

TEACHERS' AND PRINCIPALS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE TEACHER EVALUATION
PROCESS RELATED TO DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION: A CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

by

SALIH CEVIK

(Under the Direction of Sally J. Zepeda)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system make sense of the teacher evaluation process in relation to differentiated instruction. The study was situated in the context of a school district, and several data collection methods were used, including interviews, documents, and field notes. The study involved 12 participants, including 3 principals and 9 teachers, who were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The researcher conducted both within-case analyses using narrative inquiry and cross-case analyses using the constant comparative method to capture participants' perspectives in detail, and later found similarities and differences across the data, identified links between segments, and identified emerging themes.

The findings of the study revealed that the way teachers and principals interpreted differentiated instruction was shaped by their individual experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional responsibilities. The study found that the way teachers incorporated differentiated instruction into their teaching was mostly influenced by their own understanding of the concept and the academic environment in which they worked. On the other hand, principals

made sense of the teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on their experience as a teacher and leader, the context in which they worked, and their role as an accountability policy enforcer. Finally, teachers made sense of the evaluation process based on a combination of personal beliefs and experiences, as well as administrator expectations.

The study highlights the importance of considering personal and contextual factors when interpreting the results of evaluations related to differentiated instruction. The findings suggest that teacher evaluation should be informed by a broader understanding of the teacher's experiences and professional background, as well as the context in which they are teaching. The study adds to the existing body of research on teacher evaluation by shedding light on the subjective and personal factors that influence how teachers and principals make sense of differentiated instruction and how they use this understanding to inform their leading and teaching practices. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into how teacher evaluation can be improved to better capture the complexity of differentiated instruction in the classroom.

INDEX WORDS: Differentiated instruction and classroom observations; Evaluating differentiated instruction; Teacher evaluation; Teacher evaluation policy; Sensemaking and teacher evaluation; Teacher effectiveness.

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by

SALIH CEVIK

B.A., Gazi University, Türkiye, 2013

M.A., University of Minnesota, 2017

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by

SALIH CEVIK

Major Professor: Sally J. Zepeda
Committee: John P. Dayton
Juanita Johnson-Bailey

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2023

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my father, Mehmet Ferdi Çevik, whose unwavering support accompanied me throughout this journey. I dedicate this dissertation to him with the heartfelt wish that he could have been here to witness and celebrate my graduation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that teachers are the most influential, school-level factor determining student achievement (Harris, 2011). Regarding both academic and non-academic outcomes, teachers have an impact on their students in many ways, such as state standardized tests, absences, suspensions, grades, grade retention, high school graduation, behavior in class, motivation, and self-efficacy (Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Chetty et al., 2014; Gershenson, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Koedel, 2008; Kraft, 2019; Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; Ruzek et al., 2015). As such, measuring teacher effectiveness has received a great deal of policy and research attention pre and post-No Child Left Behind (Donaldson & Papay, 2015). Over the last few decades, there has been a concerted effort in the United States to expand teacher evaluation systems to address how to assess teacher effectiveness (Firestone, 2014; Hallgren et al., 2014; Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016; Steinberg & Quinn, 2017).

Regardless of the apparent research attempts through policy incentives and investments from philanthropic organizations concerned with students' access to effective instruction, there has been no consensus on a single working system that can effectively measure teacher effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Muijs, 2006). However, existing policies and research may confirm that multiple measure models for teacher evaluation are, to date, the most appropriate approach (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Among these measures, most of the research on recent reforms about teacher evaluation has concentrated on the reliability and validity of

detailed classroom observations and Value-Added Measures (VAMs) (Garver, 2020; Jimenez & Zepeda, 2017).

Teacher evaluations that incorporate student test scores are known as value-added measures because they attempt to isolate the value an individual teacher adds to a student's learning (Harris, 2011). However, "teacher effects on test scores capture only a fraction of their effect on human capital" (Jackson, 2018, p. 24). VAMs try to control for the myriad variables that contribute to a student's ability to succeed, such as socioeconomic status, parental education levels, and school resources. The problem is that these variables cannot be entirely controlled (Darling-Hammond, 2015); therefore, using VAMs may violate the cardinal rule of accountability that "hold people accountable for what they can control" (Harris, 2011, p. 4).

As for the almost universally used measures to assess teacher effectiveness, successful teacher evaluation systems use multiple classroom observations across the year by expert evaluators looking at various sources of data, and they provide timely and communicative feedback to the teacher (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012). In the United States, observations are required in 48 states as a part of the teacher evaluation system; hence, a policy in almost every state is that teachers must be evaluated using formal classroom observations (Doherty & Jacobs, 2015; Ross & Walsh, 2019). Furthermore, according to the Schools and Staffing Survey (2011), more than 95% of the nation's teachers are evaluated in this way (Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016). Ironically, regardless of their more prevalent use, the research on classroom observations is limited compared to VAMs in today's multi-measure teacher evaluation systems (Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016).

Classroom observations have been used to measure teacher effectiveness for over a century (Ellett & Teddlie, 2003). However, what was measured has been changing due to the

dynamic definition of effective teaching throughout the decades (Ellett & Teddlie, 2003; Hazi, 2019). Today, as a result of the standards-based movement, the focus of classroom observation practices has shifted to look at the many facets of teaching by assigning performance standards for each component of teacher effectiveness to evaluate them standard by standard (Donaldson & Papay, 2015; Ellett & Teddlie, 2003). In sum, current observation systems include dimensions of teaching that are considered as the indicators of teacher effectiveness by assuming that the better a teacher scores on indicators, the better the teaching (Bell et al., 2019).

As one of the dimensions of teacher effectiveness, the concept of differentiated instruction started to be accepted as a foundation of effective teaching and hence, considered as a critical indicator for evaluating teacher performance (Good, 1979; Tomlinson, 2015; Van Tassel-Baska et al., 2006). There are a variety of theoretical definitions of differentiated instruction based on the philosophy underlying teaching practices (Bondie, Dahnke, & Zusho, 2019); yet, as an overall approach, it can be described as a classroom practice model that “intended to support teachers in developing curriculum and instruction likely to maximize the capacity of a diverse group of learners” (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 203).

Differentiated instruction is regarded as a complex teaching skill with no standardized practice and focuses on responding to the diverse needs of individual learners (Dack, 2019; Deunk et al. 2015; Sherman, 2009; Van Geel et al., 2019). However, there has been no “patented formula” for how to create a differentiated classroom (Tomlinson, 2014). Instead, according to Tomlinson (2014), effective differentiation is governed by a philosophy, a set of principles, and some pivotal instructional practices. Assessing the quality of differentiated instruction is a consequently complex task due to its context-dependent dynamic nature (Van Geel et al., 2019). Interestingly, however, the effectiveness of teachers’ differentiated instruction is predominantly

measured by using classroom observations that employ standardized rubrics developed by Danielson (2007), Marshall (2009), Marzano (2013), McREL (2012), Stronge (2006), or individual states (Tomlinson, 2014).

Within the highly standardized teacher evaluation systems, differentiated instruction has become a widely accepted standard of teacher effectiveness (Danielson, 2001; McTighe & Brown, 2005; Tomlinson, 2014; Valli & Buese, 2007). Moreover, despite the well-known shortcomings associated with classroom observations that measure teacher effectiveness (Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016), high stakes accountability policies increasingly have been relied on observations as a part of teacher evaluation (American Institutes for Research, 2015; Doherty & Jacobs, 2015). Consequently, measuring differentiated instruction with classroom observations may have additional challenges for the high stakes teacher evaluation policies due to a lack of consensus of theoretical and practical definitions of the construct (Van Geel et al., 2019). These challenges likely manifest detrimentally when evaluators and teachers engage observation data because their individual and collective experiences may shape how they construct meaning pertaining to differentiated instruction. Therefore, to address the shortcomings of observations and teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction, more research is needed that sheds light on the factors that influence how teachers and evaluators conceptualize differentiated instruction.

