback to enhance the effectiveness of the instrument before proceeding with data collection. Also, to enhance validity the use of member checking allowed participants to validate and verify the accuracy of the interpretations and findings. Biases that may arise during the development of interview protocols include the researcher framing questions based on preconceived notions, potentially overlooking alternative perspectives.

Some research procedures employed by researchers establish credibility both within their research activities and in their findings. Researchers depend on four overarching criteria in their pursuit of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Researchers explore each of these aspects and incorporate insights from other scholars who have contributed to the discourse on trustworthiness in qualitative research (Stahl & King, 2021).

Credibility

Numerous methods exist for establishing credibility in research. To support credibility when reporting a qualitative study, the researcher should demonstrate engagement, methods of observation, and audit trails (Cope, 2014). In this study, audit trails were employed to reinforce credibility. I accomplished this by keeping detailed records of the transcripts and data collected organized in a manner that was easy for me

to reference. I also prompted teachers to speak openly and honestly about their experiences, both during the recruitment process and at the start of the interviews. Even if I had a professional relationship with the participants, they were still encouraged not to limit their responses based on this. The honesty of the participants was crucial for establishing credibility.

Transferability

To ensure transferability, I encouraged participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences with implementing DI. Transferability hinges on detailed descriptions that offer a comprehensive portrayal of circumstances, facilitating application to others' situations (Stahl & King, 2021). These descriptions enabled the reader to relate their personal experiences to those presented in the study. They also facilitated the emergence of similarities among participants from different schools.

Dependability

Dependability focuses on the consistency of the study (Janis, 2022). To ensure dependability, I employed strategies such as maintaining audit trails and engaging in peer debriefing. When using audit trails, I meticulously maintained comprehensive records of all research decisions, procedures, and data analyses. I achieved this by thoroughly describing the study's design, its implementation, the process of data gathering, and the evaluation of the entire process. This comprehensive approach ensured that every detail is provided to the reader, enabling the recreation of the study if needed. Furthermore, I used peer debriefing, inviting colleagues and qualitative research experts to review both the

study's processes and findings. This collaborative approach aided in identifying and addressing any potential biases that may arise during the study.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, I employed the processes of member checking and reflexivity. Confirmability involves ensuring that data and interpretations of findings are not products of the researcher's imagination but are clearly derived from the data itself (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I validated the findings with participants via email. I also asked participants if they would participate in a brief follow-up member checking interview. Sharing the findings and engaging in member checking interviews with participants offered them the chance to confirm and verify my interpretations of the data. Reflexivity enabled me, as a researcher, to reflect on my own role, biases, and impact on the research process. I maintained a reflexive journal to record my thoughts, feelings, and insights throughout the research activities, data collection, and analysis. I ensured transparency by describing the insights gained through this process and how my reflexivity influenced my interpretations of the data in the research report.

Ethical Procedures

Prior to commencing recruitment or data collection for the research project, I applied to Walden's Institutional Review Board to guarantee adherence to ethical standards throughout the study. I provided a consent form via email to participants as part of the recruitment process. They were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they had the option to withdraw from the study at any point. Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring that participants were not identifiable or referenced by name in

the study. Recruitment materials truthfully conveyed the nature and objectives of the study, ensuring participants were not misled. If participants opted out of the study, I acknowledged and honored their decision to decline participation without exerting any pressure or coercion. I expressed appreciation for their time and consideration, and I duly documented their refusal. Data collected was stored electronically and physically throughout the study. I used secure, password-protected electronic storage systems to store qualitative data for 5 years. For physical materials such as paper-based field notes or consent forms, I stored them in secure, locked cabinets or rooms to prevent unauthorized access. By doing this, I safeguarded the confidentiality, integrity, and accessibility of their data throughout the research process.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. The research design adopted a basic qualitative approach. As the researcher, I acted as an observer, gathering data on teachers' experiences with the implementation of DI. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria. Participants had to be teachers in Grades 5–8 who implement DI strategies, currently teach in the United States, and have at least 2 years of experience. The primary form of instrumentation was interview protocol. Participants were recruited from the Walden Participant pool and social media platforms. Zoom interviews were conducted for participants at a distance. Follow-up emails and member checking interviews were used to gather participant feedback.

Data analysis employed a thematic approach to identify recurring patterns and themes within the collected data. Strategies were implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings. To ensure the dependability of the findings, an audit trail was maintained, documenting all steps of the research process. Confirmability was achieved through member checks, wherein participants had the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings. Ethical procedures included obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection, obtaining informed consent at the outset of the recruitment process, and ensuring voluntary participation, with participants having the option to withdraw at any time.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. Guided by Tomlinson's theory of DI, I explored teachers' experiences with implementing DI and identified the support they required, addressing the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies?
2. What do teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies?

In Chapter 4, I develop the codes, categories, and themes, and explain the process I follow to progress from codes to categories and ultimately to themes. I address each research question, providing data to support my findings. Additionally, I describe the strategies implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Setting

Via Facebook, the Walden University Participant Pool, and snowball recruitment I invited Grade 5–8 general education teachers who implemented DI to participate in the study. I conducted the interview virtually using the Zoom platform. The sample consisted of eight teachers who implemented DI in their classrooms. I confirmed the use of DI prior to the beginning of each interview. All eight participants were middle grades teachers. Of the eight teachers, two were teaching social studies, four were teaching English language arts, and two were teaching science. Each participant had 5 or more years of teaching

experience teaching all subgroups including students with disabilities, ELLs, and gifted students. I did not collect any additional demographic data.

Data Collection

The goal of qualitative research is to explore and understand phenomena within their natural contexts, capturing the depth, complexity, and richness of human experiences, behaviors, and social interactions. It seeks to provide insights into how people interpret and make sense of the world around them (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019). Data were collected through semistructured interviews. General education teachers instructing Grades 5–8 were suitable participants for this study because their teaching responsibilities involve differentiating instruction for a diverse group of students. A total of eight participants was sufficient to achieve saturation, as no new information emerged from the data provided by the participants. The sample size and data collection methods provided sufficient data to effectively address the research questions.

I used Zoom to record and transcribe the interviews. After transcriptions were completed, I saved them as Word documents. During the interviews, I took notes on the participants' responses and wrote down reflective questions for further consideration. Each participant selected a convenient day and time for their interview, which took place between July 17 and August 9, 2024. Prior to the interviews, I emailed each participant to explain the purpose of the interview, confirm they met the study requirements, and provided information on the expected interview length. All participants provided consent via email before the interviews. I conducted the interviews virtually, with each session lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. I also conducted two follow-up interviews with

two participants lasting approximately 10 to 15 minutes for the purpose of member checking.

All interview audio recordings and transcriptions were securely stored on my computer. The collected data will be retained for 5 years, after which all data will be destroyed. To maintain participant confidentiality, I assigned identifiers such as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and so on. No identifying information about the participants was included in the study.

Data Analysis

After completing the first interview, I immediately began analyzing the data. I regularly reviewed the information, observing the development of themes and patterns. As these patterns emerged, I categorized them to better understand the data. My analysis followed a three-step process: (a) organizing and preparing the data, (b) thematic analysis utilizing NVivo and pattern coding, and (c) identifying and refining emergent themes.

Step 1: Organization and Preparation of Data

In the first step of the data analysis process, I organized and prepared the data. This involved collecting the Zoom audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes taken during each interview, and saving them in a file designated for each participant on my password-protected computer. Each participant was labeled as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and so on. After completing each interview, I reviewed the transcript alongside the audio recording to ensure its accuracy. I then read through the data multiple times and conducted a pre-coding phase by highlighting significant or notable words and

phrases. To further organize the information, I created a summary of each interview in a Word document, categorizing responses by participant and interview question.

Step 2: Thematic Analysis of Data

To initiate the thematic analysis, I used the NVivo software for coding. I compiled a list of codes based on commonalities found in participants' responses, using their own words. Each transcript was reviewed line by line to identify key words or phrases. With NVivo, I organized these significant words and phrases into different nodes based on the assigned code names. I adopted a cyclical approach to coding, consistently reviewing and rereading earlier interview responses after completing each new interview. This process helped reduce the data and identify additional codes.

A total of 52 codes emerged from the coding process, each determined based on individual participants' responses. For instance, the code *student responses to DI* was generated from participants' answers to the question about how students respond to DI. In their answers, Participant 1 mentioned that "Most students respond well. I haven't had any issues. They don't really realize they're receiving differentiated instruction, so they do well." Similarly Participant 2 discussed how students respond to DI stating, "I think students learn more because differentiated instruction helps them. They respond better since it's tailored to their level." Going into more detail about students' response, Participant 5 shared, "I feel that when students see there are multiple ways to learn and present information, it enhances their understanding and boosts their confidence, allowing them to perform better in the course." Another example of how a code emerged

from the data is based on participants' responses to the question about how teachers balance DI with their curriculum. Participant 5 explained,

I try my best to stick to the state standards and the material, but if I see that the students aren't getting it, I go back to the drawing board. I break it down as much as possible while staying within the scope of what the state requires us to teach.

Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "The standards are my starting point, but how I teach them and how I help students think through and understand the material is where I apply differentiation."

In addition to coding, I began building categories by examining patterns to identify similarities, differences, and frequencies. Using a Google spreadsheet, I organized the grouped data into categories. I consolidated similar or overlapping categories and created new ones as needed. Finally, I compared and organized these categories to reveal connections between the data and the research questions. Seven categories emerged from the pattern coding, which I recorded on the spreadsheet. One example of a category that arose was *curriculum and instructional challenges*. This category was formed from several related codes, such as *balancing student needs with curriculum*, *initial challenges with differentiated instruction*, *misconceptions about DI*, *limited instructional time*, *the need for planning and preparation time*, *curriculum stability*, *lack of training in DI*, *limited knowledge of DI*, and *class sizes*.

