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Elementary Reading Teachers' Experiences Implementing Individualized Instruction

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Laura E. Ellis

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

Elementary Reading Teachers' Experiences Implementing Individualized Instruction

by

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MS, State University of New York at Fredonia, 2007

BS, State University of New York at Fredonia, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Reading, Literacy, and Assessment

Walden University

October 2025

Abstract

Second-grade through fourth-grade teachers face challenges associated with implementing individualized reading instruction to address learning differences. A deeper understanding of teachers' experiences can help inform future educational policies targeting educators who instruct struggling readers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of elementary reading teachers who use individualized instruction to support diverse learners. The study was grounded in Tomlinson's model of differentiated instruction, which served as the guiding conceptual framework. Using a basic qualitative design, this study's central research question explored elementary teachers' experiences with individualized instructional practices. Data were collected through open-ended semistructured interviews with eight second-grade through fourth-grade educators who implement customized strategies to assist students experiencing reading difficulties. Data analysis consisted of identifying patterns through second cycle and in vivo coding to determine categories and common themes that address the research question and four themes were identified: (a) filling gaps through foundational skills curriculum, (b) professional development to individualize instruction, (c) Support for diverse abilities and behaviors, and (d) demands of the classroom, state initiatives, and laws. These results have potential implications for positive social change by guiding stakeholders in the strategic development of support systems and resource allocation for teachers. Such efforts may improve teacher capacity and, in turn, enhance reading outcomes among diverse student populations.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my dad, Robert H. Ellis, Ph.D. He grew up in a difficult household without his father, who gave his life in WW2. Through hard work, determination, and a positive outlook, he earned his Doctorate from UCSB in 1974. From a young age, he and my mom created a learning-rich environment, always encouraging me to gain more education and experience. After 47 years of marriage, Dad lost his soulmate. His spirit was damaged, and the sparkle had faded from his eyes, yet through his despair, he continues to find pleasure in quirky facts and meeting new people. His dedication and belief in bettering the world one person at a time have driven my dissertation journey.

Next, I dedicate my writing to my children. My daughters have overcome unfathomable obstacles and become incredible, brilliant, fun-loving, and inspiring adults. My son has provided me with the impetus to persevere and the support to be both a researcher and a dedicated mom.

Acknowledgments

This entire process would not have been possible without the unending support and guidance from Dr. Nancy Williams and Dr. Ellen Scales. I truly appreciate their faith and enthusiasm throughout this journey.

Thanks to the participants who gave their experiences a voice in hopes of providing a better education for every child.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Addressing the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population remains a critical priority in recent educational research and practice (Ginja & Chen, 2020). Teachers often encounter difficulties adapting instruction to meet the wide range of learning differences present in their classrooms (Gheysens et al., 2022). The problem under study is that teachers are challenged when implementing individualized reading instruction to support the learning differences of struggling readers. Although extensive research highlights the benefits of differentiated instruction (DI; Kenney et al., 2024; Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018), limited research has examined teachers' lived experiences with applying individualized strategies in their classrooms (Clark et al., 2023). Specifically, gaps remain in understanding how challenges impact teachers when making instructional decisions for struggling readers (Karst et al., 2022) and how they navigate the evolving demands of student needs and curricular expectations (Tetzlaff et al., 2022).

In this study, I explored elementary school teachers' experiences in individualized literacy instruction to address diverse learning needs within their classrooms. This study contributes to positive social change by better understanding teachers' experiences with individualized instruction. Greater awareness of the challenges teachers experience when personalizing instruction for students with learning differences can provide a more effective framework for improving literacy achievement and student outcomes. As stakeholders—including teachers, administrators, district leaders, and researchers—apply the study's findings to support all elementary students, a broader range of learners could have the opportunity to achieve meaningful literacy outcomes.

Chapter 1 provides an overview to explain the study's foundational elements, starting with the contextual background of the research problem. Next, the alignment of the study's components, including the problem statement, purpose, research question, and the chosen conceptual framework, is explained. The chapter further presents the nature of the research and defines relevant terminology. It concludes with a discussion of the study's underlying assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and its significance within the educational research landscape.

Background

Existing research literature provides evidence of the persistent literacy challenges in elementary schools across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). It also establishes the foundational causes and the federal initiatives, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which aimed to address systemic deficiencies in reading education. Educational researchers have reported on instructional strategies that focus on improving literacy outcomes, including the implementation of instruction differentiation (ESSA, 2015). However, a gap in practice persists between national initiatives to improve student literacy and teachers' classroom-based experiences over the past three decades (Dewitz & Graves, 2021). In one suburban school district in the southern United States with an enrollment of 51,600 in 2025, reading teachers reported frustration with low literacy proficiency rates, particularly among elementary students, according to a reading interventionist in August 2023. Despite instructional mandates and new curriculum, limited research has explored

how teachers use differentiated strategies to support struggling readers in their daily classes.

The present study contributes to the body of research that informs educational policies impacting reading teachers and students. An understanding of teachers' lived experiences with literacy instruction is essential because decisions made by educational leaders and administrators may continue to lack efficacy if uninformed of the teachers' classroom realities. This would further compound the educational disparities among struggling readers (Neuman et al., 2023).

The existing literature establishes the problem of low literacy rates among elementary school students but mainly focuses on student motivation as the primary cause (LaFave et al., 2022; Murray, 2021). This study can further advance discussion by exploring possible additional factors that influence teachers' experiences in grades two through four, by focusing on instructional strategies and training, classroom support frameworks, and appropriate materials available for all levels of reading students (Collet et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

The problem examined in this study was that elementary teachers face challenges when implementing individualized reading instruction to meet learning differences. According to personal conversations with a reading interventionist and other sources, while teachers are aware of state and national initiatives to improve literacy (ESSA, 2015), how these directives are translated into classroom instructional practices remains unclear (Ginsberg et al., 2024). In this study, I explored teachers' experiences with

implementing individualized reading instruction in their classrooms to help clarify the link between educational policies and practice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of elementary reading teachers when attempting to implement individualized reading instruction that meets the diverse learning needs of their students. Despite ongoing federal and state initiatives aimed at improving literacy outcomes, such as those outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and the Tennessee Promotion and Retention Law (Tennessee Department of Education, 2025) elementary teachers continue to encounter substantial challenges in implementing appropriate instruction. This issue is particularly pressing in regions where literacy rates are persistently low. Instructional mandates do not always translate into effective and feasible practices. Although educators are aware of literacy improvement efforts, according to a personal conversation with a teacher in September 2024, limited research exists that explores how the directives are interpreted and utilized within the daily realities of literacy instruction for diverse learners (Ginsberg et al., 2024). This study focused on second-grade through fourth-grade public school reading teachers across several schools in a suburban district in the southern United States. Participants' experiences may inform teachers, administrators, and stakeholders about effective individualized reading instruction to support all learners.

Research Question

In this basic qualitative study, I addressed second-grade through fourth-grade reading teachers' experiences with individualized instruction to support learning

differences in their classrooms in light of the local, state, and national initiatives to improve reading skills. The following research question guided this study:

RQ: What are elementary school reading teachers' experiences with individualized instruction practices to support students who learn differently?

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored in Tomlinson's model of DI, a pedagogical framework that advocates for responsive teaching practices tailored to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001, 2014). DI is grounded in the belief that all students can learn when instruction is appropriately adapted to meet their individual needs. Within the context of literacy education, DI offers a structured approach for addressing the diverse cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional factors that influence reading development (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Tomlinson's framework is relevant for this study, which investigates the instructional experiences of teachers working with students who exhibit learning differences that affect reading acquisition and proficiency. By focusing on flexible grouping, ongoing assessment, and the modification of content, process, and product, DI provides a lens through which individualized reading instruction can be defined and investigated. The model underscores the importance of teacher decision-making and professional judgment in designing instruction that is both equitable and effective.

In addition to its practical applications, DI is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which argues that learners construct meaning through active engagement with content that is relevant and appropriately challenging. This reinforces the study's focus

on understanding how teachers interpret and implement individualized strategies to support students with reading difficulties. Additionally, DI intersects with inclusive education principles, advocating for instructional environments that acknowledge learner differences and promote access to rigorous academic content for all students.

By exploring teachers' experiences with differentiated reading instruction, this study seeks to provide insights into the educational decisions, challenges, and supports that shape individualized literacy practices. Such insights may inform professional development initiatives, curricular design, and policy decisions aimed at enhancing reading outcomes for students with learning differences. Ultimately, the conceptual framework establishes DI as a comprehensive philosophy of teaching that prioritizes responsiveness, equity, and student-centered learning.

Nature of the Study

A basic qualitative research design with individual Microsoft Teams interviews was used to complete this study. This approach is aligned with the purpose of this study and the research question to gather information about a common lived experience (Burkholder et al., 2020). The phenomenon of interest for the study was the experiences of teachers who individualize instruction to support students with learning differences (Tomlinson & McTigue, 2006).

For this study, I used purposeful sampling and conducted several interviews with reading teachers in grades two through four within the local district of this study (Burkholder et al., 2020). I developed an interview protocol because the data were based

on participants' lived experiences and analyzed using a recursive, iterative, and inductive approach (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Methodology will be described in detail in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Differentiated instruction (DI): A philosophy of teaching based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences in their readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Subban, 2006)—often used interchangeably with *individualized instruction*.

Elementary education: Formal education that serves children between ages 5 and 11 and covers kindergarten through fifth grade, sometimes sixth grade (Harmon & Jones, 2005).

Individualized instruction: A student-centered teaching method that respects individual needs of students more on a micro level and is paced to the educational needs of individual students (Lindner & Schwab, 2020).

Learning differences: The individual and unique ways people learn and process new information. These include learning challenges such as problems with memory, organization, and attention. These differences can also be influenced by students' interests, learning profiles, and readiness (Gheysens et al., 2022).

Assumptions

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), assumptions are necessary elements of empirical inquiry, including data collection, analysis, and interpretations of findings. In the present study, several foundational assumptions were acknowledged. First, it was assumed that participants held valid teaching certifications and were actively engaged in

reading instruction within their respective classrooms. Additionally, it was presumed that participants were committed to fostering reading proficiency among their students, that interview responses reflected candor and authenticity, and that all teachers adhered to the instructional standards established by the Tennessee Department of Education. It was further assumed that each participant implemented the designated reading curriculum mandated by the district, which allows for DI and accommodations to meet diverse learner needs. Lastly, the selected research design was presumed to be most fitting for addressing the study's central research question.

Scope and Delimitations

In research, scope and delimitations are components that define the boundaries and focus of a study (Burkholder et al., 2020). This study included eight general education teachers in grades two through four who teach reading and focused on the experiences of teachers in a district of 52,000 students in a southern state. The data for the present study were collected over 5 weeks, between December 2024 and January 2025. The purpose of the research was to explore participants' actual experiences of implementing individualized reading instruction.

According to Burkholder et al. (2020), delimitations narrow a study's focus by stating the research elements that are not included. One delimitation of this study was participants' total years of experience in the field of education. While it was mentioned during interviews, it was not a deciding factor for the selection of participants beyond the minimum of 2 years of experience. Additionally, the study was delimited by excluding

teachers who previously taught second-grade through fourth grade but were no longer in the teaching field.

A qualitative design was chosen due to the nature of the research question. The objective was to highlight the lived experiences of the participants. The design allowed for exploring the contextual dynamics of reading instruction and how participants navigate the reality of teacher-student interactions. A quantitative approach would not have been an appropriate design due to its use of isolated variables, which may not effectively capture the local context of a teacher's classroom.

