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Second Grade Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiated Instruction

Alyssa Simmons
Walden University

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Alyssa Simmons

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Dr. Katherine Hayes Foundation, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Vicki Underwood, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
2018

Abstract

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by

Alyssa Simmons

MA, Northwestern State University, 2009

BS, Northwestern State University, 1998

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Despite various instructional efforts, the second grade students in a mid-sized Southwestern school district failed to progress in reading. Although differentiated instruction has been shown to improve literacy skills for young readers, many teachers at the study site did not differentiate instruction for all students. Grounded in theories of social constructivism and differentiated instruction, the purpose of this study was to investigate second grade teachers' perspectives about using differentiated literacy instruction and the effect of their teaching experience and participation in professional development on those perspectives. Data for this nonexperimental, causal-comparative study were collected from 93 second grade teachers via an anonymous, online survey and were analyzed using ANOVA and *t* tests. No significant differences in perspectives were found among teachers based on years of experience nor participation in professional development tailored to instructing English language learners or gifted and talented students. However, teachers who took part in Response to Intervention professional development were more positive about using differentiated literacy instruction. Based on these findings, a professional development series was designed to provide second grade teachers with specific differentiated instruction strategies to raise all students' reading achievement. Teachers' effective application of differentiated literacy instruction strategies in the classroom at this study site will contribute to positive social change by providing educational opportunities for all students to learn to read. As students succeed in reading, they will succeed in the upper grades, in secondary school, and beyond.

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Section 1: The Problem

The U.S. student population in public schools is diverse—culturally, linguistically, and with respect to ability. Students identified as gifted learners, English language learners (ELLs), and/or struggling learners, all of whom may represent a variety of different ethnic groups, need diverse learning experiences. According to Colangelo et al. (2010), equity in education is not defined as educational sameness. Equity refers to a teacher's awareness and respect of each student's individual differences. Teachers use differentiated instruction to address the differences among today's learners. In this quantitative study, I looked at the ways in which second grade teachers implement differentiated strategies to enrich reading instruction for all students in general education classrooms.

The Local Problem

Northport Independent School District (ISD), a pseudonym for the district used in this study, serves more than 26,900 students and is a *Met Standard* district, according to the accountability ratings recognized by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). This rating indicates that districts and campuses met the state-set target score for each index that the TEA had performance data for in 2014-2015. This rating applies to campuses that serve prekindergarten through 12th grade.

In 2015, district officials reported students leaving first grade and entering second grade in Northport ISD were not reading on grade level. Teachers observed students' reading ability and provided instructional interventions through small group instruction when needed. In 2014, 39% of first grade students finished the school year not reading on

grade level; in 2015, 49% of students began second grade not reading on grade level.

Reading has remained a problem for the Northport ISD.

In 2012, the state implemented a new accountability system by which schools are measured on yearly student progress. For example, a student must have one year's academic growth from the previous school year. The state bases the student progress measure on state assessments. This new system forces school districts to focus on every student, not just the struggling learners. District officials for Northport ISD asserted that the district strives for student success through rigorous learning practices, collaborative leadership, and a focus on maximizing student achievement. In 2015, Congress voted to replace the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was signed in 2002, and penalized public schools that did not bring the lowest-performing students up to grade level (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2015). In place of NCLB, the Every Child Succeeds Act allows each state to generate individual accountability systems that focus on student growth and teacher performance (Layton, 2015).

Gifted and talented (GT) students, ELLs, and struggling learners often lack the support they need in a continuous differentiated learning environment; this support is needed to increase achievement (Richardson, 2011). One researcher said that educators have sought to tailor instruction to the needs of individual students (Corcoran, 2014). Kahveci and Akgül (2014) argued that one possible reason GT students fail to progress in general education classrooms is that general education teachers do not provide them with differentiated instruction. When teachers are trained in differentiated instruction they are more likely to meet the learning needs of GT students (Goddard, Neumerski, Goddard,

Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2010). Researchers stated that GT children are unsuccessful when the instruction they receive is not tailored to their specific learning needs (Kahveci & Akgül, 2014; Connor et al., 2011). In addition, GT students are educated in the general education classroom most of the school day. However, general education teachers are often not adequately prepared to serve the needs of the gifted population (Goddard et al., 2010).

Some researchers claimed that gifted students received less support because of particular beliefs the researchers share. Wai (2014) asserted that most of the American public ignores students who are identified as gifted because most of them do not have gifted children. Wai further stated that most Americans believe gifted children have been given better opportunities in life, and as most Americans believe in equity rather than excellence, they feel that gifted children may not need further educational assistance. Students identified as GT spend most of their school day in the general education classroom. Researchers found that when teachers feel more educated in differentiated instructional strategies, they are more inclined to deliver those strategies that meet the needs of gifted learners (Goddard et al., 2010).

Northport ISD has experienced a 30% increase in its ELL population in the past 7 years, which reflects the general tendency in the United States (Baecher, Artigliere, Patterson, & Spatzer, 2012). The rise in the ELL population creates a need to educate teachers in differentiated instructional methods that will help them address the learning needs of these students. Ford, Cabell, Konold, Invernizzi, and Gartland (2012) posited that literacy instruction decisions for ELL students, who need early literacy instruction,

are often determined by students' English language attainment rather than by each student's specific literacy or learning needs. Differentiation should generally be structured for individual students rather than the class as a whole group and it should involve the teacher presenting different versions of the main activities of the lesson (Baecher et al., 2012).

In addition to providing differentiated instruction for GT and ELL students, students who have difficulty reading would benefit from receiving differentiated literacy instruction. Students who struggle with reading may face challenges in other areas of education, are less likely to graduate from high school, and may experience academic challenges in college or difficulties being successful in the work force (Baumgartner, Lipowski, & Rush, 2003). Students enter the classroom performing at various levels of achievement, and it is the educators' responsibility to determine the best way to teach each child. Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009) stated that struggling students benefit from receiving differentiated instruction in the classroom. To reach all the learners, teachers need to be educated in evidence-based practices and learning strategies. Jones et al. (2012) argued that teachers are tasked with determining how to meet the needs of diverse learners in the classroom when students do not respond to the instruction being delivered. Providing teachers with professional development about differentiated instruction gives them an opportunity to learn about addressing students' learning needs.

In Northport ISD, differentiation across all subgroups of children is addressed in the following manner: teachers are encouraged to use the Focus for Instruction document, part of the Developmental Reading Assessment. In this document, teachers target each

student's need for intervention based on his or her reading level. The intended purpose of integrating reading intervention is to improve literacy achievement for all students. In this study, I investigated teachers' perspectives toward differentiated reading instruction for students in second grade classes. Data were collected from 93 second grade teachers.

Rationale

Northport ISD reported a decline in reading achievement for students moving from the first grade to the second grade. Northport ISD's Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning stated the entire purpose for differentiated literacy instruction is student growth (personal communication, December 9, 2015). She also said she believes teachers who differentiate literacy instruction during small group instruction are able to look for trends in what essential skill sets need to be targeted for specific students (personal communication, December 9, 2015). Purposeful planning to implement the reading strategies that meet all students' learning needs should be intentional when teaching students (Goddard et al., 2010).

In addition to second grade students in Northport ISD performing below grade level expectations, the district profile indicated that third and fourth graders did not meet minimum state requirements in reading, which indicated a trend in low student achievement. In addition, math scores had declined in comparison to previous years. The district is focusing on professional development for teachers based on the best practices for student learning. Professional development also delivers strategies for differentiated instruction. Training teachers on how to reach the learning needs of all students in class is critical for students to succeed (Johnsen, 2012). The vision statement on the district's

profile reads Northport ISD is a learning community vigorously pursuing student success. The profile for the district also states the district has a desire to increase student achievement. Northport ISD offers a variety of professional development opportunities to its teachers in an effort to equip teachers with techniques that address the academic needs of all learners.

Across the country, capable students from diverse backgrounds do not accelerate into the highest levels of academic achievement at an acceptable rate (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014). According to assessment data available from the National Assessment of Education Progress, educators are moving small numbers of students to advanced levels of academic achievement, and unfortunately, few multi-cultural and low-income students reach those levels (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014).

In addition, gifted students' needs are not addressed. Bianco (2010) stated that "Gifted education as a field is in poor health from being faced with numerous challenges and rife with inequities" (p. 324). Research-based instruction is important in each of the Response to Intervention tiers (Jones, Yssel, & Grant, 2012). Teachers may attempt to use Response to Intervention strategies to help struggling students, but it is not clear what are they doing to foster the learning environment for gifted learners. GT students "become a national priority when excellence is sought, and a critical need is perceived" (Jolly, 2009, p. 37). However, as impartiality becomes the preference for education, gifted students' needs are not viewed as important and are supplanted with the needs of students in other subpopulations (Jolly, 2009). One of the reasons gifted education has floundered since its inception in the 1920s could be that educators lack the skills

necessary to provide an effective and rigorous education for these unique learners. Moreover, Siemer (2009) argued that in 1635 when education began in America, providing differentiated instruction for advanced learners required little effort because all students, regardless of age, were educated in the same classroom and had access to a variety of curricula.

With respect to ELLs, Arens et al. (2012) highlighted changes in public school demographics leading to a high demand for teachers who can address the needs of ELL students in classrooms to confirm that they are afforded the same learning opportunities as their peers whose first language is English. Teacher training and professional development in ELL-specific strategies could influence the knowledge and skills that teachers bring to the classrooms—and ultimately improve student achievement (Arens et al., 2012).

Ford et al. (2012) reported that most teachers' daily literacy routines included “guided reading, reading comprehension, writing, spelling, reading fluency, decoding, and read-alouds, in addition to oral language and vocabulary” (p. 890). In addition, Ford et al. stated that most literacy instruction was described as undifferentiated and presented in whole-group formats rather than designed to reach specific students' needs. If a student struggles to read, it is likely he or she will struggle in other academic areas as well (Richardson, 2011). Inadequate literacy skills will lead to poor academic performance throughout a student's educational career, so improving student achievement must be at the forefront of all community stakeholders. Therefore, the need to identify effective approaches to raise reading achievement is an urgent task for all educators across the

nation. Students' achievement in reading is an issue being addressed; however, the best way to address the problem has not been identified (Baumgartner et al., 2003). Effective instructional practices should be differentiated and integrated into classroom practices and seamlessly included in everyday instruction, not only for struggling readers, but for all students (Jones et al., 2012). By employing differentiated literacy strategies in the classroom, teachers may assist advanced readers, struggling readers, and second language learners in reaching targeted reading levels.

Definition of Terms

Professional development: the development of skills or knowledge to succeed in a profession through continued education (McLeskey, 2011).

Peer coaching: a professional development model where an expert either observes a teacher implementing an instructional technique or provides feedback, or an expert models an instructional strategy for a teacher (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010).

Low socioeconomic student: a student who qualifies for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program (TEA, 2015).

Culturally diverse: the characteristics of a person that are attained through experiences, knowledge, skills, and empathy that are informed by race, ethnicity, identity, class, sexuality, and gender (Nguyen, 2012).

Reading fluency: the ability to read with speed, correctness, and expression that represents well-developed reading skills (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1999).

Gifted and talented learners or advanced learners: individuals who display outstanding levels of ability or assurance in one or more domains (“What is Giftedness,” 2013).

Differentiated instruction: accommodating different learning styles (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). It is a way of teaching that supports active planning for student differences in classrooms (Tomlinson, 2013).

English language learners (ELLs): students whose first language is not English but are learning English (Education Service Center Region 20, 2015).

English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS): descriptions of proficiency in the English language and expectations for ELLs (Education Service Center Region 20, 2015).

Struggling learner: a student who has difficulty keeping up with same age peers in a classroom that is developmentally appropriate for his or her age (Robbins, 2015).