Step 3: Search for and Identification of Emergent Themes

After completing the coding process, I analyzed the categories to identify relationships within the data, which I then condensed into six themes that addressed the

research questions. These themes highlighted key insights derived from participants' responses regarding their experiences with DI. For instance, Theme 2 stated: Teachers reported that addressing diverse learning needs and ensuring inclusive classrooms requires the use of various instructional strategies and tools. This theme emerged from the categories of *instructional strategies and grouping*, and *diverse learning needs and inclusivity*. The six themes were as follows. Theme 1 reveals that participating teachers recognize the importance of addressing diverse student responses and engagement levels during DI implementation. Theme 2 emphasizes that participating teachers believe that meeting diverse learning needs and fostering inclusive classrooms requires the use of a variety of instructional strategies and tools. Theme 3 indicates that participating teachers employ regular and diverse assessment methods to assess student understanding and guide instructional adjustments. Theme 4 discusses the challenges participating teachers face during the implementation of DI. Theme 5 highlights that participating teachers find ongoing PD valuable for enhancing their instructional strategies related to DI. Finally, Theme 6 shows that participating teachers perceive adequate resources and support as essential to managing workload and delivering effective DI.

Table 1 provides an alignment of the codes with Research Question 1, which focuses on teachers' experiences with DI. Four key themes emerged from the data in relation to the first research question. The first theme centered on student responses and engagement with DI, where teachers reported both positive and negative reactions. The second theme addressed the use of instructional strategies to meet students' diverse needs, with teachers sharing a variety of approaches. The third theme explored

assessment methods used during DI implementation, with teachers discussing different ways of evaluating student learning. Finally, the fourth theme highlighted the challenges teachers encountered throughout the implementation process.

Table 1*Codes, Categories, Themes, and Supporting Quotes Connected to Research Question 1*

Research Question 1: What are experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies?			
Codes	Categories	Themes	Quotes
1. Student responses to DI	1. Student responses and engagement	Theme 1: Participating teachers recognize the importance of addressing diverse student responses and engagement levels during DI implementation	P2: “I think that students learn more because differentiated instruction helps them. So, I think they respond better because it’s geared to their level where they are.”
2. Student’s buy in and behaviors			
3. Student engagement and interests			
4. Students’ preconceived notion about their abilities			
5. Students unaware of DI			
6. Decreased student motivation			
7. Student conferencing			
			P8: “I personally feel like students are more open to differentiation if it’s something that comes along more organically, or that process is set up very early in the school year”
			P4: “Through my experience, most students don’t know that I’m differentiating for them. I try to do that so that no one feels singled out, called out, or made to feel different.”
			P6: “I conference with all of my students, so the groups get something different.”
8. Grouping strategies	2. Instructional strategies and grouping	Theme 2: Participating teachers reported that meeting diverse learning needs and ensuring inclusive classrooms, requires the use of varied instructional strategies and tools	P1: “I put them in groups, and because I place them in different level groups some of them are lower and some of them are higher.”
9. Group work and pair work			
10. Small group instruction.	3. Diverse learning needs and inclusivity		P4: “I try to partner them where there’s a variety of things going on that scaffold learning, but at the same time pushing those that need to be pushed and giving them roles within a group that might challenge them a little bit further.”
11. Mini lessons and scaffolding instruction			
12. Choice boards			
13. Implementation strategies			
14. Adjustments based on students’ needs			
15. Tools like sentence starters and graphic organizers			
16. Extended time and breaking down concepts, audio			P5: “I’ve been big on ability grouping and doing centers. I

 Research Question 1: What are experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies?

Codes	Categories	Themes	Quotes
recordings, guided notes 17. Use of technology 18. SQR3 19. Choice reading 20. English language learners 21. Inclusive classrooms 22. Gifted students			have students grouped based off their ability. So, I had a higher-level group of students who were able to do more rigorous center work on their own. I had a lower-level group of students with disabilities where I knew they would need more help and more one-on-one instruction”
			P3: “I always try to find the material in different languages if I can. With AI today it’s opened a whole world for that having things translated for something as simple as subtitles when you’re showing a video.”
			P7: “I always had 3 collab classes, so I always had 3 classes that were inclusive with special education kids and general ed kids, so I’m always differentiating my instruction.”
			P4: “Gifted students who are reading already at 11 th and 12 th grade reading levels can still use those differentiated strategies to make sure they understand the purpose and they can read with the intention of pulling out the information they need.”
23. Common formative assessments 24. Ticket out the door 25. Daily and weekly assessments 26. Assessment methods 27. Pop quizzes 28. Kahoot quizzes 29. Bell ringers for reteaching	4. Assessment methods	Theme 3: Participating teachers reported that to gauge student understanding and guide instructional adjustments, they use regular and diverse assessment methods.	P8: “There is a common formative assessment each week that every teacher uses so regardless of whether you have a subgroup, a gifted subgroup, or a ELL subgroup, they’re all taking the same formative assessment.” P2: “I use the exit tickets daily for them, which allows me to

Research Question 1: What are experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies?			
Codes	Categories	Themes	Quotes
30. Polls, quizzes, and warmups 31. Use of assessments to gauge understanding 32. Data tracking			<p>be able to see what they know after I'm done teaching it so that I can make some little changes for the next day."</p> <p>P5: "I feel like the performance tasks really give the students a more hands on approach to demonstrate what they've learned throughout the lesson."</p> <p>P2: "I try to do my daily warm up as a review of what was taught the day before"</p>
33. Balancing student needs with curriculum 34. Initial challenges with DI 35. Misconceptions about DI 36. Limited instructional time 37. Need for planning/preparation time 38. Curriculum stability 39. Lack of training in DI 40. Lack of knowledge of DI 41. Class sizes	5. Curriculum and instructional challenges	Theme 4: Participating teachers experience challenges during DI implementation.	<p>P4: "The standards are my starting point, then how I'm going to teach them, and how I'm going to get students to think it through and understand it. That's where I differentiate."</p> <p>P1: "It's not as hard as I thought it would be when I first started. I honestly thought, differentiation was only for the students with the IEPs and not necessarily every student, and how to make every student learn this standard."</p> <p>P6: "You have that 30 to 35 min after you've done the openers and closings, and all that stuff is really limited because the classes are shorter classes. By the time you get started, it's like time gone."</p> <p>P2: "I think teachers would probably be more willing to do it if they were given more time to prepare because it's a lot."</p>

Table 2 provides an alignment of the codes with Research Question 2, which focuses on support needed for better implementation. Two key themes emerged in relation to the second research question. The first theme focuses on teachers receiving PD to improve their use of DI, with teachers discussing both the need for PD and their experiences with it. The second theme centers on teacher workload and the resources required for effective DI implementation.

Table 2*Codes, Categories, Themes, and Supporting Quotes Connected to Research Question 2*

Research Question 2: What do teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies?			
Codes	Categories	Themes	Quotes
42. Instructional coaches 43. Helpful PD experiences 44. Professional Development 45. Learning from PD sessions 46. Beneficial workshops 47. College professors leading PD 48. More understanding in teacher training programs.	6. Professional development and support	Theme 5: Participating teachers reported that continuous professional development is beneficial to enhance their instructional strategies for DI.	P4: “The time with our instructional coach was beneficial. We filled out a survey and we worked almost as a collaborative plc, to lesson plan using that strategy. It was better because we were able to use what we learned instead of just being given more.” P3: “I know where my strengths are, and I know where my weaknesses are, and so I am going to go hunt for the PDs that are applicable to me and my situation.” P4: “Going to conferences where you get to network with other professionals and you get to see different strategies and activities that are being completed, prepared, and planned by other professionals in your same content and subject area, and thinking about how to integrate things.”
49. Need for resources 50. Additional support time for students 51. Need for Co-teachers 52. Collaborative planning time	7. Teacher workload and resources	Theme 6: Participating teachers perceived that to manage workload and provide effective differentiated instruction, adequate resources and support are necessary	P2: “A lot of teachers don’t want to do it, because now I must go create something for those groups or for this student. It makes it a lot harder. So that’s challenging within itself is implementing it because you must go and create so many other things to make sure that

Research Question 2: What do teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies?			
Codes	Categories	Themes	Quotes
			your student is successful.”
			P7: “I provide extra time for them outside of the classroom for extra learning time. I will compose a list of students that I know might not have grasped the concept or need a little bit more help on the concept, and I’ll bring them to my class during that time.”
			P4: “They need a co-teacher. So, they need that specialized EI teacher or the specialized special education teacher, or the specialized gifted teacher because we cannot be Jacks of all trades. It truly seems like we could be, and a lot of the times we force ourselves to be.”
			P4: “I think teachers can benefit from working with each other. They need time for that collaborative planning to determine what are we going to teach but also how we’re going to teach it.”

Results

In this basic qualitative study, I explored two research questions. This section presents the results of the study, guided by Tomlinson's (2008) theory of DI. I provide evidence to support each conclusion including summaries of participant responses and direct quotes from participants.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 for the study was: What are teachers' experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies? I identified four themes related to teachers' experiences with DI. The first theme was that teachers recognize the importance of addressing diverse student responses and engagement levels during DI implementation. The second theme was that teachers reported the need for varied instructional strategies and tools to meet diverse learning needs and ensure inclusive classrooms. The third theme was that teachers use regular and diverse assessment methods to gauge student understanding and guide instructional adjustments. The fourth theme was that teachers experience challenges during the implementation of DI.

Theme 1: Teachers Recognize the Importance of Addressing Diverse Student Responses and Engagement Levels During DI Implementation

The first theme that emerged from this study was that participating teachers recognize the significance of addressing diverse student responses and engagement levels during the implementation of DI. This theme was derived from teachers' reports of the different ways students respond to and engage with DI strategies. All participants were aware of how students interact with DI, including their responses to DI, levels of student

buy-in, student awareness of DI, motivation, participation in student conferencing, and engagement with their interests. Patterns emerged as each participant shared their experiences with how students respond to DI, whether those responses were positive or negative. The data indicated that each participant observed a range of ways in which students respond to DI. Most participants' responses were similar in noting that students generally respond well to DI, often without being aware that differentiation is occurring.

Participants 1, 2, and 5 shared similar experiences, noting that students generally respond positively to DI. Participant 1 stated, "Most of them respond well; I haven't had any issues. They really don't realize they're receiving differentiated instruction, so they do well." Similarly, Participant 2 responded, "I think students learn more because differentiated instruction helps them. So, I believe they respond better since it's tailored to their level." In the same vein, Participant 5 shared, "I feel like once students see that there's more than one way to learn or present information, it improves their understanding and boosts their confidence, helping them perform better in the course."

Participants also discussed how students are open to DI, largely because they are unaware that the instruction is being tailored to their needs. They went on to describe the strategies they implement to ensure that students do not realize differentiation is occurring in the classroom. Participant 3 explained, "If you approach it through choices and small groups in ways that don't make anyone stand out, they actually really appreciate it." Similarly, Participant 4 shared, "In my experience, most students don't know that I'm differentiating for them. I try to ensure that no one feels singled out, called out, or made to feel different."