Differentiated instruction is a complex but vital indicator of highly effective teaching for today's diverse classrooms (Hawkins et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). It is crucial to be able to measure the quality of differentiated instruction as a part of teacher evaluation (Farah & Chandler, 2018; Kappler Hewitt & Weckstein, 2012; Sobel et al., 2003; Tomlinson, 2017; Van Geel et al., 2019; Van Tassel-Baska, 2006). Notwithstanding, the lack of attention in the research

on how to measure the quality of differentiated instruction is problematic given that classroom observations are at the heart of today's teacher evaluation systems in the U.S. (Farah & Chandler, 2018; Kappler Hewitt & Weckstein, 2012; Jimenez & Zepeda, 2017; Ponticell et al., 2019; Sobel et al., 2003; Van Geel et al., 2019; Van Tassel-Baska, 2006; Zepeda, 2017; Zepeda & Jimenez, 2019). The field of practice (McTighe & Brown, 2005; Tomlinson, 2014; Valli & Buese, 2007) and research (Sobel et al., 2003; Van Geel et al., 2019) are in a place where classroom observations, that include differentiated instruction as a vital indicator of teacher effectiveness, must be examined more thoroughly. The present study focused on how teachers and principals construct understandings of teacher evaluation related to differentiated instruction as indicated with their interpretation of the evaluation instruments used for classroom observations.

Statement of the Problem

In teacher evaluation systems that include classroom observations, teachers are evaluated and provided with feedback based on what is measured by the individual conducting the observation (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016; Zepeda, 2017; Zepeda & Jimenez, 2019). Consequently, successful teacher evaluation partially depends on the quality of the instruments, including, for example, observation rubrics used during the evaluation process. Touted as one of the most powerful tools for measuring the levels of effectiveness of teaching, high-quality rubrics are believed to be able to inform teaching and professional development (Pianta & Hamre, 2009), and maybe correlated with VAMs to draw a more complete picture of teacher effectiveness (Grossman et al., 2014; Grossman et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2011). Moreover, observation rubrics may be able to (1) capture teaching practices valued by schools that are not entirely captured in value-added measures (Grossman et al., 2014); (2) provide teachers with

information about what is expected; and (3) encourage teacher practices that are reinforced by administrators during the evaluation process (Pianta & Hamre, 2009).

Cohen and Goldhaber (2016) examine the conceptual and empirical challenges of the classroom observations that are similar across different measures of teacher effectiveness. They point out one of the main critiques leveled against observations is their inability to differentiate among teachers, which is often referred to as a wicked effect (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2009). For example, the distribution of evaluation scores using classroom observations does not always align with the distribution suggested by value-added measures or by principals' perceptions that teachers vary significantly in effectiveness (Jacob & Lefgren, 2008). Additionally, Cohen and Goldhaber (2016) highlighted that any specific observational instrument measures only a small portion of the broader construct of teaching quality in which we do not yet have consensus. Every observational instrument rests on a theory of instruction which may or may not be supported by robust empirical evidence (Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016; Hazi, 2010).

Measuring performance is a relative concept requiring judgment and interpretation on the part of both the stakeholders involved and prospective users (Strecker et al., 2012). In particular, Hazi (2019) highlights that classroom observation instruments used for measuring teacher performance reveal more information about its designer than the teacher being observed. In addition, teachers' expectations about the instruments may differ from the researchers who designed them (Behrstock-Sherratt et al., 2013). Regardless of their high potential to provide valid, reliable, and evidence-based measures of teacher effectiveness, the potential of classroom observations mostly relies on the evaluators who in most states must carefully trained and supervised to provide accurate and consistent scores (Bell et al., 2012; Cohen & Goldhaber,

2016; Gitomer et al., 2014; Jimenez & Zepeda, 2017). Therefore, to ensure that scores from observation instruments reflect a shared vision of teacher quality, an appropriately high standard for evaluator performance must exist (White, 2018). Besides the ability of the evaluators to reflect teacher quality as indicated in the instruments, their interpretation of the instruments can play a crucial role in shaping the nature of teacher evaluation practices in schools.

In the state of Georgia's teacher evaluation model, differentiated instruction is measured as a part of the Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS), which is a component that relies on classroom observations as the primary source of information for teacher evaluation (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). In particular, classroom observation rubrics that are designed to measure the quality or the existence of differentiated instruction has suffered from similar conceptual and empirical challenges because of the generic approaches applied to measure each indicator of teacher effectiveness (Van Geel et al., 2019).

The most commonly applied teacher evaluation frameworks in the U.S. have used various combinations of at least eight differentiated instruction frameworks to describe the effectiveness of teachers in differentiated instruction (Bondie et al., 2019; Danielson, 2007; Marshall, 2009; Marzano, 2013; McREL, 2012; Stronge, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014). Despite widespread efforts to assess the quality of differentiation, it has not even been implemented with fidelity in most schools, where one-size-fits-all instruction remains prevalent (Brighton et al., 2005; Callahan et al., 2017; Dack, 2019; Tomlinson, 2016). As the underlying reasons for the absence of differentiated instruction in many schools, a lack of deep understanding of the model's underlying conceptual principles has been specified in the academic literature (Dack, 2019; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Sherman, 2009).

In brief, despite the lack of consensus on the definition of effective teaching and its indicators, teachers are expected to fit into pre-determined standards to show their teaching competency during classroom observations. Differentiated instruction is widely recognized as one of the indicators of effective teaching across almost every teacher evaluation model to evaluate teacher performance and effectiveness (Tomlinson, 2014). However, differentiated instruction is “heuristic, or principle-driven, rather than algorithmic, or formula-driven” (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 25). As such, Bondie et al. (2019) identified at least eight different frameworks used to conceptualize differentiated instruction since 2001. Therefore, numerous operational definitions of differentiated instruction have emerged based on the interpretation of these frameworks, which makes drawing a consensus among educational stakeholders more challenging.

As differentiated instruction continues to gain prominence in policy arenas, researchers and policymakers must seek common understandings between teachers and evaluators that are informed by their respective experiences and sensemaking processes (Reddy et al., 2018). On the contrary, it is cognitively agreed upon that individuals adjust experiences and information through their existing knowledge structures (Rumelhart, 1980; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Spillane et al., 2002). Hence, it could be expected that teachers’ and principals’ understandings of teacher performance related to differentiated instruction may vary among based on their existing knowledge structures.

Zepeda (2016) proposed that “when observing a teacher or giving feedback about practice, both teachers and leaders need to be explicit about the differences in the keywords that align with performance levels” (p. 48). To date, no studies were located focusing on teachers' and principals' sensemaking of teacher evaluation instruments' content related to differentiated

instruction. Moreover, cognitively, it is expected that principals and teachers draw on their previous experiences and beliefs to make sense of teacher evaluation practices, including those intended to assess differentiated instruction as an indicator of effective teaching (Goldring et al., 2015; Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004; Shaked et al., 2017; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). Furthermore, as Spillane et al. (2002) stated, “what is paramount is not simply that implementing agents choose to respond to policy but also what they understand themselves to be responding to” (p. 393).

Given the unclarity on the theoretical and practical definitions of differentiated instruction, and the gap in the literature about teachers’ and principals’ understanding of teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction, this study aimed to inform educational policy and to provide school and district administrators and teachers with information about how to shape teacher evaluation practices to measure differentiated instruction in current teacher evaluation policy.

Background of the Study

Teacher evaluation structures are directly affected by federal legislation in many states. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education launched a competitive grant called Race to the Top (RTTT). A significant criterion for the success of the RTTT application was the degree to which schools were undergoing aggressive reforms in their states, including the implementation of more rigorous teacher evaluation procedures (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). As a part of the reforms in RTTT, teacher evaluation systems must be based on multiple sources of evidence and must include student test-score growth as a significant factor (Popham & DeSander, 2014). Simultaneously, many states were at the point of facing sanctions due to not meeting the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In 2011, the Obama administration

implemented the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility Program, which gave states the ability to opt-out of the federally set student-achievement goals and to set their own instead. One of the conditions in exchange for this flexibility was creating guidelines for teacher and leader evaluation based, in part, on student performance.

Most of the research on recent teacher evaluation reforms have concentrated on the psychometric qualities of Value-Added Measures (Garver, 2020). As the use of VAMs rises due to the increased influence of economists in education, scholarship has responded similarly by focusing on the technical and methodological core of the policies (Amrein-Beardsley & Holloway, 2017). However, researchers have not provided consistent conclusions about the psychometric qualities of Value-Added Measures (Blazar et al., 2016). Hence, scholars and teachers' unions have raised concerns about the validity of student growth measures for judging teacher quality, primarily when these measures are used in high-stakes personnel decisions (AERA, 2015).

Lessons learned from the NCLB era highlight that using standardized-test based assessments as the only or main indicators of teacher or school quality may cause more harm than good because of several unintended consequences, such as educators narrowing the curriculum to focus on tested subjects, concentrating resources on the “bubble kids” or students on the cusp of passing the high-stakes test, and teaching test-taking skills derived from the content being tested (Bae, 2018). Following the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), states started to make changes in teacher evaluation systems by requiring that multiple measures of student and school success to be incorporated into accountability systems.