Limitations

Limitations refer to weaknesses in the research design or methodology that may influence the outcomes (Burkholder et al., 2020). This study may have limitations that could impact its transferability. For example, the data were collected from general education teachers who teach reading in the second-grade through fourth grades. The small group size from one southern district may not reflect the experiences of teachers of other grades in the state or nationwide. To manage this limitation, thick descriptions of the setting and assumptions were provided so readers of this study can make informed decisions regarding the applicability of the research to other contexts (Alsharidi, 2025).

Another limitation was the possibility of teachers' potential reluctance to disclose unsuccessful experiences with individualized instruction (Tetzlaff et al., 2022).

Understanding this limitation, I was cognizant of nonjudgmental body language and facial expressions and practiced interviews with a colleague for feedback (Rubin &

Rubin, 2012). I was prepared with probing questions to ensure in-depth responses while maintaining protocol for the interviewee's comfort (Burkholder et al., 2020).

All participants were provided with a copy of the interview transcript to verify the accuracy of their viewpoints. This protected against the limitation of potential researcher bias and supported the study's trustworthiness (Tisdell et al., 2025). I abided by Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for ethical data collection from participants to minimize the influence of researcher bias.

Significance

A basic qualitative study is employed to investigate and interpret teachers' lived experiences with individualized instruction. While previous research has examined the potential benefits of individualized approaches for struggling readers and the rationale for their implementation (Peters et al., 2022), the present study seeks to explore and understand educators' firsthand (Peters et al., 2022) lived experiences.

Current state policy mandates that third-grade students demonstrate grade-level reading proficiency to advance to fourth grade (Tennessee Department of Education, 2025). Although this requirement may incentivize progress toward literacy benchmarks, it can also impose significant emotional strain on students, educators, and families (Gearin et al., 2022). The present study seeks to contribute to the advancement of educational practice by challenging the primacy of standardized assessments as the sole determinant of grade promotion (GovTrack.us., 2025).

By examining elementary reading teachers' lived experiences with individualized instruction, this research aims to inform policy decisions that more accurately reflect the

realities of classroom practice. Centering these voices may foster positive social change by promoting inclusive decision-making among all educational stakeholders (Ahmed, 2023). In alignment with Walden University’s social change mission—which emphasizes the role of scholar-practitioners in improving human and societal conditions (Walden University, n.d.)—the findings from this study may catalyze further research and reform, ultimately enhancing both educational practice and social outcomes.

This study’s findings will help inform educational policies that impact elementary reading teachers’ experiences with individualized instruction. By highlighting these lived experiences, positive social change may result when all stakeholders have an equal voice in the processes and policies of education (Ahmed, 2023). According to the social change mission of Walden University (n.d.), the development of scholar-practitioners who improve human and social conditions is a means to the betterment of society.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the problem addressed in this study: elementary teachers in a suburban southern U.S. district encountered difficulties implementing individualized reading instruction to meet diverse student needs (Reading interventionist, personal communication, 2023). The chapter outlined the study’s purpose—to explore teachers’ experiences with individualized instruction—and identified the DI (DI) model as the guiding conceptual framework. Semistructured interviews served as the primary data collection method, providing first-hand accounts of teachers’ instructional practices and challenges in addressing learning differences. Chapter 2 will detail the literature search

strategy, conceptual framework, relevant literature, and the key concepts that underpin the conceptual foundation of this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was that elementary teachers experience challenges when implementing individualized reading instruction to support students with diverse learning needs. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore reading teachers' experiences with individualized instruction to better understand how these practices impact instructional effectiveness and student literacy outcomes.

Elementary teachers are challenged to individualize reading instruction to support classroom learning differences based on information shared from a reading interventionist in 2023. Struggling readers continue to struggle throughout elementary school when not supported by interventions targeted to help them read at grade level (National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley et al., 2023). While classroom differentiation strategies for struggling readers have been studied (Corley, 2005; Ginja & Chen, 2020; Melesse & Belay, 2022), little research exists on teachers' actual experiences with those strategies. This gap in knowledge is important to fill because teachers are tasked with connecting struggling readers to successful outcomes in reading (Broughton, 2023; Donaldson, 2023; Papanthymou & Darra, 2022). A more efficient and effective learning path was clarified by highlighting how teachers address individualized strategies. This study aimed to increase awareness of teachers' current educational experiences to provide a better understanding of the pathway to reading achievement.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the search strategy for the literature review and presented the conceptual framework that provided the foundation for this study. Then, I reviewed the literature on reading instruction in elementary education, how teachers

approach individualized instruction, and the factors teachers experience that influence reading and literacy achievement. A summary of the literature concludes this chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review was compiled by systematically summarizing the topics necessary to guide the study effectively. The identified topics were used to source relevant literature from established sources and peer-reviewed articles related to the subject under investigation. The literature study was conducted by obtaining information from Walden University's online library and from searching electronic sources, educational publications, professional literacy websites, and online databases, including APA EBSCO, Education Source, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Sage, ScienceDirect, ProQuest Central, Walden Dissertations, and APA PsychInfo. Additionally, I used Google Scholar to expand the search for supplementary peer-reviewed articles relevant to this research.

Key search terms and word combinations included *reading gap*, *elementary literacy*, *literacy skills*, *differentiated instruction*, and *teachers' experiences with reading achievement and development*. I used both APAPsycInfo and Education Source databases for *reading gap* and *literacy*. I used Education Source and APAPsycInfo to search for *differentiated instruction*, *elementary literacy*, and *teachers' experiences with reading achievement and development*. For the terms *reading gap*, *literacy*, and *elementary reading*, I used Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, and Sage. Key terms were used individually and in combination to generate relevant results. Additional resources were located from references cited in studies published in recent peer-reviewed

journals. Peer-reviewed results yielded by searches for similar and relevant studies dated from 2020 were considered appropriate and relevant to this study's literature review.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study was grounded in the DI model that enables teachers to strategically plan their lessons to meet the educational needs of groups of students (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). According to Tomlinson (1999), the DI model suggests that teachers should examine and respond to students' diverse learning needs to promote reading success by adjusting instructional strategies.

DI is a model that teachers can use to convey content using a learner-centered approach (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). The DI model assisted in providing an understanding of the factors that influence literacy achievement among elementary school students and the teachers' experiences in addressing individualized literacy instruction within their classrooms.

Tomlinson's work builds on foundational theories from researchers such as Vygotsky (1978), who proposed the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and Gardner (2015), who introduced the theory of multiple intelligences. Lev Vygotsky's ZPD theory states that to maximize learning, tasks should be just outside of a student's current ability level. Students could then bridge the knowledge gap by using their social support system to scaffold their work. The theory of ZPD is foundational to DI because responsive instruction and readiness are components of instructional decision making in a differentiated classroom (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Similarly, Howard Gardner's model of intelligence preferences (2015) can be seen in the DI practice of creating learner

profiles. The model of intelligence preferences outlines various areas in which a learner has a particular strength, such as interpersonal ability and verbal-linguistic ability (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) extended Gardner's theory to include the continual process of studying, understanding, and building learners' profiles to differentiate the key components of DI.

Differentiated Instruction and Elements of Modification

The DI model identifies four elements that teachers can modify to respond to student needs: content, process, product, and affect (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

Content: Management and Planning Instruction

Gathering data to track individual students' progress informs teachers which instructional content students are ready to learn in the classroom (Oslund et al., 2021). Heikka et al. (2023) found that time for planning, assessment, and development was essential in teachers' contractual schedules to teach young children effectively. This research aligns with that of Hordern (2021), who found that teachers who manage data and thoughtfully recontextualize content in their planning were more likely to achieve their instructional goals.

Data from student profiles, formative assessments, and student interest allows for planning content accessible to students (McMaster et al., 2020). Student learning profiles encompass how a student approaches learning (Melesse & Belay, 2022). Generally, a profile would include a student's learning or cognitive style, intelligence preferences, culture, and gender (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Research findings from Melesse and Belay (2022) include that differentiating content should take priority over the process

when planning for the content students need to learn. This component related to the current study by connecting teachers' instruction preparation to their experiences supporting students in reading.

Process: Instructional Strategies in an Inclusive Classroom Environment

A fundamental practice for DI teachers is to strategize and develop instructional methods to accommodate and support the individual student's abilities, interests, learning styles, and motivation levels (Tomlinson, 2014). DI encourages the use of inclusive teaching strategies that allow teachers to incorporate tools and resources from diverse backgrounds and cultures (Tomlinson, 2022). This demonstrates to students that all contributions and levels of progress are valued, regardless of background (Borgonovi et al., 2021; Chan, 2022; Evans et al., 2020). As teaching strategies are determined, teachers who use the DI model ensure that students have equal access to the necessary resources to promote engagement with the educational content (Hossain, 2024).

DI allows for students' fluid management and movement within a classroom based on data, ability, and interest (Boldrini et al., 2023). Flexible grouping strategies allow teachers to tailor instruction to diverse student needs and promote differentiated learning opportunities (Ruotsalainen et al., 2022). Grouping strategies can foster collaboration between students with similar abilities by providing targeted instruction to groups facing similar challenges and accommodating various learning preferences within the same class (Borgonovi et al., 2023; Chan, 2022; Evans et al., 2020). Mixed-ability groups can be formed to foster peer learning, which promotes opportunities among

students with different literacy and language proficiency levels (Clark et al., 2023; Manak et al., 2022; Martinez & Plevyak, 2020).

Research indicates that DI strategies foster an inclusive and effective learning environment to accommodate students' varied needs while focusing on their strengths and addressing their weaknesses regardless of their background and environmental influences (Borgonovi et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2022; Shareefa, 2023). Individualized learning provides a motivating environment for students by accommodating their learning styles, interests, and ability levels (Borgonovi et al., 2023; Chan, 2022; Evans et al., 2020). The component of process aligns with the study's focus by illustrating how teachers adapt instructional strategies to meet students' individual literacy needs.

Product: Constructive Feedback

According to the DI model, ongoing formative assessments and individualized feedback are essential for tracking student progress and guiding literacy instruction (Borgonovi et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014). Continuous assessment and feedback strategies help teachers provide support in evaluating an individual's personal growth and development (Karst et al., 2022; Phelps & Bridgeman, 2022). Individual feedback sessions also assist teachers in determining the ability of students to participate in specific and differentiated activities (Borgonovi et al., 2021; Chan, 2022; Evans et al., 2020). Researchers (Reilly et al., 2019; Siddiq & Scherer, 2019; Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2006) have also found that ongoing assessment strategies equip teachers to actively engage and communicate with parents and caregivers, enabling additional and continuous support outside the classroom environment. Determining students' ability

levels through initial and formative assessment is necessary to prepare individualized strategies to support literacy development (McMaster et al., 2020; Shareefa, 2023). The component of product relates to the current study by connecting the supports teachers need to implement individualized instruction effectively.

Affect: Attention to Students' Emotional Needs

Schools today have responded to the widespread need for student safety and emotional needs in the classroom (Henriksen & Gruber, 2024). Research has found that using the DI component of attention to students' self-regulated learning also supports students' ownership of their learning (Hirt et al., 2021). Researchers reported that teachers with a growth mindset philosophy are attuned to each student's academic and emotional needs, which aids in a sense of community within the classroom (Gheysens et al., 2022). This sense of community enables teachers to create small groups of learners who are comfortable and accepting of each other (Tomlinson, 2017). The components of *affect/environment* were relevant to this study by connecting teachers' mindsets to the implementation of individualized instruction for struggling readers.

