

2016

# Teachers' Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in Elementary Reading

Olwen Suzette Stewart  
*Walden University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

 Part of the [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#),  
[Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), and the [Reading and  
Language Commons](#)

---

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu](mailto:ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu).

Walden University

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Olwen Stewart

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.

Review Committee

Dr. Jerita Whaley, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Timothy Lafferty, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Valerie Schmitz, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2016

Abstract

Teachers' Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in Elementary Reading

by

Olwen Suzette Stewart

MS, Walden University, 2005

B.Ed. (Honours), King Alfred's College, 1988

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

April 2016

## Abstract

Many teachers in a low socioeconomic school district in Florida struggle with differentiating instruction for the large at-risk population; however, one school has been identified as a high functioning school. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate how classroom teachers at the high functioning school are differentiating instruction and how their reading coaches are supporting the teachers in designing instructional interventions. Guided by the concepts of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Tomlinson's differentiated instruction, this study examined the connection between these 2 concepts and explored approaches to the creation of an instructional model to support at-risk students. The research questions focused on the perceptions of teachers and reading coaches about instructional interventions and differentiated instruction. The participants were classroom teachers and reading coaches with 2 or more years of teaching experience in grades 3-5. A case study design was used to capture the insights of 7 participants through interviews and school district public artifacts. Emergent themes were identified from the data through open coding and findings were developed and validated. The findings indicated that at-risk students benefit from (a) dedicated, caring teachers; (b) strong stakeholder support; (c) on-going professional development; (d) opportunities for teacher collaboration; and (e) effective differentiated instructional strategies. Implications for social change include increased instructional effectiveness for teachers that improve academic performance of at-risk students.

Teachers' Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in Elementary Reading

by

Olwen Suzette Stewart

MS, Walden University, 2005

B.Ed. (Hons.), King Alfred's College, 1988

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Teacher Leadership

Walden University

April 2016

## Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my dear sons, Jai and Levi. You are both the reason that I decided to take this doctoral journey. You were my inspiration as I struggled with this study. In my darkest moments, I knew I couldn't quit because I knew you two were counting on me. Your maturity and work ethic allowed me to work on this study and trust that you would continue to succeed at school.

This study is also dedicated to my parents, Leroy and Lois, my sisters, Angela and Sharon, and my close friends. Each of you has encouraged me to continue in my quest to become a lifelong learner and have pushed me when I wanted to quit. Your dreams for me have become a reality and I am forever grateful.

## Acknowledgments

This research was possible because of the numerous individuals who supported me along the way. I must first acknowledge my family and friends who have had to deal with my physical and mental absence throughout this entire doctoral journey.

I must also acknowledge my colleagues who helped me at various stages along the road to success. Thank you to Angie, for those forcing me to wake up early on those Saturday mornings to study in the library with her. I would like to thank Rachel and Cecelia, for offering to help me without hesitation when so many others were silent. I am grateful to Tracie, Louvedor, Cindy, Arlene, Marina, and Danielle. Each of you played a role in pushing me and encouraging me to persevere. When I seemed discouraged, you would always remind me that the end was coming soon and that the reward was greater than the sacrifice.

I would like to thank Dr. Lafferty for giving me thorough feedback on my work. I am appreciative of his expertise and persistence.

A special thanks to Dr. Whaley for the many telephone conferences, emails and feedback. She always made me feel better and made me believe that finishing was possible – even when I fell behind or seemed to be discouraged. She patiently guided me through this study and over every hurdle with her expertise and genuine encouragement. Her optimistic attitude, and love for learning have truly inspired me.

## Table of Contents

Section 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Problem Statement .....	2
Nature of Study .....	4
Research Questions.....	6
Purpose Statement .....	7
Conceptual Framework and Literature Review.....	7
Zone of Proximal Development Theory .....	7
The Theory of Differentiated Instruction.....	9
Operational Definitions.....	10
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations.....	13
Assumptions.....	13
Limitations.....	13
Delimitations.....	13
Significance of the Study.....	13
Summary and Transition .....	16
Section 2: Literature Review.....	18
Introduction:.....	18
Achievement Gap and Title I Schools.....	19
Instructional Practices in Reading.....	21
Fluency .....	21

Vocabulary.....	23
Differentiated Instruction.....	26
Differentiating by Content.....	29
Differentiating by Process.....	29
Differentiating by Product.....	29
Scaffolding.....	29
Flexible Grouping.....	31
Tiered Assignments.....	33
Summary.....	35
Section 3: Research Method.....	36
Introduction.....	36
Rationale for Qualitative Case Study Research Design.....	35
Research Questions.....	37
Context of the Study.....	38
Measures for Ethical Protection of Participants.....	39
Role of the Researcher.....	41
Role of the Researcher at the Setting and with the Participants.....	41
Researcher’s Experiences or Biases Related to the Topic.....	42
Criteria for Selecting Participants.....	41
Data Collection Procedures.....	41
Documents.....	42
Data Collection Tools.....	42

Data Analysis.....	42
How and When the Data will be Analyzed.....	42
Methods to Address Validity and Trustworthiness.....	43
Member Checking.....	43
Peer Review.....	43
Triangulation.....	44
Section 4: Presentation of the Data and Findings.....	47
Introduction.....	47
Generating, Gathering, and Recording.....	47
Data Coding.....	50
Findings.....	51
Section 5: Discussion, Reflections, and Recommendations.....	57
Discussion.....	57
Interpretation of Findings.....	58
Conclusion 1.....	58
Conclusion 2.....	59
Implications for Social Change.....	59
Recommendations for Action.....	60
Recommendations for Future Research.....	61
Reflection.....	62
Concluding Statement.....	63

References.....65

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate.....88

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Classroom Teachers.....91

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Reading Coaches.....92

Appendix D: Coding of Data .....93

Appendix E: Letter of Cooperation.....94

## Section 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Classroom teachers' use of differentiated instruction in reading at a Title I school in the Southwest United States shed light on the reasons for the achievement gap in education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), the purpose of Title I is to provide financial assistance to schools with high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet the challenging state academic assessments. Title I schools receive additional funds from the government to reduce class size; the money also goes for supplemental materials, extra staff, and professional development. In spite of this, many students who attend Title I public elementary schools do not achieve proficiency on federally mandated state assessments.

Keeley (2010) found significant differences between high-achieving schools and low-achieving schools in the areas of teaching methods and how frequently the schools assess reading levels for all students. The high-achieving schools linked instruction to learning benchmarks, and teachers used flexible-skills grouping to improve reading proficiency for students. Reed, Marchard-Martella, Martella, and Kolts (2007) noted that reading achievement was at a slower rate in Title I schools compared to schools of higher economic status. Similarly, Embrey (2011), concluded that there was a significant relationship between value of reading, oral reading fluency, and demographics (Berliner, 2009; Kim & Guryan, 2010). Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), as well as Bailey and Williams-Black (2008) examined the benefits behind a differentiated instructional approach to teaching. They found that students learn best if they are engaged in deep

thinking. Therefore educators need to craft circumstances in which students can be involved in meaningful tasks that can lead to the success of every learner. In reality, different learners have different needs and they need to be supported in different ways. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) and Tomlinson and Imbeau (2012) also found that when teachers took the time to differentiate instruction, it led to increased reading achievement because lessons were tiered to meet the instructional levels of each student.

### **Problem Statement**

In a large suburban school district in Florida, there is an achievement gap between the students at elementary schools in the affluent areas and schools with a high student minority population in the low socioeconomic areas of the county Omega County Public Schools Publications, 2012). Like most of the Title I schools in the school district, the students at the school in this study performed approximately 10 percentage points lower on state tests than other elementary schools in the same district during the 2011-2012 school year.

The student population affected is composed predominantly of immigrants from Central and South America, and Haiti. There are six elementary schools in a suburban farming community within the county (Omega County Public Schools Publications, 2012). It has just one middle school and one high school. In the elementary schools, over 98% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches. English is a second language for over 90% of the students. Approximately 70% are Hispanic, 20% are Haitian, and the remaining students are Native American, African American, Asian, mixed race, and European American (Omega County Public Schools Publications, 2012).

Some researchers have agreed that both internal and external factors influenced students' academic achievement (Bruton & Robles-Pina, 2009; Chambers, 2009; Coe, 2009; Stewart, 2009). Block, Paris, Reed, Whiteley, and Cleveland (2009) as well as Woolley (2008) found that teachers working at low socioeconomic status schools tend to use a more traditional approach to teaching than their counterparts in non-Title I schools, particularly in reading. Haberman (1995) argued that traditional teaching has been reduced to a set of 14 skills in which teachers ask questions, give directions, make assignments, monitor seatwork, review assignments, give and review tests, assign and review homework, settle disputes, punish noncompliance, mark papers, and give grades. According to Woolley (2008), this traditional approach to teaching and assessing reading comprehension does not take into account this complex nature of reading comprehension or students' individual needs and differences.

Woolley (2008) agreed that a multifaceted approach to reading is more suited to students with low socioeconomic backgrounds, because comprehension involves a “complex interaction of language, sensory perception, memory, and motivational aspects” (Woolley, 2008). King-Shaver (2008), Cummins (2007), and Kosanovich (2012) all agreed that teachers need to differentiate their instruction. King-Shaver (2008) noted that students from lower economic backgrounds often demonstrated different readiness levels and maturation in their learning in a different manner from their peers.

Ruscoe (2010) found that both teachers and administrators in target Title I schools emphasized individualized instruction as a primary means of instruction in reading. More traditional approaches—such as using a basal text (Brenner, 2010), choral reading,

and round-robin reading—were not as successful as the school that focused on flexible groups, tiered assignments, and student choice as instructional practices in the classroom.

Several recent studies (Thijs & Eilbracht, 2012; Cirecie West-Olatunji et al., 2010) have suggested a link between low achievement and teachers' beliefs about ethnic and cultural minorities in the community (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). Inadequate teacher preparation in colleges and universities could also be a factor, as well as a lack of diversity training in professional development for teachers already in service (Tuccio, 2008; Barnyak & Paquette, 2010; Reiter & Davis, 2011). As a result, many schools could have a number of teachers who are ill-prepared for such a diverse student body. Consequently, teachers may need to modify their instructional approach to meet these diverse readiness levels (Bitter, O'Day, Gubbins, & Socias, 2009; Gibbons, 2009; Gersten, Dimino, Jayanthi, Kim, & Santoro, 2010).

This study was expected to contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address the problem of the achievement gap in schools in a Florida county school district by examining instructional strategies of the classroom teachers at a successful Title I school.

### **Nature of Study**

Creswell (2009) described qualitative research as one in which the researcher selects a case that will show several different perspectives on the problem or process makes. The researcher collects open-ended data in a narrative setting with, “the intent of developing themes from the data” (p. 18). Merriam (2009) explained that in qualitative research researchers are interested in “understanding the meaning people have constructed” (p.13), and how people make sense of their world. Qualitative research incorporates methods such as field observations and open-ended interviewing. On the other hand, according to Yin (1994), in quantitative studies outcomes are based on generalizations obtained from data and these studies involve testing a theory according to a hypothesis. The data collected from these methods are analyzed using statistics and hypothesis testing (Merriam, 2009).

I chose a qualitative approach because this study required a detailed understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2009) from the teachers’ perspectives. This detail could be obtained by conducting in-depth interviews in the place of work of the participants. For this study, I collected data from teacher interviews and documents relating to the teaching of reading. According to Creswell (2012), using a statistical mean—as done in quantitative studies—overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in a study. Therefore, a qualitative approach was more appropriate than a quantitative approach.

Yin (2011) argued that the purpose of case study research is to explore real-life situations while accounting for important contextual conditions that influenced the

phenomenon. I selected a case study because its design allows for the exploration of struggling readers in the upper elementary schools. The case study explored the why and how behind a high-performing Title I school. According to Yin (2011), there are often many variables in a case study. This type of research design relies on multiple sources of evidence such as interviews, observations, and documents, as well as a conceptual framework in order to guide the data collection and analysis protocols.

For the methodology of this study I selected a Title I school, School Alpha because it had demonstrated a steady increase in reading achievement in the past 3 years. Four classroom teachers in Grades 3-5, two reading coaches, and one reading resource teacher at School Alpha participated in this study. These participants were representative of the teachers at the school.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study are stated below. The questions were derived from the problem statement and are anchored in the purpose statement in the next section.

1. How do classroom teachers at a high-performing Title I school describe the ways they differentiate instruction for students who are struggling with reading?
2. How do reading coaches at a high-performing Title I school describe the ways they support teachers in designing instructional interventions for students who are struggling with reading?

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the ways in which differentiated instruction is being implemented in reading classrooms in a high-performing Title I elementary school in a Florida county school district. This study also explored the perceptions of classroom teachers in relation to specific instructional strategies that are used to improve reading achievement for students at a Title I school. I defined reading achievement as a student's ability to demonstrate growth on the state and district assessments in reading.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework in this study was based in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development theory (ZPD) with respect to child development and Tomlinson's theory of differentiated instruction (2008).

#### **Zone of Proximal Development Theory (ZPD)**

The zone of proximal development theory (ZPD) focuses on the relationship between instruction and development. According to Vygotsky (1978), the zone of proximal development suggests that when a task is presented that is too difficult for students, they become frustrated and learning does not take place. When material is too easy for students, the brain is not challenged and learning still does not take place. The degree of difficulty where learning takes place is the zone of proximal development.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD is the difference between the child's capacity to solve problems alone and the potential that child may reach under the tutelage of a teacher or more knowledgeable peers. He describes this as the distance between a

student's actual development and potential development (ZPD). His ZPD includes all the functions and abilities a child can perform only with the help of someone else.