In the state level, Senate Bill 364 was passed by the Georgia state legislature and signed into law by Georgia Governor Nathan Deal at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. This law helped to change the landscape of education in Georgia by reducing the number of state-mandated tests students must take, and by reducing the percentage that student test scores count for in the teacher evaluation system. The weight of student test scores in teacher evaluations was reduced from 50% to 30%, with the remaining 20% derived from a professional growth plan, which potentially allowed the evaluation system to become more of a coaching tool (GA, SB 364, 2016). Further, the state's recent efforts to advance teacher effectiveness in differentiated instruction by emphasizing "mandatory coursework in differentiated instruction" through Senate Bill 88 (2021) underscored the importance of differentiated instruction for teacher education in Georgia.

Regardless of concerns and unclarities about the nature and effects of rubrics, classroom observation rubrics are still a significant part of any teacher evaluation policy, including those focusing on measuring the quality of differentiated instruction in the United States (Tenam-Zemach & Flynn, 2015). As the central part of the rubrics, nearly every subject-specific professional organization in the U.S. issues some form of standards for professionals, which also informs the process of the development of rubrics based on the expected pedagogical content knowledge of teachers (Edelfelt & Raths, 1999). Numerous professional, national, state, and local organizations created and mandated similar standards to drive the development of teacher preparation programs and their accountability systems (Tenam-Zemach & Flynn, 2015). These predetermined goals or standards rely on the notion of pedagogical content knowledge (Lustick, 2010). Shulman (1987) argued that pedagogical content knowledge was "that special amalgam of

content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding” (p. 8).

Capturing the quality and existence of differentiation instruction has been a part of teacher evaluation systems through classroom observations (Van Geel., 2019). To measure teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction, researchers or states have created standards, and the rubrics to rate these standards for the purpose of teacher accountability (Tomlinson, 2014). However, there are not any specific definitions or standards for differentiated instruction that create a foundation to describe common best practices for this model of teaching (Bondie et al., 2019). Hence, existing rubrics to rate teacher effectiveness related to differentiated instruction posit a variety of differences about differentiated instruction (Danielson, 1996; Marzano, 2013; McREL, 2012; Stronge, 2006).

It is important to note that teachers and principals need to buy into new evaluation systems for successful implementation results (Reddy et al., 2018). As such, teachers’ perspectives of a new teacher evaluation policy have a crucial role because the implementation process is shaped by teachers’ perceptions (Tuytens & Devos, 2010). Furthermore, teachers’ perceptions of the usefulness of an evaluation process in improving their teaching and learning are mainly influenced by the confidence teachers have in their principal (Tuytens & Devos, 2010). Hence, teachers’ and principals’ perceptions of evaluation process hold critical importance during the implementation process. For the evaluation process to be useful, teachers must understand the content of evaluation instruments and believe that the instruments describe effective teaching (Derrington & Martinez, 2019). Then, most importantly, evaluators can translate the instruments into expected classroom teaching strategies (Derrington & Martinez, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of the teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. The researcher was interested in the perspectives about differentiated instruction. In particular, the intend of this study was to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to differentiated instruction as a construct, practice, and a part of teacher evaluation. As such, the researcher was interested in examining the differentiated instruction as it is described in the teacher evaluation rubric and the self-assessment checklist associated with differentiated instruction.

Research Questions

Given that the purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction, the following overall research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

This study required using a combination of various theoretical and conceptual frameworks to derive more rigorous results as the intent was to examine the interpretation of a sophisticated process from the points-of-view of different actors—teachers and school principals. Thus, the research questions informed the choice of the theoretical framework, study design, the data collection, and data analysis methods.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

To better address the multi-layered nature of the focus in this study, a combination of theoretical and conceptual frameworks was used to explain how a specific teacher performance evaluation process was understood by teachers and principals. More specifically, while the theoretical framework was rooted in both social constructivism and symbolic interactionism, sensemaking theory (Spillane et al., 2002) and the differentiated instruction framework (Tomlinson, 2014) were used as the conceptual frameworks. The frameworks of social constructivism and symbolic interactionism were used to understand more fully how teachers and principals understood the teacher evaluation process related to the differentiated instruction standard in the teacher evaluation system.

Sensemaking theory was used to explicate the multifaceted and varied processes by which teachers and principals make sense of differentiated instruction as a part of current teacher evaluation practices. Sensemaking theory sheds light on how individual and collective experiences, as well as academic backgrounds, shape how individuals make meaning and interpret a phenomenon. Moreover, Tomlinson's (2014) differentiated instruction framework was used to situate teachers' practice of differentiated instruction under four categories. Next, a general overview of these frameworks and how they are used in this study are discussed.

This study was framed within the theoretical frameworks of social constructivism and symbolic interactionism, both relying on the notion that individuals gain insights by exploring the richness, depth, and complexity of a given phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Social constructivism proposes the idea that "there is no objective basis for knowledge claims because knowledge is always a human construction" and that "the emphasis is on the process of knowledge construction by the social group and the intersubjectivity

established through the interactions of the group” (Au, 1998, p. 299). As for the relevance to this study that was focused on the understandings of a teacher performance evaluation process by teachers and principals, the knowledge about differentiated instruction and its evaluation is constructed by the social groups of teachers and principals.

Further, the sociological tenets of the teachers’ and principals’ understandings in the context of their own schools, the framework of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) was used. Symbolic interactionism argues that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they have constructed for them (Blumer, 1969). In contrast to some approaches to constructive qualitative research, this framework emphasizes the study of human perceptions and meanings that people construct in their social settings. The teacher evaluation process involves conversations between teachers and administrators. It can be hypothesized that teachers and leaders use language and dialogue around the observational and evaluative process structures and that by doing so, they share understandings, and consequently, individuals assign some type of value to the evaluation process (Burton et al., 2011).

According to the symbolic interactionist approach, a teacher’s personal self is dependent on social interactions. For example, Hoy (2002) claimed that new teachers learn the core of their functional roles in the school setting through the socialization process. Hence, the importance of appreciating the principles of social constructivist theory and symbolic interactionist theory was a primary step in the formulation of the research questions.

The conceptual framework of this study drew from a differentiated instruction framework and the sensemaking theory. To examine teachers’ and principals’ understanding of differentiated instruction as a construct and in the teacher evaluation process, this study relied on Spillane et al.’s (2002) sensemaking typology of the three concomitant elements: (1) prior

knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, (2) the social context of the work, and (3) connection with the messages all gleaned from the perspectives of the participants. To examine teachers' practices of differentiated instruction to better conceptualize teacher evaluation process, teachers' practices of differentiated instruction were situated in Tomlinson's (2014) differentiated instruction framework. The teachers' practices of differentiated instruction were categorized based on the component of differentiation through either: (1) content, (2) process, (3) product, or (4) environment according to student's readiness, interests, and learning profile.

Significance of the Study

To seize the opportunity to implement evaluation systems with a more precise focus on teacher professional growth and teacher accountability, policymakers need to be informed by how educational stakeholders' lived experiences shape how they interpret policies related to differentiated instruction in the context of the teacher performance assessment (Derrington & Campbell, 2018; Dodson, 2017; Finster & Milanowski, 2018; Hopkins, 2016; Jiang et al., 2015; Lavigne & Chamberlain, 2017; Paufler, 2018; Reddy et al., 2018). For instance, teachers' performance may depend too heavily on subjective and narrow interpretations of differentiated instruction standards and fail to move beyond developers' initial conceptions of the construct. Therefore, administrators' and teachers' understandings of differentiated instruction may remain misaligned. With better-informed evaluation instruments by the sensemaking process, teacher evaluation policies and practices might be improved at the state and local levels (Paufler & Clark, 2019).

Research consistently has shown that differentiated instruction has a positive impact on student achievement when adequately implemented (Reis et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2017). However, there is no consensus on what the universal implementation of differentiated

instruction is due to the complex and context-dependent nature of the construct (Van Geel et al., 2019). Hence, through principals and teachers sensemaking of differentiated instruction, this study may provide a clearer understanding of an operational definition of differentiated instruction that can inform research, policy, and practice.

This study intended to examine teachers' and principals' sensemaking of teacher evaluation instruments' content that focused on differentiated instruction. Considering there is no consensus about the theoretical or practical definition of differentiated instruction that works, this study may be able to provide a unified definition or a reason to explain why we need multiple definitions to be able to differentiate teacher evaluation practices based on teachers' differences. In addition, the findings of this study might provide information about how to design high-quality rubrics to measure differentiated instruction.