However, three participants reported different experiences regarding how students respond to DI. When describing their experiences with how students respond to DI, these participants reported that students had negative reactions. Participant 2 shared the experience of student buy-in:

Most of the challenge is getting the kids to buy in. Those kids who are lower level are so used to acting out because they can't read. You'll find yourself redirecting and correcting those behaviors, and you don't get much done.

Similarly, Participant 6 shared a negative experience related to decreased student motivation:

Student motivation is a challenge because I've seen it decline significantly over the last couple of years. You spend a lot of time just trying to encourage and motivate them to even try or to get anything done. I explain and do all the things, but when it's time for them to work, getting them to even want to attempt something is a struggle.

Similarly, Participant 4 expressed concern about students' lack of interest, "They're not interested in what you're interested in, and they don't think that what you consider important is actually important to them."

Although teachers reported both positive and negative student responses to DI, all agreed that student reactions significantly influence how DI is implemented in their classrooms. Their reflections on how students respond to DI provided valuable insight into their overall experiences with DI, particularly in terms of student engagement and participation.

Theme 2: Teachers Reported That Meeting Diverse Learning Needs and Ensuring Inclusive Classrooms Requires the Use of Varied Instructional Strategies and Tools

The participating teachers in my study shared experiences of using a variety of instructional tools to address the diverse needs of their students, highlighting the strategies they employ for DI. The instructional tools enabled the teachers to ensure that the varied needs of their students were effectively met within their content areas. Teachers shared that they use instructional tools such as small group instruction, grouping strategies, partner work, graphic organizers, and recordings in their classrooms, highlighting the benefits these tools bring to differentiate for various student populations. Patterns emerged as participants shared the strategies they use to implement DI in their classrooms. The data revealed that teachers use a variety of approaches to foster an inclusive classroom environment for all students.

Out of the eight participants, five emphasized that small group instruction was essential to their DI practices. Participant 2 spoke about small group instruction:

Some students are a little bit higher and some of them are a little bit lower, but I can group them to where everybody benefits. I take my small group help make sure they know the concept and my other groups are working.

Similarly, Participants 3 and 4 shared that students in their small groups get “something different than I’ve already done to teach and get them to a higher level of comprehension” and that “small group is for reteaching and maybe doing some acceleration.” In addition, Participant 5 described the structure of small groups in the classroom, explaining that there is “One teacher guided station where I can check in on

the students and go through information with them. Some of the other stations are more independent.”

Some participating teachers found greater benefit in grouping students to work together on various tasks rather than pulling small groups. For example, Participant 1 explained how group work is structured in the classroom:

I will go and see which students did the best on CFAs, and which students did the worst. The students that are higher-level students and my lowest students will be grouped together. They will then work on either a packet or play a Jeopardy game in those groups and feed off each other to get the information needed.

Participant 4 went more into detail of the benefits of students participating in group work rather than small groups:

Group work and pair work is wonderful to help boost student confidence. Give them a little bit of a support system. They can help each other if you partner them just right. You have someone a little bit more fluent and able to guide. While they're doing that pair work or group work, they have a collaboration sheet.

Although small groups and group work are distinct strategies, both were considered highly beneficial by the participating teachers for supporting student learning and fostering collaboration in the classroom.

Participants also described more strategies that they found beneficial for differentiating instruction in their classrooms. For instance, Participant 2 mentioned, “I have to have lower students do different things versus my students who are on the average or above average.” Similarly, Participant 6 spoke to various ways to reach

students by “providing them with sentence starters, outlines, and graphic organizers as things to just kind of help them get going.” Alternatively, Participant 7 focused on scaffolding information, explaining that “breaking down the concepts to even more simpler terms, explaining words within instructions and taking time, showing examples for the assignment.” In the same manner, Participant 8 discussed breaking down concepts, clarifying that breaking up the text, pausing for discussions, and taking notes together were beneficial for students mastering the content at their level.

Participants also discussed how these various strategies support an inclusive classroom for different subgroups of students. Participants 5 and 7 discussed the importance of cultivating an inclusive classroom for students with disabilities. Participant 5 went on to share, “Seeing that I have students with disabilities on top of regular students in the classroom. I have found that DI helps.” Similarly Participant 7 explained, “I always had three collab classes, so I always had three classes that were inclusive with special Ed kids and General Ed. So, I’m always differentiating my instructions.” Differing from this subgroup, Participant 3 communicated her experience with ELLs stating, “I always try to find the material in different languages if I can. With AI today it’s opened a whole other world for that having things something as simple as subtitles when you’re showing a video.” Another subgroup that emerged from the data was the mention of gifted students. Participant 4 shared experiences with gifted students: “Gifted students who are reading already at 11th and 12th grade reading levels can use those strategies to make sure they understand the purpose so that they can read with the intention of pulling out the information they need.” In summary, participating teachers

emphasized the importance of using DI to meet the diverse needs of various student subgroups. By tailoring their strategies—whether through small group instruction, group work, or other methods—teachers ensured that all students, regardless of ability level, received the support they needed to succeed in an inclusive learning environment.

Theme 3: Teachers Reported That to Gauge Student Understanding and Guide Instructional Adjustments, They Use Regular and Diverse Assessment Methods

The third theme that emerged from the data highlights how participating teachers assess students understanding through a variety of methods and then use those assessments to adjust and enhance student learning. This theme emerged from teachers' responses to the question of how they assess differentiation in their classrooms. All participants emphasized the importance of assessing students and how the data gathered from these assessments directly impacts their approach to differentiation. Whereas all participants discussed assessing students, a variety of methods for doing so emerged in their responses. Participants 1 and 8 discussed the use of common formative assessments (CFAs). Both participants discussed the frequency of using CFAs, noting that students complete them on a weekly basis. Participant 8 provided more detailed insights into how CFAs are used widely across different teaching teams to ensure consistency stating, "On the sixth grade hall there is a CFA for every single teacher each week that every teacher uses so regardless of whether you have, a gifted subgroup or ELL subgroup, they're accessing the same formative." These assessments ensured that all students are assessed uniformly, regardless of their specific subgroup.

Participating teachers also incorporated standardized tests like MAP assessments multiple times a year to gauge student understanding. As Participant 6 noted, “We do MAP [measures of academic progress] assessments at the beginning of well, three times a year. So, you always have students that are like across the spectrum as far as like being on grade level.” Additionally, Participant 8 disclosed that students take a standardized end of grade test annually. These tests provided a broader view of student achievement but were supplemented with more frequent assessments to measure day-to-day learning.

These day-to-day assessments differed among participating teachers. One day-to-day assessment used were exit tickets. Exit tickets were described as a frequently used informal method to assess student comprehension at the end of lessons. Participant 1 explained, “At the end of the class period, we will do a ticket out the door. . . . Based off the answers of that, we will go back over a different way to differentiate that instruction.” Likewise, Participant 2 described using them “on a daily basis for me to be able to see what they know after I’m done teaching it so that I can make some little changes for the next day.” In the same manner Participants 5 and 6 shared that exit tickets were used in the classroom when, “You give them a question at the end.” This method allowed for quick adjustments to instruction based on immediate feedback.

On the other hand, participating teachers used various assessment methods that took place during the class period. In contrast to exit tickets, participants used daily assessments such as pop quizzes, Kahoot, bell ringers, and polls during class to gauge student understanding. Participant 6 disclosed, “Formative assessments like a pop quiz . . . I use that. But it’s not really like a main way to assess.” Tools like Kahoot also provided

a quick, engaging way to assess student learning, with Participant 6 saying, “I’ve made like five questions with Kahoot” in response to various methods of assessment. Bell ringers offered another means to revisit previous material or introduce new content. As Participant 2 explained, “I try to do my daily warm-up as a review of what was taught the day before.” Polls and quick quizzes also played a role, allowing teachers to assess student comprehension in real time. Participant 7 shared, “I run polls a lot of times through Curry Pod or Padlet . . . but then I can go back and assess the situation.” On the other hand, Participant 3 used frequent, informal check-ins to gauge understanding during lessons stating “I do a lot of frequent check-ins. Sometimes I just pause and say, ‘Okay, questions, comments, thumbs up, thumbs down.’” Each of these methods provided participating teachers with a quick check of students’ understanding and informed them on how to adjust instruction to better meet students’ needs.

Theme 4: Teachers Experience Challenges During DI Implementation

The fourth theme that emerged from the data focuses on the challenges teachers face when implementing DI. This theme arose from participants’ responses to questions about the difficulties in this process, with all teachers sharing the various challenges they have encountered during the implementation of DI. Whereas some participants shared similar challenges, others experienced different obstacles unique to their situations.

A common challenge that nearly all participating teachers highlighted was finding a balance between the required curriculum and the diverse needs of their students. Based on participating teachers’ responses, teachers ensured that instruction remained aligned

with standards while adapting lessons to meet individual students' needs. As Participant 1 explained,

I make sure that each student is taught on their level, and I stay within my standards . . . even if I need to give some of them lessons where they just fill in the blank . . . while still teaching the same standard.

Participant 5 added,

I try my best to stick to the state standards . . . but if I know that . . . these students just aren't getting it, it's just not working, I'd go back to the drawing board . . . while staying in the realm of what the state wants us to teach.

Similarly, Participant 2 shared, "The seventh grade curriculum that's approved by my school board, I teach those materials. However, I must try to differentiate because I have some students who are lower level." Although most participating teachers focused on trying to implement the curriculum while meeting students' needs, Participant 7 offered a different perspective. Participant 7 addressed the balance between curriculum and student needs: "I'm on that side of the fence. I rather students master the concepts that we're going over versus just flying through some stuff, just to say we made it to the end."

Participating teachers reported a dual challenge: balancing the curriculum with student needs while avoiding moving too quickly through the material, which can hinder students' mastery. They noted that this balancing act between differentiation and curriculum requirements is particularly complex given the diverse range of student abilities.