Summary of DI Elements Relevant to this Study

Historically, the DI model's components have helped emphasize the importance of identifying and addressing gaps in literacy among elementary school students (Evans et al., 2020). While this model has been widely adopted in schools, its role as the link between teachers' experiences with individualized instruction and the needs of students with learning differences (Shareefa, 2023) remains underexplored in current research regarding its influence on teachers' use of individualized instruction to support diverse

learners (Gheysens et al., 2022; Ruotsalainen et al., 2022). The current study benefits from the DI framework due to its established place in educational institutions (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). I used the conceptual framework to guide the alignment of the research question with qualitative research design and study methods.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

Several key concepts were identified during the preparation for this study that relate to teachers' experiences with individualized instruction to support struggling readers. While *differentiation* is a term that implies prescribed content to a heterogeneous class of students, *individualization* is used to describe a plan of teaching by using a learner's unique learning characteristics to assimilate and accommodate new information when constructing new knowledge (Manea et al., 2023). Existing literature on individualized instruction in reading identifies several key concepts: learning differences, instructional theories, pedagogical strategies and tools, and the role of technology (Morgan et al., 2024). This literature review presented research on potential barriers to utilizing individualized instruction approaches in their classrooms (Heikka et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2022).

Learning Differences in Reading

Vaughn and Barnes (2023) categorized learning differences as any challenges students experience when learning to read. They found that linguistic comprehension was a key precursor to the development of reading comprehension, which may influence the wide range of learning differences within a classroom. Subsequent research supports these findings (Murray, 2021; Terry et al., 2022; Weadman et al., 2023) regarding the

timing of foundational skills and the related vulnerabilities experienced by students with reading challenges. Bonte and Brem (2024) researched the biological and behavioral influences on students' reading ability. They found that by using a multistage analysis model of a child's learning path, educators could understand a student's potential need for tailored support in reading. Other research findings (McTigue et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024; Vasilyeva et al., 2021) pointed to the influence of age and gender on learning differences, which teachers must consider when individualizing instruction in reading.

Individualized Instruction Theory

The literature review on teachers' experiences with individualized instruction supports the idea of focusing on the unique and highly personal process of becoming a proficient reader (Tomlinson, 2014). This is meaningful because the purpose of the present study is to explore teachers' experiences with individualized reading instruction to support learning differences in struggling readers. Teachers' views of best literacy practices can vary depending on the teacher's pedagogy, qualifications, and experience (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021; Gatlin-Nash et al., 2021; Manak et al., 2022) but should consistently reflect responsive and contextually situated instruction. Ginja and Chen (2020) found that teachers have varying ideas about defining and implementing individualized instruction, which can result in an imbalanced or inconsistent delivery of the reading curriculum. Consequently, teachers often revert to less individualization and more scripted versions of delivery, which do not account for learning differences (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021; Fien et al., 2021; Nalipay et al., 2023). Some researchers (Gatlin-Nash et al., 2021; Husband & Kang, 2020) found that various biases may affect

teachers' prediction of reading proficiency performance, resulting in a conscious or unconscious lowering of expectations for some reading students. However, Shareefa (2023) found that teachers with higher qualifications had a greater impact on consistently implementing individualized instruction and had more positive outcomes than teachers with experience alone.

Practices That Support Individualized Instruction

Language Development as a Literacy Component

Researchers have established that the processes involved in fostering strong reading skills in students include comprehensive, multifaceted approaches that require the involvement of families, communities, teachers, and policymakers to ensure that students receive the holistic support they need (Miller & Khatib, 2023; Quick et al., 2024).

Duncan et al. (2023) emphasized the value of early oral language skill development at home and school, which is necessary for students to develop practical communication skills to enhance their social, personal, and academic development within different environments. Similarly, another study (Mues et al., 2023) connected early language to later reading outcomes. DI supports early introduction to language as it also exposes students to different language structures and communication styles, developing their comprehension abilities within various contexts (Mues et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2017).

Research in child development highlights that children must be exposed to spoken and written language to facilitate the comprehension and expression of vocabulary that will aid them in creating meaning within different subject areas, addressing the gap in reading (Weadman et al., 2023). Hautala et al. (2024) built upon the concept of early

language skills by asserting that developing narrative skills, such as participating in coherent conversations, supports engagement while encouraging students to build reading and other literacy skills.

Rich Curriculum and Individualized Instruction

Individualized instruction supports the concept of engagement through a rich curriculum, which includes additional activities to enhance reading and literacy skills (Borgonovi et al., 2023). One study found that dramatizing narratives increases motivation and can benefit struggling readers as they can physically engage with the content (Evans et al., 2022; Hautala et al., 2024). McTigue et al. (2021) also found that allowing students to participate in reading projects with kinesthetic engagement opportunities can assist them in creating a link between reading and external contexts. Studies found that linking reading to real-life situations can encourage students to engage with reading material and activities (Turkstra et al., 2020; Ziegler et al., 2023). Martinez and Plevyak (2020) reported that many students struggle to engage with reading material or topics introduced in the classroom, displaying limited interest in the material or high distractibility. Wheeler (2023) reported that drawing, acting, and games motivated reluctant or shy readers to engage with reading instruction. This research-supported strategy aligns with the principles of individualized instruction by focusing on the needs of individual students in a manner that would promote their learning experiences and reach the intended educational outcomes (Leathers, 2020; Morris, 2023).

According to researchers (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021; Manak et al., 2022), teachers reported that struggling readers often display less interest overall in reading and

language than proficient readers, which may influence students' participation in reading activities. One researcher (Montgomery, 2022) found that traditional classroom curricula may not align with topics that interest individual students, affecting their motivation to actively participate in reading. Melzi et al. (2023) found that various reading materials and appropriate reading resources can aid in promoting interest in participating in reading activities in the classroom. This aligns with DI principles that support student interest when selecting material for individualized instruction. Research supports that students benefit when teachers select reading materials catering to various interests, including comic books, mysteries, adventure stories, and content related to science and technology (Rizzuto & Steiner, 2022). However, additional research literature finds that allowing students to choose their reading material can lead them to read their selected content (Borgonovi et al., 2023). Researchers (Leathers, 2020; Morris, 2023) also found that students who express interest in specific subjects, such as STEM-related areas, more readily engage in reading. Research findings on self-regulated learners support giving students autonomy in their learning process (Hirt et al., 2021).

Multitiered Support Systems

Multitiered support systems (MTSS) are widely used in U.S. schools to organize reading instruction due to response to intervention (RTI) initiatives; however, research has focused primarily on math interventions, leaving teachers to use class-wide reading instruction and interventions on their own (Maki et al., 2022). Researchers have emphasized the need for more evidence-based MTSS practices integrated into classroom instruction (Fien et al., 2021; Maki et al., 2022; Puzio et al., 2020). This means

remediation of class-wide difficulties must occur when a large percentage of the class is not reading proficiently (Maki et al., 2022). In the research, some teachers expressed confusion about how the decision-making processes are used when schools implement individualized instruction outside of the classroom (Fien et al., 2021; Puzio et al., 2020). Those teachers expressed interest in how differing instructional practices are matched with the various needs of students served by RTI (Oslund et al., 2021; Papanthymou & Darra, 2022), as there is no universal consensus regarding prescribed intervention practices.

Influence of Technology on Individualized Instruction

Current research (Huang et al., 2023; Van Schoors et al., 2023) has highlighted the use of adaptive educational technology to assist or potentially reduce the instructional workload for teachers implementing individualization. The same research found that adaptive technology improves student reading outcomes. Conversely, Frank (2025) suggests that technology-based instruction limits the human aspect of learning and attention to the quality of material used in the name of progress, reducing teachers' involvement and influence in the learning process.

Some literature supports that curricula with technology components may assist teachers in developing instructional methods that cater to each student's individual needs (Lee et al., 2022; Sáez & Irvin, 2022). These approaches included using educational apps and multimedia resources relevant to each student's level of understanding. While teachers were reported to understand the value of technology used to support readers, they also did not use it reliably (Van Schoors et al., 2023). In contrast, one current study

(Salmerón et al., 2023) warns of potentially hampering student reading development when digital devices are introduced to lower elementary grades. However, Salmerón et al. (2023) also reported positive results of digital drill and practice routines, especially when used with much older, low-achieving students.

Today, Digital Personalized Learning (DPL) is used in many schools in the United States (Van Schoors et al., 2023). DPL can consider learner characteristics, adapt to various environments, be customized by the teacher, and provide visual feedback to the learner. While this type of technology benefits teachers, it also requires them to be aware of constraints and use critical judgment to avoid any pitfalls of developing technology.

A learning management system, or LMS, is a widely used technological platform for screening, creating data-based pathways, assessments, and recommendations for reading instruction. Some LMSs, such as the iReady and AIMSweb platforms, are adaptive and can adjust the instructional path based on a student's performance (Morgan et al., 2024). While these platforms require training and specific technological requirements, teachers can use them to gain valuable insight and data on a student's growth in reading, thus removing some burden of individualizing instruction (Van Schoors et al., 2023).

Barriers to Successful Implementation

Research findings from the existing literature suggest that teachers experience several challenges developing and promoting meaningful and effective individualized reading experiences for all (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021; Gatlin-Nash et al., 2021; Manak

et al., 2022). Pozas et al. (2023) and Manak et al. (2022) reported that their findings revealed that some teachers find individualized instruction a demanding job obligation due to a lack of planning time and adequate training. The barriers preventing teachers from fully implementing individualized instructional strategies in their classrooms include large class sizes, lack of training and support, inconsistent prior knowledge, standardized testing pressure, administrative support and expectations, and time constraints (Al-Shaboul et al., 2021; Pozas et al., 2023). Chan and Wong (2022) found that teachers often felt pressure when starting individualized instruction despite overall positive perceptions of individualized instruction. Bester and Conway (2021) found that teacher perception of reading curriculum influenced the efficacy of DI practices. In practicing DI, teachers often felt a lack of support from their surroundings and unclear implementation mechanisms but also recognized the overall benefit of tailoring instruction to students' individualized needs (Chan & Wong, 2022; Salleh et al., 2022). Additionally, Kucirkova et al. (2021) found that educators were optimistic about technological assistance with DI but remained wary of privacy intrusion for the students and the daunting task of keeping up with training and personnel support as technology advances.

Teachers often feel the pressure of high expectations from students, parents, and administration (McMakin et al., 2023). High burnout and job dissatisfaction can result when educational staff feel unsupported (Tian & Guo, 2024). High-stakes testing and accountability, little time for planning and preparation, and limited opportunities were identified as reasons for burnout (Ruble et al., 2023). These reported issues are relevant

to this study because they may provide insight into the dynamics of using individualized instruction when supporting learning differences in students.

Large Class Sizes

Large class sizes pose significant challenges to individualized instruction strategies as they limit teachers' opportunities to interact with individual students (Adamu et al., 2022). Teachers may struggle to focus on addressing the requirements of students with diverse needs, limiting individualized feedback and attention (Aranha, 2025). Teachers should also be prepared to adjust these strategies to accommodate students' progression from one level to the next within a limited time frame (Adamu et al., 2022).

Space limitations and the need for additional resources can pose logistical challenges, especially when organizing small group activities with kinesthetic elements (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). It can be challenging for teachers to ensure that collaborative learning occurs and that all students actively participate in their individualized tasks, especially with multiple and diverse student needs (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Evaluation, assessment, and feedback processes can be daunting, especially when implementing continuous assessment practices (Adamu et al., 2022). Large classes limit the time teachers have available to focus on providing individualized feedback, hampering teachers' abilities to develop strategies to promote each student's learning (Aranha, 2025). Large class sizes can also present classroom management challenges, which can include the influence of the demands of DI on the general management of the classroom (Alghamdi et al., 2019). Teachers experience challenges in managing the

combination of implementing individualized instruction strategies with unmanageable classroom and administrative duties, which can negatively impact learning and student behavior (Aranha, 2025).