Assumptions of the Study

The major underlying methodological assumptions for this study were that the participants were willing to share their experiences and perceptions about the teacher evaluation process with the researcher. Also, it was assumed that principals were using the teacher evaluation instruments in a consistent manner and with adequate training. Furthermore, it was assumed that the participants shared their own opinions about the way in which they were evaluated through classroom observations instead of what is written or dictated as accurate in the Georgia Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) Implementation Handbook (2019). Other methodological assumptions included:

- the research sites and participant samples were varied enough to provide rich data for a case study;

- the use of multiple sources provided comprehensive data to make acceptable inferences and to triangulate the findings; and,
- the belief that a single school district can provide sufficient information for a rich and detailed case study.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they relate to the present study:

Classroom Observation – is a measurement approach used to characterize teaching quality through the use of an observation protocol (Gitomer, 2018). Classroom observations represent the primary data source of teacher evaluation conducted by a credentialed evaluator in the training, assessment, and development of new and experienced teachers (O’Leary, 2013).

Differentiated Instruction – is a teaching theory that is defined in a variety of ways by researchers based on their differentiated instruction frameworks. In TKES, the four components of differentiated instruction are indicated as “content, process, product, and learning environment” to meet individual developmental needs (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.).

Evaluator – is an appropriately trained and credentialed evaluator, principal, or assistant principal who conducts classroom observations for summative evaluation (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). In the context of this study, all summative evaluators are also principals of these schools.

Performance Standard – refers to the primary duties performed by a teacher (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Performance Indicator – is an example of the types of performance that will occur if a standard is being successfully met (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Performance Appraisal Rubric – is a behavioral summary scale that guides evaluators in assessing how well a standard is performed (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). This definition concurs with Evan’s (2013) approach that “the gap between the actual level of performance and the desired learning goals” (p. 70).

Post- Observation Conference – is a private meeting with the teacher and evaluator to review and reflect on data collected during the extended observation and to plan future professional development opportunities (Zepeda, 2017).

Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS) – is a qualitative rubric-based method by which evaluators use quality performance standards to measure teacher performance (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

The Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) – “is a common evaluation system designed for building teacher effectiveness and ensuring consistency and comparability throughout the state” of Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, n.d., para. 1).

Overview of the Research Procedures

A qualitative study design was used as it allows a rich understanding of events happening in a natural setting (Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 1995). This research used a qualitative, comparative approach that attends to the sensemaking of teacher evaluation process and practices for differentiated instruction across three cases in as many schools in one school district. A comparative case study further added depth to an understanding of how sensemaking processes work in different sites (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The research design was an embedded case study design (Yin, 2003) whereby three cases nested within a school district were chosen for analysis.

This study was situated in the context of one charter school system in the state of Georgia. The school system has a higher four-year graduation rate than the state average and higher College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) scores than the state's average score. Initially, this study was developed to be situated in another school district with similar characteristics; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions, the researcher had to change the school district. In this study, to ensure confidentiality, the system, schools, and participants were assigned pseudonyms.

One school from each school level were selected by a central office leader based on having a principal who (1) experienced TKES at least one year as a summative teacher evaluator and (2) is willing to share and contribute to reflective conversations about personal experiences. Three schools as one elementary, one middle, and one high school selected. Later, invitations to participate in the study were sent to principals in these three schools. After receiving principals' confirmation to participating the study, the principals of each school asked to identify three teacher participants who 1) are evaluated through TKES at least for one year 2) are willing to share and contribute to reflective conversations about their personal experiences. First-year teachers were excluded from the sample due to not completing a full evaluation cycle.

To examine teachers' and principals' sensemaking of the teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction, this case study employed individual interviewing, field notes, and document analysis (Prior, 2003; Simons, 2009). These data collection methods supported the effort to address the research questions, and to work toward the purpose to understand how teachers and principals constructed understandings of the teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and its restrictions, this study was conducted entirely virtually, and thus there was no physical observation of classrooms. Data for this study were collected using qualitative methods that included:

1. Two individual semi-structured interviews with each of the nine teacher participants.
2. One semi-structured interview with each of the three principal participants.
3. Field notes during the interviews.
4. The self-assessment checklist and classroom observation rubrics that were filled out by applying think aloud strategies with teacher participants.
5. Documents such as previous teacher self-assessment checklists, previous classroom observation results, students work samples, lesson plans, seating charts, and classroom pictures.

The collected data were analyzed through both deductive and inductive approaches by using the narrative inquiry approaches that led to a comparative cross case analysis of findings from each school and to inductive thematic analysis.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction of the research by describing the background and rationale for the study, the statement of the problem, and the significance of the study. Additionally, the first chapter includes an overview of the research methods, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and researcher assumptions.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the related literature relevant to the history of teacher evaluation, differentiated instruction, and evaluating teacher performance on differentiated instruction. Next, Chapter 3 presents the research design and methodology. It also includes samples of collected data and subsequent analysis. Accordingly, Chapter 4 reports the findings of

the Mitchell Elementary School case study. Chapter 5 reports the findings of Munnerlyn Middle School case study. Chapter 6 reports the findings of the Margaret High School case study. Chapter 7 reports the findings of the cross-case analysis of these three schools. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the results and implications of the findings and concludes with recommendations for administrators, policymakers, and researchers.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. In particular, the aim of this study was to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to content of teacher evaluation instruments to describe their teacher evaluation experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

Classroom observations are not a new concept to measure teacher effectiveness. However, their evolution through the history of teacher evaluation has been affected by several philosophical and political movements. To be able to understand today's classroom observation practices better, a brief history of teacher evaluation was examined in this chapter.

Classroom observations are also the most common method for measuring teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction (Van Geel et al., 2019). However, there is not any consensus or common framework to explain what differentiated instruction is for every educational setting. Moreover, the findings of recent empirical research on the impact of differentiated instruction are mixed and varied based on how differentiated instruction is

described. Therefore, to understand differentiated instruction that works, the literature about the definitions, applications, and evaluation of differentiated instruction were examined.

Teacher evaluation systems commonly rely on classroom observations conducted by school principals to measure teacher effectiveness (Wind et al., 2018). As such, evaluation has been known by teachers as one or more observations of their performance (Hazi, 2018). In addition, the state of Georgia uses documentation and self-assessment as a part of the evaluation of teacher performance related to differentiated instruction. As a part of the classroom observation system, the elements of teaching are rated, then these ratings are assembled into a score using a rubric (Bell et al., 2019).

Therefore, to examine teachers and principals' understandings about differentiated instruction in a standardized teacher evaluation system by focusing on the instruments, it is important to comprehend the three areas of literature for this study that include (1) a brief history of teacher evaluation; (2) differentiated instruction; and (3); evaluating teacher performance on differentiated instruction.

A Brief History of Teacher Evaluation

Evaluating teachers has been an educational practice since Socrates (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Although evaluating teachers dates back to the early formation of schools in the United States, the purpose, method, form, and stakes attached to evaluations have dramatically evolved since then. Despite the sparse literature from the Colonial period through the 19th century, *The Massachusetts School Law of 1647* was the first official move to give towns responsibility for the performance of their schools in the U.S. (Jewell, 2017). Prior to the 20th century, an irregular inspection of the teacher's work through direct observation by a traveling or circuit supervisor was reported as the main focus of teacher supervision and evaluation

(Blumberg, 1985). Starting from the 1900s, Ellett and Teddlie (2003) divided the history of teacher evaluation into four distinct phases; therefore, this section followed their categorization of the teacher evaluation history except for the last phase, which includes an example of today's teacher evaluation system in the state of Georgia.

Teacher Evaluation in the USA from 1900-1950

In the early part of the 20th century, the focus of the supervision and evaluation of teachers shifted from inspection to research and professional development (Campbell, 2013). As a part of this change process, rating scales of desirable teacher traits first appeared in 1915 as well as in different forms as checklists, scorecards, and appointment blanks (Lavigne & Good, 2013). Moreover, the evaluation process for the early 20th century included a post-observation conference where teachers were told how to correct his/her techniques (Barr et al., 1938; Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2009). Therefore, the classroom observations of the early 20th century can be considered as the ancestors of the classroom observations that many teachers experience today (Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2009).

According to Hazi and Arredondo Rucinski (2009), this type of classroom observation practice also led to born of a ritual defined as “the taken-for-granted procedure of observation, judgment, and prescription, done in a single visit” (Garman, 1986, p. 150, as cited in Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2009, p. 32). However, according to Ellett and Teddlie (2003), “teachers were largely evaluated on their personal characteristics rather than evaluation procedures informed by a knowledge base about effective teaching and learning” between 1900 to 1950 (p. 103).