According to Vygotsky, learning awakens numerous developmental processes that can only develop when the child is in the act of interacting with people in its environment and in cooperation with peers. Vygotsky (1978) encouraged teachers to teach slightly ahead of their students' development by way of modeling, guiding, or scaffolding students' learning and understanding (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009).

Accordingly, in order for the child to learn new skills, the teacher must provide students with mediated assistance at a level beyond independent learning yet within their ZPD (Bruner, 1981; Vygotsky 1978, 2012). Scaffolds are the supports that the teacher puts in place to facilitate the learning of a new concept. Each scaffold is directly linked to the individual according to personal needs. In scaffolding, the task itself does not change but the level of support provided to the learner does. As competence increases and concepts are developed, the learner gradually takes more responsibility or performance of the task. The scaffolds are gradually withdrawn over time until they are no longer required, thus taking the students from where they are academically to where they need to be (Bruner, 1983; Pentimonti, 2011).

Assessment in the ZPD should address the student's level of cognitive awareness mental processes, the level of concept mastery, and the mental processes of abstracting, synthesizing, comparing, and differentiating concepts (Valencia & Pearson, 2010; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Gredler, 2012).

### **The Conceptual Framework of Differentiated Instruction**

According to Tomlinson (2008), the theory of differentiated instruction meets the needs of all learners. When implemented correctly, research on differentiation is solidly rooted in sound educational theory and research (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012).

Tomlinson's research emphasized a philosophy of learning where students gain and build knowledge and then use these newfound skills to build even more knowledge. In relation to classroom teachers, Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) proposed that the teacher must attend to four specific elements: the students, the classroom, the content, and the instruction. If any one of these elements is neglected, then the quality of learning will be impaired.

Differentiation incorporates instructional strategies such as tiered assignments, attending to differences through responsive teaching, collaborative learning, jigsaw activities, interest centers, group investigations, and complex instruction (Tomlinson, 2003). Consequently, teachers' skilled use of differentiation in the classroom is a way that teachers can close the achievement gap (Tomlinson, 2008). The research on effective differentiated instruction in reading calls for teachers planning meaningful tasks for each student, flexible grouping, and continuous assessment. Teachers differentiate according to each individual's readiness (Panter & Bracken, 2009), interest, and learning style (Tomlinson, 2005). According to Tomlinson (2003), reading instruction at the elementary level should focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

Moreover, Tomlinson's research on effective reading instruction calls for teacher planning beyond what is in the textbook or outlined in the course reading texts and

teachers' guides. Teachers need to develop a plan for what they want students to know, understand, and do (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011). As a result of all this planning, teachers will also need to implement a variety of instructional strategies to meet these new objectives such as tiered assignments, responsive teaching, collaborative learning, jigsaw activities, interest centers, group investigations, and complex instruction.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Achievement Gap:* The difference that exists between the scores of low performing students in relation to these students obtaining mastery of state objectives (Florida Department of Education, 2012).

*Differentiated Instruction:* This is described as 'an instructional model that provides guidance for teachers in addressing student differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile with the goal of maximizing the capacity of each learner' (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2004b; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012). It is an instructional strategy that teachers use to base instruction on students' readiness levels (Hollas, 2005; Petscher, 2010).

*FAIR:* The Florida Assessment in Reading online tests are the comprehension checks given by the school district as a means of formative assessment. The FAIR provides documentation on student performance in word analysis, fluency, and reading comprehension. The FAIR also gives the probability of student success on the state assessment (Collier County Public Schools Manual, 2012).

*Flexible Grouping:* The process by which students are able to fluidly move between learning groups based on readiness, interest, and instructional level (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

*Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT):* The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is part of Florida's overall plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards. The FCAT, administered to students in Grades 3-11, consists of criterion-referenced tests (CRT) in mathematics, reading, science, and writing, which measure student progress toward meeting the Sunshine State Standards (SSS) benchmarks.

*Guided Reading:* small groups of students that are flexible and ever changing based upon the needs of the individual students. As students progress in their reading development, the content of the guided reading groups change from learning how to read to reading to learn new information (Richardson, 2009).

*Hispanic:* The term Hispanic is considered an ethnicity, not a race, by the United States Census Bureau. Hispanic can be viewed as "the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. People who identify their origin as Hispanic may be of any race" (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

*No Child Left Behind:* The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in ways to strengthen parent involvement and choice in education. The most critical amendments focus attention and resources on improving low-performing schools and providing access for all students to

high quality education. Under NCLB, when schools do not meet state targets for improving the achievement of all students, parents have better options, including the opportunity to send their child to another school. Parents whose children are enrolled in Title I schools that are identified in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring have the opportunity to transfer their children to a higher-performing school (NCES, 2007).

*Reading Achievement:* a student's ability to demonstrate growth on the state and district assessments in reading.

*Round Robin Reading:* an oral reading teaching strategy in which students are called on in a predetermined order, usually following their current seating arrangement (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2008).

*Teachers:* any certified educators at the school. To be deemed highly qualified, teachers must have a bachelor's degree, full state certification and prove that they know each subject they teach (United States Department. of Education, 2004).

*Title I:* the name given to a federally funded education program. This program gives funding for schools to help low-income children who are at risk of failure (United States Department of Education, 2011).

*Whole Group Instruction:* A traditional approach to delivering instruction when all children are taught the same lesson at the same time, without regard to their ability or mastery of the subject followed by independent practice (Haghighat, 2009).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

**Assumptions**

I assumed that all teachers who were interviewed were completely honest and open with their responses and were not intimidated or influenced by the researcher in any way. The interpretation of participants' practices within the study represented the researcher's point of view and thus is open to bias and alternate explanations.

**Limitations**

As this study was conducted in only one school district in Florida and the participants were selected from only one school, it is not representative of the beliefs on instructional strategies for all teachers nationwide, statewide, or even countywide. Teachers in identical teaching situations may have totally different perceptions and therefore may have answered differently. Therefore, the findings and conclusions of this study were limited to the context in which this study was conducted.

**Delimitations**

This study confined itself to the examination of certified teachers in just one public elementary school within one county district in Florida. Tutors, aides, and other paraprofessionals were not included. For the purposes of this study, middle schools, high schools, and charter were also excluded.

### **Significance of the Study**

Examining the ways in which teachers of reading in a high-performing Title I school are using differentiated instruction in their classrooms is significant for several reasons. The results of this study may impact the local setting by reducing the achievement gap that exists between Title I and non-Title I schools, by initiating strategies to encourage differentiated instruction in reading classrooms in Title I schools, and may stimulate social change. The following sections explain the significance of this study.

### **Application to the Local Problem from Which the Research Emanates**

This study is significant to the local setting because the achievement gap between the students at elementary schools in suburban affluent areas and students at schools in low socioeconomic areas of the county may impact the local setting. It may reduce the achievement gap between Title I and non-Title I schools, by initiating strategies to encourage differentiated instruction in reading classrooms in Title I schools. The Title I schools in this area may use the findings of this study to help to raise test scores in reading.

### **Professional Application**

The findings of this case study may help practitioners identify those specific instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction and scaffolding that have been successful in improving reading achievement. Haghghat (2009) found that teachers working at low socioeconomic status schools tend to use a more traditional approach to teaching, whereas a multifaceted approach to reading is more suited to students with low

socioeconomic backgrounds. This can directly impact test scores. This study is expected to influence student achievement by helping teachers to differentiate instruction and scaffold effectively. The use of scaffolding in the reading classrooms is expected to take struggling students from where they are to where they need to be (Bruner, 1981).

In addition, this study could be significant to administrators and teachers who organize and deliver professional development programs to teaching staff in schools and to pre-service teachers in colleges. It may encourage these leaders to implement professional development programs that focus on differentiated instruction and specific instructional practices that contribute to increased reading achievement for the students. It may also be beneficial to both novice and experienced teachers (Roberson & Roberson, 2009).

### **Positive Social Change**

This case study could be significant to creating positive social change because it could reduce teacher turnover and could stabilize the economy in the area. To begin with, in the state of Florida, teachers in schools with high student test scores receive a substantial monetary award. This of course improves morale and encourages teachers to stay, not only in the teaching profession, but also in high - performing schools, thus reducing teacher turnover. This study has the potential to raise the test scores of schools whose teachers previously had never received this financial reward.

More importantly, teachers' salaries are now being linked directly to students' test scores as new legislation, such as Senate Bill 736 (2011) is now in effect. This bill requires that all teachers be retained, certified, and compensated based on student test

scores on standardized tests -- not years of experience or degrees held (Ford, 2010). This study may help teachers become more effective in the classroom and therefore improve not only their students' test scores but their salaries too.

The target school of this study is in a migrant farming community with a dwindling population (U.S. Census, 2010). Poor test scores in the area have been causing some parents either to leave the community or send their children to the higher performing schools within the county, but outside of this community. The results of this case study could prevent the schools' populations from falling by raising test scores and improving the grade of the schools. Families may then be encouraged to stay in the community and help to boost the economy.

Furthermore, this study may also be significant in terms of social change in education at the elementary school level. It may provide new perspectives on the types of instructional practices needed at Title I elementary schools to improve reading achievement for all students. District personnel could then use these findings to create future policies about instructional practices and professional development in reading at Title I elementary schools. If successful, Title I schools could become as successful as their non-Title I counterparts, and thus significantly reduce the achievement gap.

### **Summary and Transition**

The purpose of this case study was to explore how a Title I school I was working to improve instruction in reading classrooms in Grades 3-5 using differentiated instructional strategies. The conceptual framework of this study was based on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Tomlinson (2008) in relation to instructional practices

recommended for increasing the reading performance of students. The methodology of this study was that of a case study, and data were collected and analyzed from multiple sources of evidence, including teacher interviews, lessons, and documents related to the reading program. This study may also be significant because it may provide administrators and teachers with a better understanding of instructional approaches to improving reading achievement at Title I schools at the elementary school level.

This study has five sections. The first section includes the problem statement, nature of study, research questions, purpose statement, conceptual statement, operational definitions, and assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, concluding with the significance of the study. The second section of this study is the literature review which is an analysis of the current literature relating to the instructional strategies used when teaching struggling readers in elementary schools. In the third section, I outline the methodology of the research design as well as the data collection procedures I used. The fourth section of this study includes an analysis of the data collected. Finally, the fifth section concludes with a summary and interpretations of the findings, conclusions, implications for social change, and recommendations for future action and research.

## Section 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which differentiated instruction is being implemented in reading classrooms in a high-performing Title I elementary school. This literature review was organized by research on the achievement gap between Title I and non-Title I schools in reading at the elementary school level. Secondly, this review examined current research on instructional practices that have been found to be beneficial in improving reading achievement for elementary school students, especially in relation to differentiated instruction and its impact on student achievement.

This review incorporated research articles and professional books and journals. The following databases were used: Academic Search Complete/Premier, Education Research Complete, ERIC, ProQuest Central, Walden Dissertations, and SAGE. I used the following keywords: differentiated instruction, differentiated strategies, effective reading instruction, Response To Intervention (RTI), struggling readers, Title I, scaffolding, Vygotsky, Tomlinson, instructional support, ability grouping, and achievement gap. The majority of the literature review consists of literature published within the past five years; however, literature that extends over 30 years is also included because it contributed to the foundation of this study.

### **Contents of the Review**

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five essential components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. These are sometimes referred to as the five pillars of reading (Cassidy,

Valadez, & Garrett, 2010; Whalon, Otaiba, & Delano, 2009). This literature review focused on just three of these components: fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Researchers (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, 2006; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Schwanenflugel et al., 2006) reported that reading fluency is a critical component for a beginning reader, because a student who is unable to read fluently is powerless to comprehend the text. Stanovich (1984), Wasick (2010), and Wright (2012) all agreed that vocabulary development and acquisition is vitally important for text comprehension. Stanovich (1984) believed that the child who has been exposed to more written language has a more developed vocabulary, and reads at a faster rate.

The final part of the review focused on research that explores the scaffolding, flexible grouping, tiered assignments that classroom teachers use to improve reading achievement for students at Title I schools.

### **Achievement Gap and Title I Schools**

There has always been a strong relationship between poverty and low achievement scores nationwide (NAEP, 2009). Despite the implementation of research-based reading initiatives, nearly two-thirds of low-income fourth graders cannot read at the proficient level (NAEP). Providing full-day preschool and kindergarten at Title I schools also may help in reducing the achievement gap for at-risk students (Jensen, 2009; McGee, 2009). Neimeier (2012) suggested that employing school personnel who establish nurturing relationships with the students could also assist in the closure of the achievement gap (Flynt & Brozo, 2009; Jensen, 2009).

Several studies have been conducted on student reading performance in Title I schools (Strand, 2010; Reis, 2011). For example, Reed, Marchard-Martella, Martella, & Kolts (2007) found reading success at Title I schools to be lacking compared to schools of higher economic status. Cummins (2007) studied reading achievement at Title I schools and found that literacy immersion was essential to the development of reading comprehension. Cummins also found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds need to have consistent, relevant teaching that builds upon students' prior knowledge (Duffy, 2009). In their study, Greenlee and Bruner (2001) also found that reading instruction at Title I schools had a negative effect on reading achievement because it was based on a homogeneous philosophy. There were significant differences in reading achievement between those Title I elementary schools which followed a traditional homogenous approach of grouping students and those schools that relied on their own instructional techniques supplemented by additional literacy activities. Block et al. (2009) found that the majority of reading instruction in schools comes from basal readers and workbooks which proved to be ineffective and have largely contributed to the achievement gap that exists.