Lacking Training, Knowledge, and Support

A lack of sufficient training can lead to misunderstanding the implications of individualized instruction in a classroom (Gatlin-Nash et al., 2021; Montgomery, 2022), limiting knowledge of the core principles, strategies, and methodologies needed to ensure that individualized teaching is successfully implemented. This limited understanding of the methodological principles can lead teachers to struggle with developing multiple, multilevel lesson plans, activities, and assessment strategies (Howell et al., 2021); however, the successful application of specific strategies aids teachers and students in achieving their educational goals.

Numerous factors can help implement systematic approaches to support teachers in effectively individualizing classroom instruction, specifically to address learning differences (Aranha, 2025; Evans et al., 2020). Access to adequate resources, administrative support, training, and development opportunities, including the time needed to plan and implement the appropriate instructional strategies, will assist teachers in facilitating inclusive and supportive teaching environments (Alghamdi et al., 2019).

Summary and Conclusions

The literature reviewed indicated the need for teachers' input to support struggling readers in today's schools. While research has established the underperformance of elementary students on national English language arts assessments,

minimal recent research focuses on teachers' experiences with individualized reading instruction to support struggling readers at the elementary level. Because nationwide and state-level initiatives have already been implemented to ensure grade-level reading proficiency for all, teachers' ability to effectively support all readers remains unclear. This study aimed to help fill this research gap.

Chapter 3 detailed the research design, rationale for interviewing reading teachers, ethical considerations, and data collection and analysis procedures. I explained how the literature gap connected to this study's design and the rationale for interviewing reading teachers. I concluded by reporting on the trustworthiness and ethical procedures used in collecting data for this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore elementary school teachers' experiences with individualized instruction. Data were collected through personal interviews with elementary reading teachers. This chapter presents the research design and rationale, describes my role as the researcher, and outlines the methodology, including participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and a summary of the chapter are also included.

Research Design and Rationale

This basic qualitative study was conducted based on the research question: What are elementary school teachers' experiences with individualized instruction to support learning differences? The DI framework and my review of the current literature regarding individualized instruction supported this research question. By exploring how teachers support learning differences by using individualized instruction, this study adds to the body of literature regarding practices that improve student outcomes.

A basic qualitative design was appropriate for this study because it enabled the exploration of teachers' lived experiences through in-depth interviews, focusing on their perceptions and practices related to individualized instruction (Tisdell et al., 2025). This approach was selected over quantitative or mixed-methods designs, which emphasize numerical data, as the research aimed to capture subjective experiences.

I selected the qualitative design after considering other research designs. A quantitative design would require gathering numerical data, which was not the

experiential data that I sought to explore. Similarly, a mixed-method design was not chosen due to the necessity of integrating numerical data. Because this study will address teachers' shared experiences, a phenomenological design was deemed most appropriate. According to Burkholder et al. (2020), a phenomenological design best describes the essence of a shared group experience. In the current study, the shared group experience was that of second-grade through fourth-grade reading teachers and how they support learning differences with individualized instruction.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was as an interviewer. To explore teachers' experiences, I collected data by recording and transcribing interviews as stated by the participants. During the research, I was not present to observe the participants in their classrooms, as this may have influenced participant behavior. The open-ended interview approach was selected because it enables verbal exchange where meaning is constructed (Crabtree & Miller, 2023). Through this discourse, eight participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000) were explored. I had no personal, professional, supervisory, or instructional relationship with any participants I interviewed for this study.

As a teacher with almost 20 years of experience in literacy instruction as an elementary reading specialist and interventionist, I realized I may have some instructional biases regarding teaching students various reading skills, so I practiced reflexivity to critically examine my assumptions and perspectives. I mitigated these biases by practicing reflexivity, member-checking, and triangulation. I adhered to Walden University's IRB guidelines regarding consent, privacy, and other ethical issues. While I

have not led any professional development sessions in the state under current study, I am aware of potential perceptions other teachers may have because I disclosed my role as a doctoral student in a collegiate reading program. Ravitch and Carl (2021) describe the role of a critical researcher as one who is aware of roles and identities. By excluding teachers with whom I have a personal or professional relationship, I avoided any conflicts of interest or potential biases.

I developed an interview protocol to guide the interview process and data collection. This structure ensured that my role and identity as a teacher did not influence the study's findings. An interview protocol is used to ensure consistency and reliability. I did not conduct interviews during school hours to limit bias. I used open-ended questions and probes to avoid any leading responses. After reviewing the transcribed responses verbatim, I member-checked to reinforce credibility and reduce potential conflicts of interest. Member-checking is a method of participant feedback where responses are checked to reflect interviewees' perceptions accurately (Burkholder et al., 2020). These considerations aligned with establishing trustworthiness and managing potential bias and are referred to as triangulation.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

I used purposeful sampling to select eight to 12 participants with certified experience teaching second-grade through fourth grade who provide reading instruction in their classrooms. State regulations regarding grade-level retention laws currently impact these teachers. A participant pool of eight to 12 was selected based on studies

with a similar design and when saturation was recognized. There is a possible population of 32 prospective participants in the surrounding school districts, as confirmed by faculty lists on school websites. All teachers had at least 2 years of elementary public school experience in the Southeast United States. This ensured enough experience to adequately reflect upon their time using individualized instruction in the classroom and experience with recent proficiency-based retention laws (Tennessee Department of Education, 2023).

After receiving Walden University's IRB approval, superintendent approval, and consent from building principals, I asked the superintendent to send an emailed announcement about this study to the district faculty. Once I confirmed that the participants meet the study's criteria, I emailed the 32 potential participants using their school email addresses. They were informed of the study (Appendix A) and asked to participate in interviews about their instructional experiences. Once the participants signed consent forms and all approvals were received, I scheduled virtual meetings to conduct the interviews. These interviews continued until saturation was achieved and no new information was provided by participants (see Tisdell et al., 2025).

Instrumentation

Data collection instruments included individual interviews that I conducted based on the research question that guided the current study. I assumed the role of data collector and analyst. The ethical guidelines of the Walden IRB informed the semistructured interview process. Once approved, the interview protocol for acquiring consent from appropriate administrators and participants began. It consisted of open-ended questions (Appendix B) based on the DI framework and related research from the literature review.

Follow-up questions were included for clarity or elaboration if needed. I used a web conferencing tool to record the personal interviews to ensure that transcription is verbatim. Responses to interview questions were analyzed for repeated themes and sufficiency in answering the research question.

The research instrument was developed to explore individual teachers' experiences with supporting learning differences with individualized instruction. The interview construct followed a protocol, and the questions were created to gather information about each participant's background and experiences. The interview questions (Appendix B) were the only data source for this qualitative study (see Saldaña, 2021) and were based on interview literature (Gheysens et al., 2022).

Content validity was established through Creswell and Miller's (2000) framework for determining validity. I began the instrument development procedure by creating interview questions relevant to this study's research question. Questions were reviewed by a reading interventionist supervisor at the research site to ensure the questions were appropriate and understandable. By developing the interview protocol, I identified the instrument objective and evaluated it for alignment with the present study's conceptual framework. The responses that were recorded reflected the participants' experiences with individualized instruction in their own words. Participants had the opportunity to check responses to react to data and the final narrative. Each participant was debriefed and allowed to discuss any concerns related to the study. This ensured that each participant felt valued in their role throughout the interview process. The responses confirmed by the participants provided sufficient data to answer the research question thoroughly from

varying perspectives. The interview process discontinued once saturation had been reached. Transcribed responses were saved digitally for later analysis of recurring themes. An email thanking each participant was sent after each interview.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Once all approvals were obtained, I began the recruitment process via Walden email. Interested participants who responded to my email were confirmed by building administration, informed of the study, and scheduled in the order of response for an interview in the following week(s). I interviewed participants via a scheduled web conference. After informing participants of the interview protocol, the semistructured interviews were automatically recorded for data accuracy and lasted no longer than 60 minutes for each participant. If the recruitment plan resulted in the need for more participants, I would have expanded the participant pool to the neighboring county which supports ten additional public elementary schools. The appropriate consent and approval would have been obtained from district leaders, administration, and participants.

Participants exited the study after responding to each interview question and additional prompts for elaboration or clarity. I thanked each participant for volunteering and offered each a chance to member check the data retrieved from the interview. This further ensured the validity of the data by confirming the accuracy of each participant's responses, with the opportunity to follow up if necessary.

Data Analysis Plan

I used Saldaña's (2021) approach to analyze the data from participant interviews by creating meaning through depth of understanding. After carefully reviewing each

transcribed interview session, I used in vivo coding. In vivo coding is an analysis strategy that uses participants' own words as codes. Qualitative researchers use visual depictions, symbolic elements, and metaphoric expressions for naming codes, sorting for categories, and analyzing for themes (Saldaña, 2021). I found commonalities that revealed meaning by focusing on this study's research question as a guide. Using these codes, I sorted and summarized each into separate data files. Once the data had been sorted, I combined common themes and concepts to build a complete picture of participants' experiences. Any patterns or combinations of data that added insight into the responses to the interview questions were developed into a new thematic category. This coding method was utilized to guarantee the accuracy and validity of the presented data (Saldaña, 2021).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a researcher's confidence level in the sources and methods used to collect relevant data (Burkholder et al., 2020). Trustworthiness is often interchanged with the qualitative term validity. I established trustworthiness in this study by applying credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to the research processes and reporting of data in the present study. These combined strategies assisted with the validity of the present study (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Credibility in research demonstrates that the findings in a study are believable, rigorous, and valid (Morse, 2018). This was achieved by conducting interviews with multiple educators who have firsthand experience in the field, providing thick descriptions, having a clearly defined research question, member-checking, and having

the research reviewed by my doctoral chairs. Further, interviews were limited to a maximum of 60 minutes to respect the participants' time engaging in the dialogue.

Transferability is the degree to which one study's findings will transfer to another situation. Transferability is established when a researcher provides thick descriptions of the setting of a study so that readers can easily make their own decisions about applicability to other scenarios (Burkholder et al., 2020). I provided a thick description, meaning extensive details of the context in which the data were gathered. Readers can judge the transferability to other research findings due to the detailed data descriptions.

Dependability is the degree to which a given study can be replicated with the same context, methods, and participants to achieve similar results (Shenton, 2004). To establish dependability in the present study, I provided details to enable a future investigator to replicate my work. Tisdell et al., (2025) explain how audit trails can describe decisions made during data collection and how categories were derived. Through detailed descriptions, I established dependability by using audit trails.

Confirmability is based on the neutrality of the data collected so that other informed researchers can arrive at the same conclusions upon examining the same qualitative data (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). I established confirmability by member-checking this study's participants and demonstrating reflexivity by documenting my biases in a reflective journal. The process of ensuring personal biases and interpretations established the confirmability of the present study.

Ethical Procedures

Walden University's IRB will ensure that this study complies with ethical standards when accessing participants and data. Once approval was obtained from the IRB, the district leaders, and building principals, invitation letters were emailed to potential participants. Responding participants received consent forms with full disclosure of the intended study, information regarding the confidentiality of the information provided, and procedures used to maintain such confidentiality, such as protected emails and secure internet transmissions. Participants were informed of how data would be used and reported anonymously, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation and ability to withdraw from the participant pool at any time.

To ensure the confidentiality of all participants, I used codes in all data and did not identify their associated schools. Each participant was informed of all risks and procedures undertaken to minimize such risks. All data remains secure in password-protected electronic files for the Walden IRB's recommended time.