Significance of the Study

All students must be provided with opportunities to connect with texts that lead to continuous progress in reading and increasing literacy (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Educators who create a challenging environment for all students can support those who struggle to read, as well as those who are academically advanced (Benbow & Stanley, 1996; Renzulli & Reis, 1997) to work at an appropriate individual challenge level in all content areas. Today’s students are not successful in reading for a variety reasons, such as low socioeconomic background, speaking another language at home, lack of parent involvement, and little prior knowledge (National Reading Panel, 2000). Many students

who are not progressing in reading have parents with little schooling, no access to appropriate literature at home, are poor, or have learning disabilities (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014). In addition, few advanced readers receive challenging reading instruction or exposure to independent reading at levels challenging to them (Reis et al., 2004).

The purpose of this project study was to examine teachers' perspectives on differentiating instruction for students in second grade classes. All students need challenging texts that are appropriate to their reading level, so they can increase their reading ability, and teachers should provide appropriate resources and instructional strategies to help students achieve this goal. The Board of Trustees and administrators for Northport ISD could use the results of this study to make informed decisions on providing professional development for differentiated instruction in schools. The results of this study could bring about an increased awareness of the importance in differentiating literacy instruction which could influence students' reading achievement leading to social change. Increased reading achievement would lead to students' academic success in their middle and high schools and increase their chance in completing high school and going to college. Increased reading achievement in elementary school contributes to social change by giving students access to lifelong learning and academic success.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Many programs have been created to improve reading skills among students. In this study, I addressed teachers' perspectives toward differentiated literacy instruction in

second grade classes in Northport ISD using the following research questions (RQs) as a guide:

RQ1: Based on years of teaching experience, what is the difference between Northport ISD's experienced and inexperienced second grade teachers' attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners?

H₀1: No significant difference exists between Northport ISD's experienced and inexperienced second grade teachers' attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELL, and struggling learners.

H₁1: A significant difference exists between Northport ISD's experienced and inexperienced second grade teachers' attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELL, and struggling learners.

RQ2: What is the difference in attitudes of Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners versus those who have not, toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement?

H₀2: No significant difference exists between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have or have not received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners with respect to their attitudes

toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

H₁₂: A significant difference exists between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have or have not received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

RQ3: What is the difference in the attitudes of Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies versus those who have not, toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement?

H₀₃: No significant difference exists between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

H₁₃: A significant difference exists in between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

RQ4: What is the difference in the attitudes of Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in English as a Second Language (ESL) instructional strategies versus those who have not, toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement?

H₀4: No significant difference exists between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in ESL instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

H₁4: A significant difference exists in between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in ESL instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this project study was to explore teachers' perspectives toward differentiated reading instruction for students in second grade classes. Data were collected from a sample of 93 second grade teachers. Their levels of familiarity with implementing differentiated reading strategies were determined after they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. I analyzed teachers' responses to assess their perspectives of the effectiveness of differentiated literacy instruction with various subgroups of learners in student groups.

In this section, I review current research in differentiated reading instruction. Theories on early literacy acquisition are presented. Various benefits and barriers to implementation are addressed to highlight literacy deficiency as a nationwide problem. I also include a review of current research in differentiated literacy instruction, with an emphasis on the different subgroups of learners: GT learners, ELL, and struggling readers.

Sources for the literature review were found in the databases ERIC, Education Research, and Education Source. The following key terms were used: *reading achievement, differentiated literacy instruction, ELL and literacy, differentiated instruction and GT students, reading comprehension, Response to Intervention, and literacy instruction*. The search was limited to the years 1971 to 2016.

Theoretical Framework

In this study I examined teachers' perspectives toward differentiating instruction for students in second grade general education classes in Northport ISD guided by the theories of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2005). Several researchers stated theories relevant to behavior, reasoning, and socioeconomic levels support the need for providing differentiated instructional strategies to students (Reis, Gentry, & Park, 1995). Social constructivism is a relevant theory for this research study, problem, and purpose because in this conceptual framework, the emphasis is placed on the collaborative nature of learning. Learning environments built on the social constructivism theory also include real-world settings instead of fixed sequences of instruction. Social context is important to learning.

Learning for Vygotsky is socially constructed and culturally mediated. In other words, learning is social in nature; cognition is situated in a particular socio-cultural context, not in the individual brain. If educators do not design specific activities in which students can internalize new concepts through interacting with each other and adults, they may stumble in their learning (Lampert-Shepel, 2008).

Educators view Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory as fundamental to instructional delivery and student development (Blanton, 1998). The theory of social constructivism, referencing Vygotsky's work, has substantial implications for teaching and learning (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). This theory is grounded in the idea that the learner must be observed within a social and cultural environment (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2001). A learning environment should be organized so that growth of higher order thinking can be developed and nurtured following social interaction (Shambaugh & Magliaro, 2001). Therefore, social interaction is vital to the development of cognition (Levykh, 2008). Vygotsky's theory supported that learning is an ongoing process, not an end result (Riddle & Dabbagh, 2008).

Vygotsky (1978) described social interaction as the basis for cognitive and emotional development. According to Vygotsky, children develop knowledge, skills, and abilities from interaction and experiences with others, which he referred to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as "the difference between the child's actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult," drawing attention to individual growth (p. 209).

McGee and Richgels (1996) argued that the Vygotsky focused on literacy attainment through social interaction but placed less emphasis on stages of behavior.

From this point of view, language and cognition appear to develop at about the same time and are connected. "Vygotsky believed that children need to be able to talk about a new problem or a new concept in order to understand it and use it" (McGee & Richgels, 1996, p. 8). As young people work with an adult or peer to problem-solve or to complete a task, the partner supports the learning by using conversation that assists the child in solving the problem; the child gradually understands the language and goes through the process until the task can be completed independently (McGee & Richgels, 1996).

To learn, students should be challenged appropriately (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). When tasks are too difficult or too easy for students, they may not learn effectively, or they may become bored. Tomlinson (1997) suggested good instruction for all learners requires an understanding of supported risk. Supported risk is akin to a teacher's encouraging the child into his/her ZPD (Mercer & Fisher, 2013). Respecting students' interests is also important because it increases students' motivation to learn.

In an interview with Tomlinson, Wu (2013) reported that sometimes honoring student interest is supporting a student in sharing a topic of particular personal passion. Sometimes it means providing connections with what is taught to what is relevant to students, or also it could mean providing a variety of choices in an assignment or product where students can delve into a topic more deeply and create a product to demonstrate learning that is more meaningful to the student. Wu shared Tomlinson's beliefs on

differentiation: “None of those things is especially difficult to do, and often they can make a profound difference in a student’s receptivity to learning” (p. 128). When intentionally planned, incorporating student choice can positively influence student performance and achievement.

Altintas and Ozdemir (2015) conducted a mixed methods study with 212 students to evaluate a differentiation model in terms of student achievement and teacher practice. The results of the study showed the teachers were in agreement the activities were imaginative, effective, and appropriate to students’ learning needs. Researchers indicated that differentiated instructional practices increase the likelihood of addressing the needs of students who find literacy learning challenging (Tobin & Tippett, 2013).

Developing Gifted Potential

Teachers of GT students have struggled for years with identifying effective ways to educate gifted students (Powers, 2008). In 2008, Powers conducted a qualitative research study in which he looked for a relationship between student choice, independent study, and real-world connections as an appealing factor for gifted students. The participants were 20 students who demonstrated a need for differentiated learning experiences. The findings supported the idea that gifted students are motivated to achieve when provided options for student choice, independent study, and real-world connections. “Differentiated instruction addresses the needs of the gifted in the diverse, mixed-ability classrooms of today by adapting content, process, or product with regards to the varying interests of readiness levels of the students” (Powers, 2008, p. 57).

Differentiated instruction is claimed to be an effective strategy to support gifted learners in mixed-ability classrooms.

A number of researchers argued that gifted students should be motivated through goal setting, student choice, and project-based learning (Altintas & Ozdemir, 2015; Brown & Abernethy, 2009; Lamont, 2012; Powers, 2008). In 2012, Lamont summarized research that showed a relationship between gifted learners and anxiety or fear.

According to Lamont, educators and parents need to help gifted learners understand realistic academic expectations. Gifted learners often feel that they do not have to put forth effort in academics. Lamont (2012) stated that students should be educated that giftedness does not mean immediate mastery. Creating a challenging learning situation for GT students will encourage GT students to increase their effort in school.

Differentiated instruction is not viewed as the sole way to deliver instruction; however, it offers a research-based perspective to consider how curriculum is taught to meet the diverse learning needs of all students (Goddard et al., 2010). One of the approaches to enhancing learning experiences for all students is to create a framework that modifies rigorous instruction-based student needs (Brown & Abernethy, 2009). Involving students in the learning process means recognizing, developing, and acting upon their various learning styles (Nixon, 2014). Recent books on the Next Generation Science Standards provide such suggestions to differentiate instruction for accelerated learners as “varying the pace within learning activities, encouraging creativity through open-ended activities, and making interdisciplinary connections” (Johnsen, 2014, p. 11). Brown and Abernethy (2009) suggested using Response to Intervention to create an

authentic learning environment for gifted learners. The Response to Intervention approach encourages teachers to delve into differentiated instruction.

Almost all students need guidance to reach full academic potential. Siemer (2009) argued that mainstreaming shows no significant improvement in academic performance for either struggling learners or gifted students. However, numerous strategies can be implemented to meet the individual needs of the students. Corcoran (2014) stated that teachers could use assessment data from work completed outside the classroom to determine which aspects of students' instruction need most attention. Corcoran, along with a school leadership team, conducted an experimental study in which they focused on student achievement data and providing personalized instruction. The study results showed that providing students more opportunities to develop literacy skills, in addition to teachers using data-driven decisions, increased students' literacy achievement (Corcoran, 2014). Traditional pull-out programs for GT students are decreasing; therefore, classroom differentiation is becoming more important for general education teachers at the elementary level (Latz, Neumeister, Adams, & Pierce, 2009). Because GT students are being educated in general education classrooms, it is important that teachers create an educational setting conducive to meeting the learning needs of GT students.

Several researchers argued that teachers lack skills and strategies to use differentiated instruction with gifted students and often feel uncomfortable (Beam, 2009; Latz, et al., 2009; Newman & Hubner, 2012). Latz et al. (2009) conducted a study to investigate teachers' perceptions of their participation in differentiated instruction. In the study, researchers used grounded theory to analyze three data sources, which included

observations, email communication, and teacher surveys (Latz, et al., 2009). “The data was categorized into four themes: scheduling, communication, teacher motivation, and differentiation usage” (Latz, et al., 2009, p. 30). It was concluded that teachers might benefit from the increased use of communication and mentoring and would utilize differentiation strategies more often. Beam (2009) believed teachers should not only be aware of their own comfort level when it comes to differentiating, but also to recognize that it is important to begin. Newman and Hubner (2012) argued that, even though research supports differentiated instruction as a best practice for gifted learners, some teachers are neither trained nor comfortable with the practice.

Differentiated instruction is also vital to meet the academic and social needs of students with varying abilities. It also provides teachers with a research-based method to adjust the delivery of instruction so that all students have an opportunity to achieve mastery of content standards (Walsh, 2012). The differentiation model challenges educational stakeholders to change the way instruction is delivered to students.