The literature review also indicated that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may need more individualized, engaging instruction outside of the classroom to be successful in reading achievement. In a mixed methods study, Bridges (2011) found that after school tutoring had a positive effect on the reading proficiency of third grade students. Similarly, in a quasi-experimental quantitative study, Rhett (2011)

investigated the effectiveness of a pull-out reading intervention program designed to assist at-risk readers, and found significant improvements in the oral reading fluency of the third grade students. However, in the same study, Rhett (2011) also found that the pullout programs did not have any significant impact in reading comprehension scores. This insignificant impact was also corroborated by Gutman (2011) in a quasi-experimental study which showed that students who participated in the weekly pull-out program showed no statistical improvement in their reading comprehension skills. Allington (2009) also proposed that differentiated instruction is necessary to narrow the achievement gap.

### **Instructional Practices in Reading**

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five essential components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. This report encouraged classroom teachers to “explore the research, open their minds to changes in their instructional practice and take up the challenge of helping all children become successful readers” (Rupley et al., 2009). Teaching effective comprehension strategies can help students understand the text better (Mostow, 2009; Coyne, 2009; Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Cheatham, & Champlin, 2010; Wanzek, Roberts, Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Woodruff, & Murray, 2010). Tomlinson (2003) agreed that reading instruction at the elementary level should focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

### **Fluency**

Fluency in reading refers to the reader's ability to read text smoothly, accurately, at a proper speed, and with appropriate expression (Shanker & Ekwall, 2003; Calhoun, 2010). While comprehension is the main focus on reading test scores, the literature suggests that reading fluency is of primary significance because of its relationship with overall reading abilities, including comprehension (Deno, 1985; Begeny, 2005; Hudson, Pullen, Lane, & Torgesen, 2009; Arvans, 2010; Embry, 2011). Rather than spending valuable time on decoding, fluent readers are able to free up their cognitive resources to allow more time for reading comprehension (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009).

Moreover, Shinn, Good, Knutson, Tilly, and Collins (1992) considered oral reading fluency as the single most important measure of reading ability for students in the learning stages. Similarly, Fuchs, Fuchs, and Maxwell (1988) compared four different reading measures (question answering, passage recall, cloze, and oral reading fluency) with students' performance on the Reading Comprehension subtest of the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT; Gardner, Rudman, Karlsen, & Merwin, 1982). In this study, 70 students were administered the five measures previously listed. Results of the study revealed that while each of the measures correlated with the SAT, the correlation for oral reading fluency was significantly higher than the correlations for the other three measures. These findings are particularly noteworthy because question answering, recall, and cloze measures are all direct measures of reading comprehension, whereas oral reading fluency does not directly assess whether students understand what they read.

In a recent study, Wise et al. (2010) examined whether different measures of oral reading fluency related differentially to reading comprehension performance. They

compared real-world oral reading fluency, nonsense words fluency, and fluency with connected texts. The students' oral reading fluency was measured in terms of timed tasks that require students to identify letter–sound correspondences, identify nonsense words, identify real words, or read connected text aloud. The results from this study suggested that real-world oral reading fluency was the most strongly related to a student's reading comprehension performance.

Rasinski (2010) also stressed the importance of fluency in reading comprehension. He referred to the three fluency dimensions that support reading comprehension. These dimensions are; accurate decoding, *automaticity*, and *prosody* (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2009). Accurate decoding is the ability to sound out written words in a text with as few mistakes as possible. It is related to phonics and other decoding strategies such as blending consonants, and chunking letters together. Automaticity is the word used for almost effortless or automatic decoding thus allowing the reader to focus on the meaning of the text (Rasinski, Rikli, & Johnston, 2009). Prosody is ability to read pieces of text with expression and with the appropriate emphasis on phrases (Rasinski, 2010). It is reading the text with expression to enable comprehension. According to Rasinski (2010), all three of these dimensions need to be mastered in order for the reading to be fluent. Lane, Pullen, Hudson, and Konold (2009) also found that as students read and reread books at an appropriate level, their fluency improved.

Shinn, Good, Knutson, Tilly, and Collins (1992) conducted a study which suggested that Curriculum Based Measurement oral reading works as a general index of

reading proficiency including comprehension. This adds to the strong literature base supporting the theory that oral reading fluency is an indicator of overall reading competence and comprehension (Mesmer, 2009; Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley 2009; Guthrie, McRae, Coddington, Klauda, Wigfield, & Barbosa, 2009; Kim, Petscher, Schatschneider, & Foorman, 2010).

### **Vocabulary**

Vocabulary is also very important to reading comprehension. Several recent studies (Konstantopoulos & Borman, 2011; Marzano, 2009, Munisteri, 2009, and Suchey, 2009) have all linked vocabulary instruction to student achievement.

According to Nagy & Herman, (1984), most vocabulary is learned indirectly by engaging in oral language, by being read to, and by reading on their own. They argue that students will encounter over 85,000 words in their school life and it is impossible and impractical to attempt to teach them all. Nagy suggests that students will learn the necessary vocabulary through intensive reading for at least 200 days out of the year, without direct instruction.

Reading a wide variety and selection of literature is known as *wide reading* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, Pollock 2001). This method of teaching vocabulary is partially supported by the National Reading Panel (2000), but this report recognizes that some direct instruction in vocabulary is necessary, as children also learn new vocabulary words directly when they are taught explicitly (Williams, 2009). In a quasi-experimental study on increasing the vocabulary levels of low-income children, Beck and McKeown (2007) compared two groups of students. The first group received direct vocabulary

instruction focusing on “sophisticated” words. The second group of students did not receive any specialized instruction. The data showed that there was significantly more vocabulary learning taking place in the instructed group than the group that received no instruction. More vocabulary instruction equaled better results. Beck and McKeown (2007) concluded that more instruction than just listening to daily read-alouds is needed to increase vocabulary.

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001), made a strong case for systematic vocabulary instruction. They found that in order to learn a new word in context, students need to be exposed to that word at least at least six times in order to fully understand not just the meaning, but also how to use the word and to remember it (Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; McNamara, 2012). Direct vocabulary instruction is more effective than wide reading because over a majority of the words encountered by students occur less than once in a million words of text (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2005; Carnine, Silbert, Kanmennui 2009). Carlo et al. (2004) also found that a well-designed, challenging curriculum focusing on teaching academic words, and using strategies for inferring word meaning from context, can significantly improve comprehension in English language learners (Scott & Nagy, 2009).

Direct vocabulary instruction practice methods may include reading literature aloud to students while stopping to explain and talk about words students may or may not know, (Bromley 2007; Beck & McKeown 2009). Taylor et al., (2009) found that explicit vocabulary instructional activities that allow students the opportunity to boast their vocabulary knowledge is proven to be beneficial. Additionally, Zipke (2011) found that

direct instruction of ambiguity detection, the ability to recognize that some words have more than one meaning, is an appropriate and important instruction for all learners. This can have a significant impact on student learning and engagement.

More specifically, Sanchez Sadek (2006) suggested posting all the vocabulary words related to academic language visibly in the classroom as each vocabulary word is introduced. Sanchez Sadek (2006) specifically suggested that the teacher and students should also consciously use the vocabulary constantly to master the recognition, spelling, and meaning of specific words.

In a recent study, Sobolak (2011) determined that additional robust vocabulary instruction was necessary for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to make necessary gains in vocabulary acquisition. It was also found that the additional instruction was beneficial to all the students who received it (Ward, 2009). Similarly, Pullen et al. (2010) also found that students at risk for reading failure benefited significantly from a second tier of vocabulary instruction.

### **Differentiated Instruction**

In addition, another piece of the literature review for this study is based on Tomlinson's theory of differentiated instruction (2008). Tomlinson (2003) focused her instructional theory on responsive instruction which asks teachers to design their reading instruction to cater to the performance levels of each individual student.

In relation to classroom teachers, Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) proposed that the teacher must attend to four specific elements: the students, the classroom, the content, and the instruction. If any one of these elements is neglected, then the quality of learning

will be impaired. Teachers should differentiate according to each individual's readiness, interest, and learning style (Tomlinson, 2005).

The learning environment is one of these essential elements. Neuman (2004) found that a print-rich environment in which the students are exposed to functional signs and meaningful symbols that stimulate children's literacy can have a dramatic effect on early literacy growth (Justice & Softka, 2010). Wood, Harmon, and Taylor (2011) also advocated the use of a print-rich environment to promote literacy in all grade levels. Such an environment might have a classroom library, newsprint, classroom labels, multimedia, posters, maps, and student produced work (Wood, Harmon, & Taylor, 2011; Rivera, 2009).

Another of the essential elements of effective classroom instruction is the curriculum (Clay, 2009; Dean, Stone, Hubbell, & Pitler, 2012). Teachers must attend to the content of what they teach. According to Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), a quality curriculum should deepen and develop student understanding. The teacher must skillfully design curriculum around essential knowledge, understanding and skills to be learned; as well as meeting the benchmark and standard required by the school district.

The fourth essential element in effective classrooms is instruction. According to Tomlinson (2003), reading instruction at the elementary level should focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Moreover, Tomlinson's research on effective reading instruction calls for teacher planning beyond what is in the text book or outlined in the course reading texts and teachers' guides. Teachers need to develop a plan for what they want students to know, understand, and do. As a result of

all this planning, teachers also need to implement a variety of instructional strategies to meet these new objectives such as tiered assignments, responsive or reciprocal teaching (Spörer, 2009; Oczkus, 2010; Yang, 2010; Palinscar, 2012), collaborative learning (Johnson, 2009), jigsaw activities interest centers, group investigations, and complex instruction.

Differentiated instruction meets the needs of all learners (Tomlinson, 2008). Tomlinson's research emphasized a philosophy of learning where students gain and build knowledge and then use these newfound skills to build even more knowledge. The intent of differentiated instruction is to maximize classroom instruction by emphasizing each student's growth and individual success by meeting the student where he or she is and assisting him or her in their learning process (Hall, 2005, Landrum, 2010; Connor, 2011). Teachers need to develop a plan for what they want students to know, understand, and do. As a result of all this planning, teachers also need to implement a variety of instructional strategies to meet these new objectives (Tomlinson, 2003).

In contrast, Poole (2008) did not find a substantial link between differentiated instruction and increased reading performance. Poole found that most of the noted differentiated instruction occurred in the variety of materials rather than in the interactions between teacher and student, and that in the basic instructional groups, no significant difference was found in the ability levels of the low performers. A possible reason for the discrepancy of these findings could be due to the poor implementation of the differentiated instruction by inexperienced teachers with preconceived ideas of student ability. Another factor could be that Poole's study was focused solely on

heterogeneous grouping known as flex groups in which there is at least one student with high reading ability, one with medium ability, and one with low reading ability, in each group. Poole (2008) concluded that the low-ability students read fewer words, are interrupted more, and continue to have the potential for stigmatization. Therefore, these students had less opportunity to show any improvement in their reading than their more proficient counterparts in the mixed ability groups (Poole, 2008).

Similarly, Bailey and Williams-Black (2008) found only three of the teachers in their study truly implemented differentiated instruction with any degree of fidelity. These teachers faithfully differentiated instruction by content, process, and product. Tomlinson (2003) also noted that when teaching reading skills, teachers need to link content, process, and product in their instruction.

### **Differentiating by Content**

In order to differentiate by content, teachers adapt or modify what is being taught in the lesson and how they give students access to the material they want the students to learn (Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers ensure that even though the students are working at their own pace they still must meet the specified deadlines for their projects.

### **Differentiating by Process**

When differentiating the process, teachers alter the teaching strategies and methods for students depending on their need. The process is differentiated by how the teachers deliver the instruction, and by the strategies the teacher has the students use by exploration of the content (Tomlinson (2001).

### **Differentiating by Product**

According to Bailey and Williams-Black (2008), a product is what the student produces or develops to show their understanding of the content. When differentiating the product, students can choose different products to demonstrate that they have learned the content. Tomlinson (2003) referred to this phase of differentiating as evaluation.

Clearly, instructional support is needed for proper implementation (Hawkins, 2009). The study (Bailey and Williams-Black, 2008) also found that many teachers do not know how to successfully incorporate differentiated instruction into their regular instructional practice. Out of the 14 teachers who responded to the survey only three gave descriptions of classroom practices that demonstrated differentiated instruction while teaching literacy. They were the only ones who were able to describe two reading activities where they differentiated content, process and product.

### **Scaffolding**

In order for the child to learn new skills, the teacher must provide students with mediated assistance at a level beyond independent learning yet within their ZPD (Bruner, 1981; Vygotsky 1978; Van der Pol, 2010). Scaffolds are the supports that the teacher puts in place to facilitate the learning of a new concept. Each scaffold is directly linked to the individual according to personal needs (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). In scaffolding, the task itself does not change but the level of support provided to the learner does. As learner competence increases, and concepts are developed, the learner gradually takes more responsibility or performance of the task (Frey, 2010). The scaffolds are gradually withdrawn over time until they are no longer required by the students. Thus

taking the students from where they are academically to where they need to be (Bruner, 1981; Pentimonti, 2011).

Scaffolding has been identified as one of the best teaching practices for helping students read (Schwanenflugel et al., 2009; Chen, 2011; Jadallah et al., 2011). According to Walqui and Van Lier, (2010), scaffolding instruction is good for helping English language learners (ELLs) get to where they should be academically. Walqui (2006) explained how scaffolding revolves around the ZPD development because scaffolding involves students interacting with others to learn rather than working autonomously. According to Walqui (2006), scaffolding comes in three separate stages. The first stage includes providing a support structure for students, the second stage of scaffolding includes implementing activities in the classroom, and the third stage involves collaboration.

Likewise, McKenzie (2011) conducted a mixed-methods study using scaffolding with ELL students in the mainstream elementary classroom. The results from this three month long study indicated that strategies used when applying scaffold instruction in mainstream classrooms with ELL students do have a significant impact on increasing reading scores.