Summary

The problem addressed in this study was the lack of understanding regarding teachers' experiences with individualized instruction to support learning differences. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences with individualized instruction in a Southeast U.S. public school district. In this chapter, I explained the research design and rationale for the study, which addresses the problem and the purpose of this study. I then described the methodology for selecting participants and the instrumentation for collecting data. The recruitment and data collection

procedures were detailed, and a comprehensive plan was developed to analyze the collected data. Issues of trustworthiness were also explained in detail, along with my plan regarding establishing each component required for this qualitative study. Finally, I revealed my plans to maintain high ethical standards using Walden University's IRB to guide my treatment of participants and data. Detailed results are discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to describe teachers' experiences with individualized instruction to support learning differences. The following research question guided this study: What are elementary teachers' experiences with individualized instruction that supports learning differences? This chapter explores elementary teachers' experiences with implementing individualized instruction in their classrooms, offering insight into how they adapt teaching strategies to meet diverse student needs. It also details the methodological procedures used to gather data that support the study's central purpose.

The chapter describes the educational setting and participant demographics, providing a foundational understanding of the environment in which the study was conducted. Further, this chapter explains the methods used to collect qualitative data, including interview protocols, observational strategies, and the analytical framework applied to interpret findings. This chapter also presents the strategies employed to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research, such as member checking, triangulation, and audit trails. Next, a section summarizes the core findings, highlighting patterns and themes that emerged from the data and illustrating how teachers navigate the challenges and benefits of individualized instruction. Finally, this chapter concludes with a synthesis of the chapter's content, which then leads to subsequent discussion and interpretation in Chapter 5.

Setting

This study took place in one suburban school district in the southern United States. The school district is one of the largest in the state and one of the fastest growing. Enrollment has grown from 25,000 in the 2000–2001 school year to 52,000 in the 2024–2025 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). Semistructured interviews for this study took place via Teams, a video-conferencing platform, which was the preferred method of contact for the interviewees. Interviews were conducted outside of teaching hours, either while the interviewees were at home or in their classroom, immediately after the school day was complete. The school where I am employed was not included in the 20 elementary schools in the district to reduce any influence of bias or professional relationships.

Demographics

The data for this study were gathered from eight certified general education teachers with at least 2 years of experience as a classroom teacher in my school district. The reason for selecting this experience level was to ensure that each participant had 1 full year teaching with end-of-year state testing and individualized instruction within their classroom. The participants in this study were all certified teachers in elementary classrooms. The study included participants who were second-grade through fourth-grade teachers, four of whom had experience in multiple grade levels. These grade levels were selected because recent educational legislation has the most impact on them. Participants were selected from 19 elementary schools in the district and represented four of those

schools. All teachers identified as female and had a range of experience from 2 to 24 years. Information on the participants' experience is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Information on Participants' Teaching Experience

Participant	Grades taught	Years teaching reading
P1	K, 2nd, 3rd	10
P2	2nd, 3rd, 4th	8
P3	2nd, 3rd	7
P4	K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd	24
P5	4th	6
P6	2nd	3
P7	3rd	8
P8	2nd	2

Data Collection

Once the IRB (Approval No. 09-30-24-1020889) approved this study, I obtained consent from the district's Director of Schools, individual principal consent, and finally consent from the participants. While I received consent from eight principals, only teachers from four schools responded to my emailed request. I received responses from 12 potential participants. Four did not respond after initially expressing interest. I followed up with email requests for responses but did not receive any from those potential participants. I collected qualitative data from eight participants. All participants had reviewed the consent form and agreed to recorded interviews.

Over 5 weeks from December 2024 to January 2025, I conducted all semistructured interviews using Microsoft Teams to collect data for this study. Participants provided details about their experiences with individualized instruction using this method (Rowlands, 2021). When necessary, I asked probing questions to clarify and

elicit additional contextual responses (Carl & Ravitch, 2021). Semistructured interviews were appropriate for this study because excerpts from the interview transcripts can give the readers of this study an understanding of the participants' real lived experiences (Knott et al., 2022). Each interview was audio-recorded and securely saved to my laptop for later retrieval. Interviews lasted no longer than 60 minutes, which was sufficient time to build a rapport, describe the purpose of my study, disclose the security measures of the interview data, and conduct the interview. After the responses were given, I reiterated security precautions and offered each participant the option to review the transcription for member-checking purposes. Upon conclusion, participants were thanked and emailed a \$20 Amazon gift card. Once eight interviews were complete, saturation of the data was reached (Tight, 2023).

In this research, I ensured that data collection remained uniform throughout the study. The methodology was designed to maintain consistency across all interviews by adhering to the defined protocols. This approach minimized variability and ensured that interview questions and procedures were conducted under standardized conditions. I followed the same script to reinforce the reliability and validity of the resulting findings.

Data Analysis

Once I completed data collection, I reviewed each recording with its corresponding transcription for accuracy. This was done to ensure a true representation of the participants' responses. Automated transcription is limited by factors that include audio quality, overlapping dialogue, and contextual ambiguity. To ensure reliability, interviewers must preserve the intended meaning of the spoken content when reviewing

transcriptions. Any identified discrepancies were then corrected. Transcription length ranged from 19 to 54 double-spaced pages. I removed extraneous transcribed conversation, such as dialogue about personal children or pets. Participants reviewed their transcripts via email and confirmed accuracy. Next, as I read each transcript, I used In Vivo coding and highlighted relevant words and phrases to capture the participants' authentic voice (Saldaña, 2021). I began the process of second-cycle coding by applying specific colors to common terms and patterns. This made counting and sorting codes more efficient. Finally, I created a spreadsheet of terms and phrases that were relevant to this study's research question. Variations of terms were considered when identifying frequently repeated words within the transcripts. A comprehensive list of 30 coded terms, including their lexical variations, was compiled. From this list, broader thematic phrases were derived to capture the conceptual similarities among the codes. These synthesized phrases were then organized into 10 overarching categories. I consolidated these categories into the common themes I had noticed during analysis. This resulted in a final summary of four themes that related to the experiences of elementary reading teachers with individualized instruction for learning differences (Table 2). These themes are directly relevant to my research question: What are elementary reading teachers' experiences with individualized instruction for learning differences?

Table 2*Themes Related to Codes*

Codes	Categories	Themes
Ability, abilities	Foundational skills:	Theme 1: Participants experience a need for grade-level curriculum that includes foundational skills to aid in filling reading gaps.
Behavior(s)	Led to themes- 1, 2, 3	
Gap(s)	Derived from codes: 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 23,	Theme 2: Participants experience a need for additional training and materials to individualize learning for struggling readers.
Access, accessing, accessible	27, 29, 30	
Assess, assessing, assessment(s)	Instructional materials/supplies:	-Theme 3: Participants experience the need for additional support when instructing individual students with wide-ranging reading abilities and challenging behaviors.
Challenge(s), challenging	Led to themes- 1, 2	
Curricula, curriculum	Derived from codes: 4, 7, 9, 14, 18,	-Theme 4: Participants experience personal and professional stress from classroom demands, laws, and assessments when providing individualized instruction to struggling readers
Difference(s)	20, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30	
Differentiate(s), differentiation	Instructional methods:	
Disability, disabilities	Led to themes- 1, 2, 3	
Disruption(s)	Derived from codes: 1, 3, 7, 9, 14,15,	
Dyslexia, dyslexic	16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30	
Experience(s), experienced	Challenges/struggles:	
ESL, ELL	Led to themes- 1, 2, 3, 4	
IEP	Derived from codes: 1-30	
Individualize(d), individualization	Collaboration, learning, knowledge, professional development:	
Law	Led to theme- 2	
Motivate(s), motivated, motivation, motivator(s), motivating	Derived from codes: 1, 3, 5, 7-13, 16,	
Pressure(s)	18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 27	
Resource(s)	Professional/personal boundaries:	
Retention	Led to themes- 3, 4	
Strategy, strategies, strategically	Derived from codes: 2, 6, 11, 12, 14,	
Struggle(s), struggled, struggling	15, 19, 20, 26, 27	
Skill(s)	District curriculum:	
Text(s)	Led to themes- 1, 2	
Support(s), supporting, supportive	Derived from codes: 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9,	
Enough time	16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30	
Train(s), trained, training, PD	Laws, rules, mandates:	
Phonics	Led to themes- 3, 4	
Letters and sounds	Derived from codes: 2, 5, 7, 9-17, 19,	
	21, 27, 28	
	State assessments, screening:	
	Led to themes- 3, 4	
	Derived from codes: 1, 3, 5, 6, 12-15,	
	17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30	
	Student abilities:	
	Led to themes- 1, 2, 3, 4	
	Derived from codes: 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9,	
	10, 12-16, 20-24, 27-30	

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Researchers use certain criteria to evaluate qualitative research to ensure it is trustworthy and of high quality (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). According to Burkholder et al. (2020), trustworthiness is a researcher's confidence level in the sources and methods used to collect relevant data. Verification strategies during the development of qualitative research establish methodological trustworthiness between the elements of the research and the research question (Morse, 2018). In the following section, I will define and describe the data and methods that ensure the trustworthiness of my findings.

Credibility is also referred to as internal validity. A researcher's ability to consider varying complexities during data collection is considered when establishing credibility. This can be accomplished by using several methods that validate the collected data. I established credibility during the semistructured interviews by presenting thick description, triangulation, member checks, saturation, reflexivity, and peer review (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Transferability is the degree to which one study's findings will transfer to another situation. Transferability is established when a researcher provides descriptions of the setting of a study so that readers can easily make their own decisions about applicability to other scenarios (Burkholder et al., 2020). Readers of this study can judge the transferability to other research findings due to the detailed contextual descriptions, as opposed to replicating the study and its findings (Guba, 1981).

Dependability is the degree to which the collected data are dependable and stable. I presented a thorough and well-articulated rationale for the decisions made during data

collection, which were based on my research questions. This aided in establishing the dependability of my study, as it was outlined in this study's Methodology section of Chapter 3. Tisdell et al., (2025) explain that audit trails describe decisions made during data collection and how categories were derived during analysis. For further dependability, I used the audit trail method to provide details of how decisions were made during the data collection and analysis process, which were consistent with my research design.

Confirmability is based on the neutrality of the data collected. Other informed researchers can confirm the same qualitative data (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) while considering the author's inevitable biases. I established confirmability and reduced researcher bias by member-checking this study's participants and demonstrating structured reflexivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This reflexive practice was completed by documenting my subjective perspectives and biases in a reflective journal. The process of acknowledging personal biases and interpretations established the confirmability of the present study.

Results

Using the conceptual framework of Tomlinson's model of DI (Tomlinson, 2001), I identified categories that reflected common topics during participant interviews. These categories were then matched with similar categories that had emerged in the participants' responses. From those merged categories, I derived 10 common themes that related to my research question. Table 3 depicts the connection between this study's

research question and the themes that emerged. The following sections include participant interview data that supports each theme.

Table 3

Connection of Research Question to Themes

RQ	Theme	Description of Connection
What are elementary school reading teachers' experiences with individualized instruction practices to support students who learn differently?	Theme 1: Participants experience a need for grade-level curriculum that includes foundational skills to aid in filling reading gaps	-Participants express concerns about gaps in reading skills and the need for a structured curriculum to effectively support individualized instruction.
	Theme 2: Participants experience a need for additional training and materials to individualize learning for struggling readers.	-Participants experience challenges finding adequate professional development and instructional materials to meet the diverse needs of struggling readers.
	Theme 3: Participants experience the need for additional support when instructing individual students with wide-ranging reading abilities and challenging behaviors.	-Participants find that individualizing reading instruction for students with wide-ranging abilities and behaviors requires more support, such as trained additional staff.
	Theme 4: Participants experience personal and professional stress from classroom demands, laws, and assessments when providing individualized instruction to struggling readers	-Participants report workplace challenges due to the pressure of meeting individualized needs of struggling readers while balancing administrative expectations and standardized testing requirements.