Building Bridges

There are challenges in providing a good education to all students, regardless of whether the child is gifted, ELL, struggling, or all three. Researchers have emphasized the need for highly qualified teachers who can address the critical areas of achievement standards and curriculum for all students (De Oliveira & Olesova, 2013; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2014; Tricarico & Yendol-Hoppey, 2012). Other researchers have argued that educators should investigate instructional quality and seek to understand how specific classroom instructional strategies could influence student-learning achievement (Hayes,

Rueda, & Chilton, 2009). Every learner's success in school is reliant on teachers who are both invested in and intentional about planning for success (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2014). An understanding between students, educators, and parents about how to best teach the ELL population could potentially generate the change needed in instructional delivery and influence positively student achievement. In 2014, Theoharis and O'Toole summarized action research as a school community implemented targeting the ELL population. According to Theoharis and O'Toole, teachers and administrators began using a co-teach model to deliver instruction more collaboratively. "Students reading English at grade level increased from 50 percent to 86 percent" (p. 28). Research showed the number of ELLs in the United States has increased over the past several years and now makes up more than 10% of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 student population (De Oliveria & Olesova, 2013).

De Oliveria and Olesova conducted a study to determine whether teachers and teacher candidates had a sufficient understanding to effectively educate ELLs. The study included 29 participants who were identified as teachers and teacher candidates enrolled at an Indiana university during the 2011 fall semester. Addressing key issues in literacy development for ELLs, the findings of the study showed that, in addition to culture and home languages used by students; educators using academic language more than conversational speech influenced student learning (De Oliveria & Olesova, 2013). De Oliveria and Olesova further suggested that teachers' use of instructional strategies tailored to ELLs would help students improve their reading achievement.

The possibilities of improving student achievement for ELL students could increase if there is a connection among cultural awareness, instructional delivery, and literacy development. Baecher et al. (2012) argued that

While development of literacy in the first language has progressed steadily for many ELLs, many others have interrupted formal education or have spent years returning to their home countries and back to the United States, resulting in gaps in their academic skills. Researchers have helped practitioners understand the complexity of the academic achievement of ELLs in U.S. schools and have identified many of the key variables at play. These include the level of first language literacy, years and type of schooling in the home country, length of residence in the United States, and the nature of academic English. For school-age ELLs, academic English requires linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence, as well as specific semantic and syntactic knowledge to meet high literacy demands across multiple genres. (p. 14)

When teachers bridge students' culture into the instruction delivered, students may see the benefit of learning the content, thus increasing their achievement. Ford et al. (2012) stated there is little doubt that ELL students' English language proficiency influences their reading development. Theoharis and O'Toole (2014) argued that educators need to rethink instructional delivery to serve diverse populations more equitably.

Crossing Boundaries

Researchers have argued that providing intense differentiated instruction along with intentional interventions can remediate reading struggles and provide a way for

teachers to reduce barriers that may exist between struggling learners and student achievement (Carta et al., 2015; Goodwin & Ahn, 2010; Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009). Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009) supported findings from several researchers who argued that following a Response to Intervention model with struggling learners would support those learners and improve their achievement. Goodwin and Ahn (2010) highlighted the rising concern about the lack of progression in literacy achievement among children and adolescents who are struggling learners. In addition, Carta et al. (2015) suggested “the importance of increased focus on early literacy and language in classroom instruction in programs serving high proportions of children at risk as a means of preventing reading failure in future years” (p. 281). Increasing literacy achievement for struggling learners has been a chief concern for both educators and researchers.

Having conversations about understanding and implementing differentiated classroom instruction is an important component of crossing the boundaries that may exist with teachers implementing literacy instruction that meets the needs of all students. Connor et al. (2011) stated students do not reach appropriate levels of academic achievement because they are not exposed to the amount and type of instruction necessary to help them be successful. “Reading difficulties have long-term implications for children’s well-being including grade retention, referral to special education, dropping out of high school, and entering the juvenile criminal justice system” (Connor et al., 2011, p. 174). Interventions available in schools, such as differentiated instruction, may provide opportunities for enrichment to students not formally identified as needing special education; but who may be struggling, particularly in the area of reading (Jones et

al., 2012). Beam (2009) believed differentiation is a means to educate students on all spectrums of learning abilities.

Professional Development for All Teachers

Researchers agreed that teachers need to be educated how to support all students for continuous learning in their classrooms (Bianco, 2010; Johnsen, 2014; Moon & Brighton, 2008). For example, Johnsen (2014) reported that school districts devoted less than 4 days per school year on professional development related to the education of elementary gifted students. Educators need to be aware of the professional standards in their field to maintain high levels of professionalism (Johnsen, 2012). Bianco (2010) stated that teachers lack knowledge to identify gifted learners and posed the importance of educators staying abreast of standards in gifted education and best practices for teaching gifted learners. Moon and Brighton (2008) indicated that even though educators acknowledge the importance of supporting young gifted students, they may be either unwilling or unsure of how to put into practice supportive instructional strategies or may feel unable to do so within the parameters of public school expectations. Johnsen (2012) suggested that teachers trained in GT learner best practices foster creative and fast-paced learning environments for students.

Addressing the needs of struggling learners is a difficult challenge for classroom teachers. Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009) argued that teachers need on-going support from administrators and curriculum specialists on how to make data-driven decisions regarding student progress, determining effectiveness of instruction, and using observational student data to implement accommodations and supports that may be needed. In addition,

Walker-Dalhouse et al. (2009) further stated teachers need guidance in addressing time constraints when schedules may limit opportunities for individualizing instruction.

Demographic changes have increased the heightened demand for highly qualified teachers who are able to meet the needs of ELL students in classrooms (Hill & Flynn, 2006) and can create learning opportunities for ELL students to experience the same learning environment as other students. However, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Arens et al., 2012) revealed that many teachers have not been trained in ELL-specific instructional strategies. “In 2002, 41 percent of teachers in the United States reported teaching ELL students but less than 13 percent reported receiving professional development related to the needs of this student subgroup” (Arens et al., 2012, p. 1). Professional development focused on ELL instructional strategies could enhance teachers’ knowledge and skills to positively influence student achievement.

Peer Coaching

Differentiated instruction may be the best practice for all learners, but many elementary teachers do not feel comfortable or adequately prepared to differentiate instruction (Latz et al., 2009; Newman & Hubner, 2012; Siemer, 2009). Any learner—gifted, ELL, or struggling—who is not challenged or highly engaged may seem disruptive or off task. “It seems that when it comes to differentiation, teachers are either not doing it at all or beating themselves up for not doing it as well as they are supposed to be doing it” (Delisle, 2015, p. 28). To lessen the likelihood of students being overlooked by educators, Siemer (2009) suggested that training teachers to address abilities and needs of all learners should be part of NCLB’s highly qualified teacher requirement.

One suggestion to support teachers in the instructional shift toward providing differentiated instruction is to offer peer coaching. Latz et al. (2009) argued that peer coaching is a non-threatening way to build confidence in teachers. “Teachers emerge from a peer-coaching experience with a heightened sense of confidence” (p. 28). Light, Calkins, Luna, and Drane (2009) suggested teachers participate in a professional development model that employs activities, such as peer coaching, collaborations, and mentoring, which could influence teaching and learning. Coaching provides opportunities for teachers to learn from one another and receive feedback on a lesson taught or an instructional strategy that was used. Researchers posited that reciprocal peer coaching provides multiple opportunities for helping individuals become highly qualified teachers (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Trautwein & Ammerman, 2010).

Implications

Educators can use the findings of this study to inform differentiated instructional practices for students. In Texas, it is a requirement that teachers complete 30 hours of professional development in gifted education, with a 6-hour update annually. Educators in Texas are required to complete continuing professional education requirements to renew a teaching certificate. The requirements vary depending on the type of teaching credential held and include 150 professional development hours every 5 years for classroom teachers (Henricksen, 2013). Johnsen (2014) lamented that less than 5 hours per school year are devoted to professional development for educating gifted learners. Currently, there are no requirements for professional development hours designated for addressing ELLs or struggling learners in general education classrooms.

Students spend most of their school day in the general education classroom; however, often general education teachers are not adequately prepared to serve the variety of needs of the gifted population, the ELL population, nor other students who struggle. For teachers who devote time to planning differentiated reading instruction for learners, steps should be taken to promote the importance of providing all learners with different opportunities to increase their achievement in reading. District and campus administrators can work collaboratively to develop professional development on how to teach reading to diverse learners (Johnsen, 2014). Students identified as ELL often need instruction delivered in a variety of ways. Research on educator preparation programs indicated that general education teachers who have not earned additional certifications, for example bilingual or ESL certification, are not sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of ELL students (Van Roekel, 2011).

Reading is a prerequisite for academic success. Those who struggle with literacy are often more vulnerable to academic endangerment and economic injustice (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Poor reading skills often correlate with poor comprehension (Maybin, 2006). Providing the best resources and programs for teaching students how to read is a pivotal factor for learning reading readiness skills. By employing differentiated instructional literacy strategies, teachers can still assist all readers in reaching targeted reading levels, thereby reaching societal maturation.

A possible outcome of this study could be identification of barriers that may limit the implementation of differentiated literacy instruction, which could influence student achievement. Another possible outcome of this study could be creating professional

development curricula and prioritizing topics about professional development for teachers on differentiated instructional strategies in literacy. A possible project resulting from this study could be professional development webinars on how to support diverse learners in the classroom through differentiated literacy instruction.

Students must be able to read if they are to be successful academically and socially. Shapiro (2008) believed students who master reading by third grade have a greater increase in reading fluency than those who do not. The risk for those students who are not successful readers could include dropping out of school, which may result in their inability to obtain a job. Literacy is one of the many attributes society uses to measure success. Schools are contributing to the overall well-being of students by teaching them to read. Using differentiated literacy instruction could empower all students by learning to read, an essential life skill.

Summary

Providing students with a variety of educational choices prepares them to face the ever-changing demands on educational achievement and in the work force. It is important for students to develop the kind of critical thinking skills necessary to be successful in the real world (Richmond, 2014). Section 1 included a discussion of the local problem in Northport ISD, a description of the purpose of the study, the literature review, and the research questions used for this study. Despite the use of various instructional efforts, the second grade students in Northport ISD were not progressing in reading. Even though researchers have reported the use of differentiated instruction to improve students'

literacy skills; many teachers in Northport ISD were not consistently differentiating reading instruction for their students.

In the following section, I describe the research methodology used to examine teachers' perspectives of differentiated reading instruction. Section 2 includes the description of data collection and data analysis procedures. Section 3 includes a description of the project that resulted from the findings of the study (Appendix A). Section 4 includes the reflections and conclusions that resulted from the completion of this project.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This quantitative study employed a nonexperimental, causal comparative research design to determine if elementary school teachers' perspectives toward differentiated reading instruction differed across groups according to experience, whether they received training in (a) GT learners, (b) working with ELLs, or (c) Response to Intervention. In causal-comparative designs, researchers seek to find current differences between groups of individuals defined by their differences on other pre-existing variables. Quantitative research with a causal-comparative design was best suited for this study because I was seeking to identify if there were differences between teachers' perspectives and understanding of differentiated literacy instruction based on their background and experiences. The null hypotheses for the study were that there would be no significant differences in teacher perspectives toward differentiated reading instruction based on (a) years of teaching experience and (b) training received in GT learner approaches, ELL strategies, or Response to Intervention.

Setting and Sample

The setting for this study was 23 elementary schools in Northport ISD, an urban school district serving more than 26,900 students in the heart of a metropolis in Texas. The population for the study was the 117 second grade general education teachers who taught the 2,114 second grade students in the district.

Instrumentation and Materials

The Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs, which was developed to gain an understanding of academic diversity in middle schools from the perspective of administrators and teachers (Tomlinson et al., 1995), was used in this study. A study by Tomlinson et al. described a survey used with administrators and a survey used with teachers. Tomlinson et al. developed the surveys to focus on school characteristics, administrator beliefs, teacher beliefs, curriculum, assessment practices, and cooperative learning practices. For the current study, the 17 questions from the Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs were used to determine if the current methods being used for instruction was meeting the needs of diverse learners. The instrument used in this study was a 5-point Likert-type scale (Appendix B) with scores ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The survey included demographic questions to categorize participants into groups based on years of experience, as well as professional development in GT learners, ELL, and Response to Intervention.