After the creation and use of early rating scales, Taylor's efficiency movement emerged as a part of scientific management (Taylor, 1919). The efficiency model was focused on judging

quality and efficiency through a focus on inputs (teacher behavior) and outputs (student results) (Shaw, 2016; Taylor, 1947). The impact of this movement on rating scales assumed that if scientists could study the most effective teachers to capture descriptors of their behaviors, then administrators could rate the ineffective and inefficient teachers based on what they captured from effective teachers (Glanz, 1998; Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2009; Nolan & Hoover, 2004). In the decades leading up to World War II, the attention on teacher characteristics and teacher training became more apparent due to the concerns related to how to design and assess teacher preparation programs (Ellett & Teddlie, 2003; Shaw, 2016).

By the Sputnik's launch, a new concern about whether teachers were teaching content at a depth necessary to win the Cold War emerged and sharpened the methods-versus-content debates in the 1950s (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Deng, 2007; Frymeier, 1969, Ingle & Lindle, 2019). Moreover, researchers examined observable teacher behaviors, which led to checklist-based observation protocols (Marzano et al., 2011). To serve as a foundation for these protocols, clinical supervision models emerged which were based on mirroring the relationships between physicians and medical students in teaching hospitals into the context of schools for teacher evaluation (Marzano et al., 2011).

Teacher Effectiveness Research and Teacher Evaluation—1950s-1980s

The literature on teacher evaluation after World War II reflected a shift from inspection for accountability toward clinical supervision for teacher development (Donaldson & Papay, 2015; Jewell, 2017). In the 1950s, the evaluation focused on building relationships between teachers and leaders (Donaldson & Papay, 2015). It was thought that there was a search for relevance in the classroom and a thirst for individuality and human dignity during the 1960s and 1970s (Patterson, 2015; Sweeney & Mannatt, 1986). In the 1960s, scholars and practitioners

sought to codify these efforts into the practice of clinical supervision (Donaldson & Papay, 2015). As a result of these attempts in classrooms attempting to codify research into practice, the notion of supervision as a function of leadership emerged in the 1960s (Patterson, 2015; Sullivan & Glanz, 2000).

Even if it is not hard to syllogize how unsystematic teacher evaluation was until the 1960s, the Coleman Report was the first official critique of the lack of systematic ways to evaluate teachers while minimizing the role of the teacher in accounting for educational outcomes (Berliner, 1976; Coleman et al., 1966; Dooley, Owens, & Conley, 2019). In 1969, Goldhammer introduced his five-stage process, including observations and pre- and post-observation conferences, which is still the basis of many teacher evaluation models today. However, despite these new models' attempts to improve teacher evaluation practices, they continued to circumvent the calls to define effective practice and rate teachers accordingly that had been popular earlier in the century (Donaldson & Papay, 2015).

At the beginning of 1973, Madeline Hunter identified the Hunter Model, a diagnostic instrument describing teaching practices that were thought to improve teaching (Baral, 1974; Hunter, 1973). Hunter's Model influenced views of teaching and teacher evaluation throughout the 1970s and 1980s and ensured in a way that the focus of the evaluation was rooted in teacher behavior in the classroom rather than student outcomes (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Consequently, most local school districts used a checklist evaluation form that merely noted the presence of each of seven steps of Hunter's Model for good lesson design, including an anticipatory set, objective, direct instruction, modeling, checking for understanding, guided practice, and independent practice (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Hunter, 1982; Ponticell et al., 2019). Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, teacher evaluation across the country tended to follow

a fairly standard pattern dominated by the Hunter Model, which was a model that had no clear evidence or linkage with positively impacting student achievement (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Donaldson & Papay, 2015).

Reform Movements and Teacher Effectiveness Research in Teacher Evaluation from the 1980s into the 21st Century

Evaluation systems in the 1970s and 1980s were formative in nature but not able to provide the required, ongoing feedback that teachers needed to reflect on professional improvement (Colby et al., 2002; Shinkfield & Stufflebeam, 1995). The systems developed in the 1980s were the improved versions of the models developed in the 1960s and 1970s. However, these systems were still over-relying on a small number of observations, and the principals' lack of expertise in many disciplines (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Moreover, the evaluation systems around the 1970s did not include high level/up-to-date instructional strategies while having little differentiation for the evaluation of novice and experienced teachers (Danielson & McGreal, 2000).

With the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983, the American public realized that the United States' educational system was failing and falling behind the rest of the world (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report was effective in convincing states both that educational reform was necessary and that the federal government could play a vital role in the solution (Jewell, 2017). *A Nation at Risk* also stressed that teacher performance and accountability in education were paramount (Shinkfield and Stufflebeam, 1995; United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In response to *A Nation at Risk*, Wise et al. (1985) called for the improvement of teacher evaluation to address the nation's failure, which "must be capable of yielding fairly objective, standardized, and externally defensible information about teacher performance" (p. v). Moreover, Wise et al.'s (1985) study concluded that evaluation processes must meet the needs of students and align with the stated educational goals of school districts (Jewell, 2017; Wise et al., 1985). In addition to Wise et al. (1985)'s research-based response, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy produced a response report in 1986, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the Twenty-first Century*. This report comprised several key components to improve student outcomes, including the creation of a National Board for Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS) for standardized teacher evaluation. The NBPTS introduced a national teacher certification program in 1987 that included multiple observations and developed a protocol for teacher performance assessment to fulfill the requirements of completing this certification program (Dooley et al., 2019).

The 1980s and 1990s experienced a growing interest in teacher evaluation as a lever for school improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 1983; Donaldson & Papay, 2015). Consequently, educators felt increased pressure to help students attain more complex outcomes due to the state-mandated, on-the-job assessments and evaluations of teaching for the purpose of licensure (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Ellett & Teddlie, 2003). Using teacher evaluation for school improvement often resulted in the development of large, statewide systems for teacher evaluation.

The expanded version of Madeline Hunter's seven-step model of mastery learning had become an evaluation structure in many states (Jewell, 2017; Marzano et al., 2011). While there were alternative evaluation models in the 1980s emphasizing individualized career development

for teachers and proposing differentiated teacher evaluation practices based on the teacher's experience, age, and developmental level, the Hunter model was still the most popular of its time (Jewell, 2017; Tracy, 1995). Further, in that decade, helping teachers to grow through a system of formative and summative assessment, as well as providing support through mentoring programs, emerged (Darling-Hammond, 1988; Harris, 1986). By constructing the work of Hunter and others in the 1980s, several efforts throughout the 1990s helped to define rigorous, detailed standards for effective teaching practice, with corresponding evaluation rubrics (Donaldson & Papay, 2015).

The 1990s experienced an increase in centralized school accountability, along with federal government proposals to increase academic standards (Jewell, 2017). At the same time, model teacher standards were developed, and a concept of national teacher license was proposed (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992; Jewell, 2017). In 1996, Charlotte Danielson published *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*, and because of its popularity, it became to be considered as the professional standard for teacher evaluation in a short time (Danielson, 1996; Jewell, 2017; Marzano et al., 2011).

The earliest Danielson model defined teacher evaluation as assessment in the areas of planning and preparation, the classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities (Danielson, 1996; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Jewell, 2017). The Danielson model was the most comprehensive option during this time as it examined 76 different components of effective teaching as well as provided a more extensive ranking system for teachers as unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished than any other framework (Danielson, 1996; Jewell, 2017; Marzano et al., 2011). The latest version of this framework

(Danielson, 2013) is further examined with more details in a later part of this chapter for its focus on differentiated instruction.

The 1990s and 2000s were known as an “era of accountability” in which most of the education actors were focused on growth models and VAMs that looked at teacher efficacy and its relations to student test scores (Dooley et al., 2019). The 21st century was also the time where the focus on the structure of teacher evaluation shifted from teacher behavior to student achievement, and from supervision to evaluation (Jewell, 2017). The first stage of the shift was holding schools, not teachers, accountable (Lavigne & Good, 2013). NCLB incorporated the language of accountability into educational practice by offering increased funding related to the presence of highly qualified teachers in all classrooms and requiring that professional development programs were provided to meet that goal (Jewell, 2017; NCLB, 2001).

Moreover, NCLB was rooted in the assumption that higher educational standards, highly qualified teachers, better instruction, new programs, and increased school choice would result in increased test performance (Jewell, 2017; NCLB, 2001). In this reauthorization of ESEA, a highly qualified teacher was characterized as, in part, a teacher who holds a Bachelor’s or higher degree and acquires a full state certification, and demonstrates subject area competence in which he/she teaches (Cutler 2003, NCLB 2001, Zepeda, 2016).