Another challenge faced by participating teachers centered around the initial difficulties with implementing DI and the misconceptions they held about DI at the outset. One participating teacher initially struggled with differentiation. Participant 1 indicated, “When I first started out, I kind of had an issue with differentiation.” This participant went on to acknowledge that early misconceptions made DI seem more daunting: “I honestly thought differentiation was only for the students with the IEPs [individual education program] . . . and not necessarily every student.” As Participant 1 continued to implement DI, there was a shift in how DI was implemented, the teacher stated, “It’s not as hard as I thought it would be when I first started.” Similarly Participant 8 shared a shift in understanding:

My perspective was that the special education teacher is making a different version of this assignment, which is differentiated. And basically, it was that the content was manipulated so that it was presented in a more accessible way, or that the content needed to be leveled down for the students to access. Now I feel like the shift has been that differentiation is a strategy that could apply to each student in a different way.

The shift from seeing DI as simplifying content for certain students to understanding it as a broader strategy was key, though it took time for participants to grasp fully.

Another challenge discussed was the issue of time for differentiation. Participating teachers expressed concerns about both the limited instructional time available and the need for additional planning time to effectively prepare for differentiation. Instructional time constraints were a persistent challenge faced by one

participating teacher. Participant 6 explained, “Instruction time that you do have—that 30, 35 minutes after you’ve done the openers, closers, and all that stuff—is really limited . . . by the time you get started, it’s like, time’s gone.” The pressure to manage limited time while covering all the required content made differentiation even more difficult to implement effectively. On the other hand, the time required for planning was another significant obstacle for participants. Participant 4 explained “Time is a big issue—pre-planning that goes into my lessons and my presentation of how I’m going to teach it.” Similarly, participating teachers often felt that they lacked sufficient time to develop differentiated lessons, as Participant 2 noted, “I think teachers would probably be more willing to do it if they were given more time to prepare, because it’s a lot.”

Several participants identified the lack of necessary training as a challenge in their process of implementing DI. Participating teachers expressed a need for more training in DI practices. As Participant 3 explained, “There needs to be teacher training . . . whether that’s in the licensing or credentialing programs . . . or in your PDs.” Similarly, Participant 5 went into more detail:

I know teachers dread it, but training is always useful. I know we hate it. We hate sitting through it, but I do feel that if we have a better overview of what is expected, as far as differentiating instruction, then we’ll know what resources to ask for.

Likewise, Participant 6 reflected on the lack of training in the school: “We never really got that training. So, we were kind of left to figure it out on our own, which I feel like somewhat does an injustice.” The participating teachers perceived that without sufficient

training, teachers are left to rely on their own knowledge, which can limit the effectiveness of DI.

Other participants identified large class sizes as a significant challenge they faced when attempting to implement DI. Participating teachers shared how the larger class sizes impede DI. Participant 3 disclosed: “Class size is a massive obstacle for DI, because when you put 30 something kids in a room, of course, they can’t focus.” Participating teachers also expressed the need for smaller class sizes to manage DI effectively. For example, Participant 4 suggested, “I think you need smaller class sizes or smaller group sizes. So, if you have 30 students in a class and you have 2 teachers, then you can do tandem teaching.” Conversely, Participant 5 explained how the number of students impacts the learning experience in the classroom:

Trying to figure out how I can cover everything to where this one kid isn’t left out because the learning needs are all over the place, you have some that are extremely high. They’re picking up on it. They’re good. You have some that are I think I got it. Then you have some that are just way low so trying to incorporate that out of a size of maybe 20, I can only do so much.

Based on teacher responses, managing individual student needs in large classes becomes increasingly challenging to meet the needs of students.

Research Question 2

The second research question for the study was: What do teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies? I identified two themes related to the support teachers’ need. The first theme was that continuous PD,

including beneficial workshops and coaching, is vital for participating teachers to enhance their instructional strategies for DI and stay updated with best implementation practices. The second theme was that to manage participating teacher workload and provide effective DI, adequate resources, collaborative planning time, and support structures are necessary.

Theme 5: Teachers Reported That Continuous PD is Beneficial to Enhance Their Instructional Strategies for DI

Theme 5 highlighted the participating teachers' experiences with PD and its benefits in supporting the implementation of DI. This theme arose from teachers' responses regarding whether they had received any PD to enhance their DI implementation process. All participants recognized the value of PD and its benefits for effectively implementing DI. Although some participants shared similar experiences with PD, others had differing experiences.

PD experienced among participating teachers revealed a range of positive impacts, especially when instructional coaches were involved. Out of the eight participants, half of the teachers consistently emphasized the benefits of having instructional coaches to support the implementation of DI. For instance, Participant 1 emphasized, "An instructional coach coming in and helping that teacher to learn how to differentiate between lessons . . . would be something that would be needed." Similarly, Participant 3 praised the personalized approach of an instructional coach: "She was so great about saying to us, 'Where are you struggling? How can I support you?'" In the same manner, Participant 7 praised the support received from an instructional coach: "I

love the fact that I can call on him. If I have any question about anything, he responds quick, or he'll just show up at your door offering opinions, resources, or strategies, and all that kind of stuff." Participating teachers also found it beneficial when coaches adapted PD to their specific needs, ensuring that the training was not just theoretical but directly applicable to their classroom challenges. Participant 3 noted:

The ones that I get to choose are helpful and the reason for that is, I know where my strengths are, and I know where my weaknesses are, and so I am going to go hunt for the PDs that are applicable to me and my situation.

A collaborative approach to PD was also valued, as Participant 4 recalled, "We actually worked almost as a collaborative PLC... It was better because we were able to actually use what we learned."

Other participants shared their varied experiences and insights gained from PD sessions or other learning opportunities. Two participating teachers mentioned specific strategies and tools that were transformative in their practice from a school-directed PD. Participant 2 highlighted the impact of learning Kagan strategies: "That was really good . . . It helped me tremendously on being able to set it up because . . . I used to feel like I had to guide my kids through everything." Similarly, Participant 3 expressed enthusiasm for Ed Puzzle: "They focus on differentiation, allowing the teachers to really hone in on where they are." On the other hand, one participant found PD workshops and conferences to be invaluable for networking and exchanging ideas. Participant 4 shared, "Going to conferences where you get to network with other professionals . . . and see different strategies and activities . . . was really helpful." The opportunities allowed

participating teachers to broaden their perspectives by learning from peers in similar content areas. In one instance, external experts, such as college professors, led PD sessions that were especially insightful. Participant 8 recounted a professor: “[He] would come in and show us different pieces of text . . . based on common issues that come up in IEPs,” which provided a deeper understanding of the instructional nuances required for special education students.

Theme 6: Teachers Perceived That to Manage Workload and Provide Effective DI, Adequate Resources and Support Are Necessary

Theme 6 focused on the importance of participating teachers having adequate resources and support to effectively implement DI. This theme emerged from teachers’ responses when asked about the types of support they needed to improve their implementation of DI. Most of the participating teachers discussed the additional support and resources they needed to improve the implementation of DI.

Participating teachers mentioned the significant amount of time and effort required to create materials for DI. Participant 2 explained:

A lot of teachers don’t want to do it because now I have to go create something for those groups or for this student . . . You have to go and create so many other things to make sure that your student is successful.

This time and effort led to the demand for more centralized resources, with Participant 7 suggesting, “It would be lovely if there was some type of spreadsheet . . . in one place . . . I’ve been making my own list since I realized it would be nice if I could have this all in

one place.” Teachers expressed the need for easily accessible, organized materials to streamline the DI process.

In reviewing the data, participating teachers highlighted the need for extra support time for both students and teachers. One participant noted that providing extra instructional time outside of regular class hours was essential for student success. Participant 7 shared, “I will compose a list of students that I know might not have grasped the concept . . . and I’ll bring them to my class during that time.” This additional time allowed students who struggled with certain concepts to receive the support they needed in a more focused setting. On the other hand, a common topic among three participants was the need for additional staff in the classroom to manage the demands of DI to support teachers. Participating teachers expressed that having more adults in the classroom can significantly improve instructional quality. For example, Participant 3 emphasized, “An extra pair of hands and extra pair of eyes is helpful.” Co-teachers, particularly those with specialized expertise, were seen as crucial for supporting specific groups of students, such as ELLs or special education students. As Participant 4 noted, “They need that specialized ELL teacher or the specialized special education teacher . . . because we cannot be jacks of all trade.” Similarly, Participant 8 noted, “Having a special education coordinator or a case manager who’s really familiar with the student makes a huge difference, because so many of the strategies for differentiation depend on the student and the case that’s in front of you.” The presence of co-teachers or aides allowed for more effective differentiation and targeted instruction.

In addition to support time for students and teachers, participating teachers emphasized that collaborative planning time was crucial for the successful implementation of DI. Two participants underscored the importance of collaborative planning to ensure successful DI implementation. Participant 4 shared, “Teachers can benefit from working with each other . . . time for that collaborative planning to determine . . . how we’re going to teach it.” Collaboration allowed participating teachers to share ideas, plan intentionally, and create strategies that align with both curriculum standards and students’ needs. Participant 8 further stressed the importance of meetings between grade levels and special education staff: “Every district should have . . . a meeting in which the special ed caseworkers from the former grade . . . get to meet together and speak about each student.” These meetings allowed for a smoother transition and better support for students with IEPs.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, establishing evidence of trustworthiness is crucial to ensure reliability and validity of findings. This study implemented several strategies, including member checking, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with participants to allow them to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations of their responses. Dependability was ensured through thorough and systematic documentation of the research procedures, allowing for the possibility of replication by other researchers. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context and participants’ experiences, enabling others to determine if the findings could be applicable

to similar settings. Confirmability was achieved through reflexivity and maintaining an audit trail, which provided transparency in the research process and minimized bias in data interpretation. These strategies collectively established the trustworthiness of the study's findings.

One way that I ensured the accuracy and validity of the data interpretations and analysis, was using member checking. This approach allowed participants to validate and verify the accuracy of the interpretations and findings. I prepared a summary of the findings and sent it to all participants via email. In the email, participants were invited to provide feedback either by replying directly or by attending a Zoom interview. One participant responded with positive feedback, noting that the findings effectively captured their experiences and observations while implementing DI. Out of the original eight participants, I selected two for follow-up interviews as part of the member checking process. During these follow-up sessions, I shared an overview of the collected data, presented the six identified themes, and discussed the resulting recommendations. These interviews were conducted via Zoom, offering the participants an opportunity to review and provide feedback on the findings. I used Zoom's recording feature to capture these discussions and ensured that I accurately transcribed the conversations for further reflection and analysis. This step was crucial in enhancing the credibility of the study and ensuring that participants' voices were faithfully represented in the final analysis. Both participants agreed with the study's findings. One participant expressed feeling enlightened upon realizing that others shared similar experiences and perspectives. The

other participant went a step further, discussing how the findings also impact co-teachers, not just general education teachers.