The reliability and validity of the survey items were established through “face validity assessment using middle school teachers and administrators of gifted programs as review experts and pilot testing the instrument on a small group comprised of those individuals” (C. Callahan, personal communication, August 18, 2016). The developers of the instrument administered the survey to a sample of middle school teachers nationwide. When comparing the teachers in the original study to the proposed population of teachers for this study, I noticed the populations are both largely female teachers and

predominately White. Dr. Callahan shared the rationale for obtaining reliability and validity with me (see Appendix C).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected through an attitudinal survey to investigate educator experiences and perspectives about differentiated instruction with students in general education classrooms. Participants were asked to complete the survey through Survey Monkey (see Appendix B). I emailed the survey link to the district's Chief of Staff, who emailed the survey link to the 117 second grade teachers. In the email, I included instructions and explained the voluntary nature of the survey, and that the study was being conducted by a secondary administrator in the district. There was a statement at the start of the survey that explained the purpose of the survey. In the survey explanation, I included a statement about the protection of human subjects because the data were being collected for educational purposes. I also included a consent statement that indicated clicking forward showed the participant's willingness to complete the survey. Because the census was 117 teachers, an ideal participation rate would be 100% of the teachers completing the survey; however, with a confidence interval of ± 5 and a confidence level of 95%, a response rate of 86 participants was considered acceptable to reflect the target population (Creative Research Systems, 2016). Responses of the 93 participants who choose to complete the survey were recorded. All data collected will be stored in my password-protected computer for 5 years.

Upon completion of the data collection phase of the study, the data were prepared for analysis using the method of summated ratings in SPSS. The method of summated

ratings was appropriate because I considered the 5-point Likert scale data to be ordinal rather than continuous (Hall & Richardson, 2016). Using the method of summated ratings, I assigned values to each response and created a total score on the 20 items for each respondent (Harpe, 2015). All items were scored with the same values.

The quantitative data analyzed for the purposes of this study were used to summarize the perspectives of teachers toward differentiated instructional strategies for all learners and to determine if there were significant differences between the groups under comparison (experienced vs. non-experienced and trained in differentiation strategies for gifted or English learners, etc., vs. not trained). These groups were sorted using the responses to the demographic questions in the survey. I then compared the subgroup mean scores using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and *t* tests. The results were also presented in a table that includes descriptive statistics about responses to each of the survey items.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The following assumptions were made while conducting this research study. I assumed the sample of participants was representative of the second grade teachers in Northport ISD. The sample of 93 teachers was large enough in relationship to the entire teaching staff in Northport ISD. I assumed that participants would answer honestly regarding their viewpoints toward implementation of differentiated literacy instruction in the second grade classroom.

Some limitations of this study existed. This study was conducted during the spring semester, so the data might reflect the working environment during that time. The

spring semester in Northport ISD consists of teachers administering state assessments along with midyear district assessments. To address the limitations, participants were invited to complete the survey at a time that was convenient to them.

Delimitations included restricting this quantitative study to second grade teachers in one urban school district. The results of this study would be generalizable to educators who (a) teach second grade children in a public school, (b) work in the district where the study was conducted, and (c) have been trained in differentiated instructional strategies for literacy.

Protection of Participants' Rights

The data collection process must be respectful and ethical. I obtained permission before collecting data as part of the informed consent process (Creswell, 2012). Prior to collecting any data, I was granted IRB approval through the school district's superintendent and Walden University (Approval No. 12-27-16-0271084). To keep teacher information anonymous, a school official provided each participant a link to the survey created on Survey Monkey. The survey included an explanation of the study and a statement of agreement to participate in the survey. I explained that anonymity and confidentiality would be preserved and that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time with no ramifications. In the statement, I explained that clicking forward in the survey constituted agreement to participate in the survey.

I was a school administrator in Northport ISD. At the beginning of the survey, an explanation was provided to the participants that my role as a school administrator would have no bearing on their professional teacher evaluation or employment status in

Northport ISD as all the data were anonymous. Researchers have ethical obligations to protect participants from harm (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2011). The nature of this research study generated little chance of harm to the participants. I did not supervise any of the teachers who participated in this study. I was a secondary-level administrator and all the teachers who were asked to participate in the study taught at the elementary level.

Data Analysis Results

I conducted a quantitative project study in an urban school district. The quantitative project study was conducted using an online survey with second grade teachers; there were 117 teachers invited to participate and 93 teachers responded. Results of the responses to the 17 survey items regarding teachers' perceptions towards differentiated instruction were tested for significance by using an ANOVA. The findings are presented, in this section, as they relate to each research question.

The overall perception scores of the participants had a mean response of 3.70, which represented the average score on the 5-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Because the mean equaled 3.70, it can be said that participants were neutral to slightly in agreement as a group regarding their attitudes toward and use of differentiation overall. Table 1 shows descriptive data for each survey item. As can be noted in Table 1, most teachers agreed that "Differentiated literacy instruction would influence student achievement for English language learners (ELL)." The median for that item was 5, the mean was 4.53, and the standard deviation was .5. When it comes to Question 14, "English language learners benefit from differentiated instruction," however, the median was 2, the mean was 2, and the standard deviation was

.9. This indicated that, while most teachers agreed (in theory) that differentiated literacy instruction would help ELL students, few agreed that ELLs were receiving or benefitting from that type of instruction.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Items

Survey Item	Min.	Max.	Mean	Median	SD
1. I have sufficient knowledge about differentiated literacy instruction.	2	5	3.91	4	0.702
2. Differentiated instruction greatly influences student achievement in literacy.	1	5	4.43	4	0.615
3. GT students benefit from differentiated literacy instruction.	1	5	4.49	5	0.636
4. Differentiated literacy instruction would influence student achievement for English language learners (ELL).	4	5	4.53	5	0.502
5. I frequently use students' talents to differentiate literacy instruction in class.	2	5	3.99	4	0.715
6. I identify the learning needs of diverse learners in my reading class.	3	5	4.34	4	0.580
7. Using guided reading questions is a way to differentiate literacy instruction.	2	5	4.29	4	0.669
8. I frequently use student choice for assessment to differentiate in my literacy class.	1	5	3.25	3	1.007
9. I am comfortable allowing student choice in completing products for my literacy class.	1	5	3.49	4	0.974
10. Students' learning needs are used to monitor and adjust my literacy instruction.	2	5	4.31	4	0.608
11. I am comfortable assessing students' literacy achievement in a variety of ways.	2	5	4.15	4	0.675
12. I frequently deliver literacy instruction in a variety of ways.	2	5	4.22	4	0.657
13. All students benefit from implementing differentiated literacy instruction.	3	5	4.42	4	0.518
14. English language learners benefit from differentiated instruction.	1	5	2.00	2	0.944
15. Struggling readers grasp concepts at the same rate as their peers in literacy class.	1	5	3.99	4	0.699
16. I am comfortable providing differentiated literacy instruction for struggling readers.	1	5	3.09	3	1.028
17. Significant barriers exist in my classroom, which interfere with implementation of differentiated literacy instruction.	1	5	3.02	3	1.023

The normal P–P plot of the total score is displayed in Figure 1. "Probability plots are generally used to determine whether the distribution of a variable matches a given distribution. If the selected variable matches the normal test distribution, the points cluster around a straight line" (IBM Knowledge Center, 2017). The linear nature of the data establishes the data are normally distributed and ANOVA can be applied ("Explorable," 2017).

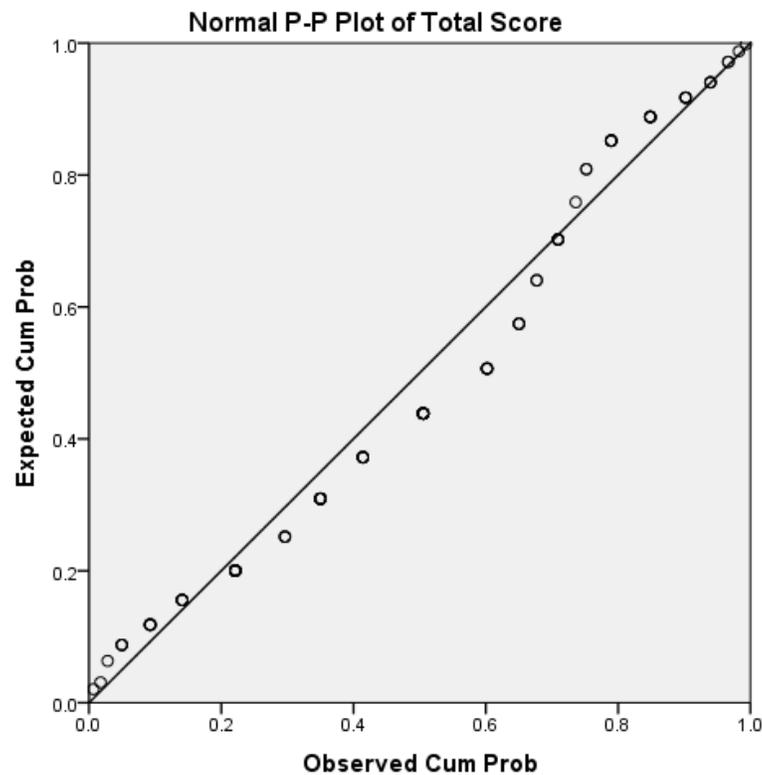


Figure 1. Normal P–P plot of total score.

Findings: Years of Experience

In this section, I discuss the findings that relate to RQ1, where I investigated the relationship between years of teaching experience and teachers' attitudes toward

differentiated literacy instruction that influences student achievement for targeted student populations.

RQ1: Based on years of teaching experience, what is the difference between Northport ISD's experienced and inexperienced second grade teachers' attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners?

H₀1: No significant difference exists between Northport ISD's experienced and inexperienced second grade teachers' attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELL, and struggling learners.

H₁1: A significant difference exists between Northport ISD's experienced and inexperienced second grade teachers' attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELL, and struggling learners.

The years of teaching experience varied amongst the participants. However, the years of teaching experience did not influence the teachers' attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELLs, or struggling learners. Table 2 shows the years of experience percentages for experienced versus novice teachers in the Northport ISD. The largest percentage of respondents fell in the 0-5-year category.

Table 2

Years of Experience

	Frequency	%
0 – 5 years	32	34.4
6 – 10 years	26	28.0
11 – 20 years	25	26.9
> 20 years	10	10.0
Total	93	100.0

I used Levene's test as an inferential statistic to determine the homogeneity of variances. Levene's test is a statistical analysis that tests the assumption that sample variances are equal. "If the resulting p -value of Levene's test is less than some significance level, usually 0.05, the obtained differences in sample variances are unlikely to have occurred based on random sampling from a population with equal variances. Thus, the null hypothesis of equal variances is rejected, and it is concluded that there is a difference between the variances in the population" (Levene, 1960, p. 278). The statistical relationship, $F(3, 89) = 1.143, p = .34$, shows the p -value is greater than .05. The variances for teachers' years of experience for teachers were considered equal.

The results of the ANOVA for second grade teachers' years of experience are displayed in Table 3. There was no statistically significant difference in teachers' perception towards differentiated literacy instruction based on years of experience. The null hypothesis is not rejected and therefore, I concluded that teachers' attitudes towards the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement do not differ significantly based on years of experience.