Theme 1: Filling Gaps Through Foundational Skills Curriculum

The first theme to emerge from interviews was that participants experience a need for grade-level curriculum that includes foundational skills to aid in filling reading gaps.

All eight participants expressed challenges when implementing the district-approved curriculum to fill learners' foundational gaps. Research has shown that strong phonological and grapheme/phoneme practices in kindergarten and first-grade instruction are vital in building a solid background of literacy skills (Lane et al., 2025). The need to supplement the existing curriculum to remediate instructional gaps present in students upon entering the grade level can cause challenges in assessing student ability. P1 and P6 praised parts of the curriculum for providing useful formative assessments to gain some useful information on students' gaps. P1 explained, "I do think that the [curriculum-provided skill assessment] is pretty beneficial because you are able to see, based on how many words they read correctly or spelled, where their specific gaps are." P6 added,

The benchmarks and the screeners with our curriculum, the [curriculum-provided skill assessment] that we do just seeing can they spell? Can they decode? What's their fluency like? Just getting that initial data and then progress monitoring that I think is a really good indicator of what they can do and can't do.

Challenges With Curriculum

Participants were clear when describing the challenges of individualizing instruction to students who are still learning to identify letters. P2 stated, "I had three students in the same year that were non-readers in second grade." This participant struggled to individualize instruction because "all three had different issues" when identifying letters. P8 agreed that foundational skill gaps made it difficult to individualize for diverse learners, saying, "Teaching with such a range of abilities, we have kids that

are, you know, above-level and those that are below and struggling with even identifying letters, so it can be a challenge.” P4, who had the most years of experience, stated:

My end game is TCAP [Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program]. They have to be proficient or they should be proficient on TCAP, and there is not enough language and writing [in the district curriculum] ... Like, as in writing a paragraph to a prompt- that does not really exist a whole lot in [the curriculum], so you know, just over years and years teaching, I’ve kind of developed my own curriculum.

While some participants appreciate the suggestions for differentiation in their curriculum’s teacher manual, P7 said:

It gives you what they say is differentiated. But, it’s almost as if every lesson they have, like a few little tweaks, but it doesn’t really hit a large spectrum of challenges, so I feel like, you know, even what they consider to be that lower differentiated group or lesson is still way above what we sometimes need.

P5 had questions about teaching foundational skills while also providing grade-level texts:

You’re trying to teach them to a group of kids and then independently read a story and get the theme out of it. And then this kid can’t read his letters. Like, where do you start? How do you make that work?

Supplementing the Curriculum

P2 noted that useful information can be collected from the formative assessments included in the district-provided curriculum. P2 pointed out that it is science-backed and

that data can be collected frequently to provide instruction to help struggling readers. While extra data can inform instructional practices, many participants struggle to find the time to fill certain gaps. P1, P3, and P8 explained their methods to provide foundational skills to their students. P1 stated, “I’m just trying to fill in the gaps where I can. So, I bought a pack on Teachers Pay Teachers that is based on the [district curriculum].” P3 also shared that they had to explore other sources for filling gaps in foundational skills: “Using other outside resources like Common Lit or Read Works. Those types of passages to kind of help supplement to bring in that rigor or with Magnetic Reading. Or iReady, that’s been really good to use as intervention.” Searching for supplemental material often requires extra time, P8 mentioned:

Just like making sure, like, we have to a lot of times search for those extra outside of the curriculum passages that would be on level for those struggling readers. And so it’d be nice if that was provided with the curriculum and it’s really not.

Theme 2: Professional Development to Individualize Instruction

The next theme that emerged was that second-grade through fourth-grade reading participants experience a desire for training and resources to individualize learning for struggling readers. All participants expressed the need for access to professional development. All participants felt that relevant resources were necessary to individualize instruction to struggling readers. Some participants were unsure of the available training. Most expressed that the absence of useful resources often led to spending extra time and money to acquire them.

Access to Physical Resources

While P1, P5, P6, and P8 all mentioned that having more physical resources would aid them in supporting struggling readers, they also conceded that it took extra time to find the resources they needed. P1 and P5 stated that having an educational assistant for a longer period would allow them to address the individual needs of struggling readers. P5 said they think having “more people in school, like truly more EAs, more licensed, any honestly just people that can help, right? Like, that’s where I feel like things get impossible. It’s just ‘cause. I can’t do everything at once.”

P3, P6, and P8 expressed similar needs for additional reading instruction material to assist in providing individualized support for readers. P3 explained how their grade-level team needed to collaborate:

We were able to pull in our own resources because we do have to take TCAP and so for our kids to get ready, some of the [district curriculum] stuff is not as rigorous as what we need it to be.

P6 stated:

Sometimes I just wish we had just like a place to pull resources from. I mean the county does provide like a Padlet of resources, and we have the things from the curriculum. But as we all know, there’s things that we just don’t have sometimes that we wish we did, and that’s where we have to turn to TeachersPayTeachers.com or look in the old supply closets or ask a friend, and I wish we had kind of just on the school level. I wish we had just a place even like physical manipulatives or texts or things that we can grab passages from. It’s a lot

of digging and making copies, so that is something I wish we had, sometimes-like an inventory, I guess.

P8 said that even the physical texts from the curriculum were in short supply:

They'll have a passage that we put up on the screen, and they read from that, but yet it would be better if they had it in their hands. And they'll give us a few copies, like we'll get six copies of a text, but that's obviously not enough for every student to have it in front of them.

Additionally, P8 added that:

We have to a lot of times, search for that extra outside of the curriculum passages that would be on level for those struggling readers. And so it'd be nice if that was provided with the curriculum and it's really not—we have to search outside of the curriculum for that.

Specific Training on Individualized Instruction

P1 mentioned that the trainings offered by the school district were not “communicated as effectively as they should be.” When speaking about professional development training, P4 stated that they do not

feel like there's been a whole lot of training on it versus you just going and digging into the like the teacher module books, which I'm old and I'm not going to go home and bring it home and do it 'cause they don't pay me for that, sorry.

P5 felt the best way to be trained in individualized instruction with the district's curriculum would be to simply watch it being implemented. However, in their years of

teaching the current curriculum, they had never seen a lesson being taught by another teacher.

Participants 2, 3, and 7 agreed that specific training in the identification of needs and individualized instruction was necessary for assisting struggling learners. Regarding the characteristics of struggling readers, P7 stated:

I would love to see like more opportunities where we could learn more about specific learning disabilities- with things like dyslexia or dysgraphia or, you know, just specific learning disabilities we could see how to recognize them? How to address them? To see more of those markers and to have a little bit more training in them, because I feel like some of it, if we aren't aware of it and what to be looking for specifically, then it's getting missed until they get to a point to where now they're so far behind catching up is difficult.

P3 believed that every elementary reading teacher should have training in Orton-Gillingham phonics instruction to better support individualized instruction for struggling readers. P2 recognized the fact that despite districtwide professional development offerings, it would be ideal to customize training to the needs of each elementary reading teacher, especially “knowing that some teachers didn't do any preservice work. You know, they may be in there—they may be teaching.”

Theme 3: Support for Diverse Abilities and Behaviors

The next theme to emerge was that reading teachers in second-grade through fourth grades experience the need for additional support when instructing individual students with wide-ranging reading abilities and challenging behaviors.

Participants experienced difficulty managing the large variance of reading abilities in their classrooms with minimal support. Some reported having non-English speaking students, students unable to identify letters, and students who read proficiently at the fifth-grade level in one classroom. Others reported struggling to support inclusion students, students with dyslexia, and those with challenging behaviors while providing adequate literacy instruction to small groups during instructional time. Challenging and disruptive behaviors often lead to inefficient delivery of instruction and negative academic outcomes for struggling readers (van Dijk et al., 2024). P3 explained the struggle with encouraging students with learning challenges:

If I have one nonverbal and then one that is like very ... We are working really hard on it at school, but it's like, how do you get them to come to the table and want to read with you?

All participants expressed forms of interrupted learning in their classrooms, which, without adequate support, affects their ability to individualize instruction successfully. P5 stated:

I'm trying to just focus on reading. But then you have the trauma, the ESL [English as a second language], the homelessness, like all of that stuff, it feels like you're pulled in 1,000 directions and it's an impossible job to do, is what it feels like. And you don't feel like you did enough ever 'cause you haven't, but you can't—but in a day, like, where you have to evacuate the classroom, that is what it is, and that those kids just don't get what they should. It's only you, it was very difficult to get through a lesson—I think I had 2 days where I felt good about it.

Similarly, P6 stated that they were unsure if their ESL students were learning. P6 said, “I think about my ESL kids and sometimes it’s hard for me to know, like [what] to provide them with because it’s hard to know where the language barrier is versus just their reading.” P6 went on to explain the difficulties in determining their students’ reading deficits due to the limited time to collaborate with their school’s RTI and ESL teachers:

And then, you know, RTI is—we don’t see them much. And I think part of that is just our school, though, is the ESL and RTI are outside in portables. So we can’t—we send our kids there, they send them back. We don’t really even cross paths, but we definitely share information when needed. But otherwise it’s not—We don’t talk a whole lot or get a whole lot of support.

While motivating struggling readers can be challenging, P3, P4, P5, and P8 voiced that motivating grade-level students to read has become more challenging, despite individualization. P8 noted that the simple lack of interest can significantly reduce engagement in a text, while P3 stated,

Everything now is just so go, go, go—and so rigorous that, like our love of reading, is starting to be pulled away, because everything has to have a purpose rather than just reading for fun, if that makes sense.

P4 pointed to the current trend in personal devices as a reason for that lack of motivation, “The tablets and the video games and the things that they see like—I’m not a video game—I’m not as exciting as that.”

Teachers are typically familiar with classroom interruptions, such as fire drills, intruder drills, special events, sickness, and difficult students. P5 has seen more students display outright refusal to work than in previous years. This participant also mentioned that if one of the students begins to throw furniture, then there is no option but to evacuate the classroom while the situation is de-escalated by counselors or administration. When learning is interrupted by behavioral outbursts, the focus shifts from teaching students to protecting them. All participants stated that additional assistants in the classroom could diminish interruptions and increase the emphasis on individualized instruction for those who struggle to read the most.

Theme 4: Demands of the Classroom, State Initiatives, and Laws

The fourth theme that became evident was that second-grade through fourth-grade reading teachers experience challenges from classroom demands, laws, and assessments when providing individualized instruction to struggling readers. State lawmakers in which this study takes place have enacted a retention policy for public school third-grade students who do not meet specific reading proficiency levels. While several pathways exist to bypass the proficiency regulations, participants expressed increased pressure to ensure students meet grade-level proficiency promotion guidelines. The increase in high-stakes assessments has led to a similar increase in required accountability and responsibilities within the classroom. Teachers are required to monitor student progress, administer benchmark assessments, inform parents, make referrals for support services, uphold legal supports from IEP and 504 plans, as well as address any disruption in learning. The state test scores and benchmark assessment numbers are often used for

TVAAS (Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System) reporting, which determines teachers' professional success. The available time to learn and practice differentiated and individualized instruction is decreased, while the pressure to raise students' reading scores increases. P7 explained the high level of stress teachers experience when they said:

I think there's a lot of pressure with that, you know, we can see successes in some students that maybe come to us, you know, at a first-grade level. We get them to a mid-2nd grade, but they're still gonna show nothing on that test—when it comes down [to it], that's the number they're gonna look at to determine our success. So it's such a hard line. And then for them to put such a hard line on retention at that level is a lot.