To support the potential transferability of the findings, I included thorough and detailed descriptions of the data, enabling its application to other contexts. I interpreted the data by identifying and explaining the patterns and variations that emerged. To substantiate my interpretations, I provided direct quotes from participants' responses as evidence. The precise and comprehensive descriptions of the data may help readers apply the findings to different settings, potentially offering valuable insights for future studies.

To ensure dependability throughout the study, I carefully selected methods to address the research questions and conducted multiple reviews of the data and findings. These reviews began immediately after the completion of the first interview and continued consistently throughout the entire process of data collection and analysis. This ongoing review process helped maintain the rigor and reliability of the study.

Confirmability was ensured by using data directly from participants' transcriptions to support the interpretations. The Zoom software was used to transcribe the interviews, and I verified their accuracy by comparing the transcriptions to the Zoom audio recordings. After confirming the accuracy, I transferred the transcriptions into a Google Sheet, organizing them by codes to easily extract direct participant quotes. To remain mindful of any potential bias I might have introduced during the research process, I maintained a self-reflection journal, where I documented my thoughts, questions, and insights throughout the study.

Summary

In this basic qualitative study, I explored the challenges faced by teachers in Grades 5–8 when implementing DI strategies, as well as the support required to enhance their effectiveness. To address the research questions, I conducted interviews with eight teachers who applied DI in their general education classrooms. I analyzed the participants' responses to explore the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies?
2. What do teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies?

As I conducted the interviews and analyzed the data, seven categories emerged which were organized into six themes. Four themes related to Research Question 1 are as follows:

1. Teachers recognize the importance of addressing diverse student responses and engagement levels during the implementation of DI.
2. Teachers emphasized that meeting diverse learning needs and fostering inclusive classrooms requires the use of a range of instructional strategies and tools.
3. Teachers indicated that to assess student understanding and guide instructional adjustments, they employ regular and diverse assessment methods.
4. Teachers encounter challenges during the implementation of DI.

The two themes related to Research Question 2 are as follows:

5. Teachers reported that ongoing PD is valuable for enhancing their instructional strategies for DI.
6. Teachers perceived that adequate resources and support are essential to manage workload and deliver effective DI.

The first research question focused on examining the experiences of general education teachers in implementing differentiated instructional strategies, which were closely tied to four of the six themes that emerged from the data analysis. Participants' responses provided insight into various aspects of their experiences, including how students engage with and respond to DI techniques, the specific instructional tools and resources teachers used to facilitate DI, and the assessment methods they employed to gauge student understanding and progress. Additionally, their responses shed light on the challenges and obstacles general education teachers encountered during the implementation process, offering a comprehensive view of their efforts to integrate DI strategies effectively within their classrooms. These experiences, collectively, illustrate both the successes and difficulties faced by educators in fostering a more tailored learning environment for their students.

The second research question focused on the support that general education teachers in Grades 5–8 require to successfully implement DI, aligning with two of the six themes identified from the data. The evidence revealed that teachers recognized the importance of having adequate support and were able to articulate the specific types of assistance they needed. Participants' responses highlighted the necessity of ongoing PD

as a key support, alongside various instructional resources that would enable the effective implementation of DI strategies.

In Chapter 5, I discuss my findings in relation to the literature review and address the study's limitations. Additionally, I offer recommendations for future research, which are based on the strengths of this study. Finally, I outline the potential impact of the study on positive social change and provide recommendations for implementing meaningful change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' challenges in Grades 5–8 when using DI strategies and what support is needed to use these strategies better. I employed a basic qualitative approach to explore participants' experiences with implementing DI. Qualitative research seeks to understand individuals within their natural environments, reflect on the meanings they derive from their experiences, and provide insights into their perceptions and beliefs (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This study was conducted to examine how teachers implement DI in their classrooms and the challenges they encounter. Understanding these barriers allows school leaders to take supportive steps to assist teachers in this process (see Dack, 2018).

Data were collected through semistructured interviews with eight participants to address two research questions. The analysis resulted in six themes. Theme 1 reveals that teachers recognize the need to address diverse student responses and engagement levels during DI implementation. Theme 2 highlights that teachers believe meeting varied learning needs and fostering inclusivity require a range of instructional strategies and tools. Theme 3 indicates that teachers use regular and varied assessments to gauge student understanding and guide instruction. Theme 4 discusses the challenges teachers encounter in implementing DI. Theme 5 emphasizes the value of ongoing PD for enhancing DI strategies. Lastly, Theme 6 underscores the importance of sufficient resources and support for managing workload and delivering effective DI. The data collected in this study contribute to existing literature by detailing the experiences of teachers in Grades 5–8, a perspective not extensively covered in the review of literature.

Participating teachers reported their use of DI in the classroom, sharing strategies involved in its implementation. These strategies included small group instruction, partner work, breaking down materials, and focusing on meeting students at their individual levels. The data also highlighted challenges faced during implementation, such as large class sizes, insufficient resources, lack of training, and a need for additional classroom support. Lastly, participants discussed the impact of PD sessions, noting both the helpful sessions they have experienced and the need for more targeted PD to ensure successful DI implementation.

Interpretation of the Findings

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in Tomlinson's (2017) approach to DI. Tomlinson emphasized that differentiation is the best instructional practice, where teachers adapt lessons to engage students based on their diverse needs. Based on the themes of the study, six findings emerged including the recognition of diverse student responses to DI, the use of instructional tools for DI, assessing students' understanding of DI, challenges to implementing DI, experiences with PD to support DI, and the need for adequate resources and support for DI implementation. In this section, I discuss how my findings validate, challenge, or expand the existing knowledge in this field by comparing Tomlinson's framework to the practices and experiences shared by participants in this study. Additionally, I compare the data collected with the research presented in the literature review in Chapter 2 to further analyze these experiences.

Findings Related to Research Question 1

The first research question focused on understanding the experiences of teachers in Grades 5–8 as they implemented DI strategies. Through an in-depth analysis of the data, four key findings emerged, each shedding light on different aspects of these teachers' experiences. These findings provide a comprehensive view of the challenges, successes, and perceptions teachers encountered while integrating DI into their classrooms, highlighting both the practical implications and the broader impact on their instructional practices.

Finding 1

A key finding that emerged from the data analysis was that teachers recognize the significance of addressing the varied responses and engagement levels of students during the implementation of DI. The participating teachers noted a broad range of student reactions to DI, encompassing student buy-in, awareness, motivation, participation in conferencing, and engagement with interests. Most participants observed that students respond well to DI strategies, often without realizing that differentiation is occurring. Teachers highlighted that tailoring instruction to student needs generally leads to positive outcomes, including improved understanding, increased confidence, and better performance. For instance, participants noted that students generally respond well to DI often without realizing the instruction is tailored to their level, and that DI helps students learn better as it is customized to meet their individual needs. Additionally, participants emphasized that offering multiple ways to learn boosts students' understanding and confidence.

However, some teachers reported challenges with negative student reactions to DI. Specifically, issues such as student buy-in, motivation, and perceived lack of interest were identified. The participants described challenges in securing buy-in from lower-level students who often exhibit behavioral issues due to academic struggles, along with a decline in student motivation in recent years, making it difficult to encourage effort and engagement. This finding was confirmed in the study conducted by Gibbs (2022), which reported that student behavior significantly affected the execution of DI. Gibbs's research emphasized that behavioral issues are not merely obstacles to classroom management but are deeply intertwined with the effectiveness of DI. The behaviors stemming from frustration or a lack of academic confidence highlight the need for tailored motivational strategies that accompany DI practices. Additionally, teachers raised concerns about students' disinterest in topics they do not find relevant to their own interests. In comparison, the literature presents a somewhat different perspective. Chandra Handa (2020) found that students felt they received fewer challenging assignments than teachers believed they assigned during the implementation of DI. Additionally, students reported limited opportunities for content-based learning and fewer chances to engage in real-life learning experiences. Although the participants' concerns focus on behavioral and motivational issues, the literature highlights a perceived gap between teacher intentions and students' experiences, particularly in the areas of challenge, relevance, and application of learning. Despite this single piece of literature, there has been little attention given to how students respond to DI. This comparison shows that while both educators and students acknowledge difficulties, their viewpoints emphasize different

aspects of the instructional experience. Despite varied student responses, all teachers agreed that student reactions significantly influence how DI is implemented in the classroom. Both positive and negative responses to DI shape the approaches and strategies teachers use to engage students effectively and foster participation. Teachers' experiences with how students respond to DI provide insights into the broader dynamics of student engagement and the role of DI in supporting diverse learning needs.

Finding 2

Another finding that emerged from the study in relation to Research Question 1 is the teachers' use of a variety of instructional tools to address the diverse needs of their students and implement DI effectively. Common practices included small group instruction, strategic grouping, partner work, graphic organizers, and the use of recordings. These tools were frequently employed to create inclusive and supportive classroom environments, with each strategy carefully tailored to meet the unique needs of different student populations. However, Gibbs and Beamis (2021) highlighted that implemented strategies were often centered around student activities aligned with individual teachers' learning styles, which resulted in minimal commonality. This contrast emphasizes the diverse approaches teachers take in implementing DI, suggesting that a lack of uniformity can be both beneficial and challenging. Most participants (five out of eight) emphasized the significance of small group instruction as an essential part of their DI approach. This strategy allows teachers to tailor content and support students' varied learning levels. The participants described using small groups as an effective strategy for providing differentiated support, allowing both higher and lower-level

students to benefit simultaneously. They employed small groups to offer alternative instructional methods aimed at elevating students' comprehension levels, as well as for reteaching and acceleration purposes. Additionally, one classroom structure included a teacher-guided station for direct support alongside independent workstations, providing a balanced approach to both guided and independent learning.

Additionally, some teachers found grouping students together more beneficial than traditional small group instruction. Group and pair work were highlighted as effective for promoting collaboration and boosting student confidence. The participants highlighted the use of group work to foster collaboration and peer support. Students were often grouped based on assessment performance, with higher and lower-level students working together on tasks such as games or learning packets. Group work was seen as a valuable support system, where students could help one another through activities like pair work and the use of collaboration sheets, promoting a cooperative learning environment. Consistent with findings in the literature, Porta and Todd (2022) also identified group work and mixed-ability grouping as common techniques used by educators to enhance student collaboration and engagement. Both the participants and the literature highlight the effectiveness of these strategies in promoting cooperative learning and peer-to-peer support. However, while the participants emphasized the practical application of these strategies in fostering collaboration, the literature offers broader evidence of their use in educational settings.