Table 3

ANOVA Results for Years of Experience

Total score	<i>SS</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between groups	190.570	3	63.523	1.923	.132
Within groups	2939.559	89	33.029		
Total	3130.129	92			

Findings: GT Learner Professional Development

In this discussion, I include the findings that relate to RQ2 where I investigated the relationship between the difference in teachers' attitudes toward differentiated literacy instruction influencing student achievement for targeted student populations based on those who have had professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners and those who have not.

RQ2: What is the difference in attitudes of Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners versus those who have not regarding the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement?

*H*₀2: No significant difference exists between second grade teachers who have or have not received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

*H*₁2: A significant difference exists between second grade teachers who have or have not received professional development in instructional

strategies for GT learners with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

Of the 93 second grade teachers participating in this study, 11.8% reported that they had not received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners and 88.2% have received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners. The survey data for these two groups were compared using an independent samples *t* test. Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was significant, $F(91) = 4.96$, and the *p*-value is .028, therefore unequal variances were assumed. Due to lack of a significant result, $t(19.84) = -1.42$, $p = .17$, the null hypothesis that there is no difference in perceptions towards differentiated literacy instruction between teachers who received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners and those who did not cannot be rejected.

Survey question 3 asked if differentiated literacy instruction benefits GT learner students. Based on the means of the groups of teachers who have received professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners ($M = 4.46$) and those who have not ($M = 4.73$), most teachers agreed that differentiating instruction for GT learner students influences student achievement.

Findings: Response to Intervention Professional Development

In the following discussion, I include the findings that relate to RQ3, where I investigated the relationship between the difference in teachers' attitudes toward differentiated literacy instruction influencing student achievement for targeted student

populations based on those who have had professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies and those who have not.

RQ3: What is the difference in the attitudes of Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies versus those who have not regarding the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement?

H₀₃: No significant difference exists between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

H₁₃: A significant difference exists in between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

Northport ISD has provided 70% of its second grade teachers with professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies. Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was significant, $F(91) = 12.26, p = .001$, therefore unequal variances were assumed. The significant result, $t(65.12) = -2.75, p = .008$, indicated that there was a significant difference in perceptions towards differentiated literacy instruction between second grade teachers who have received professional development in Response

to Intervention instructional strategies ($M = 63.69$, $SD = 6.31$) and those who have not ($M = 60.70$, $SD = 3.66$). The standard deviation of the sample was larger for the teachers who received training in Response to Intervention strategies, so there is more variability in their response, which means there is less agreement that differentiated instructional strategies could positively influence student achievement for struggling learners. The differences in the mean scores were significant. This statistical difference supports the hypothesis that there is a difference in teachers' perceptions towards differentiated literacy instruction between those who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies and those who have not.

In survey questions 15 and 16, teachers were asked about providing differentiated literacy instruction for struggling learners. Teachers who have had professional development in Response to Intervention strategies answered more positively ($M = 4.01$) that struggling learners benefit from differentiated literacy instruction than teachers who have not had professional development in Response to Intervention strategies ($M = 3.91$). Teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention strategies were mostly neutral ($M = 3.0$) in their comfort level of differentiating instruction for struggling learners while those who have not had professional development in Response to Intervention strategies were slightly more positive ($M = 3.35$) in their comfort level for differentiating literacy instruction for struggling learners. A possible explanation for this finding may be that the teachers who have not had the professional development in Response to Intervention strategies may not fully understand the complexity of differentiating literacy instruction for struggling learners.

Findings: ESL Professional Development

In the following discussion, I include the findings that relate to RQ4, where I investigated the relationship between the difference in teachers' attitudes toward differentiated literacy instruction influencing student achievement for targeted student populations between those who have had professional development in ESL instructional strategies and those who have not.

RQ4: What is the difference in the attitudes of Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in ESL instructional strategies versus those who have not toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement?

H₀₄: No significant difference exists between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in ESL instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

H₁₄: A significant difference exists in between Northport ISD's second grade teachers who have received professional development in ESL instructional strategies versus those who have not with respect to their attitudes toward the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement.

In Northport ISD, 6.5% of second grade teachers have not had professional development in ESL instructional strategies and 93.5% of Northport ISD's second grade

teachers have had professional development in ESL instructional strategies; however, there was no significant difference in teachers' perceptions towards differentiated literacy instruction based on whether teachers had received professional development in ESL instructional strategies. Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was not significant, $F(91) = 1.23, p = .27$, therefore the variances were considered to be equal. An independent samples t test was performed, resulting in $t(91) = -1.12, p = .27$, thereby failing to reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference in teachers' attitudes regarding the influence of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement between those who have received professional development in ESL instructional strategies versus those who have not.

Survey questions 4 and 14 related specifically to ESL students. Teachers who have had professional development in ESL instructional strategies ($M = 4.52$) and those who have not ($M = 4.67$) both responded positively that differentiating literacy instruction would influence student achievement. However, when asked if ESL students would benefit from differentiated instruction, both groups of teachers disagreed ($M = 2.00$).

Based on analyses of the data, I can conclude there is a difference in perceptions towards the influences that differentiated literacy instruction has on student achievement between teachers who have had professional development in Response to Intervention strategies and those who have not had that professional development. Teachers perceive struggling students will benefit from receiving Response to Intervention instructional strategies. There were no significant differences in perception towards differentiated

literacy instruction between teachers with different levels of experience or those who have received professional development in GT learner instructional strategies or ESL instructional strategies.

The conceptual framework I used as a basis for this study supported the ideas that it is important to use student interests and to identify the ZPD of students through differentiating learning experiences specific to student need. The data in this study showed educators in Northport ISD perceived that struggling students benefit from Response to Intervention instructional strategies, but they were either neutral or slightly positive in their perspectives toward providing struggling learners with differentiated instructional strategies depending on if they had received professional development in Response to Intervention strategies or not. The median response of 5 for survey question 3 indicated that most teachers agreed that GT learner instructional strategies support the learning environment for GT learner students. The median response for survey question 14 was 2, which indicated teachers' attitudes towards whether differentiating instruction benefits ESL students were negative. However, the median response for survey question 4 was 5, which indicated their attitudes about whether differentiated instruction influences student achievement for ESL students was positive. While most teachers agreed (in theory) that differentiated literacy instruction would help ELL students, few agreed that ELLs were receiving or benefitting from that type of instruction.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Section 3 of this project study includes an overview of the goals for this professional development series and the implementation in Northport ISD. This project is a plan for professional development on the use differentiated instructional literacy strategies with GT learners, ELLs, and struggling learners. Based on the data analysis in Section 2, a rationale is provided to support the need for professional development differentiated instructional literacy strategies and the use of those instructional strategies with all students. A description is included to explain the relationship between the reviewed literature and data collected that influenced the creation of this professional development plan. The professional development plan, for Northport ISD second grade teachers, includes detailed information about implementation, follow-up training sessions, and how to continue collaboration across the district. Section 3 concludes with an evaluation plan to determine the effectiveness of the professional development and includes plans for future collaboration for the coming school year. I begin the plan with a discussion of the learning objectives for the professional development plan. I include an outline of the learning objectives and how the professional development plan will be delivered. Appendix A includes the professional development materials needed for implementation of the plan.

This project is designed for teachers to come together three times over the course of 9 weeks to experience professional development on using differentiated literacy instructional strategies with all students. The plan is designed to provide Northport ISD

second grade teachers with the instructional strategies needed to increase student achievement in literacy. The professional development series addresses the need for professional development in differentiated literacy instructional strategies. The professional development series will begin in June 2018 during the spring quarter of Northport ISD's school year and will conclude in August 2018.

Rationale

A significant finding in the data analysis was the difference in perspectives on differentiated literacy instruction between teachers who have had professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies and those who have not. The teachers who have received professional development in Response to Intervention instructional strategies had a more positive response ($M = 63.69$) to the survey questions on average than the teachers who had not ($M = 60.70$). There were no significant differences in perspectives towards differentiated literacy instruction between teachers having ($M = 63.16$) or not having ($M = 61.36$) professional development in instructional strategies for GT learners and having ($M = 63.13$) or not having ($M = 60.33$) professional development in ESL instructional strategies. Therefore, the project will be a professional development plan for Northport ISD's second grade teachers in differentiated literacy instructional strategies that can be used for all students. The purpose is to create an opportunity for second grade teachers to learn, implement, and practice differentiated literacy instructional strategies and to use this information to plan differentiated instruction in general education classes for all students. In the following literature review, I share information about the various ways to differentiate instruction. In the discussion, I

provide information regarding the importance of identifying learning styles for improving student achievement, specifically instructional strategies to increase students' reading achievement. Overall, in the project I embraced what teachers already know and provided additional instructional strategies to increase student engagement and improve students' reading levels. In addition to the instructional strategies, the project includes a digital platform where teachers can share what they have learned and reflect on their practice with other teachers in Northport ISD. The online platform will allow educators in Northport ISD to use anonymous student data, in a problem-solving format, to monitor and adjust instructional strategies based on feedback from their peers so student achievement continues to improve. This project has the potential to be part of new teacher orientation for any newly hired teacher in Northport ISD. Finally, the project can help facilitate future professional development for all teachers in Northport ISD. Teachers who demonstrate mastery of a specific instructional strategy and show academic growth in students' literacy achievement can lead their campuses through the learning process as well.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this project study was to explore teachers' perspectives toward differentiated literacy instruction for students in second grade classes. Data were collected from a sample of 93 teachers who responded to the survey sent to 117 teachers. I analyzed the teachers' responses to assess their perspectives of the effectiveness of differentiated literacy instruction with various student groups. The perspectives towards implementing differentiated literacy strategies showed teachers see value in using

Response to Intervention instructional strategies, but there were varying levels of comfort in delivering those differentiated instructional strategies in their classrooms.

In this section, I review current research in the areas of effective approaches to professional development, job-embedded professional development, and modeling differentiated professional development. In the literature review I also included a review of current research in professional development for differentiated literacy instruction with an emphasis on classroom connections, adapting instructional practices, coaching models, and the influence of professional development on literacy instruction.

Sources for the literature review were obtained from the Walden University library. The databases ERIC, Education Research, and Education Source were accessed. I conducted a search in these databases for research studies with the following key terms: *professional development and literacy, differentiated literacy instruction, ELL and literacy, GT students and literacy, coaching, and evaluating differentiated literacy professional development*. The search was limited to the years 2012 to 2017.

The data analysis I described in Section 2 shows how teachers responded positively to the use of differentiated literacy instructional strategies for Response to Intervention purposes. In addition, I reviewed research about different professional development platforms and professional development evaluations.

Professional Development

Most professional development is designed and delivered with the best intentions; however, one size does not fit all (Caddle, Bautista, Brizuela, & Sharpe, 2016). Teachers have different educational backgrounds and motivations, and it is important to meet

teachers where they are in their professional development journey. Collecting evidence from participants and student performance can provide support for implementing a professional development program. Hardin and Koppenhaver (2016) believed professional development should be modified to include consistent feedback for teachers and continuous follow-up support. Guskey (2002) stated there are five indicators that should be used when evaluating a professional development program, “participants’ reactions, participants’ learning, organization support and change, participants’ use of new knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes” (pp. 46-48).