Participants reported feeling the stressors of performing well on local and state assessments. The state retention law can dictate teachers' instructional focus, causing participants to express a lack of power. P5 stated, "It feels out of my control, to be honest with you." P2 noted that retention based on one state assessment was not always the answer:

We have another law for dyslexia that now requires all this reporting. Is that getting students better instruction and intervention to combat dyslexia? I don't know 'cause we're spending a lot of time writing documents, you know? So I just think it's a double-edged sword.

P2 also pointed out that holding a struggling child back from promotion "goes against every bit of research that can be found on retention—just because you're going to hold someone accountable for something, it doesn't necessarily improve practice." As the

participants agreed that rigor and fidelity to the curriculum were important for student success, they also frequently expressed feelings of increased responsibility and pressure to ensure every child's success through individualized instruction. Participant 7 taught for 5 years, then took a 17-year break to raise children and returned to teaching 4 years ago. Over that timespan, they observed a shift in school-home dynamics that decreased the shared responsibility of student success and promotion. In the past, homework or extra practice on individual skills could be sent home to supplement learning, but today P7 notices that:

[Whatever] we would send home is what they would do. And I feel like there's also not as much—I don't want to say support at home, but just there's a lot of like—the idea is that they learn at school and it's not as much of a partnership and we're trying to build that partnership [with parents]. I feel like there's a lot of where it's like, OK, you do that at school and then at home we'll do sports.

P6 also verbalized frustration with the focus on TCAP at school, while the students do not practice at home. P6 stated:

There's a pressure on us to give them those TCAP-style questions and to give them test-taking skills and I really do think they just they go home and they're on video games and iPads and TVs all night long and they just don't read and they're not read to. It's really hard to motivate them to [practice] outside of school.

Standardized state tests have provided teachers with useful data but can also create stress for teachers and students. The statewide law directs schools to retain students in third grade if they do not achieve levels of *met expectations* or *exceeded expectations* on the

TCAP English language arts assessment. P1 and P8 felt that retaining a student in third grade based on their TCAP score was unfair and too late. P1 stated:

I really think that the 3rd grade retention law should be bumped back to be a kindergarten retention law because first of all, kids used to be retained all the time in kindergarten, and it's honestly no big deal. It's way more embarrassing if a child gets retained in 3rd grade than in kindergarten.

P8 explained a similar perspective:

I feel like third grade is pretty late to catch some of these students. I feel like if we were going to hold students back, I would like to see it in earlier levels where they're getting foundational skills because once they're in third grade, they still aren't able to sound out. A lot more challenging, but yeah, my preference would be if they're going to hold students back, it should be earlier, but also teachers should have a lot more say on when that happens versus the government dictating that.

Finally, P5 emphasized a repercussion of high-stakes assessments and retention laws on teachers and students who struggle, by explaining, "With the retention law, I'm just, I say whatever. I'm calling their bluff. I've not seen anybody actually be held back. I don't care."

Summary

When interviewed, participants who were second-grade through fourth-grade reading teachers answered the research question: What are elementary school reading

teachers' experiences with individualized instruction practices to support students who learn differently?

Four themes recurred throughout the interviews. The first theme highlighted participants' experience needing a grade-level curriculum that includes foundational skills to aid in filling reading gaps. This was important because students who learn differently often have gaps in their foundational knowledge that must be addressed by classroom reading teachers. Curricula typically phase out phonics instruction by third grade, despite the participants' belief that phonics instruction is necessary for all struggling readers.

The second theme demonstrated the participants' desire for training and resources to assist in providing individualized learning for struggling readers. Participants expressed the ongoing need for specific training to best help struggling readers. They often felt unprepared to address the wide range of abilities, languages, and motivational obstacles that can be characteristic of struggling readers.

The third theme that was frequently discussed was that the participants experienced a lack of physical resources and assistants to aid in the process of individualized instruction for struggling readers. Schools sometimes had limited funds for educational assistants and appropriately leveled texts for individual students who face challenges in reading.

The fourth theme that was prevalent in the participants' interviews focused on the difficulties of trying to manage a classroom and individualize instruction while meeting their own performance goals and growth measures on standardized tests. As a result,

participants felt that state retention laws negatively impacted struggling readers. The Individualized instruction has become difficult to implement due to increasing classroom demands, the needs of increasingly diverse student groups, and pressures of state laws and initiatives.

The participants in this study each stated that they want all students to be successful. Their experiences with individualized instruction for struggling readers were challenged by obstacles in knowledge, lack of physical resources, limited curriculum, and restrictive mandates. The themes that were uncovered throughout the analysis of participant interviews may point to a better understanding of teachers' experiences with individualized instruction for students who struggle to read.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of elementary school reading teachers in implementing individualized instruction to support a variety of learners. I used qualitative methodology to examine second-grade through fourth-grade teachers' experiences by conducting open-ended semistructured interviews. Data were gathered and categorized into common themes to better understand participants' real-life experiences with individualized instruction in their classrooms. Key findings include the benefits of foundational reading skills in individualized instruction, the challenges of acquiring specific training and resources to implement individualized instruction, and the demands of educational laws and assessment deadlines. In Chapter 5, I interpret the connections between the findings and the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. I also discuss the limitations, recommendations, and implications of the findings. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a summary of the research.

Interpretation of the Findings

The purpose of this section is to relate the findings from this study to the peer-reviewed literature discussed in Chapter 2. The literature showed the implementation, benefits, and limits of using individualized instruction in elementary classrooms. Using the framework of Tomlinson's theory of DI, I explored the experiences of second-grade through fourth-grade teachers when using individualized instruction to support struggling readers and compared the findings to those found in previously published research from scholarly journals.

Learning Differences in Reading

Bonte and Brem (2024) examined the biological and behavioral factors that influence students' reading abilities. Their study demonstrated that employing a multistage analysis model of a child's learning trajectory can help educators identify the potential need for individualized reading support. Complementary research (McTigue et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024; Vasilyeva et al., 2021) highlighted the roles of age and gender in shaping learning differences, underscoring the importance of considering these variables when tailoring reading instruction to meet individual student needs. While supported in research (McTigue et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024), participants in this study did not list age or gender as characteristics that contribute to the diversity of struggling readers.

Individualized Instruction Theory

Ginja and Chen (2020) identified variability in teachers' interpretations and applications of individualized instruction, which may contribute to inconsistencies and unequal implementation of the reading curriculum. Teachers' perceptions of effective literacy practices often differ based on their pedagogical beliefs, qualifications, and professional experience (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021; Gatlin-Nash et al., 2021; Manak et al., 2022). However, regardless of these differences, literacy instruction should consistently be responsive to student needs and contextually grounded within the specific learning environment.

Practices That Support Individualized Instruction

Language Development as a Literacy Component

Vaughn and Barnes (2023) defined learning differences as the various difficulties students may encounter in the process of learning to read. Their research highlighted linguistic comprehension as a critical precursor to reading comprehension development, suggesting that variations in linguistic comprehension may contribute to the diverse learning differences observed among students in the classroom.

Two participants mentioned language development in terms of vocabulary and foundational skills, citing the challenges of having diverse language speakers, structured support students, and those from varied socioeconomic levels within one classroom. P4 noted that some students would benefit from more daily language development time:

A 20-to-30-minute dedicated language time. You know the vocabulary. A lot of that stuff comes from the home. You know, they say that, you know, like in your lower SES, you know, household the words that those kids hear are ‘No, stop it. Sit down. Be quiet.’ They don’t hear, ‘I need you to go, you know, put this in the chest of drawers or...’ You know, they don’t hear that vocabulary.

When asked how the language development of students necessitates modification of instructional materials, P5 stated:

I would say we have been able to, especially with AI. You can bump any text down a level and it automatically does it for you, so it simplifies the vocabulary.

Rich Curriculum

Martinez and Plevyak (2020) reported that numerous students encounter difficulties engaging with reading materials or topics presented in the classroom, often exhibiting low interest or heightened distractibility. Wheeler (2023) found that incorporating creative activities such as drawing, acting, and games effectively encouraged participation among reluctant or shy readers, enhancing their engagement with reading instruction.

Five participants in the present study acknowledged that various instructional methods and materials were necessary to engage and maintain motivation in students. P4 was concerned that their district-provided instructional materials could not compete with the high engagement of computer screens, stating, “I’m not a video game.” P8 expressed their challenges in motivating students when the curriculum is not engaging enough:

A lot of times one of the challenges is motivation. I feel like when they think it is challenging, if it’s not a text they’re interested in, they’re less motivated to want to read it. Also, just you know when they’re struggling, I think sometimes they’re aware that they’re struggling and it becomes maybe an embarrassment for them.

You know you want to motivate and do the best you can for them also. Just like making sure like we have to a lot of times, search for that extra outside of the curriculum passages that would be on level for those struggling readers. And so it’d be nice if that was provided with the curriculum and it’s really not we have to search outside of the curriculum for that.

Multitiered Support Systems

Several researchers (Terry et al., 2022; Murray, 2021; Weadman et al., 2023) reported similar findings regarding the importance of the timing of foundational reading skills and the associated vulnerabilities experienced by students with reading difficulties. Other scholars (Fien et al., 2021; Maki et al., 2022; Puzio et al., 2020) emphasized the need for increased use of evidence-based practices within schools actively implementing MTSS, particularly through integration into classroom instruction. According to Maki et al. (2022), when a significant portion of students in a classroom are not reading proficiently, class-wide remediation efforts are necessary.

Additionally, some teachers in these studies reported uncertainty about the decision-making processes used when individualized instruction occurs outside the general education classroom (Fien et al., 2021; Puzio et al., 2020). These educators expressed interest in understanding how different instructional strategies are aligned with the diverse needs of students receiving support through RTI, particularly given the lack of a universally agreed-upon framework for selecting appropriate interventions (Oslund et al., 2021; Papanthymou & Darra, 2022). Research findings (Papanthymou & Darra, 2022) suggest that incentivized teacher training in special education and individualized instruction would support teachers in meeting their instructional goals.

During the open-ended interviews, participants expressed the need for increased contact with reading interventionists and coaches. They listed several reasons they believed in the breakdown of communication, including lack of time, interventionists'

rooms were located in portable classrooms outside of the school, and lack of interventionist availability. P6 mentioned:

And then, you know, RTI is we don't see them much. And I think part of that is just our school, though, is the ESL and RTI are outside in portables, ... we send our kids there, they send them back. We don't really even cross paths ... We don't talk a whole lot or get a whole lot of support.

Influence of Technology on Individualized Instruction

All participants noted a lack of foundational skill resources within the district's designated curriculum for their respective grade levels. They believed that supplementing instruction with foundational skills could help reduce the overall range of reading abilities in their classrooms. P2 noted that using technology was useful to gather data and track progress, but administration dictated the amount of time students were allowed to use technology during the school day.

An LMS is a commonly utilized technological tool designed to facilitate screening, generate data-driven instructional pathways, administer assessments, and provide recommendations for reading instruction. Certain LMS platforms, such as iReady and AIMSweb, are adaptive, meaning they adjust instructional trajectories based on individual student performance (Morgan et al., 2024).

Although effective use of these systems requires both training and appropriate technological infrastructure, they offer educators valuable insights into students' reading development. As a result, LMS platforms can help alleviate some of the instructional burden associated with individualizing reading support (Van Schoors et al., 2023). While

technology can be viewed as a potential tool for delivering additional instruction, P3 reported small group instruction time, not LMS, focused on addressing foundational gaps.

P3 explained:

I can also see teachers straying away from differentiation because everything is on the computer, so they can just assign it.... And so like last year, we had this huge thing where we had to like, reduce our copies. And so we did it like 1 week on the computer, and it was such a hot mess ... we will give up everything else but this piece of paper is gonna be in front of them because it's just like they see the computer and it's exciting. They're 8 and 9. The purpose of them having a laptop is not meant for what's actually going through their head.