Participants also shared a variety of other strategies for differentiating instruction to meet diverse needs. These strategies included creating differentiated tasks for lower,

average, and above-average students, offering support such as sentence starters, outlines, and graphic organizers to help with task completion, and using scaffolding techniques to simplify information. These scaffolding methods involved breaking down complex concepts, using simpler language, providing examples, and pausing for discussions to ensure content mastery across different student levels. These methods align closely with findings in the literature, where implementation strategies also include sequencing lessons and activities, tailoring plans to student needs, and using scaffolding support such as modeling, graphic organizers, group activities, and tiered lessons (Benjamin & Pansear-Aguilar, 2020; Gibbs & Beamis, 2021). The use of scaffolding, as described, highlights the deliberate efforts teachers make to accommodate diverse learning needs within a DI framework. By breaking down content into manageable parts and ensuring understanding through continuous feedback and interaction, teachers can enhance student comprehension and engagement. Both the participants' experiences and the literature emphasize the importance of flexibility in instruction to promote student success.

Furthermore, teachers emphasized the importance of using DI to support a variety of student subgroups and ensure inclusivity. The participants emphasized DI as a key approach for supporting diverse student populations. For students with disabilities, DI was highlighted as essential for integrating them with their general education peers. ELLs benefited from the use of technology and artificial intelligence, such as translated materials and video subtitles, to enhance their understanding. Additionally, gifted students were supported through strategies that helped advanced readers read purposefully and extract key information from texts. In comparison, the literature

underscores the need for PD to help teachers effectively meet the needs of students across various subgroups. Research by Mason et al. (2022), Spoon et al. (2020), and Stairs-Davenport (2021) suggested that although DI is beneficial, teachers require ongoing training and support to implement these strategies successfully. Both the participants and the literature recognize the importance of DI, but the literature emphasizes the need for PD as a critical component for ensuring teachers are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students. However, there is limited research on the specific strategies tailored for different student subgroups, rather than focusing solely on PD initiatives.

Finding 3

The third finding identified in the study was that participating teachers assess student understanding through various methods and use the data from these assessments to adapt and enhance student learning. Teachers agreed on the importance of assessments in their classrooms, using different strategies to gauge understanding and adjust their instructional approaches accordingly. One previous study found that teachers implement district curriculum and differentiated assessments, which fostered a positive environment and employed diverse tasks (Johnsen et al., 2020). This aligns with the participants' emphasis on using a range of assessment tools to not only evaluate student learning but also to create an engaging and supportive classroom environment. By employing varied and differentiated assessment methods, teachers can address diverse learning needs while promoting equity and inclusivity. Participants highlighted the use of CFAs as a consistent method for assessing student understanding on a weekly basis. These assessments are standardized across teaching teams to ensure consistency in evaluating student learning.

In one example, it was noted that CFAs are implemented for every teacher each week, ensuring that all students, regardless of subgroup (e.g., gifted or ELL), are assessed equally. This approach helps create a uniform method for tracking progress and ensuring equitable assessment across diverse student populations.

Additionally, teachers used a variety of day-to-day assessment methods to gather immediate feedback on student learning and make quick adjustments to their instruction. Exit tickets, commonly used at the end of lessons, were highlighted as an effective tool for identifying areas that need further differentiation and making small adjustments for the following day. Participants noted their value in quickly assessing student comprehension. In addition to exit tickets, teachers employed other assessments throughout the class period. Pop quizzes and engaging tools like Kahoot games were used for quick checks on understanding, while daily bell ringers helped review previously taught content or introduce new material. Real-time tools like Curry Pod and Padlet enabled teachers to run polls and quizzes for instant feedback. Frequent informal check-ins, such as questions or thumbs-up/thumbs-down responses, were also used to gauge student comprehension during lessons. These varied strategies provided multiple touchpoints for assessing and responding to student needs. The use of assessment aligns with findings in the literature, where classroom assessments serve multiple purposes, including lesson planning, adapting instruction for diverse learners, and facilitating collaboration among colleagues. For example, Wherful et al. (2021) noted that assessments are used to gauge understanding, group students based on their needs, identify areas requiring further instruction, and assess individual progress. This highlights

the essential role of formative assessments in creating responsive, flexible learning environments and ensuring that instruction is continuously adapted to meet diverse student needs.

Teachers also relied on standardized assessments, such as tests and annual end-of-grade tests, to gain a broader understanding of student achievement. Participants noted the use of various standardized assessments to track student performance. MAP assessments, conducted three times a year, provide insight into students' progress across the academic spectrum, while an annual end-of-grade standardized test is used to assess overall student performance. These assessments offer valuable data for monitoring growth and achievement throughout the year. In contrast, the literature points out some challenges associated with high-stakes testing. Kenney et al. (2023) and Saclarides and Kane (2022) suggested that such testing often leads teachers to prioritize low-performing students to ensure they meet minimum standards, potentially neglecting higher-achieving students. Furthermore, the pressure to prepare students for state testing can shift the focus from broader learning goals to intensive test preparation. Whereas participants in the study viewed assessments as tools for understanding progress and growth, the literature emphasizes the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing, such as narrowing the focus of instruction and increasing pressure on teachers.

Finding 4

The final finding that emerged from the study related to Research Question 1 reveals the various challenges teachers face in implementing DI. Whereas some challenges were shared among many participants, others were specific to individual

experiences, reflecting the diverse obstacles that come with balancing DI within the classroom environment. A key challenge noted by nearly all participants was finding a balance between adhering to the required curriculum and meeting the diverse needs of students. Teachers reported that while they strive to stay aligned with state standards, they often need to adapt their lessons to accommodate students' varying abilities. Aligned with the literature, Gibbs (2022) identified inflexible curriculum as a challenge for effective implementation. This observation reinforced the complexity educators face when rigid curricular frameworks restrict their ability to differentiate effectively. Participants emphasized the importance of adjusting lessons to meet student needs while maintaining adherence to state standards and curriculum requirements. For example, one approach involved modifying lesson difficulty, such as providing fill-in-the-blank activities for some students, while still teaching the same standards. Another approach focused on sticking to state standards but adjusting lessons when students struggled. Differentiation within the school board-approved curriculum was also highlighted as essential. In contrast, one participant prioritized concept mastery over rapidly covering content, emphasizing a focus on deeper learning rather than strictly adhering to curricular pacing.

Despite these efforts, participants acknowledged the challenge of balancing differentiation with the need to follow mandated curricula. The literature reflects similar challenges. Grecu (2022) and Williams (2023) pointed out that adapting curricula to meet diverse student readiness levels is a significant difficulty for educators. Additionally, external pressures, such as standardized testing and administrative expectations, often

make it harder for teachers to modify instruction effectively. Whereas participants in the study focused on strategies to overcome these hurdles, the literature emphasizes the broader systemic challenges, such as balancing curriculum demands with the diverse needs of students, which can hinder teachers' ability to fully implement DI.

Time emerged as another prominent challenge in two main areas; limited instructional time and the extensive planning required for DI. Instructional time constraints were noted, with one participant highlighting the difficulty of fitting effective DI into the 30 to 35 minutes available after routines like openers and closers, making it hard to cover the required content while also differentiating effectively. Porta et al. (2022) and Unal et al. (2022) similarly found that teachers often struggle with the demands of DI, particularly in balancing the need to differentiate while managing the constraints of instructional and preparation time. These studies emphasized that the inherent time limitations in school schedules pose a significant barrier to DI, as effective differentiation requires thoughtful design and pacing that often exceed the available instructional windows. Additionally, participants expressed concerns about inadequate planning time. Pre-planning for differentiated lessons requires significant effort, and participants felt that more preparation time would make teachers more willing and able to implement DI successfully. Consistent with the literature, DI is widely recognized as challenging and time-consuming for teachers.

Several participants identified insufficient training as a barrier to effective DI implementation. Teachers believe that the lack of PD and training left them unprepared to differentiate effectively. In previous studies, Cantrell et al. (2020) and Kahmann et al.

(2022) underscored the critical role of PD in enhancing teacher practice and ensuring the successful application of DI strategies. These studies emphasized that without comprehensive and continuous PD, teachers may struggle to design and execute effective DI plans that address diverse student needs. Participants stressed the importance of training for effectively implementing DI. One participant called for more training opportunities, whether through licensing, credentialing programs, or PD sessions. Another acknowledged that while teachers may not always enjoy training sessions, they provide valuable overviews and resources for DI. A lack of training was also noted as a challenge, with one participant highlighting that without proper guidance, teachers are left to figure out DI on their own, potentially reducing its effectiveness. These participant responses align with findings in literature, where PD is seen as essential for equipping teachers with the necessary skills to implement DI effectively.

The final challenge identified was managing large class sizes, which significantly hindered the implementation of DI. Teachers expressed that as class sizes increase, effectively differentiating instruction becomes more difficult to manage. In one previous study, Gibbs (2022) found that large class sizes hinder successful implementation of DI. When class sizes are large, teachers face challenges in providing individualized attention and monitoring student progress, making it difficult to tailor lessons to meet the varying needs of all learners. Larger classes were noted to make it difficult for students to focus and for teachers to manage DI. Smaller class sizes, group sizes, or the presence of additional support staff were suggested as ways to enhance the ability to differentiate instruction. One participant specifically emphasized the difficulty of meeting the diverse

needs of students in a class of 20, particularly when abilities range from very high to very low. Although the literature addresses the challenges teachers face, there is a lack of research on class sizes and their impact on DI suggesting a potential avenue for future research.

Findings Related to Research Question 2

The second research question explored what teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies. The responses revealed several areas where teachers feel enhancements are necessary to better support DI implementation. Two findings emerged related to Research Question 2 focusing on support needed. The findings suggest that addressing these needs could create a more supportive environment for teachers to successfully meet the diverse academic needs of their students.