Implementing differentiated instructional strategies may seem overwhelming to teachers; however, in 2013, Hodge studied a classroom-based approach to professional development. In the study, teachers reported linking professional development to classroom instruction greatly positively affected student learning (Hodge, 2013). Thomas (2015) said exposing teachers to professional development opportunities is a way to increase and improve literacy instruction for students. Stevenson, Carrier, and Peterson (2014) reported that teachers felt inadequately prepared to provide differentiated instruction due to “time constraints, lack of background knowledge, and low self-efficacy” (p. 2). In addition, Barr, Eslami, Joshi, Slattery, and Hammer (2016) suggested teachers who are inadequately prepared for early literacy instruction is the leading reason for the high incidence of literacy problems in the United States. Teachers need to feel prepared and equipped to adapt their instructional practices and learning environment to meet the needs of all students. To address this challenge, Gaitas and Martins (2016) stated, teachers must be prepared in early teacher education and supported through

professional teacher development. Educator preparation programs may not include guidance on how to provide differentiated instruction. Ciullo et al., (2016), reported teachers feel professional development is often insufficient, which contributes to their lack of preparedness in literacy differentiation for all students. The quality of teacher education and the support teachers receive are among the most important factors in shaping student learning and growth (Gaitas & Martins, 2016).

Students are not the only ones who benefit from differentiated instruction. Adults learn in different ways also. One way to provide differentiated professional development to teachers is through instructional coaching. Stover, Kissel, Haag, and Shonkier (2011) stated that a literacy coach provides intentional, differentiated, and on-going professional development for teachers. Researchers suggested offering professional development using a literacy coach as an effective way to improve teaching (Amendum, Ginsberg Hendrick, Kainz, & Vernon-Feagans, 2013; Thomas, 2015). Teachers who are given crucial feedback from a coach about their instructional practices could be more likely to implement differentiated literacy instruction in their classrooms.

Traditional face-to-face professional development is an efficient platform for delivering training to a large group of teachers. However, creating an environment where small group professional development can be on going provides an opportunity to differentiate professional development for teachers. Professional learning communities (PLC) have been linked to improved instructional delivery and increased student achievement (McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler, & Lundeberg, 2013). A PLC, in conjunction with face-to-face professional development, can support and sustain learning

and lead to increased student achievement (Paskevicius & Bortolin, 2016). Therefore, the design of my professional development project is ongoing and multi-model, which allows for face-to-face professional development sessions, online collaboration, and opportunities for teachers to transfer their learning immediately into the classroom with the support of a literacy coach.

Adapting Instructional Practices

Planning for and implementing differentiated instructional strategies can be challenging for educators because it forces teachers to think differently about instructional delivery. The results of the survey showed that both experienced and inexperienced teachers have some education that influences their instructional practice. According to Steinke (2012), administrators should increase teachers' self-efficacy by providing opportunities for teachers to increase their "work place literacy" (p. 55). The planned professional development sessions will expose teachers to a variety of differentiated literacy instructional strategies. Thomas (2015) believed exposing students to different types of literacy instruction is important. Just like students, teachers should be exposed to different types of literacy instruction as well. Some teachers reported due to a deficiency in ability and knowledge about how to adjust instructional practices, meeting the needs of diverse learners is "one of their greatest challenges" (Tobin & Tippett, 2013, p. 423). Educating teachers with instructional methods to reach all learners could positively influence student achievement for the students in Northport ISD. Advanced students, as well as those who struggle, need to be supported through instructional practices. In 2017, Wilkinson et al. said one way to support all learners is to implement

inquiry dialogue that “enables students to test their ideas against those of others, providing a self-correcting mechanism that helps improve the quality of argumentation” (p. 67). In the same report, Wilkinson et al. stated even though there are benefits to inquiry discussion, the practice is vastly missing from classrooms. Providing teachers an opportunity to learn how to academically support all students can increase student-reading achievement.

Instructional Grouping

Much like students, teachers need support to grow professionally. Professional development sessions that teach teachers different ways to deliver literacy instruction are crucial to the success of all students. Researchers agree that students need appropriate support during times of academic struggle. Brown and Ruthkosky (2012) stated that when students do not receive appropriate academic scaffolding, there could be a negative influence on academic progress. For teachers to provide beneficial guided reading instruction, the process of creating small groups should be planned carefully. Fountas and Pinnell (2012) stated that teachers need to become experts in small group instruction to better address the different learning needs of students. When teachers are intentional about providing guided instruction to small groups of children, students are able to think about the text before they start reading which increases their understanding (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Fountas and Pinnell also suggested that when students are involved in meaningful guided reading instruction, their reading abilities consistently improve. Small group reading instruction is one way to provide differentiated literacy instruction and academic support for all students.

Researchers support a whole-group setting for reading instruction; however, students are often more engaged in a small group. Hollo and Hirn (2015) reported increased academic improvement in students who participated in small group instruction. Students were involved in the instruction and more attentive to the group when in a small group setting (Hollo & Hirn, 2015). To use an instructional platform supported by research, the professional development session will begin with a whole-group setting and progress into a small group format where teachers can develop their lessons using the differentiated literacy strategies presented. While ability grouping may have a negative connotation regarding education, researchers have shown there are benefits to ability grouping. Matthews, Ritchotte, and McBee (2013) found that ability grouping improves academic achievement for all students because when students are grouped homogeneously, they are able to show more academic growth. Instruction can be delivered at the level appropriate to the group's ability when small groups are formed homogeneously. Matthews et al. also found that teachers reported a high level of satisfaction because they could deliver intentional and focused instruction to a specific group of students. Providing teachers an opportunity to learn in different groups will show them how students learn by being grouped in different ways. Grouping students by ability proves to be a useful strategy for increasing student improvement in literacy.

Learning Environment

Implementing a tiered reading approach, such as Response to Intervention, will create an opportunity to reach those students who are not showing growth in literacy. The findings of this study showed that teachers responded positively to using differentiated

literacy strategies for struggling learners. Research indicated more students in the United States are reading at proficient levels than in years past; however, many students are still reading below grade level (Al Otaiba et al., 2015; Snow & Matthews, 2016). In 2014, Vogl and Preckel stated that academic achievement and learning progress depend on the learning environment and how it is tailored to the learning needs of all students. Vogl and Preckel (2014) posited that students need to be challenged appropriately with classmates of the same intellect to be successful. The professional development sessions will show teachers that creating opportunities for students to choose different ways to complete an assignment will provide a learning environment conducive to meeting the learning needs of all students. Research showed that the quality of the learning environment coupled with time students were exposed to literacy instruction influenced reading achievement (Connor et al., 2014). Students in the study who were given high quality instruction showed significant gains in vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Connor et al., 2014). Gottfried (2014) reported that students' academic success in elementary school has been connected to a child's future academic achievement and that creating a positive learning environment leads to increased academic achievement. The professional development sessions planned for the teachers of Northport ISD will include a learning environment that creates an opportunity for teachers to intentionally plan for addressing the learning needs of all students.

Project Description

One of the major findings in this study was that teachers were not comfortable delivering differentiated literacy instruction to learners in their classrooms. Addressing

the need for teachers to be confident in delivering differentiated instructional strategies can be done through creating professional development curricula and prioritizing topics about professional development for teachers on differentiated instructional strategies in literacy. The project resulting from this study is professional development on how to support diverse learners in the classroom through differentiated literacy instruction.

The differentiated professional development plan will be delivered in three full-day workshops. The full-day format is designed to allow teachers time to present lessons in their classrooms, then bring reflections back to the workshop for refinement with colleagues. Each workshop will focus on different differentiated instructional strategies. Table 4, the Professional Development Outline, indicates the schedule for the professional development plan.

Table 4

Professional Development Outline

Date	Workshop	Purpose	Evaluation
June, 2018	Analyze this	Teachers will learn to use a tiered framework as a tool for analyzing a text.	PDQI
July, 2018	Organize this	Teachers will learn to use graphic organizers to differentiate products.	PDQI
August, 2018	Choose this	Teachers will choose activities from a choice board to understand the value of student choice.	PDQI

To begin the first workshop, teachers will complete a brief questionnaire about their knowledge and implementation of differentiated instructional strategies for literacy. As the facilitator, I will lead a discussion about the basis for differentiated instruction. I

will begin the first workshop using a tiered framework as a tool for analyzing a text. A variety of products will be discussed as possible student options: (a) annotating the text and identifying themes; (b) selecting different musical pieces that reflect the mood of different parts of the text; and (c) creating a storyboard to illustrate different parts of the text. Teachers can meet with colleagues from different campuses to discuss how the products could accommodate the needs of their students and develop a specific lesson that they would deliver before the next workshop.

I will start the second workshop with teacher reflections about the first differentiated instruction lesson by asking them to respond to the writing prompt, “The most interesting thing I learned about my students during a differentiated literacy lesson was...” The written response will be followed up with a peer share activity, Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up. The facilitator will play music while the teachers walk around, with their hand in the air, looking for a partner. When the music stops, each teacher should be paired with another teacher. They will share findings with each other before we move into the next activity of the workshop. In Workshop 2, teachers will focus on using graphic organizers to differentiate products. Teachers will gather in discussion groups to talk about how graphic organizers could meet the needs of their students. In the discussion group, teachers will create a lesson in which a graphic organizer is the student product. The graphic organizer will be used as a product with a lesson of the teachers’ choice before Workshop 3.

Workshop 3 will begin with me asking teachers to talk about student responses, benefits and challenges, and key understandings regarding the second differentiated

literacy lesson delivered in their classes. For the last workshop, teachers will experience choosing activities from a choice board. Working through the board will allow teachers to gain a better understanding of the value in student choice. Activities on the choice board will target different components of differentiated instruction in classroom scenarios, comparing various choice board formats, and describing how to incorporate different differentiated instructional strategies in practice. Upon completion of the choice board activity, teachers will be given an opportunity to create a choice board with colleagues.

Finally, an online platform will be created by the professional development department, with input from the teaching and learning department, for teachers to continue collaborating with colleagues across Northport ISD. Teachers will be able to share videos, develop lesson ideas, analyze lesson reflections, and discuss new learning through discoveries made through implementing the differentiated instruction process. To motivate teachers to participate in the online platform, principals could offer some type of monthly incentive such as jeans passes, duty-free lunch, or an extra conference period.

Potential resources for this project are the three designed differentiated literacy workshops. Materials needed to conduct the workshops include: conference room, Wi-Fi, digital projector, sign-in sheet, agenda, evaluation form, teacher laptops, and teacher lesson plans. The digital platform created by the professional development department with the teaching and learning department will be a product of the workshops for teachers' collaboration and reflection in their future professional development of strategies for differentiation. Results from the teacher survey on the first day of the

workshop will provide information that may influence the presentation of the professional development.

Some potential barriers were identified for the implementation of this project. One potential barrier is allowing sufficient time for planning and development of lessons that include differentiated literacy instructional strategies, and time for team meetings to analyze results of implementing differentiated literacy instruction. If sufficient time is not allotted for development of the ideas, the implementation of the PD presented may not be carried out successfully. Developing a master schedule to include small group instruction, interventions, and campus-wide professional development can also be challenging. Allocating sufficient funds for adequate materials can be a potential barrier.

The teachers of Northport ISD will assume the role of students during the professional development sessions. They will be responsible for using the development time to enhance their lesson plans according to the focus presented during the workshop. Teachers will also be responsible for implementing the learning in their classrooms and collecting students' work samples to bring to the following workshop. The teachers will remove any identifying student information from the work samples prior to sharing in the workshop. In addition, teachers will be responsible for actively participating in workshop discussions and the online platform collaboration.

Project Evaluation Plan

The goal of the project evaluation plan is to determine how effective the differentiated instruction workshops are for enhancing the tools teachers have regarding differentiated instructional strategies that will improve student achievement in literacy.

The effectiveness of this project will be measured through a formative approach. After each workshop, participants will be invited to complete a plus, delta, question, and information (PDQI) form (Appendix D). The PDQI will provide an opportunity for participants to evaluate the professional development session in an anonymous format. Teachers will be encouraged to reflect on their learning and their learning needs during the professional development series. I will adjust the workshop delivery based on the feedback to meet the needs of the teachers. Consistently monitoring and adjusting throughout the series will create a learning environment that will be accessible to most of the participants. The key stakeholders for this professional development series are Northport ISD second grade teachers, Northport ISD Curriculum Director, and Northport ISD campus administrators.