The 2000s to Present: The Era of High-Stakes Accountability

Research on the effects of NCLB revealed increased attention to the inequities across race and class differences in teacher quality (Loeb & Miller, 2009; McDermott, 2011). In 2006, 29% of schools were failing to make adequate yearly progress as well as most states were not requiring that teachers receive annual performance evaluations (National Center for Teacher Quality, 2007). As of 2009, 33% of schools were still failing to make adequate yearly progress

(Usher, 2011). In 2009, President Barack Obama introduced a waiver system under which states could discontinue compliance with the NCLB (Jewell, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This system, the Race to the Top (RTTT) program, was announced as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), funded by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). States were asked to implement specific actions they would take to reform their education systems in return for receiving waivers from the specific parts of NCLB (Ayers, 2011). For teacher evaluation, these actions were expected to address plans to

- Establish clear approaches to measuring student achievement growth for individual students.
- Design and implement rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation systems for teachers.
- Differentiate effectiveness using multiple rating categories that take student achievement growth into account as a significant factor and are designed with teacher involvement.
- Conduct annual evaluations that include timely and constructive feedback and provide teachers with data on student achievement growth for their students, classes, and schools.
- Use evaluations to inform decisions about staff development, compensation, promotion, tenure, certification, and removal of ineffective teachers. (Hallgren et al., 2014, p. 2)

The Race to the Top program was explicitly focused on teacher and leader evaluation (Ayers, 2011; Clifford & Ross, 2011; Hallgren et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Zepeda, 2016).

The U.S. Congress allocated more than \$5 billion between 2009 and 2012 to the RTTT program to focus states and schools' attention on designing and implementing programs to

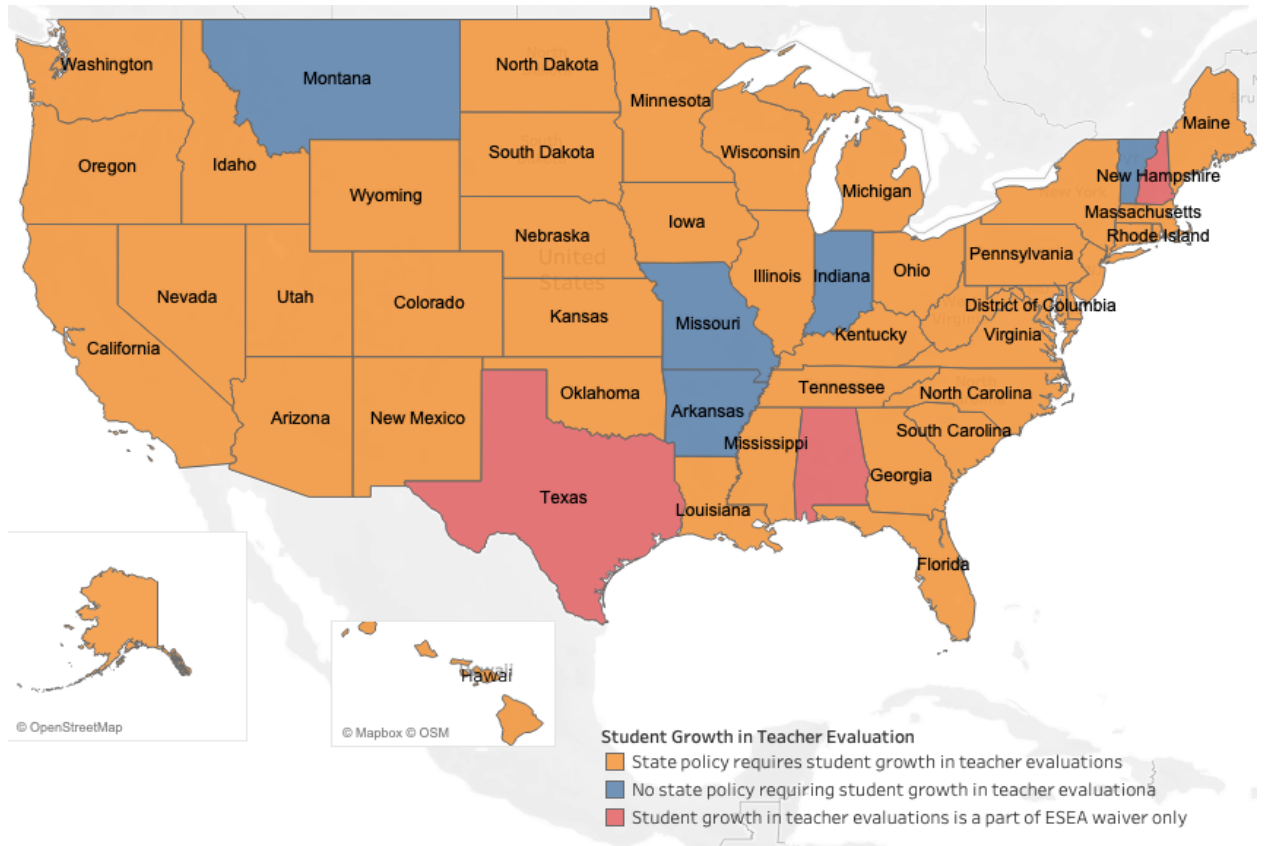
evaluate teachers and principals (Zepeda, 2016). The logic behind this movement was that teacher effectiveness could be enhanced through evaluation systems (Zepeda, 2016).

The U.S. Department of Education extended the tenets of RTTT by 2014 as a voluntary flexibility waiver opportunity to all states without monetary incentives as a way to address certain unmet requirements under NCLB (Close et al., 2019; Pennington, 2014). Along with these provided opportunities, the federal government effectively forced all states to implement a reformed teacher evaluation system because none of the states had met NCLB's goal of 100% of all students performing at grade level (Close et al., 2019). The term reformed used here simply meant that “the higher the consequences attached to the data derived through these systems, the more federal Race to the Top funds states received” for the first wave of waivers (Close et al., 2019, p. 22). The 44 waivers had been issued for the individual states. In 2015, there were just five states—California, Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, and Vermont—that still have no formal state policy requiring student growth in evaluating teacher effectiveness, as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Also, the publication of *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*, emphasized that states have struggled to formally differentiate between teachers making different contributions to students' learning and lives (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2019; Weisberg et al., 2009). According to *Widget Effect*, under evaluation systems with only two rating categories, almost all teachers were rated as satisfactory. As a result of surfacing this problem and since 2009, many states added additional rating categories to provide more nuanced information about teacher evaluation (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2019; Weisberg et al., 2009). In 2015, there were 44 states that required three or more rating categories in their teacher evaluation systems (Ross & Walsh, 2019).

Figure 2.1.

Teacher Effectiveness State Policy Trends (2009-2015).



Note. Adapted from Doherty and Jacobs (2015).

President Barack Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) in 2015 as the eighth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), replacing the defunct NCLB and its waivers associated with the RTTT (ESSA, 2015; Zepeda, 2016). With this reauthorization of ESEA, an era of significant federal involvement in teacher licensing and evaluation had ended, and accountability related policies decentralized; and therefore, it might seem to mark a federal deprioritization of teacher evaluation reform (Pennington & Mead, 2016). Hence, under the Obama administration, federal policy shifted from reliance on teacher inputs as a proxy for teacher quality toward a more decentralized policy that focused on understanding student outcomes tied to teachers (Saultz, 2017; Saultz et al., 2017). Thus, it is essential to note

that ESSA moved from a federal focus on unqualified to ineffective when describing a good teacher, which signals a notable shift from input toward outcomes (Saultz, 2017; Saultz et al., 2017).

ESSA gave states more control over their accountability systems while weakening the federal influence on teacher evaluation systems promoted in RTTT and in the NCLB waiver requirements (Close et al., 2019). As a result of the loosened federal control of teacher evaluation, ESSA plans were considered as guidelines, not rules, deferring to local districts to make more choices about teacher evaluation models and their implementation in local contexts (Close et al., 2019).

While ESSA provided freedom to states to build their own system and give statewide flexibility, it is also turned into a burden for many states related to implementation challenges associated with offering so many different types of teacher evaluation systems (Close et al., 2019). Starting in the 2017–2018 school year, states were required to have plans in place that described how they would ensure low-income and racial/ethnic underrepresented students are not being taught at disproportionate rates by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers (ESSA, 2015, Saultz et al., 2017).