Finding 1

The first finding related to Research Question 2 was teachers experience with PD to support DI. All participating teachers recognized the value of PD in enhancing their DI practices, with varying experiences and positive outcomes highlighted. A significant topic was the benefit of instructional coaches in supporting DI implementation. Half of the participants emphasized the advantages of working with coaches who provided personalized support and tailored PD to meet teachers' specific needs. However, in a study by Saclarides and Kane (2022), instructional coaches reported that taking on additional roles, such as analyzing test data, hindered their ability to collaborate effectively with teachers, leaving little time for instructional support. This highlights a

critical disconnect between the ideal role of instructional coaches and the practical realities they face. Participants in the current study emphasized the importance of personalized support, customizable PD and collaborative learning communities to improve DI. Personalized support, such as having an instructional coach, was highly valued, with one participant advocating for a coach to help teachers differentiate lessons, while others praised coaches for offering tailored feedback and practical strategies based on individual needs. Customizable PD experiences were also seen as essential, with one participant highlighting the importance of choosing PD sessions that directly addressed their strengths and weaknesses, ensuring relevance and practicality. Additionally, the collaborative PLC model of PD was appreciated for fostering a hands-on learning experience, where teachers could work together to apply new strategies in real-time. Consistent with the literature, PLCs were seen as structured platforms that support educators in goal setting, collaborative inquiry, and ongoing PD. Caniglia et al. (2023) and Anderson and Oliver (2022) also highlighted how PLCs enhance instructional effectiveness by fostering a supportive environment conducive to professional growth and collaboration.

In addition to instructional coaches, participants also shared experiences with various PD sessions and learning opportunities that introduced impactful DI strategies and tools. For example, one participant credited a school-directed PD for introducing Kagan strategies, which enhanced student-led activities and reduced the need for constant teacher guidance. Another participant highlighted the use of Ed Puzzle, a tool that support differentiation by allowing teachers to tailor instruction to individual student

needs. Networking opportunities at conferences were also valued, with one participant appreciating the chance to exchange ideas and learn new strategies from other professionals, broadening the range of DI approaches. Additionally, expert-led PD sessions, such as those featuring college professors, were praised for offering specialized insights. For example, one session focused on understanding texts related to IEPs, providing deeper instructional strategies for supporting special education students. Participants highlighted several PD sessions that have been valuable in enhancing their instructional practices. However, these specific PD approaches appear to be underexplored in the existing literature, indicating a potential gap in understanding their broader impact and effectiveness.

Finding 2

The second finding related to Research Question 2 highlighted the need for adequate resources and support for teachers implementing DI. Participating teachers discussed the support needed to improve their DI practices, focusing on the need for materials, time, additional staff, and collaborative planning. A significant challenge for teachers was the extensive time and effort required to create materials for DI. This challenge is echoed in the literature, which indicates that teachers find DI to be time-consuming (see Porta et al., 2022). For example, one participant noted that the need to create multiple materials for different student groups can be daunting, discouraging some teachers from pursuing DI. The lack of ready-to-use resources led to a demand for more centralized, organized materials. Another participant suggested the creation of a centralized spreadsheet or resource repository to streamline the process, highlighting the

need for easily accessible DI materials. The literature frequently highlights challenges like the time-consuming nature of DI and the difficulty teachers face in managing diverse student needs. However, there is comparatively little research addressing the creation and availability of resources necessary to support teachers in effectively implementing DI strategies.

Additionally, teachers emphasized the importance of additional support time for both students and teachers to facilitate effective DI. Gibbs (2022) noted time constraint as a challenge to DI, highlighting how limited instructional and planning time can impede teachers' ability to differentiate effectively. This finding resonates with the participants' experiences in the current study, as they discussed the necessity of having more instructional time to reinforce concepts that students struggled with and to plan differentiated lessons adequately. Some participants emphasized the importance of providing additional instructional time outside regular class hours to reinforce concepts that students struggled with. A common practice involved identifying students who needed extra help and offering them targeted support in the classroom.

On the other hand, several participants identified the need for additional staff in classrooms to better manage DI demands. An extra pair of hands was considered beneficial for enhancing instructional quality. The focus on co-teachers support the findings in the literature where teachers reported that collaborative efforts between general education teachers and co-teachers enhance the understanding of students' unique needs. Moefield (2020) and Alnasser (2020) pointed out that co-teachers often view

general education teachers as the primary instructional leaders, while their own role is to focus on differentiated strategies to support diverse learners.

Co-teachers with specialized expertise were seen as crucial for supporting specific student groups, particularly ELL and special education students. One participant stressed that regular teachers cannot be expected to master all specialized needs, making specialized teachers essential. Another participant noted that having a special education coordinator or case manager familiar with individual students' needs could significantly improve differentiation, as it often relies on understanding each student's unique requirements.

Additionally, collaborative planning time was highlighted as essential for successful DI. Two participants emphasized the need for teachers to have time to work together, share ideas, and plan lessons that align with curriculum standards and address diverse student needs. Research by Unal et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of collaboration, noting that teachers benefit from engaging in discussions with experienced colleagues, instructional coaches, and mentors. However, there is limited literature specifically addressing the need for dedicated collaborative planning time for teachers. Collaborative planning was noted as beneficial for teachers to develop unified approaches to teaching content. Additionally, regular meetings between grade-level teachers and special education staff were seen as crucial, providing opportunities for special education caseworkers from different grades to collaborate. These meetings helped facilitate smoother student transitions and improve support for students with IEPs.

Limitations of the Study

There were limitations that could have affected the trustworthiness of this study. The first limitation was the small sample size, as all participants were women. Including both male and female participants might have yielded different results. Additionally, this study focused solely on teachers in Grades 5–8, so the findings may not be applicable to lower elementary or high school settings.

Another limitation was that data collection and analysis in a basic qualitative study can be time-consuming. To address the notion of the study being time-consuming, I ensured that sufficient time was allocated for both processes. Additionally, teachers may have been hesitant to participate due to the time commitment required for the interview. However, I mitigated this by providing participants with an estimated duration for the interview, helping to manage their expectations.

The final limitation was the potential for personal biases. I aimed to remain objective throughout the research process, ensuring that my own beliefs or experiences did not influence the study's findings. To mitigate this, I kept a self-reflection journal, which allowed me to regularly assess and monitor my biases and subjectivity during the course of the research.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this qualitative study, I developed three recommendations for future research, informed by the study's strengths, limitations, and the literature reviewed. This study provided an in-depth account of participants' experiences with DI in Grades 5–8,

revealing important insights and areas for further exploration. First, future research could examine teachers' beliefs and misconceptions about DI. Secondly, it would be valuable to investigate the PD needs related to DI. Lastly, research could focus on evaluating differentiation strategies for specific student subgroups. Given that this study included only eight teachers from Grades 5–8, expanding the sample size in future research could provide broader insights. These recommendations are intended to support future studies in advancing the understanding and application of DI in varied classroom contexts.

Recommendation 1: Examine the Relationship Between Class Size and DI

Effectiveness

Based on the data collected in this study, one of the significant challenges highlighted by participating teachers was managing DI in large classes. Therefore, it is recommended to examine the relationship between class size and DI effectiveness. Teachers indicated that as class sizes grow, effectively implementing DI becomes increasingly difficult due to the diverse range of student needs and the limited time and resources available to address them. For example, Participant 3 described class size as a significant barrier, stating: “Class size is a massive obstacle for DI, because when you put 30 something kids in a room, of course, they can’t focus.” Additionally, Participant 5 shared the difficulties of differentiating in a larger class: “Trying to figure out how I can cover everything to where this one kid isn’t left out because the learning needs are all over the place . . . out of a size of maybe 20, I can only do so much.” In the same manner, Participant 4 emphasized the benefits of smaller groups or classes for DI, suggesting, “I think you need smaller class sizes or smaller group sizes. So, if you have 30 students in a

class and you have 2 teachers, then you can do tandem teaching.” Larger class sizes make it increasingly challenging for teachers to maintain student focus and provide individualized support, reinforcing the idea that reducing class sizes or adding instructional staff can enhance the quality of DI.

Whereas existing literature consistently highlights various challenges associated with implementing DI there is a notable gap in research specifically examining the impact of class size on DI effectiveness. Studies often emphasized the difficulties teachers face in addressing diverse learning needs, such as lack of time for planning, unmotivated students, class size, and behavior management concerns (Gibbs,2022). These challenges become more pronounced as the number of students increases, suggesting a potential link between class size and the quality of DI. However, despite these insights, research rarely explores this connection directly. The focus remains predominantly on general obstacles to differentiation, with minimal empirical evidence addressing whether and how class size influences teachers’ ability to deliver DI effectively. This gap underscores the need for further studies to explore the direct relationship between class size and the quality of DI, given the implications for instructional effectiveness and student outcomes.

Recommendation 2: Investigate the PD Needs for Effective DI

The study revealed that six of eight participants highlighted the importance of PD in enhancing their understanding and implementation of DI. The importance of PD aligns with Brunsek et al. (2020), who emphasized the critical role of PD in shaping educators’ practices. Therefore, it is recommended to investigate the PD needs for effective DI.

However, teachers' experiences with PD varied, with some emphasizing the benefits of having instructional coaches or attending targeted PD sessions, while others expressed a need for more effective and practical PD opportunities. For example, Participant 1 stressed the need for instructional coaching to facilitate DI, stating: "An instructional coach coming in and helping that teacher to learn how to differentiate between lessons . . . would be something that would be needed." This sentiment reflects research by Cantrell et al. (2020), which indicated that educators who engage in well-structured PD show increased implementation of pedagogical skills. Similarly, Participant 3 appreciated the personalized approach offered by instructional coaches: "She was so great about saying to us, 'Where are you struggling? How can I support you?'" The personalized support mentioned suggests that tailored, one-on-one assistance, which addresses specific challenges faced by teachers, is particularly valuable. This support is consistent with findings by Kahmann et al. (2022), who highlighted the role of individualized PD in improving student outcomes.

In addition to instructional coaching, participants discussed a variety of PD sessions and approaches. For example, Participant 3 emphasized the value of choice in PD:

The ones that I get to choose are helpful, and the reason for that is, I know where my strengths are, and I know where my weaknesses are, and so I am going to go hunt for the PDs that are applicable to me and my situation.

The benefit of allowing teachers to select PD based on their individual needs is supported by Hinojosa (2022), who underscored the importance of self-directed learning

opportunities for teachers. On the other hand, Participant 4 valued collaborative PD, noting, “We actually worked almost as a collaborative PLC . . . It was better because we were able to actually use what we learned.” This experience is in line with research from Mason et al. (2022), who found that collaborative learning communities enhance the application of PD content. The effectiveness of collaborative learning communities where teachers can share insights and strategies and directly apply their learning are beneficial to the implementation of DI.