### **Flexible Grouping**

Tomlinson (2003) focused her instructional theory on responsive instruction which asks teachers to design their reading instruction to cater to the performance levels of each individual student. The research on effective differentiated instruction in reading calls for teachers to plan meaningful tasks for each student, flexible grouping, and

continuous assessment. Tomlinson (2003) noted that when teaching these reading skills, teachers need to link content, process, and product in their instruction. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) also recommended the use of flexible grouping for reading instruction. Using flexible reading groups allows teachers to provide instruction in the specific skills or to remediate skills that may be lacking. This may also increase reading performance because of the focus on specific skills for specific students (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Skindrud and Gersten (2006) analyzed the effectiveness of reading programs at low socioeconomic status schools. Skindrud and Gersten (2006) found that an instructional program that relied on homogenous grouping was not nearly as effective as an instructional program that called for flexible grouping. The results showed that scores on standardized tests favored flexible grouping over the more traditional ability grouping.

Flexible grouping allows students to work in various different groups depending on the goal of the learning task (Optiz, 1999). With flexible grouping the teacher reads a story aloud and extends the story through guided reading instruction, or a shared reading lesson (Optiz, 1999). When using the flexible grouping model, teachers can decide upon a variety of grouping patterns to enhance student learning. If teachers wish to create groups of students who rarely work together, they may use random grouping. Chapman and King (2008) offered the random grouping option. Students benefit from being placed with students who they were not used to working with by improving communication and interpersonal skills. The selection process for random grouping is also varied. Successful results are obtained by carefully observing group dynamics. Teachers create

groups by counting off students to the number of groups being formed, alphabetically, by birth date, by drawing names, or by forming groups of proximity (Opitz, 1998).

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) recommended the use of “co-operative grouping” but warn that ability grouping should be done sparingly because low ability students actually perform worse when they are placed in homogeneous groups. Only the medium ability students showed any significant improvement in achievement. These researchers also pointed out that using a variety of criteria for grouping students was the best way to prevent overusing a grouping strategy that was incompatible with a student’s needs (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

In a quasi-experimental, pretest–posttest research study, Schlag (2009) determined that flexible reading groups significantly enhanced student learning and reading achievement. Similarly Jecks’ (2011) quantitative meta-analysis study compared flexible grouping to whole class instruction, as well as fixed ability grouping. He also concluded that flexible grouping was a more effective instructional method in producing elementary student reading achievement than either of the two other non-flexible options. In contrast, a study by Haghighat (2009) compared four Title I schools with similar demographics. For this study, Haghighat tested a Within Grade Level Flexible Grouping model in one of the schools. However, the results were disappointing. The students at the target school did not demonstrate higher academic gains than the students at the other comparison schools. In fact, the outcomes of the reading tests were similar in all four schools.

### **Tiered Assignments**

Tiered assignments are a differentiated instructional strategy in which all the students have the same goals, the same objective, and the same content, but the process and product vary according to the reading readiness of the student. Tobin (2007) referred to readiness as a student's entry point in relation to a particular understanding. Therefore tiered assignments focus on several levels of instructional interventions that are based on the gaps in the students' skills. Teachers tier lessons or assignments by student interest or by instructional reading levels, and should design lessons based on degrees of complexity to ensure that students are adequately challenged (Tomlinson, 2004). Adams and Pierce (2006) indicated that teachers can focus on student interest or learning profile when tiering lessons. They emphasized that when a lesson is tiered in this manner, students' ability levels would be diverse and they would be placed in the tier that best complements their individual learning style (Adams & Pierce, 2006).

Tiered instruction relies heavily on pre-assessment utilized by the teacher to prescribe content, materials, and learning experiences (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). Tomlinson (2004b) indicated guidelines for planning such tiered assignments. Teachers must plan tiered assignments to ensure every aspect of each student's individual learning need is accommodated to ensure student's understanding and growth needs are demonstrated. First of all, the teacher should decide on the concepts that all students will be engaged in, which are necessary to produce understanding. Secondly, teachers should consider all students who will be participating in this activity, and then create one interesting activity requiring high-level thought. Next, the teacher should create a chart in the form of a ladder. The top of the ladder will represent those students who have

advanced skill and complexity of understanding, and the bottom of the ladder will represent those students who have low skill and complexity of understanding. Then, the teacher should clone the assignment, creating various versions at different levels of complexity. Finally, a version of the assignment should be matched with each student based on his or her need and task requirements (Tomlinson, 2004b).

Tiered instruction, as described by Hancock (2010), has been linked to increases in academic achievement of students at all grades levels in all subjects. According to Hancock (2010), school districts around the nation are already adopting and reaping the rewards of using tiered instruction and tiered assignments. Fien et al. (2010) examined the relation between nonsense word fluency, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension gains. Using a multitiered approach which emphasized early intervention, they found the students made significant early gains in oral reading fluency as well as in reading comprehension. Tomlinson et al. (2004), Mawhinney (2000), Moats (2009), and Pullen (2010) all described the positive benefits of using tiered instruction and its implementation and adoption by several school districts.

### **Summary**

Section 2 contains a review of the literature regarding research on the achievement gap in reading at the elementary school level. This section also examined current research on instructional practices, and research relating to the effectiveness of differentiated instruction strategies that have been successful in elementary school reading classrooms. In the next section, I describe the methodology that I used to conduct this study.

## Section 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the extent to which differentiated instruction is being implemented in reading classrooms in a high-performing Title I elementary school in a Florida county school district. This study also explored the perceptions of classroom teachers in relation to specific instructional strategies that are used to improve reading achievement for students at a Title I school.

I collected data primarily through interviews with reading teachers and reading coaches. I reviewed documents relating to the instructional reading program, state and district assessment results, school improvement plans, as well as the schools' professional development plans. In order to triangulate the data, after I had analyzed the interviews and documents, I reviewed the interviews with the participants through member checking interviews for clarification. Finally, I had a peer educator review the findings.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Case Study Design**

The research paradigm for this study was qualitative and the research design was a case study. Creswell (2013) described qualitative research as one in which the researcher makes multiple meanings of the experiences of individuals. The researcher collects open-ended data in a narrative setting with "the intent of developing themes from the data." Merriam (2009) explained that in qualitative research, researchers are interested in "understanding the meaning people have constructed," and how people make sense of their world. Qualitative research incorporates methods such as field observations and open-ended interviewing.

However, in quantitative studies, outcomes are based on generalizations obtained from data, and these studies involve testing a theory according to a hypothesis (Yin, 1994). Creswell (2009) noted that conducting a survey or experimental method are the two primary means by which quantitative studies are carried out. The data collected from these methods are then analyzed using statistics and hypothesis testing.

Upon careful review of these two paradigms, I found that a qualitative approach answered the research question of this study better than a quantitative approach. Creswell (2009) identified the research problem, the personal experiences of the researcher, and the intended audience of the study as key factors to consider when selecting a research paradigm. In relation to personal experiences, I have been an elementary classroom teacher in several different Title I schools for over 21 years and I have explored numerous instructional practices in relation to improving reading achievement for these students. In considering the audience, I also believed that this study would attract a wider audience of stakeholders other than just Title I elementary teachers who want to have a deeper understanding of this topic. That type of deep understanding can best be presented through a qualitative study. Therefore, a qualitative approach was more appropriate than a quantitative approach.

## **Research Design**

I selected a case study for this study because the case study design allows for the exploration of the why and how behind real-life situations where a phenomenon is occurring (Yin, 2009). The purpose of case study research is to explore real-life situations while accounting for important contextual conditions that influenced the phenomenon. There are often many variables in a case study. This type of research design relies on multiple perspectives and multiple sources of evidence such as interviews, documents, as well as a theoretical proposition in order to guide the data collection and analysis protocols (Simons, 2009). Creswell (2012) found that case studies often explore the case or cases over time while collecting data from multiple sources such as interviews, documents, or observations. Yin (2009) noted that case studies have significant merit as research design and argued that case study research is a good design to use when the researcher is trying to explain, describe, illustrate, or enlighten in relation to phenomenon that occur in a given situation. Yin (2009) also noted that the most important purpose of case study research is to explain the presumed casual links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies. There are phenomena that occur that cannot be explained by conducting an experiment or survey research because the reason behind the phenomenon may be more embedded in the activities that are occurring and may not be abundantly clear to those examining the phenomenon.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are stated below. The questions are derived from the problem statement and anchored in the purpose statement in the next section.

1. How do classroom teachers at a high performing Title I school describe the ways they differentiate instruction for students who are struggling with reading?
2. How do reading coaches at a high performing Title I school describe the ways they support teachers in designing instructional interventions for students who are struggling with reading?

### **Context of the Study**

The context of this case study is a large suburban district located in Florida. The student enrollment for the district for the 2014-2015 school year was 44,325 students. The district employs nearly 3,200 highly qualified teachers, 49% with advanced degrees. The district includes 29 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, eight high schools, and one pre-K through 12 school. The graduation rate for the district was 81%. The ethnic make-up of the student population consists of 45% Hispanic, 39% White, 12% Black, 2% Mixed, and 1% Asian. More than 62% of the student population is categorized as economically needy, which means that they qualify for free or reduced - priced lunches (Omega County Public Schools, 2015).

In selecting the school for this study, I chose among the 13 Title I elementary schools in the district. This school is located in a small suburban farming community within this county. In the elementary schools in this part of the county, over 98% of the

students qualify for free or reduced lunches and English is a second language for over 90% of the students. Approximately 70% are Hispanic, 20% are Haitian, and the remaining students are Native American, African American, Asian, mixed race, and European American (Omega County Public Schools, 2015). I purposefully selected School Alpha as a case for this study because out of all six of the Title I elementary schools in this small community, it has the highest FCAT scores in reading, improving from a “D” grade in 2003 to an “B” in 2004, and then eventually reaching an “A” in 2006. The student enrollment for this school for the 2014-2015 school year was 744 students. The ethnic make-up of the student population consisted of 92% Hispanic, 2% Haitian, 2% White, 2% African American, and 1% other. Approximately 97% of the student population is categorized as economically needy.

### **Measures for the Ethical Protection of Participants**

The protection of the participants was of the utmost concern. I did not use the names of students, teachers, the school, and the school district during the study. The principal of School Alpha was approached to give permission to conduct the study at the school. Once the principal had granted approval, all participating teachers were contacted via personal email. Those who agreed to participate were given a consent form. I asked all the participants to sign and return it within one week.

The information provided on the consent form included the research purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality assurance, and disclosure of potential conflict of interest, contact information, and withdrawal policy. This research did not reveal or create any acute psychological state that would have necessitated referral. It also did not

reveal or create any criminal activity, or child or elder abuse. However, if the situation had arisen, I would have followed the state and district guidelines and procedures.

To further protect all participants, I took measures to ensure their confidentiality throughout the interviews. No real names were used. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and the name of the school district was also altered to maintain anonymity. I am keeping all data collected during the study in a secure location in my home. All electronic data was stored in my password-protected computer and backed up both on a password-protected hard drive, and on a flash drive (locked in a secure filing cabinet in my home office). I will retain the raw data for 5 years following publication of this study (ProQuest) before I discard it (Creswell, 2009).

### **Role of the Researcher**

A qualitative researcher acts as an instrument of data collection. Hatch (2002) stated that the principal data for qualitative researchers is gathered directly by the researcher. For this study, I was the sole person responsible for collecting and analyzing data, reviewing documents, and conducting interviews at the selected school.

### **Role of the Researcher at the Setting and with the Participants**

I have been teaching for over 27 years, and although I have taught in low socioeconomic schools for 21 of those years, I have never taught at the school selected for this case study. As I am not a school administrator, I had no position of authority over the participants. I established a cordial working relationship with the study participants as mutual educators in the school district with compatible goals to improve student academic performance.

### **Researcher's Experiences or Biases Related to the Topic**

According to Chenail (2011), qualitative interviewing presents challenges for researchers in terms of bias management. Yin (2009) also noted that researchers have to be especially careful about biases when conducting case study research because they generally have a preconceived idea about the topic of study. Yin argued that, in order to help avoid these potential biases, researchers must be willing to be open to findings contrary to their own beliefs.

I currently teach at a different Title I school within the same school district in the same area as School Alpha. Because of this role, this study was limited by my potential bias. Due to the close nature of the target community, the participants were acquaintances of mine. However, I remained objective and kept an open mind. I made an effort to be receptive to data that may not have supported the literature. Merriam (2009) suggested that, rather than trying to eliminate these "subjectivities" (p. 15), it is best to recognize, identify, and monitor them as to their impact on the collection and interpretation of data.

### **Criteria for Selecting Participants**

I purposefully selected the participants of this study using criterion sampling. The criterion used was seven to ten participants in total. There were four classroom teachers and three reading coaches. I selected classroom teachers from the upper elementary grades 3-5. These teachers must have been classroom teachers in grades 3-5 at School Alpha for at least the past two years. The reading coaches must also have been at the

school for the past two years. The classroom teachers were all primarily responsible for the teaching of reading to all the students within their own classrooms.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Qualitative interviewing enables the hidden meanings not seen through observations to be addressed and explained through detailed conversations (Hatch, 2002). Data collection for this study consisted primarily of interviews with the classroom teachers in grades 3-5 and the reading coaches. Once I had received IRB approval I began my data collection. My IRB Approval number is 09-23-14-0096745. To gain access to the participants, I first sought the permission from the school's principal. Then, I contacted all potential participants by email and waited for responses. I waited one week before I sent a second follow-up email. I contacted each respondent by personal telephone or email to arrange a convenient time and place to conduct the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and was conducted at their school or over the telephone. To conceal the identities of participants each participant was assigned a pseudonym as their name.