The unequitable distribution of highly effective teachers is a severe problem for states to answer through their ESSA plans (Saultz et al., 2017). However, before addressing the problem of unequitable distribution of effective, state and district educational leaders have to decide who are the effective teachers and how to identify them. Then, they may equitably distribute an effective workforce within and across the districts based on student demographics (Saultz et al., 2017). However, to achieve this task, states have to decide what measures they will include, such as teachers' effects on student achievement, observable measures of teacher practice, student

surveys, attendance, etc. Hence, the teacher evaluation related policy flexibility might cause more confusion than clarity and flexibility for the states who have to redesign their evaluation policies during the post-ESSA era.

Considering ESSA's flexibility on teacher evaluation requirements, it is expected to see some states removing VAMs from their teacher evaluation systems while others might not be able to give significant statewide investments since RTTT (Close et al., 2019). In 2009, only 15 states required teacher evaluations that included student growth; by 2015, this number increased nearly threefold to 43 states (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2019). However, as swiftly as states moved to make these changes, many of them shifted back with the same urgency. In 2017, there were still 39 states requiring student growth as a measure in their teacher evaluation systems.

In 2018, only 15 states were using VAMs, while 28 states were requiring Student Learning Objectives (SLO) as an objective measure of student growth (Close et al., 2019). Additionally, while 23 states were not using VAMs, only 7 states did not include SLOs in their evaluation systems in 2018. Only six states were not requiring classroom observations as a part of teacher evaluation as of 2018 (Close et al., 2019). As of 2019, 34 states required teacher evaluation systems to include student growth measures (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2019). Moreover, more than 80% of states, 41, required an evaluation with two or more rating categories. In addition to the extended number of rating categories, slightly fewer, 31 states in 2019, either required or explicitly allowed districts to factor student survey data than in 2015 in which 33 states factored student survey data.

Interestingly, only one state, New York, explicitly outlawed the use of student survey data for teacher evaluation purposes. Furthermore, 10 states required all teachers to be observed

multiple times, while 27 states required only some teachers to be observed. Currently, only 22 states maintained the requirement of annual feedback of all teachers as equivalent to the number of states in 2011 while there was a peak point in 2015 where 27 states required annual feedback for all teachers (Ross & Walsh, 2019).

Today's teacher evaluation landscape must be understood in the historical context of education. Throughout the centuries, historically, teacher preparation, credentialing, and evaluation policies were developed at the state or local levels. The federal role in teacher policy has expanded over time in the more recent history. Also, the methods to measure teacher effectiveness as well as the philosophies behind them evolved over time. However, observable characteristics of teachers and their practices have been at the heart of almost every method of teacher evaluation across its history. As example and to correspond to the focus of this study, teacher performance evaluation process in the state of Georgia is examined in the next section.

Georgia's Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

The historical federal legislation has profoundly influenced the landscape of the Georgia teacher evaluation design. Georgia was one of the six states that received RTTT funding of at least \$400 million and began designing the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) in the fall of 2010. The state of Georgia designed TKES to fulfill the requirements of the Secondary Education Act Flexibility Program to receive waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB). Thus, the value-added student growth measure comprised 50% of a teacher's overall effectiveness rating in this system (GADOE, 2013). Later, in 2016, the new requirements of the ESSA changed the TKES formula so that the value-added student growth measures would account for 30% of a teacher's overall effectiveness rating (GA, SB 364, 2016).

In the Georgia’s teacher evaluation system, Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS) defined the expectations for teacher performance that included 5 domains and 10 Performance Standards as illustrated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

TAPS Domains and Standards

Domains	Standards
1. Planning	1. Professional Knowledge 2. Instructional Planning
2. Instructional Delivery	3. Instructional Strategies 4. Differentiated Instruction
3. Assessment of and for Learning	5. Assessment Strategies 6. Assessment Uses
4. Learning Environment	7. Positive Learning Environment 8. Academically Challenging Environment
5. Professionalism and Communication	9. Professionalism 10. Communication

Note. Georgia Department of Education (2019).

TAPS provided evaluators a rubrics-based evaluation method by which they can measure teacher performance related to quality performance standards. The performance standard related to differentiated instruction is broadly described as “the teacher challenges and supports each student’s learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences” under the instructional delivery domain (Georgia Department of Education, 2019, p. 30). TAPS implementation process outlined in the *Georgia’s Teacher Keys Effectiveness System Implementation Handbook* is illustrated in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2.

Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards Process Flow.



Teacher assessment process starts with the orientation step. This step aims to create a shared understanding by stating that “to ensure both teachers and evaluators have a clear understanding of expectations, building administrators shall annually conduct a Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) Orientation prior to observations” (Georgia Department of Education, 2019, p. 10). TAPS process includes a familiarization phase, which is not a single event. The familiarization phase is an ongoing dialogue throughout the evaluation process; however, it is still considered as the second step of this process.

The third step, self-assessment, is defined as reflection of professional practice through completing the self-assessment checklist (see Appendix B) prior to the pre-evaluation conference. The information from the checklist is used to determine a professional growth goal or in the development of a professional growth plan for teachers. The fourth step, the pre-evaluation conference, is used to inform the individual being evaluated of his or her expectations and to finalize the professional growth goal(s) or professional growth plan(s). The performance

standards and performance appraisal rubrics are required to be included in the Pre-Evaluation Conference discussion.

The fifth step is the formative evaluation process. This step focuses on the observations and documentation for the totality of evidence across all aspects of the evaluation system. All 10 performance standards are expected to be rated in the formative assessment process through at least two announced or unannounced observations by using observation rubrics. Performance standards inform the formative assessment in this step. Formative observations are determined to be at least 30 minutes in duration and are based on all 10 performance standards.

In total, there are 10 rubrics, and each rubric is aligned to a performance standard (See Table 2.1). Each rubric has four levels, and the description for Level III in the Performance Appraisal Rubric is the performance standard; hence, Level III is the expected level of performance. The performance standard and performance appraisal rubric for the differentiated instruction is illustrated in Figure 2.3. The rubric provides a clearly delineated stepwise progression, moving from highest to lowest levels of performance. Each level is intended to be qualitatively superior to all lower levels. Each rubric states the measure of performance expected of teachers and provides a qualitative description of the related performance at each level (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Each rubric also has a set of performance indicators to provide examples of observable, tangible behaviors related to each standard (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The performance indicators are described as examples of the types of performance that will occur if a standard is being successfully met. However, the list of performance indicators is not exhaustive, which is explicitly highlighted, “performance indicators are not inclusive and should not be used as a checklist” (Georgia Department of Education, 2014a, p. 1).

Figure 2.3.

TAPS Performance Standard and Appraisal Rubric Related to Differentiated Instruction.

Performance Standard 4: Differentiated Instruction

The teacher challenges and supports each student’s learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences.

Sample Performance Indicators

Examples may include, but are not limited to:

The teacher:

- Differentiates the instructional content, process, product, and learning environment to meet individual developmental needs.
- Provides remediation, enrichment, and acceleration to further student understanding of material.
- Uses flexible grouping strategies to encourage appropriate peer interaction and to accommodate learning needs/goals.
- Uses diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment data to inform instructional modifications for individual students.
- Develops critical and creative thinking by providing activities at the appropriate level of challenge for students.
- Demonstrates high learning expectations for all students commensurate with their developmental levels.

Level IV <i>In addition to meeting the requirements for Level III</i>	Level III <i>Level III is the expected level of performance</i>	Level II	Level I
The teacher continually facilitates each student’s opportunities to learn by engaging him/her in critical and creative thinking and challenging activities tailored to address individual learning needs and interests. <i>(Teachers rated as Level IV continually seek ways to serve as role models or teacher leaders.)</i>	The teacher consistently challenges and supports each student’s learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences	The teacher inconsistently challenges students by providing appropriate content or by developing skills which address individual learning differences.	The teacher does not challenge students by providing appropriate content or by developing skills which address individual learning differences.

Note. Adapted from Georgia Department of Education (2019).

The other component of the fifth step of this process is the documentation, which are the secondary data sources of the teacher evaluation process. This data source is not required through the evaluation process; however, it is stated that the documentation might be requested from a teacher when a standard is not observed during an observation or when the consistency of a teacher's practice cannot be established (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

The sixth step, mid-year conference, is intended to inform the teacher of his or her progress on the TKES components. The mid-year conference focuses on student growth data, the 10 performance standards, and professional growth. The seventh step is the summative assessment evaluation, which is a smaller process in the whole teacher evaluation process. In this step, the summative evaluator, the school principal in the present study, completes a summative performance evaluation for each teacher based on all available data from the formative evaluation process. It is expected from the evaluator to rate each of the 10 Performance Standards based on the totality of evidence and consistency of practice. The final step of the teacher evaluation process is the summative conference which is basically an individual meeting with each teacher to provide specific feedback by evaluation results.