Overall, teachers identified gaps in PD content and delivery, indicating a need for further research to understand and address the specific PD needs related to DI. Consistent with the findings of this study, the literature review emphasized the need for targeted PD for teachers (e.g., Stairs-Davenport, 2021). Based on the literature and data collected, PD is essential for successful DI implementation, pointing to the need for further research in this area.

Recommendation 3: Assess Differentiation Strategies for Specific Student Subgroups

The study revealed that teachers often face challenges in supporting specific student subgroups, such as ELLs, students with disabilities, and gifted students. Therefore, it is recommended to assess differentiation strategies for specific student subgroups. Participating teachers noted the importance of using tailored differentiation strategies to meet the unique needs of these groups. However, they also expressed the difficulty in doing so, given the diverse learning profiles within each subgroup. Most inquiries about instruction for ELL subgroups focused on effective teaching methods for ELL students ranging from general strategies to content-specific strategies and the use of

native language (see Stairs-Davenport, 2021). Participant 3 highlighted the importance of finding resources in students' native languages and utilizing technology to support ELLs: "I always try to find the material in different languages if I can. With AI today, it's opened a whole other world for that—having something as simple as subtitles when you're showing a video." Finding these resources indicates the significance of language accessibility and the use of digital tools to aid comprehension for ELLs.

In contrast, Participants 5 and 7 spoke about students with disabilities as a subgroup. Participant 5 emphasized the importance of using DI to create an inclusive classroom: "Seeing that I have students with disabilities on top of regular students in the classroom, I have found that DI helps." Similarly, Participant 7 explained how they always have inclusive classrooms and the importance of continuous differentiation: "I always had three collab classes, so I always had three classes that were inclusive with special ed kids and general ed [education]. So, I'm always differentiating my instructions." Addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities requires ongoing modifications to lessons and accommodations within inclusive settings, emphasizing the importance of tailored strategies for successful integration into mainstream classrooms.

Even though gifted learners may start the school year performing above grade level, they frequently demonstrate minimal academic growth throughout the year (Spoon et al., 2020). Gifted students were also a subgroup that one participant focused on when discussing DI. Participant 4 shared strategies used for advanced readers, emphasizing the importance of helping them read with intentionality: "Gifted students who are reading already at 11th and 12th grade reading levels can use those strategies to make sure they

understand the purpose so that they can read with the intention of pulling out the information they need.” This participant indicated the value of differentiation approaches that push gifted students to engage critically and purposefully with challenging texts. Overall, the goal is to explore best practices for addressing the distinct needs of groups like ELLs, students with disabilities, and gifted students. Future research could target exploring effective differentiation strategies for these specific student populations.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings from this qualitative study, several practical recommendations have been identified to enhance the implementation of DI in classroom settings. These recommendations aim to provide teachers with the necessary support, resources, and collaborative opportunities to effectively address the diverse needs of their students. Recommendation 1 focuses on PD and coaching for DI. Recommendation 2 focuses on collaborative planning and classroom support. By implementing these recommendations, schools can create a more inclusive and responsive educational environment that promotes effective differentiation and support all learners.

Recommendation 1: Establish Ongoing, Targeted PD and Coaching for DI

The study revealed that PD and the presence of instructional coaches play a significant role in helping teachers effectively implement DI. Therefore, schools should prioritize ongoing and targeted PD opportunities that focus on practical, classroom-ready DI strategies and techniques. PD sessions should be tailored to meet the specific needs of teachers, offering choice-based sessions that address areas where teachers feel less confident. The inclusion of instructional coaching is crucial, as coaches can provide

personalized, in-class support and model DI techniques in real-time. This approach would help bridge the gap between theoretical PD and practical classroom applications. Action steps could include:

- Develop a schedule of PD sessions throughout the school year focusing specifically on DI strategies.
- Assign experienced instructional coaches to work with teachers individually or in small groups.
- Allow teachers to select PD sessions based on their areas of need.
- Ensure that PD sessions are followed by ongoing coaching and opportunities for teachers to receive feedback and refine their practice.

Recommendation 2: Implement Collaborative Planning and Increase Classroom Support

The findings underscored the value of collaborative planning and additional classroom support for effective DI. Teachers highlighted the need for structured collaboration time to plan differentiated lessons and align their practices with curriculum standards. Additionally, participants noted the importance of having more adults in the classroom, such as co-teachers or aides, to better support specific student subgroups like ELLs and students with disabilities. Schools should establish dedicated planning periods for teachers to collaborate and create co-teaching models or provide instructional aides to assist in large or diverse classrooms. Action steps include the following:

- Allocate time in the school schedule specifically for collaborative planning among teachers of the same grade level or content area.

- Form PLCs where teachers can work together regularly to discuss challenges, share effective differentiation strategies, and analyze student data to inform instructional decisions.
- Implement co-teaching models that pair general education teachers with specialized educators (e.g., special education or ELL teachers).
- Hire additional aides or paraprofessionals to assist in larger classrooms or those with higher needs.

Implications

This basic qualitative study contributed to research about teachers experiences with DI implementation, the challenges they face, and the support needed to effectively implement DI. The findings from this study highlight the importance of DI in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment, thereby promoting social change. By focusing on meeting the diverse needs of all students, DI encourages educators to move away from one-size-fits-all teaching approaches and instead tailor their methods to support every learner, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning approaches. The emphasis on targeted PD, collaborative planning, and additional classroom support creates opportunities for teachers to gain the skills and resources necessary to effectively reach all students. This shift in teaching practice can lead to improved student engagement, confidence, and academic success, particularly for those who have traditionally been marginalized or overlooked in standardized educational approaches. Ultimately, implementing the study's recommendations can contribute to a more

inclusive educational culture, where every student is given the opportunity to thrive, fostering greater equity and social change within the school community and beyond.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of teachers implementing DI and the challenges and successes they encountered in meeting the diverse needs of their students. Through in-depth interviews and analysis, several key themes emerged, highlighting the importance of recognizing diverse student responses, utilizing various instructional tools, assessing student understanding, overcoming implementation challenges, receiving adequate PD, and having sufficient resources and support. The findings underscore that although teachers acknowledge the value of DI in creating inclusive learning environments, they also face obstacles related to balancing curriculum standards, managing class sizes, and accessing the necessary time and resources.

The study's findings led to practical recommendations that focus on enhancing PD, fostering collaborative planning, increasing classroom support, and providing centralized resources for teachers. These recommendations are intended to empower educators to effectively differentiate instruction and create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

By emphasizing the need for ongoing support, collaborative efforts, and targeted training, this study contributes to the growing understanding of how DI can be successfully implemented in diverse classroom settings. The insights gained provide valuable guidance for school leaders, policymakers, and educators seeking to improve instructional practices and foster a culture of equity and inclusivity. Ultimately, the study

emphasizes the potential of DI to drive positive social change by addressing the diverse needs of students and creating opportunities for all learners to thrive academically and socially.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

**Research Title: Teachers' Challenges with Implementing Differentiated
Instructional Strategies in Grades 5–8 Classrooms.**

Interviewee Name:	Conducted By:
Interview #	
Date:	Start Time:
Location:	End Time:

Introduction

Hello, I'm Sharda Massey. I extend my heartfelt gratitude for your participation in my research study. Throughout this interview, I will be asking you some questions to gauge your experiences with implementing differentiated instruction into your classroom. The questions will include questions that have been predetermined as well as follow up questions based on your responses. To get the best insight into your experience, your openness and honesty in responding to the questions are greatly appreciated.

The interview is expected to last no more than one hour. I'll be recording our conversation to aid in analyzing the data and ensuring the accurate capture of your responses. Additionally, I'll be taking notes throughout the interview. The information gathered during this interview will remain confidential. Your name and identity will not be included in the study, and only I will have access to this data. You are not obligated to

discuss anything that makes you uncomfortable, and you have the right to end the interview at any point. Please feel free to ask for clarification at any time if anything is unclear to you. Your comfort and understanding are of utmost importance.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin the interview? Are you ready to proceed?

1. Icebreaker Questions:

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?

How long have you been teaching?

What subjects do you teach?

What grade levels do you teach?

2. In your experience, how do students typically respond to differentiated instruction?

3. Describe your experience with implementing differentiated instructional strategies in your classroom?

What are some strategies that you have used?

4. How do you balance the diverse needs of your students while adhering to curriculum requirements and standards?

5. What challenges have you encountered when trying to implement these strategies with students in Grades 5–8?

6. Please provide specific examples of challenges you've faced when attempting to differentiate instruction for your students?
7. How do you currently assess the effectiveness of differentiated instructional strategies in meeting the diverse needs of your students?
8. In your opinion, what resources or support do teachers need to improve their use of differentiated instructional strategies?
9. What professional development opportunities have you found most helpful in enhancing your ability to implement differentiated instructional strategies?

Closing:

Thank you sincerely for your invaluable participation in my research and for sharing your insights on differentiated instruction. Your responses will be treated with utmost confidentiality. I would like to arrange a follow-up session for you to review the transcript and ensure the accuracy of your responses. Do you have any questions or concerns currently? Once again, I appreciate your time and input. Thank you.

Appendix B: Alignment of Interview questions and Research Questions

<p>RQ1: What are teachers' experiences in Grades 5–8 when implementing differentiated instructional strategies?</p>	<p>2. In your experience, how do students typically respond to differentiated instruction?</p> <p>3. Describe your experience with implementing differentiated instructional strategies in your classroom. What types of strategies have you used?</p> <p>4. How do you balance the diverse needs of your students while adhering to curriculum requirements and standards?</p> <p>5. What challenges have you encountered when trying to implement these strategies with students in Grades 5–8?</p>
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	<p>6. Please provide specific examples of challenges you've faced when attempting to differentiate instruction for your students?</p> <p>7. How do you currently assess the effectiveness of differentiated instructional strategies in meeting the diverse needs of your students?</p>
<p>RQ2: What do teachers in Grades 5–8 report is needed to improve the use of differentiated instructional strategies?</p>	<p>8. In your opinion, what resources or support do teachers need to improve their use of differentiated instructional strategies?</p> <p>9. What professional development opportunities have you found most helpful in enhancing your ability to implement differentiated instructional strategies?</p>