### **Documents**

The final source of evidence for this study was the collection and review of documents relating to the instructional reading program, such as class test reports, lesson plans, FCAT and FAIR reports, benchmark testing reports, as well as documents pertaining to professional development and the improvement policy at the school. All the documents used in this study are available to the public through the district's website.

## **Data Collection Tools**

The individual interviews were audio-taped using an old style Optimus tape recorder, as well as an iPhone 6 video-camera as a back-up. The interview protocol for the classroom teachers and reading coaches consisted of 7–10 questions including follow-up probes to elicit more information.

## **Data Analysis**

### **How and When the Data Were Analyzed**

Data analysis is the process of converting raw interview data into evidence-based interpretations for published reports (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To begin an analysis of the data gathered, I personally transcribed each interview using my tape recorder, my iPhone 6 and my personal computer. Once transcribed, I checked the transcriptions for accuracy and the interview transcripts were shared with the participants to allow for member checking. I examined the interviews to see if any trends emerged on the use of differentiation in the classrooms.

I collected documents for this study and I analyzed them using content analysis. A content analysis involves describing the organization and content of each document as well as the purpose for the document. Yin (2009) noted the importance of document review because it is an important resource in case studies in terms of supporting the interview data.

## **Methods to Address Validity and Trustworthiness**

### **Member Checking**

This qualitative study was designed to describe the experiences of classroom teachers and reading coaches in the upper elementary grades. In order to ensure the validity of the data analysis, member checking was used. Member checking involves taking the data, the transcripts, and the analyses back to the participants to get their feedback to determine if they feel the interpretations are accurate (Creswell, 2009). For the purpose of this study, I gave all the participants access to the transcripts and offered them the opportunity to clarify, or delete their original responses. This was done in person and through personal e-mail.

### **Peer Review**

In addition, peer review was used. I have chosen a peer educator who teaches in the same school district, but at a completely different school. As the reviewer I reviewed the findings of the study and commented on the plausibility of the interpretation of data. Creswell (2013) believed that the process of using a peer debriefer keeps the researcher honest and asks for clarification on issues. The peer reviewer or debriefer had the opportunity to review my findings and interpretations and made recommendations to me.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing research questions from multiple perspectives (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). Yin (2009) noted the importance of data triangulation. According to Yin (2009), data should be used from multiple sources. Yin (2009) found that this process allows for multiple sources of evidence by which data can be collected to provide support to the phenomenon being studied. For this study an oral questionnaire was used

to conduct the interviews for the reading coaches as well as the classroom teachers in Grades 3, 4, and 5. Results from interviews, and member checking were supported by analysis of written documents, assisted in addressing the research question. By interviewing two different categories of participants, I tried to substantiate the ways that educators described differentiation in the school. Stake (1995) explained that by using triangulation, researchers follow protocols to check the accuracy and authenticity of the research. According to Stake (1995), researchers have to search for more than one interpretation rather than confirmation of single meaning.

Triangulating different sources of data and using it to find themes is a valid method to address validity and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I reviewed and analyzed all the sources of evidence together, so that the case study's findings would be based on the coming together of information from different sources (Yin, 2009).

### **Summary**

Section 3 contained the methods used to conduct the research study. I included specific reasons for choosing the research design, the participants, and the collection and storage of the data. I also included details about the background of the study school and the participants in conjunction with my role as the researcher. The section concludes with an explanation of how I insured the validity of the study findings before presenting the results and analysis of the data. In the next section, I present the findings and analysis of the data.

## Section 4: Presentation of the Data and Findings

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to explore how a Title I school was working to improve instruction in reading classrooms, in Grades 3-5, using differentiated instructional strategies. Data were collected primarily through interviews with classroom reading teachers and reading coaches. Three participants were classroom teachers and four were reading coaches or reading resource teachers.

I triangulated all the data by analyzing the interviews and documents, member checking interviews for clarification, and by having a peer educator review the findings. All the documents used in this study were available to the public through the district's website. The research questions that guided this qualitative case study were:

1. How do classroom teachers at a high performing Title I school describe the ways they differentiate instruction for students who are struggling with reading?
2. How do reading coaches at a high performing Title I school describe the ways they support teachers in designing instructional interventions for students who are struggling with reading?

### **Generating, Gathering, and Recording**

#### **Process for Generating Data**

Before I collected data, I had to get permission to conduct the study. I met with the principal of School Alpha and she agreed to write and sign the Letter of Cooperation (see Appendix E). Approval to conduct the research study was approved by Walden University and the Institutional Review Board on September 9, 2014. The two categories

of participants for this case study were classroom teachers, who teach reading in grades 3-5 at School Alpha, and reading resource teachers or reading coaches.

The principal of School Alpha gave me a list of potential participants with 12 names on it. I began gathering information about each name on the list to see if the educators on the list met my requirements. I had to discard two of the names on the list immediately because they had not been at the school for more than two years. This left me with only 10 names. Initially, I contacted each participant by email. Only three reading coaches and four classroom teachers agreed to be interviewed in the end. Once they had all agreed I sent them a consent form along with a list of the questions that I was going to ask them in the interview. This gave them a chance to read and prepare their responses before the actual interview.

### **Process for Gathering Data**

I advised the candidates to read and sign the consent form, which all did—the face-to face participants in person and the telephone participants electronically (one classroom teacher and two reading coaches). Each participant was interviewed according to their individual needs.

I used critical case sampling because it was likely to “yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge” (Patton, 2001). Table 1 shows the role of each participant. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

Table 1

#### *Participants' Name and Roles*

Classroom Teacher	Selah
-------------------	-------

Classroom Teacher	Ruth
Classroom Teacher	Kylie
Classroom Teacher	Rae
Reading Coach	Vera
Reading Coach	Kay
Reading Resource Teacher	Sue

### **Process for Recording Data**

I used an old-style Optimus tape recorder to record to interviews. I recorded each interview on a 60-minute Sony tape cassette. Each interview was recorded on one side of each cassette and labeled. I used the same tape recorder to record the telephone interviews at my desk using the speakerphone. For the face-to-face interviews I also used my iPhone 6 digital video camera to record the interviews as a back-up in case we were interrupted.

### **System for Keeping Track of Data and Emerging Understandings**

Once all the interviews were completed, I personally transcribed each interview. To protect the identity of the participants I used pseudonyms whenever I referred to them.

As I typed each one, I was able to revisit the interviews and pay closer attention to some of the points made that I had not previously noticed. Once transcribed, I checked the transcriptions for accuracy. The interview transcripts were shared with the participants to allow for member checking. Five of the participants received their transcripts by email. They responded by email with revisions, corrections, and eventual

agreements. Two of the participants met me in person to check their transcripts. I revised all the transcripts and was able to get a final approval from all the participants. The transcripts were stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer. The hard copies are being stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office.

When all the transcripts were finished, I began reading and rereading each one. I read them carefully, line by line making notes and coding as I went through each one. As well as the notes and codes that I made, I also started writing my thoughts in a composition book. This was used to jot down any common themes and understandings that may have occurred to me as I was reading. Also I made a note of anything that stood out or was uncommon about what was said.

### **Data Coding**

I used Rubin and Rubin's (2005) evidence-based interpretations of data to organize and present my data. I came up with five emerging themes to address the two research questions. Those themes were differentiated instructional strategies, teacher attitudes, professional development, teacher collaboration and reasons for success. I created separate folders for each interview question.

With these themes in mind, I used the highlight function in Microsoft Word on the computer to code sentences, phrases, and paragraphs that addressed each theme. I also used the comment function to add thinking points and notes in the margin. After reading the highlighted areas and comments I created numerous subcategories for each theme that was previously noted (see Appendix D).

### **Findings**

### **Differentiated Instruction**

All the participants in the study expressed how effective differentiated instruction has been with struggling readers. The classroom teachers shared how they used leveled texts, graphic organizers and tiered assignments in their classrooms. Selah explained that she translates into Spanish, Haitian Creole, as well as American Sign Language to further individualize reading instruction with her students. Katie, a classroom teacher, uses a buddy system so the struggling readers have a higher performing reading buddy to work with on certain assignments with the hope that they would strengthen their skills and be able to apply and transfer them to their own grade level work.

When looking at the difficulties in differentiation in reading instruction, Ruth and Sue described how difficult it has been to differentiate due to the wide range of abilities in each classroom. Ruth explained that she has had “ranges from ESE (Exceptional Special Education) to gifted – all in the same class.” Sue agreed and added that the amount of levels can be even more confusing because School Alpha has a migrant population. Students might leave and then reappear in their class a few months later, having had little or no schooling. Therefore, it is difficult for teachers to know what they have done in their absence and where to start them.

There was a consensus among all four classroom teachers and all three of the reading coach participants that differentiation is only effective when teachers have time to plan and prepare adequately. As reading coaches, Kay and Vera also recognized that the classroom teachers needed more time to plan for differentiating reading instruction. Kay went on to clarify that teachers definitely needed more time to plan differentiation,

to plan a variety of materials, to gather resources, and to plan alternative ways of demonstrating knowledge for the students.

### **Teacher Attitudes**

I found that both the classroom teachers and the reading coaches were very passionate about helping the students who are struggling with reading at School Alpha. They all mentioned that the job required dedication and a commitment to the community as a whole. Selah explained that it was impossible to get the job done during the work day. It required taking work home, coming in early, staying late, and working at the weekends. Kylie described the frustration when she has had to decide how late she will stay in the evenings or how much work she will do on the weekends to try to be prepared for differentiated instruction in reading.

Ruth, Selah, and Kay were all concerned that the district administration had unrealistic expectations from the teachers. Selah felt that they expected too much from teachers at the beginning of the year when they have not had the opportunity to gather adequate data from the students. Ruth had strong feelings about the district curriculum map and pacing guide calling it a “canned program” that doesn’t take the needs of the students into account. She felt that the gains made by the students in the school were significant, but these achievements were not recognized because the students did not meet the district goals. According to Tomlinson, Brimijoin, and Narvaez (2008), ongoing assessment is a key principle of differentiation. However, Kay was worried about the overemphasis on testing. She thinks that there is far too much testing and this takes away from instruction.

One of the teachers, (Kay) complained because the county has too many resources because it can be “overwhelming and debilitating” and she has to sift through all the resources to find what is going to work for her students.

### **Professional Development**

When asked how preservice preparation, training, and professional development had helped them to prepare them for differentiating in reading instruction, the participants were all in agreement that professional development offered at School Alpha was beneficial to them. They listed Kagan training, Reciprocal Teaching training, Fountas and Pinnell guided reading, and running record training, as being particularly effective. According to Selah, these programs have provided strategies that really help with cooperative learning in the classroom and with vocabulary instruction for struggling students.

Both Kylie and Rae felt that the Reading Endorsement classes offered by the county were invaluable. Kylie felt that it was “probably the best training I’ve ever had!”

Three of the participants, Kay, Vera, and Rae, mentioned that School Alpha is now also a “Leader in Me” school (Covey, 2014). For the last six years the teachers and students have worked on the ‘Seven Habits of Successful Students’ (Covey, 2014). This program helps create leadership skills and positive self-esteem in the students.

### **Teacher Collaboration**

Collaboration between teachers, reading coaches, and administrators was also a common theme with the participants. They all valued their regular scheduled meetings as well as the data driven collaboration. Apparently, at School Alpha they do a lot of

professional learning communities (PLC) on a rotating basis here every morning except on Fridays. They are required to do collaborative planning once a week in the English Language Arts (ELA). The reading coach (Vera) described how she frequently visits classrooms, giving helpful suggestions to the classroom teachers. When necessary, Kay will model certain strategies, assist with the professional learning, and also collaborate and plan with the teachers, resource teachers, and with the coach to give additional support. Occasionally, Kay also plans and delivers training sessions alongside the coach. She works based upon the individual needs of the group.

Rae, Sue, and Selah all agreed that the Omega Teacher Evaluation Model (OTEM) has helped them to become better educators. It has helped them to teach and differentiate more effectively. Selah felt that the extra classroom walkthroughs and observations by the school administration have helped her because of the positive and constructive feedback that she receives.

### **Reasons for Success**

When exploring why School Alpha has a reputation for success within the community three of the participants, Selah, Kay, and Vera, believed it is because of strong leadership. According to these participants, the school has had two very strong principals—effective instructional leaders who pushed the students and teachers to do their very best.

Four of the participants mentioned the strong community and family atmosphere at the school. The school reading coach (Vera) and the school's media specialist, who was not one of the participants in this study, frequently work together to reach out to

parents. They bring the parents into the school to celebrate student literature and try as much as every school to get parents more involved. They organize parental outreach programs and they have many school-based incentives in place at the school, such as “Math and Muffins,” “Books and Bagels,” and “Dads and Doughnuts.”

Vera and Kay also mentioned that there is an emphasis on the enjoyment of independent reading in School Alpha. The students are highly motivated to read independently. “Lots of time is devoted to it, children set goals, we celebrate, it doesn’t have to be tied to testing, but it can be” (Kay).

One of the main focuses in reading instruction at School Alpha is that they conduct reading intervention in the primary grades only. Vera, Kylie and Kate explained the reading resource teachers only work with the first grade primarily, and then just a few in the second grade. All the participants agreed that this method builds a strong foundation which strengthens literacy in the intermediate grades. “We’ve always had a strong literacy lab that works as a preventative model for first graders and second graders to build from there” (Vera). The school has a well-stocked and well used resource library for use in guided reading.

Using documentary data added another source for analysis. The school improvement plan from School Alpha illustrated and explained the structure of the reading intervention policy in the school. The documentary data also provided the record of professional development at the school and support system that was in place for classroom teachers. These documents served as a record for the reading strategies and professional development used at School Alpha. The classroom teachers had been

trained to use several different strategies involving the teaching of reading using differentiation. The perception of the effectiveness of the strategies was expounded upon by the participants during the interviews. I reviewed the documents from School Alpha showing that their state and district test scores were consistently higher in reading in Grades 3-5 than the other Title I schools in the same community in the district.