Sáez and Irvin (2022) advocated for technology-assisted early intervention strategies to strengthen key foundational skills, such as phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge. Their findings align with experiences reported by P6 and P8, who reported that they use technology to reinforce basic reading skills. P6 stated, "We use iReady Reading our school purchased. They love it and that's helpful because it has characters and it's fun for them." While some schools in the district have larger budgets to purchase LMS platform upgrades and additional features, this was a disparity noticed by P8, who stated previously that their school did not have the budget for technology like iReady Reading or extra texts, often needing to share books among students.

Barriers to Successful Implementation

Large Class Size

Researchers have reported that the high number of students in a class harms learning and could lead to teachers feeling overwhelmed and burnt out (Adamu et al., 2022; Pozas et al., 2023; Ruble et al., 2023). Average-sized classes that have multiple students with diverse or challenging needs can have the same effect as large class size with similar increases in teacher burnout (Trojan & Auger, 2025). While none of the participants in the current study mentioned large class size as a problem, all eight participants attributed the need for assistance with individualized reading instruction to the growing cultural, linguistic, and educational diversity of current classrooms. P5 emphasized that years ago in their classroom, “I didn’t have the needs that we have now” and “I just think more people in school like truly more EAs more licensed, and honestly just people that can help ... Like, that’s where I feel like things get impossible. It’s just ‘cause. I can’t do everything at once.” P1 stated they have only taught at the two local districts, and “neither of them had full-time EAs in any grade level.” P4 indicated that “more educational assistants were necessary to meet the diverse needs of their classes” to effectively implement individualized instruction.

Lacking Training, Knowledge, Support

All participants recognized the need for more targeted professional development focused on methods and strategies for individualized reading instruction for diverse learners. Research by Hall et al. (2022) indicates that the duration of small group interventions and the specific skills addressed can significantly influence the progress of

students with reading difficulties. However, six participants reported feeling limited in their ability to make instructional decisions when not trained in identifying specific reading challenges. They voiced the need to collaborate with other teachers, to share planning time, to have conversations with coaches and interventionists, and to have the opportunity to observe more experienced teachers deliver similar instructional material. They voiced the need to collaborate with other teachers, to share planning time, to have conversations with coaches and interventionists, and to have the opportunity to observe more experienced teachers deliver similar instructional material. While deciding when to implement increasingly individualized instruction, teachers may have difficulty deciding which skills to reinforce and how to instruct students with learning differences effectively and appropriately. P6 stated:

I would like some like dyslexia training or even what to look for in that, because I don't really know at this point in my career. Or any other reading disabilities like the warning signs ... when they are a low reader and I know when things are abnormal and to pass that on to people who can test them. But just as far as knowing for myself, I think I would like some training or support on that.

Similarly, P7 said:

I would love to see like more like more opportunities where we could learn more about specific learning disabilities specific you know, with things like dyslexia or dysgraphia or, you know, just specific learning disabilities we could see how to recognize them? How to address them? You know, we're not trained in that. I know that we can't diagnose, we can't do any of those things, but to see more of

those markers and to have a little bit more training in because I feel like some of it, if we aren't aware of it and what to be looking for specifically. It's getting missed until they get to a point to where now they're so far behind catching up is difficult. Realizing that there's more than just, you know, a delay or more than just, you know. I think it would be nice to be able to have something that was a little more specific, like a lot of us are reaching out and looking for those things and reading about those things. But to have that more—more training available would be nice.

They voiced the need to collaborate with other teachers, to share planning time, to have conversations with coaches and interventionists, and to have the opportunity to observe more experienced teachers deliver similar instructional material. P5 stated, "I would love to see other teachers teaching ... And how to actually help kids. I don't really get to watch other teachers in my building. That would be a great opportunity." Additionally, this participant expressed that after teaching the district curriculum for 6 years, "I've never seen a (district curriculum) lesson be taught."

Limitations of the Study

Several possible limitations to this study may have impacted the reported findings. Participants were selected by initiating an emailed request for second-grade through fourth-grade reading teachers. Eligibility criteria included that participants must be certified second-grade through fourth-grade teachers with at least 2 years of experience teaching reading in a general education classroom. The Walden University IRB approved the flyer used to send to the district's Director of Schools, principals, and

potential participants. While most of the requests to principals were approved, one principal denied my request due to the principal's feeling that "teachers already had enough on their plates." Once second-grade through fourth-grade teachers were emailed, ten agreed to participate. Of those ten, two did not reply to my request for consent and discontinued contact with no further explanation. Some of the limitations of this study include a small sample size from a relatively small geographic area within one school district and a limited timeframe for data collection.

As a responsible researcher, I had to consider the potential that personal bias may have influenced this study. I am a teacher with over 20 years of experience teaching reading and pursuing a doctoral degree. To some participants, I may have been perceived as more knowledgeable or experienced in the area of reading than they were. To decrease any feelings of intimidation, I assured the participants that their involvement was voluntary and anonymous. I built a friendly rapport before initiating the interviews to ensure participants felt comfortable detailing their experiences. Additionally, I did not email any potential participants with whom I had a personal or professional relationship.

Another possible limitation of this study was the limited timeframe in which the interviews were conducted. Participant responses were collected over 5 weeks, which included winter break. Most participants interviewed from their homes, while families or other distractions may have been present. As a researcher, any interruptions were verbally acknowledged and respected until the interviewee was ready to proceed. The limited timeframe may have impacted participants' perception of their experiences at the time of the interview. A longitudinal study may present a more generalized or a more detailed

account of the participants' views of their experiences with individualized instruction over time.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences with individualized instruction to support learning differences within their classrooms. Eight certified general education teachers participated in semistructured interviews to describe their personal lived experiences with individualized instruction. Based on the participants' explanations of their experiences helping struggling readers, I suggest additional research to explore possible solutions to the barriers that exist for teachers in the successful implementation of individualized instruction.

While teacher autonomy versus fidelity to a curriculum is a topic of debate, individualized instruction must be grounded in students' needs as determined by objective assessment data. It is recommended that policymakers and school leadership teams identify evidence-based strategies to support teachers in effectively and efficiently differentiating instruction for struggling readers. Such strategies may include targeted professional development focused on managing classrooms with diverse learning profiles. Additionally, some educators have expressed that opportunities to observe peer instruction may serve as a cost-effective means of enhancing their capacity to implement individualized instructional practices. The relevance of this issue is corroborated by prior research presented in the literature (Dulfer et al., 2024). Instructional supplies and materials need to be provided to teachers to minimize the personal and professional stress of seeking out appropriate resources to supplement the required curriculum.

The enactment of retention laws necessitates increased classroom staffing to support teachers in delivering individualized instruction. Additional personnel would enable educators to more effectively address the needs of retained students and those continuing to struggle with reading, thereby promoting progress toward grade-level proficiency. Achieving this level of support requires specific funding to place qualified instructional staff in all second-grade through fourth-grade classrooms. It is recommended that policymakers and educational leaders critically examine the implications of retention policies and pursue strategic solutions to mitigate their impact.

Some schools have instructional coaches to ease the burden of implementing the district's curriculum. However, the role of instructional coaches is largely defined by the principal in which the coach is placed. Universally defined roles for instructional coaches, as well as the required placement in every school in a district, are recommended to support teachers who provide strategic and targeted reading instruction for all struggling readers. Without awareness and responsive action to address the challenges teachers experience, burnout and attrition could lead to an increase in teacher shortages (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021). While none of the participants in the current study mentioned large class size as a problem, several researchers have reported that the high number of students in a class harms learning and can lead to teacher burnout (Adamu et al., 2022; Pozas et al., 2023; Ruble et al., 2023).

Implications

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of implementing individualized instruction in reading by second to fourth-grade teachers. The findings of this study offer

valuable insights for educational researchers, administrators, and policymakers seeking to understand the instructional and support-related challenges faced by classroom teachers working with struggling readers. By examining teachers' lived experiences, stakeholders may be better positioned to develop and strengthen the educational infrastructure required to address the diverse needs of these students. The findings of the present study are intended to be used to give teachers a voice in how the current system of individualized instruction can be improved to support struggling readers.

The findings from this study may contribute to social change by informing local school boards, district administration, and school leaders with the first-hand experience of teachers who implement individualized instruction in reading. This could raise awareness and foster constructive conversations about effectively addressing the educational needs of a diverse population with similarly diverse learning requirements. Social change through increased awareness may impact future research about how to address teachers' professional capabilities while providing access to resources to fully implement individualized instruction for their students. As a result, more struggling readers could have the opportunity to achieve their literacy goals throughout life.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of elementary school reading teachers in implementing individualized instruction to support a variety of students with learning differences. Future research based on this study's findings could assist and inform educational policies, teacher preparation programs, professional development opportunities, and curriculum/program design in elementary schools.

Individualized instruction represents a departure from traditional models of education. It involves the strategic tailoring of educational content, instructional methods, and pacing to align with the unique skill sets and preferences of each student. This data-driven model aims to optimize educational outcomes for learners through targeted and efficient instruction. Educators seeking to implement individualized instruction for students with reading difficulties express a strong interest in deepening their understanding of this approach; however, they frequently encounter significant barriers, including limited resources, insufficient time, and inadequate capacity to execute such practices effectively. Consequently, educators indicate that despite concerted efforts, they are frequently unable to adequately address the instructional needs of struggling readers.

A disparity exists between the intentions of educational policymakers and the practical implementation of instructional strategies at the classroom level. Based on this current research, continued analysis and responsive action are needed to connect educational policies to the needs of an increasingly diverse population of struggling readers. The findings from this study suggest that curricula need to expand to include foundational skills in higher grades and that teachers need more training in individualized reading instruction to meet the diverse needs of students. The findings further indicate a need for increased support personnel to effectively manage the individualized demands of explicit, targeted reading instruction. Additionally, they underscore the necessity of revising high-stakes assessment practices and retention policies, accompanied by adequate financial investment, to mitigate the challenges associated with implementing individualized reading instruction.

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Appendix A: Participant Invitation

Opportunity for Teachers to be Heard!

A fellow [Name of district] County School District teacher is developing a new study about how teachers use their experiences to teach reading. This could help teachers and education leaders better understand the challenges of reading instruction in the classroom. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences teaching reading to students with learning differences.

About the study:

- Your participation has already been approved by Dr. [Director] and your school's Principal
- One 60-minute in-person phone interview that will be audio-recorded (no videorecording)
- The first 8 interviewees will receive a digital \$20 Amazon gift card as a thank-you upon completion of the full interview
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Certified 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grade teacher with at least 1 full year of teaching experience
- Has taught reading in a general education classroom.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Laura Ellis, a doctoral student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during the first semester of this school year (2024-2025).

Please reach out to Laura Ellis at [\[email\]](#) to let the researcher know of your interest.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How many years have you taught reading to Elementary students?
2. What has been your experience with teaching reading to your students?
3. How do you define differentiated instruction in reading?
4. How do you identify specific issues students are having when reading?
5. Describe some strategies you have used to improve students' reading ability. How can you tell if the strategies are effective?
6. How familiar are you with your school's reading curricula? What methods of individualized instruction or differentiation have you used from the curricula?
7. What challenges have you had when individually instructing children who struggle to read?
8. What kind of learning differences do you typically experience in your students each year? How do you modify the reading curriculum to support students with learning differences?
9. How do you perceive your role in the ESSER Act of 2015? What are your experiences with implementing state initiatives, such as the Third Grade Retention Laws for literacy success?
10. What kind of supports do you feel would assist you in helping students with learning differences? Do you feel there are specific professional development opportunities for you to identify and support struggling readers? If yes, what are they and how did they help? If not, what opportunities would you like to see offered to teachers like you?