Project Implications

Teachers are expected to increase the student achievement of all students and meet the needs of ELLs, GT learners, and struggling learners. Differentiated literacy instruction is a research-based approach that offers specific strategies to meet the needs of all learners.

In the professional development plan for differentiated literacy strategies at this study site, teachers will focus on increasing implementation of differentiated literacy instruction for all students. As implementation of differentiated literacy instruction increases across the district, student achievement in literacy may also increase. Implementing differentiated literacy instruction may result in ongoing professional development as teachers research new instructional literacy strategies to improve their

practice. This project study can connect research and practice by demonstrating the use of instructional literacy strategies in the classroom setting.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this project study was to analyze teachers' perceptions about differentiated literacy instruction. With the proposed project that stems from the findings, I hope to enhance teachers' awareness of the importance of teaching all students by using differentiated literacy instruction. Teachers are likely to change their perspective on implementing differentiated literacy instruction when their students demonstrate an increase in literacy achievement due to differentiated instructional strategies.

This project study was designed to explore teachers' perspectives on differentiated instruction and to design targeted professional development to expose teachers to different literacy strategies, along with opportunities to implement the strategy to accommodate different learning styles. After the professional development, if successful implementation of differentiated instruction in the classroom is shown to raise student achievement, educating second grade teachers on how to apply it in the classroom will make a difference to all second grade students in the district.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The project includes professional development sessions that were created to educate the teachers on the importance of providing differentiated literacy instruction. Teachers can begin monitoring the learning styles of their students and adjusting their instruction after attending the professional development sessions. Another strength in this project study is that second grade teachers can share their ideas, thoughts, and opinions through written response, discussions, and an online platform; these types of reflection were not available before this project study. Teachers sharing in this way across the

district can increase school improvement. Creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate and reflect on their needs is essential to improving literacy instruction.

The project is subject to three limitations. One is that although the professional development will be presented over 3 days, there is a likelihood that there may be inconsistent implementation in the classrooms between workshops. A second limitation is that not all teachers may fully embrace the instructional strategies presented in the workshops. A third limitation is that not all teachers may be comfortable with technology, which will inhibit their willingness to collaborate in the online platform between sessions and after the workshops have ended.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

A recommendation to approach the problem in a different way would be to begin with the population selected. The project study targeted second grade teachers in Northport ISD. To improve or enlarge the project study is to include potential candidates in first and third grade also. This would increase the participation and allow data to be analyzed vertically between grade levels. Additionally, second grade teachers would continue to be the targeted population because the district data indicated that there were concerns with reading achievement at this level across the district, which eventually influences reading achievement in other grades.

Another recommendation would be to add qualitative data: visit planning sessions, make observations in classrooms, and invite participants to a focus group interview. The project study was completed within the third quarter of the school year; however, allowing a full semester for the study would have given time for observations

and a focus group. An extended amount of time with teachers is critical for a project like this. Finally, another recommendation is to include the administration team from each elementary campus in the project study. Their input with teacher observations, planning, and data analysis would have provided some excellent feedback for the study.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change Scholarship

The professional development plan derived from this project study will provide second grade teachers with an instructional resource for differentiated literacy instruction for all learners. Before the project study, teachers were teaching in a way that addressed the struggling learner, with little confidence in their ability to deliver the differentiated instruction. The professional development that is based on the findings of this study will encourage teachers to plan together across the district, to address students' learning styles through small group instruction and to provide student choice in assignment products. Teacher awareness of differentiated literacy instruction will increase, and more teachers will become successful facilitators of student learning.

This project study is supported by an extensive literature review. I began the study by creating scholarly research questions; a review of literature concerning the problem supported the study. Readings from journals empowered my thinking and could be used to develop the professional development plan used in the project. Reviewing the literature proved to be a necessary component to the project study because I was able to gain a better understanding of how to address the problem. I read literature with similar problems and gathered scholarly support for developing a solution. Once I determined the

type of data needed for the study and had a better understanding of the problem, I worked with different individuals in Northport ISD to discuss their awareness about the district's reading achievement in second grade, and their perceptions of how second grade teachers are approaching planning and teaching literacy in the classroom. Using communications from district employees, the reports from the district's assessments, and the literature review, I decided how to start the project study. The scholarship of designing and creating this project study was to provide a platform that would influence both the teachers and the students.

Project Development and Evaluation

The project is the culmination of years as a teacher, years as an elementary principal in a Title 1 district with a large population of ELL students, and at the start of this project, being the mother of a second grader who is an advanced learner and identified GT student. I often wondered why my son's teachers would not address his learning needs and learning style. When I started this project, I was looking only at GT students and differentiated literacy instruction; however, I realized differentiated literacy instruction is essential for all students, not just those identified as GT. It concerned me when teachers did not vary their instructional delivery and allow student choice for assignment products. I often wondered why, if teachers knew my son was identified as GT learner, instruction and assignments were not differentiated for him. When I became an elementary school principal, I realized that this was a concern in my son's classroom as well as the campus I was leading. I began researching possible reasons for what I perceived as a lack of awareness towards differentiated literacy instruction.

Northport ISD is a diverse school district with 67% of the student population being identified as ELL and 11% being identified as needing intervention regarding the Special Education population as designated by the State. The project was important for the second grade teachers in Northport ISD because, according to my findings, second grade teachers in Northport ISD are not consistently differentiating literacy instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

This project will be evaluated at the end of each session. Workshop attendees will complete a PDQI form (see Appendix D) as it relates to the content covered in the workshop for that day. I will use the participant feedback to adjust the workshop, where needed, to meet the needs of the teachers. Responding to the needs of the teachers throughout the series will create a learning environment that will be accessible to most of the participants.

Leadership and Change

Many leadership styles exist to achieve different standards. Effective leadership should be circumstantial. Ultimately, educational organizations set goals for increasing student achievement, but attaining these goals can often be challenging because leading people to change is not always easy. If a school is going to succeed, all stakeholders must be reflective in their instructional practices and be willing to lead the community to change focused on student achievement. Teachers who are encouraged to be the instructional leaders in their classrooms create a successful learning environment for all students. Providing students with well-rounded instruction creates life-long learners and creates a vision of learning that benefits society.

One of the most important facets in this project study was that I had an opportunity to increase teachers' awareness of differentiating literacy instruction to meet the learning needs of all students. I learned change is an on-going process, not something that happens quickly. Implementing change requires a leader who reflects, refines, and reinforces their own practice to benefit those they lead. When a leader demonstrates a reflective practice, teachers can be more comfortable with a change that is implemented. Cultivating leadership in teachers stems from researching best practices, field-testing the practices, sharing the knowledge with colleagues, and spending time developing the practice. To implement change in instructional delivery and increase student achievement in literacy, teachers in Northport ISD need additional training in differentiated literacy instruction. If they learn how to use differentiated instructional strategies, they may be able to influence the effect their instructional delivery has on students. Therefore, I suggest professional development in the form of three full-day workshops embedded into the school year.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

I believe that this project was needed for the second grade teachers in Northport ISD. I hope that teachers will continue to utilize the online platform, Google Classroom, for communicating with each other, reflect on their practice, and continue to improve student achievement. I hope the teachers will eventually share their knowledge with teachers in other grade levels across the district. I imagine that the final product for this project study will be shared with new teachers within the district. As I reflect on the project study, I will continue to be intentional about empowering teachers to reflect on

their practice and adjust their instructional delivery to support all learners in the 21st century.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The implications for future research depend on the teachers, the district, and their commitment to continuous improvement for student achievement. It is through intentional process that teachers and administrators will be able to implement what was learned throughout the school year. The scope of the project will need to be increased to include third grade teachers. The rationale for this is teachers in third grade will eventually teach the students from second grade. The administration should communicate the expectation that the second grade teachers share the information and demonstrate how the third grade teachers can build relationships with the second grade students. The third grade teachers should be trained on how to plan collaboratively, review student data, and determine how students learn best. The school's administrative team will support the process by being familiar with the implementation timeline and the resources necessary to assist with adjusting instructional delivery to enhance student achievement for all learners. The second grade teachers could serve as the facilitators, trainers, and coaches for the third grade teachers who will be trained through this process. To further support this effort, there needs to be an on-going review of current research that may be infused into the professional development that will help teachers stay aware of current trends regarding differentiated literacy instruction and accommodating learning styles. The future research is needed to include more grade levels. I used one instrument to collect data from participants. In the future, I suggest including qualitative data in the form of

focus group interviews, reviewing lesson plans, and classroom observations to create an in-depth description of teachers' perspectives toward differentiated instruction and their needs for further professional development.

Conclusion

Educators can no longer teach using a one-size-fits-all method. Standardized state assessments and other district data support the view that all students should be given appropriate scaffolding to meet the Every Child Succeeds Act requirements. Learning environments should be created to meet the varying learning needs of all students. All educators are responsible for all learners. Educators should also support each other as the art form of teaching evolves. In addition, teachers should reflect on how they are influencing the learning environment, school culture, and student achievement in their individual schools.

To provide effective instruction in the classroom, teachers should possess the necessary skills to monitor and adjust their instructional delivery with students. This exceptional skill establishes professional integrity within the school community. When teachers address the need for change in a lesson, they choose appropriate instructional strategies to match student needs (Wasley, 1999). Teachers may include the use of instructional strategies in their lesson plans; however, the level of awareness and ability, coupled with skill to implement the strategy, is reflective of the teacher's ability to adjust the instruction, which will influence student achievement. I believe any student has the ability to learn and achieve, but when a child is with a teacher who has the ability to

address the learning needs of all students, then we will see a positive effect on student achievement.

In this study, I identified attitudinal differences among teachers towards differentiated literacy instruction that may limit the implementation of differentiated literacy instruction for student achievement. I used the findings of this study to create a targeted professional development curriculum and prioritized topics on differentiated instructional strategies in literacy. The results of this study may bring about an increased awareness of the importance of differentiating literacy instruction leading to a shift in teachers' attitudes about differentiated instruction and their knowledge about implementing it, thereby improving instruction and students' reading achievement.

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Appendix A: The Project

Second Grade Teachers' Perspectives toward Differentiated Instruction
Professional Development Training Plan

Alyssa Simmons

Spring 2018

“So it is with children who learn to read fluently and well: They begin to take flight into whole new worlds as effortlessly as young birds take to the sky.”- William James

Table of Contents

Introduction

Purpose

Audience

Implementation Timeline

Day 1 – Analyze This – January Session

- Sign-in Sheet
- Overview of Professional Learning Plan Purpose
- Analyzing Text in a Variety of Ways
- Tiered Framework Development
- Evaluation Form

Day 2 – Organize This – February Session

- Sign-in Sheet
- Written Reflection with Peer Sharing
- Using Visuals to Organize Thoughts
- Graphic Organizer Development
- Evaluation Form

Day 3 – Choose This – March Session

- Open Discussion – Sharing of Student Work
- Student Choice Board
- Break-out for Small Group work
- Develop a Choice Board

- Evaluation Form
- Follow-up Email Communication
- Notification of Online Platform
- Purpose of Online Platform
- Participation Incentive

The Project PowerPoint

Introduction

This project is designed to support teachers in implementing differentiated literacy strategies into their instruction, and to provide job-embedded professional development that includes opportunities to collaborate with teachers across the district. The project resulting from this study is professional development on how to support diverse learners in the classroom through differentiated literacy instruction. The differentiated professional development plan will be delivered in three full-day workshops over a 3-month period. The full-day format is designed to allow teachers time to present lessons in their classrooms, then bring reflections back to the workshop for refinement with colleagues. Each workshop will focus on different differentiated instructional strategies, which are described below.