### **Summary**

In this section, I presented the findings from analyzing the qualitative data collected through interviews with the seven participants and documentary data retrieved from School Alpha. The fifth section concludes the study with a summary and interpretations of the findings, conclusions, implications for social change, and recommendations for future action and research.

## Section 5: Discussion, Reflections, and Recommendations

### **Discussion**

In Omega County, there is an achievement gap between the students at elementary schools in affluent, suburban areas and students at low SES schools with a high minority student population (Omega County Public Schools Publications, 2014). The students in the Title I schools in the school district performed approximately 10 percentage points lower in reading on state tests than other elementary schools in the same district during the 2013-2014 school year. This qualitative case study examined the extent to which differentiated instruction is being implemented in reading classrooms in a Title I elementary school. Given this problem, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of classroom teachers in relation to specific instructional strategies that are used to improve reading achievement for students at a Title I school. This study also investigated how reading coaches described the ways they supported classroom teachers who are differentiating reading instruction and helping their struggling readers.

The research questions that guided this qualitative case study are stated below. The questions were derived from the problem statement and the purpose of this study.

1. How do classroom teachers at a high performing Title I school describe the ways they differentiate instruction for students who are struggling with reading?
2. How do reading coaches at a high performing Title I school describe the ways they support teachers in designing instructional interventions for students who are struggling with reading?

I used case study research for inquiry into the problem of the achievement gap between elementary school students at schools in the suburban affluent areas and students at schools with a high student ethnic minority population in low socioeconomic areas of a southwest Florida county. I collected data through interviews and documents. I used documents about School Alpha's improvement policies, test scores, and demographics. The interviews were with seven participants – four classroom teachers and two reading coaches, and one reading resource teacher. Each of the participants had to have been working at the school for at least two years. The classroom teachers had to be responsible for teaching reading in Grades 3-5. I conducted five of the interviews in person and two over the telephone. This was followed by member checking to increase the validity of the information collected.

I found that the teachers at School Alpha are highly focused on early reading intervention in the primary grades because students are not struggling as much in the upper grades. According to Dean et al. (2012), effective planning for instruction should involve creating an environment for learning, helping students develop understanding, and helping students extend and apply knowledge. The consensus among the participants was that with scheduled collaborative planning, high-quality professional development, and teachers who use effective differentiation strategies, School Alpha is helping to close the achievement gap in reading.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

#### **Conclusion 1: Implement Research-Based Strategies**

The participants in this study stated that they used differentiation in guided reading using leveled texts and flexible grouping, small group instruction, reciprocal teaching, buddy reading, graphic organizers, and tiered assignments. Based on the responses to the interview questions, it is evident that the teachers at School Alpha were implementing research-based strategies effectively and that these strategies were useful for struggling readers. The teachers were all providing their students with mediated assistance at a level beyond independent learning, yet within their ZPD (Bruner 1981; Vygotsky 1978, 2012).

The findings indicated that the teachers at School Alpha are focused on independent reading, differentiated instruction in reading, and reading intervention in the early grades.

### **Conclusion 2: High Expectations and Teacher Collaboration**

The findings in this study indicated that the reading coaches and the school administration at School Alpha are providing adequate support to the teachers in designing interventions for students who are struggling with reading. They have rotating PLCs, weekly collaborative planning, as well as professional development. It is apparent that the participants in this study have high expectations for their students, they promote continued teacher collaboration, and they focus on results (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010) by celebrating success.

### **Implications for Social Change**

This case study was significant to creating positive social change because it could help to reduce teacher turnover at all the schools in the community, and may even help to

stabilize the economy in the area. To begin with, classroom teachers' test scores are now being linked directly to teacher salaries as new legislation such as Senate Bill 6 is now in effect. This bill requires that all teachers be retained, certified, and compensated based on student test scores on standardized tests -- not years of experience or degrees held (Ford, 2010). This study may help all teachers become highly effective in the classroom and therefore improve not only their test scores but may increase their salaries too.

Also, the target school of this study is in a migrant farming community with dwindling population numbers (United States Census, 2010). Poor test scores in the area have been causing some parents either to leave the community or send their children to the higher performing schools within the county, outside of this community. The results of this case study could prevent the schools' populations from falling by raising test scores. Families may then be encouraged to stay in the community and help to boost the economy.

Furthermore, this study may also be significant in terms of social change in education at the elementary school level. It may provide new perspectives on the types of instructional practices needed at Title I elementary schools to improve reading achievement for all students. District personnel could then use these findings to create future policies in relation to instructional practices and professional development in reading at Title I elementary schools. If successful, Title I schools could become as successful as their non-Title I counterparts thus significantly reducing the aforementioned achievement gap.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Based on the findings of this research study, several recommendations for action are suggested.

**Recommendation 1: Use Reading Resource Teachers Exclusively in the Primary Grades**

The Title I schools in the area should shift their focus in reading instruction to concentrating on the first grade students. Reading resource teachers should only be intervening in the first grade focusing on all the Tier 2 and Tier 3 students. This will reduce the need for interventions in the upper elementary grades because the students will have built a strong foundation in their reading skills.

**Recommendation 2: Celebrate and Emphasize Independent Reading.**

There needs to be a districtwide push to celebrate independent reading. Schools should increase the amount of literacy events with incentives to motivate students as well as to showcase what the children have achieved.

**Recommendation 3: Continue to Provide High Quality Professional Development in Differentiated Instruction to Teachers.**

The findings in this study expose the importance of providing specific training in order to help meet the needs of struggling readers. With so many resources available, the teachers need guidance to streamline the resources to help teachers give their students what they need.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The following recommendations of future research would extend the lines of inquiry begun in this case study.

Recommendation 1: Compare the achievement gap that exists in other Title I schools within the district, but not in the same community as School Alpha.

This Florida school district has 13 Title I schools. Only five of these school are in the farming community of School Alpha. The others have a different demographic and are in a different and larger city. These schools have a more stable population, and fewer students who are considered to be English Language Learners (ELL).

Recommendation 2: Conduct a study that examines the strategies teachers use to help students who are struggling in mathematics.

This study focused heavily on students who struggle in reading. School Alpha focuses so much on celebrating reading and writing. Is it possible that similar strategies will work in mathematics? It might be useful for teachers to know what strategies they can use in the mathematics classes in elementary schools. A study that explored effective differentiation strategies in mathematics could be beneficial.

### **Reflection**

This process has caused me to reevaluate my career as a reading resource teacher in an elementary school. When I started the study, I was a third grade classroom teacher. I had been differentiating in my reading classes and I was using many different strategies to help my students. However, I didn't understand why my students were still so unsuccessful when it came state and district tests. After conducting the interviews and analyzing the data, I now realize that simply using these strategies in my classroom was not enough. The whole school may need to shift its focus. As a regular classroom teacher, I am not sure I have any power to change anything. I cannot force other teachers

in the school to use differentiation strategies in their classrooms. I cannot make sure I am working with dedicated teachers who are willing to 'go the extra mile' for their students. Maybe I should be looking to go into administration or becoming a reading coach. I feel that my role now, is to share my findings with my reading coach and principals so they can consider improving the quality of instruction, not only at my school, but in the whole community.

### **Concluding Statement**

This case study examined the ways that teachers in a Title I elementary school were using differentiation in reading instruction. The schools in this farming community scored approximately 10 points lower on the state standardized test, than other schools in more affluent areas. After interviewing teachers, examining documents and analyzing data, I discovered that the target school still has specific policies which set it apart from the other schools in the community. The school in the study focuses on early intervention. The policy in this school is to identify reading problems in the early grades. They concentrate their resource teachers and intervention strategies exclusively in their first and second grade classes. This strategy has worked so well, that by the time the students are ready to take the state standardized test, there are fewer students who are struggling with reading. All the teachers at the school frequently collaborate with their colleagues, and they consistently use specific differentiation strategies in reading in all the grade levels. The school community focuses on independent reading, it has strong Professional Learning Communities, and it has teachers and who are dedicated to reaching each individual student by going above and beyond what is expected of them.

Hopefully, other principals and reading coaches in other schools in this small town will take note and replicate some of the initiatives and policies of School Alpha to improve student literacy in their schools.

## References

- Adams, C. M., & Pierce, R. L. (2006). *Differentiating instruction: A practical guide to tiered lessons in the elementary grades*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Alexander, J. M. B. (2010). *An Examination of Teachers' Perceptions regarding Constructivist Leadership and Teacher Retention*. ProQuest LLC. 789 East Eisenhower Parkway, PO Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
- Allington, R. L. (2005). The other five "pillars" of effective reading instruction. *Reading Today*, 22(6), 3. Allington, R. L. (2009). *What really matters in fluency*. New York: Pearson.
- Allor, J. H., Mathes, P. G., Roberts, J. K., Cheatham, J. P., & Champlin, T. M. (2010). Comprehensive reading instruction for students with intellectual disabilities: Findings from the first three years of a longitudinal study. *Psychology In The Schools*, 47(5), 445-466.
- Anusavice, S. H. (1999). *Differences in academic achievement, school affiliation, student and teacher efficacy beliefs, parents' perceptions, and teacher instruction between highly mobile students placed at stable and traditional schools* (Order No. 9945922). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304509757). Retrieved from <http://ezp.waldenulibrary.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/304509757?accountid=14872>
- Applegate, M. D., Applegate, A. J., & Modla, V. B. (2009). "She's My Best Reader; She Just Can't Comprehend": Studying the Relationship Between Fluency and Comprehension. *Reading Teacher*, 62(6), 512-521.

- Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F., Osborn, J., O'Rourke, R., Beck, I., Carnine, D., & Simmons, D. (2003). Put reading first. *Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA)*.
- Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. M. (2003). A Child Becomes a Reader: Birth through Preschool. Proven Ideas from Research for Parents.
- Arvans, R. (2009). *Improving Reading Fluency and Comprehension in Elementary Students Using Read Naturally*. ProQuest LLC. 789 East Eisenhower Parkway, PO Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
- Ash, G. E., Kuhn, M. R., & Walpole, S. (2008). Analyzing “inconsistencies” in practice: Teachers' continued use of round robin reading. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 25*(1), 87-103.
- Bailey, J. P., & Williams-Black, T. H. (2008). Differentiated instruction: Three teachers' perspectives. *College reading association yearbook, 29*, 133-151.
- Barnyak, N. C., & Paquette, K. R. (2010). An investigation of elementary pre-service teachers' reading instructional beliefs. *Reading Improvement, 47*(1), 7-18.
- Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2007). Increasing young low-income children's oral vocabulary repertoires through rich and focused instruction. *The Elementary School Journal, 107*(3), 251-271.
- Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2009). Text talk: Capturing the benefits of read-aloud experiences for young children. *Essential Readings on Vocabulary Instruction, 55*(1), 35.

- Begeny, J. C. (2005). Assisting low-performing readers with a flexible grouping intervention aimed to increase students' oral reading fluency. Syracuse University, NY.
- Berliner, D. C. (2009). Poverty and potential: Out-of-school factors and school success. *Education Policy Research Unit*. Retrieved 8 September 2009 from <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/poverty-and-potential>
- Bitter, C., O'Day, J., Gubbins, P., & Socias, M. (2009). What works to improve student literacy achievement? An examination of instructional practices in a balanced literacy approach. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 14(1), 17-44.
- Block, C. C., Parris, S. R., Reed, K. L., Whiteley, C. S., & Cleveland, M. D. (2009). Instructional Approaches that Significantly Increase Reading Comprehension. *Journal Of Educational Psychology*, 101(2), 262-281.
- Brenner, D., & Hiebert, E. H. (2010). If I follow the teachers' editions, isn't that enough? Analyzing reading volume in six core reading programs. *The Elementary School Journal*, 110(3), 347-363.
- Bridges, C. (2011). *The correlation between after school tutoring and reading scores of at-risk third graders* (Order No. 3482150). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ Walden University. (908623852). Retrieved from <http://ezp.waldenulibrary.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/908623852?accountid=14872>
- Bromley, K. (2007). Nine things every teacher should know about words and vocabulary instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(7), 528-529,531-537.

- Bruner, J. (1981). The social context of language acquisition. *Language & Communication*, 1(2), 155-178.
- Bruner, J. (1983). Play, thought, and language. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 60(3), 60-69.
- Bruton, A., & Robles-Piña, R. A. (2009). Deficit thinking and Hispanic student achievement: Scientific information resources. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 15, 41-48.
- Calhoun, M. B., Sandow, A., & Hunter, C. V. (2010). Reorganizing the instructional reading components: could there be a better way to design remedial reading programs to maximize middle school students with reading disabilities' response to treatment? *Annals of Dyslexia*, 60(1), 57-85.
- Carlo, M. S., August, D., McLaughlin, B., Snow, C. E., Dressler, C., Lippman, D. N., & White, C. E. (2004). Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English-language learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39(2), 188-215.
- Carnine, D., Silbert, J., Kanme'ennui, E.J., & Tarver, S. G. (2009). *Direct instruction reading*: Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Cassidy, J., & Cassidy, D. (2009). What's hot for 2010: 14th annual survey reveals some "crumbling pillars" of reading instruction. *Reading Today*, 27(3), 1-9.
- Cassidy, J., Valadez, C. M., & Garrett, S. D. (2010). Literacy trends and issues: A look at the five pillars and the cement that supports them. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(8), 644-655.

- Cirecie West-Olatunji, Shure, L., Pringle, R., Adams, T., Lewis, D., & Cholewa, B. (2010). Exploring how school counselors position low-income African American girls as mathematics and science learners. *Professional School Counseling, 13*(3), 184-195.
- Chambers, T. V. (2009). The "Receivment Gap": School Tracking Policies and the Fallacy of the "Achievement Gap". *The Journal of Negro Education, 41*7-431.
- Chapman, C., & King, R. (2008). *Differentiated instructional management: Work smarter, not harder*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Chen, N. S., Teng, D. C. E., & Lee, C. H. (2011). Augmenting paper-based reading activity with direct access to digital materials and scaffolded questioning. *Computers & Education, 57*(2), 1705-1715.
- Chenail, R. J. (2011). Interviewing the investigator: Strategies for addressing instrumentation and researcher bias concerns in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report, 16*(1), 255.
- Clay, M. (2009). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Coe, R. (2009). School improvement: Reality and illusion. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 57*(4), 363-379.
- Common Core State Standards, I. (2010). Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards, Glossary of Key Terms. Common Core State Standards Initiative,*

- Connor, C. M., Morrison, F. J., Schatschneider, C., Toste, J. R., Lundblom, E., Crowe, E. C., & Fishman, B. (2011). Effective classroom instruction: implications of child characteristics by reading instruction interactions on first graders' word reading achievement. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 4(3), 173-207.
- Covey, S. (2014). *The Leader in me*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Coyne, M. D., Zipoli Jr, R. P., Chard, D. J., Faggella-Luby, M., Ruby, M., Santoro, L. E., & Baker, S. (2009). Direct instruction of comprehension: Instructional examples from intervention research on listening and reading comprehension. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25(2-3), 221-245.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cummins, J. (2007). Pedagogies for the poor? Realigning reading instruction for low-income students with scientifically based reading research. *Educational Researcher*, 36, 564-572.
- Dean, C. B., Stone, B., Hubbell, E., & Pitler, H. (2012). *Classroom instruction that works: Research based strategies for increasing student achievement* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

- Deno, S. (1985). Curriculum-based measurement: the emerging alternative. *Exceptional Children, 52*(3), 219-232.
- Duffy, G. G. (2009). *Explaining reading: A resource for teaching concepts, skills, and strategies*. Guilford Press.
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T. (2010). Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work. (2nd ed.). Bloomington, In: Solution Tree Press.
- Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Strachan, S. L., & Billman, A. K. (2011). Essential elements of fostering and teaching reading comprehension. *What research has to say about reading instruction, 4*, 286-314.
- Embrey, S. L. (2011). *Skill versus will: An investigation of a relationship between motivation to read, oral reading fluency, and demographics for third-grade elementary students*. Walden University.
- Fani, T., & Ghaemi, F. (2011). Implications of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in Teacher Education: ZPTD and Self-scaffolding. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 29*, 1549-1554.
- Fien, H., Park, Y., Baker, S. K., Smith, J., Stoolmiller, M., & Kame'enui, E. J. (2010). An Examination of the Relation of Nonsense Word Fluency Initial Status and Gains to Reading Outcomes for Beginning Readers. *School Psychology Review, 39*(4), 631-653.
- Flynt, E. S., & Brozo, W. G. (2009). It's all about the teacher. *Reading Teacher, 62*(6), 536-538.

- Ford, A. (2010). Senate Bill 6 Affects Everyone. Retrieved July 2013  
<http://feaweb.org/senate-bill-6-affects-everyone>.
- Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2010). Identifying instructional moves during guided learning. *The Reading Teacher*, 64(2), 84-95.
- Fuchs, L. S., Fuchs, D., & Maxwell, L. (1988). The validity of informal reading comprehension measures. *Remedial and Special Education*, 9(2), 20-28.
- Gardner, E. F., Rudman, H. C., Karlsen, B., & Merwin, J. C. (1982). Stanford achievement test-Primary 3. Austin, TX: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Grejda, G. F., & Hannafin, M. J. (1992). Effects of word processing on sixth graders' holistic writing and revisions. *Journal of Education Research*, 85, 144-149.
- Gersten, R., Dimino, J., Jayanthi, M., Kim, J. S., & Santoro, L. E. (2010). Teacher Study Group Impact of the Professional Development Model on Reading Instruction and Student Outcomes in First Grade Classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47(3), 694-739.
- Gibbons, P. (2009). English learners, academic literacy, and thinking. *Learning in the challenge zone*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gredler, M. (2012). Understanding Vygotsky for the Classroom: Is It Too Late? *Educational Psychology Review*, 24(1), 113-131. doi:10.1007/s10648-011-9183-6
- Greenlee, B. J., & Bruner, D. Y. (2001). Effects of success for all reading programs on reading achievement in title I schools. *Education*, 122(1), 177-188.

- Grissmer, D., Grimm, K. J., Aiyer, S. M., Murrah, W. M., & Steele, J. S. (2010). Fine motor skills and early comprehension of the world: two new school readiness indicators. *Developmental psychology, 46*(5), 1008.
- Guion, L. A., Diehl, D. C., & McDonald, D. (2011). Triangulation: Establishing the validity of qualitative studies.
- Guthrie, J. T., McRae, A., Coddington, C. S., Klauda, S. L., Wigfield, A., & Barbosa, P. (2009). Impacts of comprehensive reading instruction on diverse outcomes of low-and high-achieving readers. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 42*(3), 195-214.
- Gutman, T. E. (2011). *The effects of read naturally on reading fluency and comprehension for students of low socioeconomic status*. Walden University
- Haberman, M. (1995). Selecting star teachers for children and youth in urban poverty. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*, 777-777.
- Hall, T. (2005). Differentiated instruction. National Center on Assessing the General Curriculum.
- Haghighat, I. D. (2009). Improving achievement for all students through the implementation of within grade level flexible grouping (Order No. 3361839). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304827259). Retrieved from <http://ezp.waldenulibrary.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/304827259?accountid=14872>
- Hancock, L. A. (2010). Tiered instruction couched within the five block schedule: An alternative to the sheltered instruction observation protocol model (Order No.

3407790). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (522106939).

Retrieved from

<http://ezp.waldenulibrary.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/522106939?accountid=14872>.

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Suny Press.

Hawkins, V. J. (2009). Barriers to implementing differentiation: Lack of confidence, efficacy and perseverance. *New England Reading Association Journal*, 44(2), 11-19.

Hawley, W. D., & Nieto, S. (2010). Race and Ethnicity Matter. *Educational Leadership*.

Hollas, B. (2005). *Differentiating instruction in a whole group setting: taking the easy first steps into differentiation*. NH. Crystal Springs Books.

Hudson, R. F., Pullen, P. C., Lane, H. B., & Torgesen, J. K. (2009). The Complex Nature of Reading Fluency: A Multidimensional View. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25(1), 4-32.

Jadallah, M., Anderson, R. C., Nguyen-Jahiel, K., Miller, B. W., Kim, I. H., Kuo, L. J., ... & Wu, X. (2011). Influence of a teacher's scaffolding moves during child-led small-group discussions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(1), 194-230.

Jecks, D. (2011). *Flexible skills grouping of elementary students for reading instruction: A meta-analytic review*. Western Illinois University.

Jenkins, J. R., Stein, M. L., & Wysocki, K. (1984). Learning vocabulary through reading. *American Educational Research Journal*, 21 (4), 767-787.

- Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Johns, J., & Berglund, R. (2010). *Fluency: Differentiated Interventions and Progress-Monitoring Assessments* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Newark, DE: Kendall Hunt Publishing
- Johnston, F., Invernizzi, M., Juel, C., & Lewis-Wagner, D. (2009). *Book buddies: A tutoring framework for struggling readers*. New York: Guilford Press
- Justice, L.M., & Softka, A. E. (2010). *Engaging children with print: Building early literacy through read-alouds*. New York: Guildford Press.
- Keeley, T. A. (2010). *What educational initiatives contribute to higher than expected achievement in student performance for public schools in the state of Indiana?* (Order No. 3404443, Indiana State University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, , 99-n/a.
- Kim, J. S., & Guryan, J. (2010). The efficacy of a voluntary summer book reading intervention for low-income Latino children from language minority families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *102*(1), 20.
- Kim, Y. S., Petscher, Y., Schatschneider, C., & Foorman, B. (2010). Does growth rate in oral reading fluency matter in predicting reading comprehension achievement?. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *102*(3), 652.
- King-Shaver, B. (2008). Differentiated Instruction: the New and Not So New. *California English*, *13*(4), 6-8.

- Kosanovich, M., & Center on, I. (2012). Using "Instructional Routines" to Differentiate Instruction: A Guide for Teachers. Center on Instruction.
- Kuhn, M. & Stahl, S. (2003). Fluency: A review of developmental and remedial practices. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95, 3-21.
- Konstantopoulos, S., & Borman, G.D. (2011). Family background and school effects on student achievement: A multilevel analysis of the coleman data. *Teachers College Record*, 113(1), 97-132
- Landrum, T. J., & McDuffie, K. A. (2010). Learning styles in the age of differentiated instruction. *Exceptionality*, 18(1), 6-17.
- Lane, H. B., Pullen, P. C., Hudson, R. F., & Konold, T. R. (2009). Identifying essential instructional components of literacy tutoring for struggling beginning readers. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 48(4), 277-297.
- Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Marzano, R.J. (2009). The art and science of teaching: Six steps to better vocabulary instruction. *Educational Leadership*, 83-84.
- Mawhinney, T.S. (2000). Finding the Answer. *Principal Leadership*, 4(1),
- McKenzie, L. D. (2011). *Scaffolding English language learners' reading performance*. Walden University

- McGee, L. M., & Ukrainetz, T. A. (2009). Using scaffolding to teach phonemic awareness in preschool and kindergarten. *The Reading Teacher, 62*(7), 599-603.
- McNamara, D. S. (Ed.). (2012). *Reading comprehension strategies: Theories, interventions, and technologies*. Psychology Press.
- Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mesmer, H. A. E. (2009). Textual scaffolds for developing fluency in beginning readers: Accuracy and reading rate in qualitatively leveled and decodable text. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 49*(1), 20-39.
- Moats, L. (2009). Knowledge foundations for teaching reading and spelling. *Reading and Writing, 22*(4), 379-399.
- Mostow, J., & Chen, W. (2009, July). Generating Instruction Automatically for the Reading Strategy of Self-Questioning. In *AIED* (pp. 465-472).
- Munisteri, K. P. (2009). The relationship between students' oral reading fluency assessment and their reading comprehension scores on the second- and third-grade terra nova and the third- and fourth-grade New York state english language arts assessments (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3386093)
- Musti-Rao, S., Hawkins, R. O., & Barkley, E. A. (2009). Effects of repeated readings on the oral reading fluency of urban fourth-grade students: Implications for practice. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 54*(1), 12-23.

- Nagy, W. E., Herman, P. A., & Anderson, R. C. (1984). Learning words in context. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 25(2), 213-231.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (NCES). (2007). The nation's report card: reading highlights (NCES Publication No. 2007-497). Washington, DC.
- National Reading Panel (2000). Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.
- Neimeier, C. K. (2012). *Factors influencing student achievement at a high-performing title I elementary school*. (Order No. 3509674, Walden University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, , 215.
- Neuman, S. B. (2004). The effect of print-rich classroom environments on early literacy growth. *Reading Teacher*, 58(1), 89-91.
- New No Child Left Behind Flexibility: Highly Qualified Teachers Fact Sheet (2004)  
<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/methods/teachers/hqtflexibility.html>
- No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Retrieved March 2010 from  
<http://ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>.
- Omega County Public Schools district operations manual. (2012). Omega, FL: CCPS Publications.
- Omega County Public Schools district operations manual. (2013). Omega, FL: CCPS Publications.
- Omega County Public Schools district operations manual. (2014). Omega, FL: CCPS Publications.

- Opitz, M. F. (1998). *Flexible grouping in reading: Practical ways to help all students become better readers*. New York: Scholastic Professional Books.
- Optiz, M. F. (January/February, 1999). Empowering the reader in every child.
- Oczkus, L.D. (2010). *Reciprocal teaching at work: Powerful strategies and lessons for improving reading comprehension* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Palincsar, A. S. (2012). *Reciprocal Teaching. International Guide to Student Achievement*, 369.
- Panter, J. E., & Bracken, B. A. (2009). Validity of the Bracken School Readiness Assessment for predicting first grade readiness. *Psychology in the Schools*, 46(5), 397-409.
- Patton, M.Q. (2001). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Productions.
- Pentimonti, J. M., & Justice, L. M. (2010). Teachers' use of scaffolding strategies during read alouds in the preschool classroom. *Early childhood education journal*, 37(4), 241-248.
- Pentimonti, J. M. (2011). *Meeting the needs of all children: The use and impact of scaffolding in the preschool classroom*. The Ohio State University
- Petscher, Y. (2010). A meta-analysis of the relationship between student attitudes towards reading and achievement in reading. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 33(4), 335-355.