Purpose

The purpose of this workshop series is to teach teachers differentiated instructional literacy strategies to use with all students. During the workshops, teachers will plan lessons to be used in their upcoming literacy lessons. Students of all reading levels will experience lessons in literacy that challenge, engage, and provide support to increase academic achievement. The objectives for this workshop series are that teachers will collaborate to:

- Learn instructional strategies such as analyzing text, varying students' products, and the importance of student choice.
- Create lesson plans for literacy instruction that use instructional strategies to differentiate instruction for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners.

- Implement lesson plans created during this workshop series daily in the classroom.
- Participate in the workshop reflection activities to discuss challenges and insights, and support colleagues in the adjusting of lessons when needed.
- Collect and share student work samples during the workshop series to monitor student progress.

Intended Audience

This professional development project has two intended audiences. The initial audience will be the District Curriculum Specialists, Campus Principals, Campus Instructional Coaches, and Campus Instructional Media Specialists. I will present a PowerPoint that gives an overview of the project study findings, including recommendations, for approval. After obtaining District approval, the second grade teachers will be the projected audience to participate in the professional development sessions. This project is relevant because it has been created based on teacher survey data and current research. In addition, this project is important because it addresses the district's need to increase student achievement in literacy by preparing the teachers to effectively meet the literacy needs of all students across the district.

Teachers' Professional Development Training

Course of Study	Activities	Resources	Timeline
Day 1: Analyze This	Differentiation Questionnaire Collaborative Share Out Overview of Research New Learning Development Time Share out Developed Ideas PDQI Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conference Room • WiFi • Digital Projector • Sign-In Sheet • Agenda • Evaluation Form • Teacher Laptops • Teacher Lesson Plans 	June 2018 8 hours
Day 2: Organize This	Reflective Writing Collaborative Share Out Overview of Research New Learning Small Group Development Time Share out Developed Ideas PDQI Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conference Room • WiFi • Digital Projector • Sign-In Sheet • Agenda • Evaluation Form • Teacher Laptops • Teacher Lesson Plans • Student Work (names removed) 	July 2018 8 hours

continues

Course of Study	Activities	Resources	Timeline
Day 3: Choose This	Categorize Student Work Chart Benefits and Challenges using student work Overview of Research New Learning Development Time Share out Developed Ideas Online Platform Explanation PDQI Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conference Room • WiFi • Digital Projector • Sign-In Sheet • Agenda • Evaluation Form • Teacher Laptops • Teacher Lesson Plans • Student Work • Online Platform Information 	August 2018 8 hours

Second Grade Teachers' Perspectives toward Differentiated Instruction

Professional Development Training Plan

Day 1 – Analyze This

Time: 8 hours

Objectives

By the end of the day, teachers will be able to:

- Understand the purpose for the professional development training
- Use a tiered framework as a tool for analyzing a text
- Create lesson plans for literacy instruction that use instructional strategies to differentiate instruction for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners
- Implement lesson plans created during this workshop daily in the classroom

Day 2 – Organize This

Time: 8 hours

Objectives

By the end of the day, teachers will be able to:

- Reflect about the reinforcements and refinements of the first differentiated instruction lesson
- Understand how using graphic organizers can differentiate products
- Create lesson plans for literacy instruction that use instructional strategies to differentiate instruction for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners
- Implement lesson plans created during this workshop daily in the classroom

Day 3 – Choose This

Time: 8 hours

Objectives

By the end of the day, teachers will be able to:

- Reflect about the reinforcements and refinements of the second differentiated instruction lesson
- Understand of the value in student choice
- Create a choice board with colleagues
- Create lesson plans for literacy instruction that use instructional strategies to differentiate instruction for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners
- Implement lesson plans created during this workshop series daily in the classroom
- Use an online platform created by the professional development department to continue collaborating with colleagues across Northport ISD.

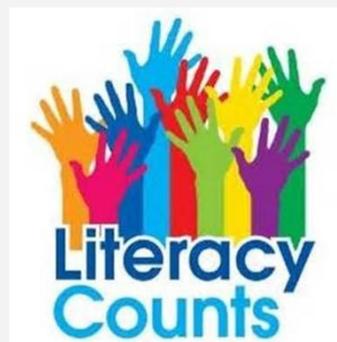
DIFFERENTIATED LITERACY INSTRUCTION

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PRESENTED BY ALYSSA SIMMONS

“So it is with children who learn to read fluently and well:
They begin to take flight into whole new worlds as
effortlessly as young birds take to the sky.”

- William James



PROJECT STUDY

- Purpose of study - The purpose of the research study was to explore teachers' perspectives toward differentiated reading instruction for students in second grade classes.
- Findings –
 - The years of teaching experience did not influence the teachers' attitudes toward the impact of differentiated literacy instruction on student achievement for gifted students, ELLs, or struggling learners.
 - With respect to teachers' attitudes toward the impact of differentiated literacy instruction for GT and ELLs and student achievement, there is no difference between teachers who have and have not received professional development for GT and ELL instructional strategies.
 - There is a difference in teachers' perception towards differentiated literacy instruction based on those who have received professional development in Rtl instructional strategies and those who have not.
- Recommendations –
 - Job-embedded, on-going professional development
 - Grade-level collaboration across the district

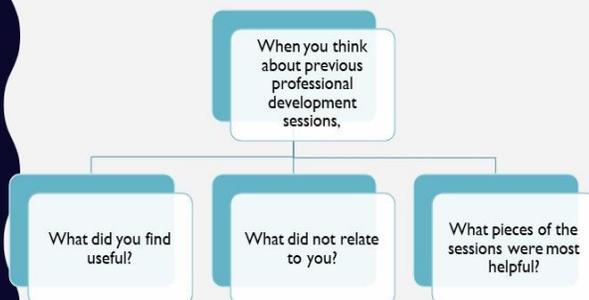
PURPOSE

- **Based on the survey findings and current research**
 - Support teachers' instructional practice with differentiated instructional literacy strategies to use with all students.
 - Support the district's literacy initiative
 - Increase collaboration with teachers across the district

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Learn	Learn instructional strategies such as analyzing text, varying students' products, and the importance of student choice.
Create	Create lesson plans for literacy instruction that use instructional strategies to differentiate instruction for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners.
Implement	Implement lesson plans created during this workshop series daily in the classroom.
Participate in	Participate in the workshop reflection activities to discuss challenges and insights, and support colleagues in the adjusting of lessons when needed.
Collect and share	Collect and share student work samples during the workshop series to monitor student progress.

ADULT LEARNING



PARTICIPANTS AND FACILITATORS



- All second grade teachers in GPISD

- Campus Instructional Coaches
- Campus Instructional Media Specialists

DAY 1: ANALYZE THIS

The objectives for today are, teachers will collaborate to:

- Learn instructional strategies such as analyzing text.
- Create lesson plans for literacy instruction that use instructional strategies to differentiate instruction for gifted students, ELLs, and struggling learners.
- Implement lesson plans created during this workshop series daily in the classroom.

8:00 AM – 9:00 AM	Teacher Sign-in	9:00 AM – 9:15 AM	Questionnaire completion	9:15 AM – 9:30 AM
Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up	9:30AM-10:00AM	Overview of Research	10:00AM – 10:30AM	Present New Learning: Analyzing Text
10:30AM-10:45AM	Break	10:45AM-11:00AM	Development Explanation	11:00AM-12:00PM
Development Time	12:00PM-1:00PM	Lunch Break	1:00 PM-1:45 PM	Share Out Developed Ideas
1:45PM-2:15PM	Expectations for upcoming workshop &	PDQ! Evaluation	2:15 PM-2:45 PM	Questions
	2:45PM	Dismissed		

DAY 1 SCHEDULE

DAY 2: ORGANIZE THIS

Today we will learn to use graphic organizers to differentiate products, so we can meet the needs of diverse learners in our classrooms.

DAY 2 SCHEDULE

8:00 AM – 9:00 AM	Teacher Sign-in	9:00 AM – 9:15 AM	Written Reflection	9:15 AM – 9:30 AM	Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up
9:30AM-10:00AM	Overview of Research	10:00AM-10:30AM	Present New Learning: Analyzing Text	10:30AM-10:45AM	Break
10:45AM-11:00AM	Development Explanation	11:00AM-12:00PM	Development Time	12:00PM-1:00PM	Lunch Break
1:00 PM-1:45 PM	Share Out Developed Ideas	1:45PM-2:15PM	Expectations for upcoming workshop &	PDQI Evaluation	2:15 PM-2:45 PM
	Questions	2:45PM	Dismissed		

WRITTEN REFLECTION

In 7-10 sentences,
respond to this
writing prompt

“The most interesting
thing I learned about
my students during a
differentiated literacy
lesson was...”

DAY 3: CHOOSE THIS

Today we will choose activities from a choice board, so we can understand the value of student choice in completing an academic product.

DAY 3 SCHEDULE

8:00 AM – 9:00 AM	Teacher Sign-in	9:00 AM – 9:15 AM	Questionnaire completion	9:15 AM – 9:30 AM	Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up
9:30AM-10:00AM	Overview of Research	10:00AM-10:30AM	Present New Learning: Analyzing Text	10:30AM-10:45AM	Break
10:45AM-11:00AM	Development Explanation	11:00AM-12:00PM	Development Time	12:00PM-1:00PM	Lunch Break
1:00 PM-1:45 PM	Share Out Developed Ideas	1:45PM-2:15PM	Expectations for Online Platform	PDQI Evaluation	2:15 PM-2:45 PM
	Questions	2:45PM	Dismissed		

Appendix B: Teacher Survey

Read each statement and select the answer that best applies to you. By clicking forward into the survey, you are agreeing to participate in the study. You may choose not to answer all questions, and you may stop at any time. Thank you for your time.

How many years have you been teaching? 0-5 years; 6-10 years; 11-20 years; over 20 years

Have you received professional development in GT instructional strategies? Yes or No

Have you received professional development in ELL instructional strategies? Yes or No

Have you received professional development in RTI instructional strategies? Yes or No

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I have sufficient knowledge about differentiated literacy instruction.					
2. Differentiated instruction greatly influences student achievement in literacy.					
3. GT students benefit from differentiated literacy instruction.					
4. Differentiated literacy instruction would influence student achievement for English language learners (ELL).					
5. I frequently use students' talents to differentiate literacy instruction in class.					
6. I identify the learning needs of diverse learners in my reading class.					
7. Using guided reading questions is a way to differentiate literacy instruction.					
8. I frequently use student choice for assessment to differentiate in my literacy class.					
9. I am comfortable allowing student choice in completing products for my literacy class.					
10. Students' learning needs are used to monitor and adjust my literacy instruction.					
11. I am comfortable assessing students' literacy achievement in a variety of ways.					
12. I frequently deliver literacy instruction in a variety of ways.					
13. All students benefit from implementing differentiated literacy instruction.					
14. English language learners benefit from differentiated instruction.					
15. Struggling readers grasp concepts at the same rate as their peers in literacy class.					
16. I am comfortable providing differentiated literacy instruction for struggling readers.					
17. Significant barriers exist in my classroom, which interfere with implementation of differentiated literacy instruction.					

Appendix C: Permission to Use Instrument

From: Callahan, Carolyn M. (cmc) [mailto:cmc@eservices.virginia.edu]

Sent: Tuesday, December 08, 2015 12:25 PM

To: Alyssa Simmons <Alyssa.Simmons@Northport ISD.org>

Subject: RE: permission

Yes, you have permission to use the survey. The survey was actually developed for Academic Diversity in the Middle School: Results of a National Survey of Middle School Administrators and Teachers Tonya Moon Carol A. Tomlinson Carolyn M. Callahan University