- Poole, D. (2008). Interactional differentiation in the mixed-ability group: A situated view of two struggling readers. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43, 228-250.
- Pullen, P. C., Tuckwiller, E. D., Konold, T. R., Maynard, K. L., & Coyne, M. D. (2010). A Tiered Intervention Model for Early Vocabulary Instruction: The Effects of Tiered Instruction for Young Students at Risk for Reading Disability. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 25(3), 110-123.
- Rasinski, T. V. (2009). *Essential readings on fluency*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Rasinski, T., Homan, S., & Biggs, M. (2009). Teaching reading fluency to struggling readers: Method, materials, and evidence. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25, 192-204.
- Rasinski, T. (2010). *The fluent reader: Oral & silent reading strategies for building fluency, word recognition & comprehension*. New York, NY: Scholastic
- Rasinski, T., Rikli, A., & Johnston, S. (2009). Reading fluency: More than automaticity? More than a concern for the primary grades? *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 48(4), 350-361.
- Reed, J. M., Marchand-Martella, N., Martella, R. C., & Kolts, R. L. (2007). Assessing the effects of the reading success level A program with fourth-grade students at a title I elementary school. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 30(1), 45-68.
- Reis, S. M., McCoach, D. B., Little, C. A., Muller, L. M., & Kaniskan, R. B. (2011). The effects of differentiated instruction and enrichment pedagogy on reading

- achievement in five elementary schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(2), 462-501.
- Reiter, A. B., & Davis, S. N. (2011). Factors Influencing Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs about Student Achievement: Evaluation of a Pre-Service Teacher Diversity Awareness Program. *Multicultural Education*, 19(3), 41-46
- Rhett, T. Y. (2011). *The effectiveness of a reading intervention pull-out program*. Walden University
- Richardson, J. (2009). *The next step in guided reading: Focused assessments and targeted lessons for helping every student become a better reader*. Scholastic Incorporated.
- Rivera, M. (2009). The Powerful Effect of Play in a Child's Education. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed For Quick Review*, 75(2), 50-52.
- Robb, L. (2008). *Differentiating reading instruction: How to teach reading to meet the needs of each student*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Roberson, S., & Roberson, R. (2009). The role and practice of the principal in developing novice first-year teachers. *Clearinghouse*, 82 (3), 113-118.
- Rubin, H., & Rubin, I. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rupley, W. H., Blair, T. R., & Nichols, W. D. (2009). Effective reading instruction for struggling readers: The role of direct/explicit teaching. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25(2-3), 125-138.

- Ruscoe, J. (2010) Exploring the impact of administrative support and instructional practices on student achievement in reading at two Title I elementary schools. Ed.D. dissertation, Walden University, United States -- Minnesota.
- RTI: Questions reading professionals should ask. (2009, August/September). *Reading Today*, 27 (1), 1, 6.
- Sanchez Sadek, C. (2006). Educational questions. Retrieved April 17, 2008, from <http://www.educationalquestions.com/qa10.htm>
- Schlag, G. E. H. (2009). *The relationship between flexible reading groups and reading achievement in elementary school students*. Walden University.
- Schwanenflugel, P. J., Meisinger, E. B., Wisenbaker, J. M., Kuhn, M. R., Strauss, G. P., & Morris, R. D. (2006). Becoming a fluent and automatic reader in the early elementary school years. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(4), 496-500,502-511,513,516-522.
- Schwanenflugel, P. J., Kuhn, M. R., Morris, R. D., Morrow, L. M., Meisinger, E. B., Woo, D. G., & Sevcik, R. (2009). Insights into fluency instruction: Short-and long-term effects of two reading programs. *Literacy Research and Instruction*,48(4), 318-336.
- Scott, J. A., & Nagy, W. E. (2004). Developing word consciousness. Vocabulary instruction: Research to practice, 201-217.
- Skindrud, K. & Gersten, R. (2006). An evaluation of two contrasting approaches for improving reading achievement in a large urban district. *The Elementary School Journal*. 106, 390-407.

- Shanker, J. & Ekwall, E. (2003). *The Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory* (4th ed.) City, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Shinn, M. R., Good, R. H., Knutson, N., Tilly, W. D., & Collins, V. L (1992). Curriculum-based measurement of oral reading fluency: A confirmatory analysis of its relation to reading. *School Psychology Review*, 27, 459-479.
- Simons, H. (2009). *Case study research in practice*. Sage Publications.
- Sobolak, M. J. (2011). Modifying Robust Vocabulary Instruction for the Benefit of Low-Socioeconomic Students. *Reading Improvement*, 48(1), 14-23.
- Spörer, N., Brunstein, J. C., & Kieschke, U. L. F. (2009). Improving students' reading comprehension skills: Effects of strategy instruction and reciprocal teaching. *Learning and Instruction*, 19(3), 272-286.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Stanovich, K. E. (1984). The interactive-compensatory model of reading. A confluence of developmental, experimental, and educational psychology. *Remedial and Special Education*, 5(3), 11-19.
- Stewart, L. (2009). Achievement differences between large and small schools in Texas. *Rural Educator*, 30(2), 20-28
- Student Success Act, S.736 (2011).
- Suchey, N. (2009). Oral passage reading fluency as an indicator of reading comprehension (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3370244)

- Taylor, D. B., Mraz, M., Nichols, W. D., Rickelman, R. J., & Wood, K. D. (2009). Using explicit instruction to promote vocabulary learning for struggling readers. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25, 205-220.
- Taylor, B. M., Peterson, D. S., Pearson, P. D., & Rodriguez, M. C. (2010). Looking inside classrooms: Reflecting on the “how” as well as the “what” in effective reading instruction. *Essential Readings on Struggling Learners*, 34.
- Templeton, S., & Bear, D. R. (Eds.). (2013). *Development of orthographic knowledge and the foundations of literacy: A memorial festschrift for Edmund H. Henderson*. New York: Routledge.
- Templeton, S. (2011). Teaching Spelling in the English/Language Arts Classroom. *The Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) New York: Routledge.
- Templeton, S., & Bear, D. R. (Eds.). (2013). *Development of orthographic knowledge and the foundations of literacy: A memorial festschrift for Edmund H. Henderson*. New York: Routledge.
- Thijs, J., & Eilbracht, L. (2012). Teachers' Perceptions of Parent-Teacher Alliance and Student-Teacher Relational Conflict: Examining the Role of Ethnic Differences and "Disruptive" Behavior. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49(8), 794-808.
- Tobin, R. (2007). Differentiating in the language arts: Flexible options to support all students. *Canadian Children*, 32(2), 11-18.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). Mapping a route toward differentiated instruction. *Educational leadership*, 57, 12-17.

- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & McTighe, J. (2006). *Integrating Differentiated Instruction & Understanding By Design: Connecting Content and Kids*. Assoc. for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C. (2003). *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom: Strategies and tools for responsive teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C. (2004). Differentiation in diverse settings: A consultant's experience in diverse settings. *The School Administrator*, 7(61), 28-35.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2004b). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Tomlinson, C. (2009). Two Schools Pursuing Learning Profiles. *School Administrator*, 66(2), 32-33.
- Tomlinson, C.A., Brimijoin, K., & Narvaez, L. (2008). The differentiated school: Making revolutionary changes in teaching and learning. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Imbeau, M. B. (2012). Common sticking points about Differentiation. *School Administrator*, 69(5), 19-22.
- Tuccio, K. A. (2008). *Multicultural Diversity in Teacher Preparation Programs*. ProQuest.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Data retrieved from <http://www.census.gov>.

- U.S. Department of Education. (2015). Data retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html>.
- Valencia, S. W., & Pearson, P. D. (2010). Reading assessment: Time for a change. *Essential Readings on Assessment*, 18.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.).
- Wanzek, J., Wexler, J., Vaughn, S., & Ciullo, S. (2010). Reading interventions for struggling readers in the upper elementary grades: A synthesis of 20 years of research. *Reading and writing*, 23(8), 889-912. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walqui, A. (2006). Scaffolding instruction for English language learners: a conceptual framework. *The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 159-180.
- Walqui, A., & Van Lier, L. (2010). Scaffolding the academic success of adolescent English language learners. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
- Wanzek, J., Roberts, G., Linan-Thompson, S., Vaughn, S., Woodruff, A. L., & Murray, C. S. (2010). Differences in the relationship of oral reading fluency and high-stakes measures of reading comprehension. *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, 35(2), 67-77.
- Whalon, K. J., Al Otaiba, S., & Delano, M. E. (2009). Evidence-based reading instruction for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on autism and other developmental disabilities*, 24(1), 3-16.

- What Works Clearinghouse (2013). Read Naturally[R]. What Works Clearinghouse Intervention Report. Updated. What Works Clearinghouse.
- Williams, C., Phillips-Birdsong, C., Hufnagel, K., Hungler, D., & Lundstrom, R. P. (2009). Word study instruction in the K–2 classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(7), 570-578.
- Wise, J. et. al (2010). The relationship between different measures of oral reading fluency and reading comprehension in second-grade students who evidence different oral reading fluency difficulties. *Language, Speech & Hearing Services In Schools*, 41(3), 340-348.
- Wood, K. D., Harmon, J. & Taylor, D. (2011). Guidelines for integrating comprehension-based word study in content classrooms. *Middle School Journal*, 42(5), 57-64.
- Woolley, G. (2008). The assessment of reading comprehension difficulties for reading intervention. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 13, 51-62.
- Wright, T. S. (2012). What classroom observations reveal about oral vocabulary instruction in kindergarten. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(4), 353-355.
- Yang, Y. F. (2010). Developing a reciprocal teaching/learning system for college remedial reading instruction. *Computers & Education*, 55(3), 1193-1201.
- Yin, Robert K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods, 3rd ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2011). *Applications of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Zipke, M. (2011). First Graders Receive Instruction in Homonym Detection and Meaning Articulation: The Effect of Explicit Metalinguistic Awareness Practice on Beginning Readers. *Reading Psychology*, 32(4), 349-371.

## Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

You are invited to take part in a research study of differentiated instruction at School Alpha. You were chosen for the study because of your experience as a classroom teacher. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Olwen Suzette Stewart, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. This researcher is currently a reading resource teacher in another elementary school in the school district. Her role as a reading resource teacher is completely separate from her role as a researcher.

### **Background Information**

The purpose of the case study is to examine the extent to which differentiated instruction is being implemented in reading classrooms at School Alpha.

### **Procedure**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-on-one interview about your experiences. The interview will last approximately 1 hour and will consist of 7-10 questions.
- Participate in a member checking interview to review the data collected by the researcher for clarification and additional information. The member checking interview will take place in person, by personal email, or by phone, and will last approximately 30 minutes.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the study. No one at School Alpha will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during the study. Declining or discontinuing will not negatively impact the participant's relationship with the researcher. If you feel stressed during the study you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The perceived risks to participating in this study are minimal. The interview questions may cause the participant some degree of stress if the questions make the participant reflect on negative experiences. The participant may decline to answer a question or withdraw from the research study at any point. The perceived benefit for this research is it may assist School Alpha in reflecting on current practices with new teachers in the classroom.

**Compensation**

No compensation will be provided.

**Confidentiality**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research study. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher. Email: [uksista65@hotmail.com](mailto:uksista65@hotmail.com) or 239-247-0850

If you are willing to participate in this research study or would like more information, please email or call Olwen Suzette Stewart within seven business days.

Thank you in advance for considering participating in this research study.

Olwen Suzette Stewart

### Appendix B: Interview Questions for Classroom Teachers

1. Please share examples of the ways you differentiate instruction in reading for struggling students? Research Question 1
2. What difficulties or obstacles do you face in differentiating instruction in reading for your struggling students?
3. What do you think would help you better meet the needs of your struggling readers?
4. What assistance have you had in your school in differentiating reading instruction that you found beneficial?
5. What type of support do you receive from the administration in differentiating instruction in your classroom?
6. What pre-service preparation, training, or professional development helped to prepare you for differentiating reading instruction for struggling readers?
7. What else could you say about addressing the needs of students who struggle in reading that I did not ask that you would like to talk about?

### Appendix C: Interview Questions for Reading Coaches

1. What kind of support do you provide to classroom teachers with students who are struggling with reading? Research Question #2
2. What kinds of professional development do you think teachers need in order to help meet the needs of struggling students?
3. What difficulties or obstacles do you think teachers face in differentiating instruction in reading for their students?
4. As the instructional leader in this school, in what ways do you collaborate with classroom teachers to build and strengthen instruction for the individual needs of each student?
5. Classroom teachers in Grades 3-5 use a variety of instructional materials and strategies to improve reading achievement for their students. What specific strategies and materials do you believe have improved reading achievement for students in the upper elementary grades?
6. In your opinion, why does your school have a reputation for success in reading instruction in this community?
7. What else could you say about addressing the needs of students who struggle in reading that I did not ask that you would like to talk about?

## Appendix D: Coding of Data

SN = Student Needs

CN = Cognitive Needs

BI= Behavioral Issues

LE = Learning environment

TE=Teacher Experiences

ED = Experience with Differentiation

CD = Challenge in Teaching Differentiation

ET = Effectiveness in Teaching Differentiation

PST = Pre-service Training

IST = In-service Training

ID = Implementing Differentiated Instruction

II = Implementing Instructional Strategies

EE = Establishing Expectations

FT = Focusing on Traditional Instruction

EI=External Issues

AD = Administration Support (or lack of)

HST = High stakes testing

Appendix E: Letter of Cooperation from Community Partner

Letter of Cooperation from Community Partner 06/9/2014

School Alpha (Pseudonym) Located in a southwestern state

Dear Olwen Suzette Stewart,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled An Inquiry of Differentiated Instruction in Elementary Reading through Qualitative Case Study. As part of this study, I authorize you to interview classroom teachers in grades 3-5 who have been at the school for more than two years, interview school reading resource and reading coaches, and review documents relating to the instructional reading program, such as class test reports, lesson plans, FCAT and FAIR reports, benchmark testing reports, as well as documents pertaining to professional development at the school. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Principal School Alpha (Pseudonym)

Letter of Cooperation from Community Partner

08/12/2014

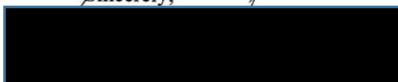
School Alpha (Pseudonym) Located in a southwestern state

Dear Olwen Stewart,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled 'An Inquiry of Differentiated Instruction in Elementary Reading through Qualitative Case Study'. As part of this study, I authorize you to interview reading teachers, reading resource, and reading coaches with more than 2 years teaching experience, review documents pertaining to differentiation in reading. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting. I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of the principal.

Principal, School Alpha (Pseudonym)

The researcher retains the signed copy to protect the identity of the school and principal.