The state-developed rubric and the self-assessment checklist for teacher performance evaluation related to differentiated instruction in this study was central to evaluation assessment of teacher performance related to differentiated instruction in the state of Georgia. However, the rubrics about instructional planning and instructional strategies were also considered because of their theoretical and practical connectedness to differentiated instruction.

Differentiated Instruction

Whereas segregating students according to certain background characteristics has been a ubiquitous historical trend for educational systems, a global reform agenda reinforces schools to create more inclusive classrooms where student diversity is appreciated (OECD, 2015). In fact, classrooms are increasingly populated by students with diverse needs in the U.S. where students from diverse academic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds are taught together in one setting (Coady et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2017; Proctor & Owens, 2019). As such, coping with student diversity is inevitable for whom they are responsible for effective teaching and learning in today's schools. To accommodate the growing diversity in classrooms, teachers must recognize their students' different needs (Godley et al., 2006). However, regardless of several efforts to develop and implement new philosophical approaches to address different needs of students in diverse classrooms, many teachers have still been using a one-size-fits-all instructional approaches (Brighton et al., 2005; Callahan et al., 2017; Dack, 2018; Latz et al., 2008; Tomlinson, 2016).

The one-size-fits-all teaching approach is a philosophical approach that stems from the belief that all students can be treated in an equal way by ignoring the diverse needs of students (Fox & Hoffman, 2011; Subban, 2006; Suprayogi et al., 2017). On the contrary, the differentiated instruction (DI) teaching approach is expected to consider the differences between students and acknowledge their strengths and limitations to accommodate their needs based on these differences (George, 2005; Heacox, 2012; Subban, 2006; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2003). As such, differentiated instruction provides an approach to responding to individual student needs in education settings (Dack, 2019).

In the next sections of this chapter, the definition of differentiated instruction and the evaluation of teacher performance related to differentiated instruction were examined.

What is Differentiated Instruction?

Carol Ann Tomlinson, one of the foremost researchers in the field of differentiated instruction, created a model of differentiated instruction in recent years which is considered as the most visible and widely cited model in the literature (Dack, 2019; Tomlinson, 2014). However, Bondie et al.'s (2019) rigorous literature review about the changes in teacher's practice related to differentiated instruction revealed a list of frameworks that described differentiated instruction in the academic literature.

Bondie et al. (2019) included 28 studies in their review, and 7 different frameworks explained the approaches to differentiated instruction used in research studies in the U.S between 2001 and 2015. As classification, 64% the studies in Bondie et al. (2019)'s literature review used Tomlinson's (2001) definition for describing differentiated instruction. In a majority (64%) of the studies between 2001 and 2015, differentiated instruction was defined as "adjustments to content (what is taught), process (how learning is constructed), product (how learning is assessed), and the physical learning environment according to the teachers' perception of student readiness, learning profile, and interests" (Bondie et al., 2019, p. 345).

For the rest of the studies in Bondie's review of the literature about differentiated instruction, Renzulli's (1998) framework was another popular foundation for differentiated instruction which also incorporated aspects of Tomlinson's model (Bondie et al., 2019). Renzulli's (1998) triad model for serving students with advanced abilities is focused on extending their skills, fostering creative thinking, and supporting their commitment to tasks. Renzulli's model has a narrower approach than Tomlinson by simply focusing on the academic

abilities of the students to differentiate instruction. However, one aspect in common for the studies using either Tomlinson or Renzulli is that they emphasize the “the importance of teacher response to perception of learner differences” (Bondie et al., 2019, p. 345).

In contrast, 32% of the studies in Bondie et al.’s (2019) literature review were based on frameworks focused on helping teachers to work with and understand student diversity. There were three common trends to help teachers with perceived diversity by focusing on teacher-adjusted practice, teacher and student-adjusted practice, and national policy-adjusted practice (Bondie et al., 2019). To explain how to adjust practice, Dunn and Dunn’s (1992) thinking styles; Black et al.’s (2004) formative assessment framework; and Ladson-Billings’ (2009) culturally relevant pedagogy along with Tomlinson’s (2001) differentiated instruction were used to clarify the philosophical structure about differentiated instruction concepts (Bondie et al., 2019). The studies are rooted in these frameworks as an approach to differentiated instruction by emphasizing teacher perceptions (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Latz et al., 2008; Pitts, 2009; Santamaria, 2009; Stewart & Houchens, 2014).

In addition to teacher-centered differentiated instruction frameworks such as Tomlinson and Renzulli, Latz et al.’s (2008) developed a framework that was a relatively student-centered. In Latz’s framework, a three-layered approach used to shift ownership for differentiated instruction by reshaping a prescribed curriculum to a teacher-adjusted curriculum, and then this teacher adjusted curriculum to a learner driven curriculum. More specifically, Latz et al. (2008) combined the Bett’s (2004) student mastery model of developing independent, self-regulated lifelong learners through mastery learning experiences by applying Renzulli’s (1998) triad models to guide teacher design of challenging learning activities.

In their study with a more global approach to differentiated instruction, Suprayogi et al. (2017) examined several differentiated instruction models and summarized them based on the typical dimensions of differentiated instruction across the literature (see Table 2.2). In the Suprayogi et al. (2017) framework, integration was constructed based on the five common dimensions of differentiated instruction that are found in the international literature. Suprayogi et al.'s working definition of differentiated instruction was “an instructional approach that accommodates the diversity of students by (1) coping with student diversity; (2) adopting specific teaching strategies; (3) invoking a variety in learning activities; (4) monitoring individual student needs; and (5) pursuing optimal learning outcomes” (2017, p.292).

Table 2.2.

Inventory of Common Differentiated Instruction Dimensions

Moore (2005)	Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010)	Fogarty and Pete (2011)	Whipple (2012)	Smit and Humpert (2012)	Suprayogi et al., (2017)
Differences in content	Differences in learning profiles	Provide choice to learners	Differences in lesson planning	Differences in attitude	Coping with student diversity
Differences in process	Differences in readiness	Change the content, process, and product	Differences in content	Differences in content	Adopting specific teaching strategies
Differences in product	Differences in content	Challenge the emotions, attention, memory of different learners	Differences in processes	Differences in process/product	Invoking a variety in learning activities
Differences in learning environment	Differences in process		Differences in student interests	Differences in communication/collaboration/ coaching	Monitoring individual student needs
	Differences in affect		Differences in assessment	Differences in formative assessment	Pursuing optimal learning outcomes
	Differences in interests		Differences in products		
	Differences in products				

Note. Adapted from Suprayogi et al. (2017).

The Research About the Effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction

Researchers suggested the implementation of some type differentiated instruction as a possible way to help increase students' test scores for whom historically marginalized students, and the students as a whole (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Fox & Hoffman, 2011; George, 2005; Heacox, 2012; Tomlinson, 2014). However, there was limited empirical evidence about the impacts of differentiated instruction on students' academic achievement in K-12 settings. However, almost all of these studies have shown positive outcomes or no significant change in the outcomes from the use of differentiated instruction.

Al Otaiba et al. (2014) conducted a randomized controlled experiment to compare the efficacy of two Response to Intervention (RtI) models as the differentiated instruction models, namely Typical RtI and Dynamic RtI. The difference between these models was related to the timing of the differentiated instruction. Typical RtI was placing every student in the same intervention regardless of their initial screening scores; by contrast, in Dynamic RtI, students were provided different interventions according to their initial screening. The researchers included 34 first-grade classrooms (n = 522 students) across 10 socio-economically and culturally diverse schools to examine first-grade Response to Intervention (RtI) in reading. Al Otaiba et al.'s (2014) findings revealed that students in the Dynamic RtI group significantly outperformed their peers in the Typical RtI group. In brief, this study claimed that besides the ability to improve reading outcomes for all children, the effectiveness of differentiated instruction on students' reading achievement might depend on the timing of this differentiation.

Reis et al. (2007) investigated the effects of a differentiated, enriched reading program on students' oral reading fluency and comprehension using the schoolwide enrichment model—reading (SEM-R). The researchers conducted an experimental study with a sample of 226

students in grades 3 to 6 from 2 urban elementary schools. They found significantly higher scores of the SEM-R group comparing with the control group. To expand their findings, Reis et al. (2011) examined the effects of SEM-R in both urban and rural schools in a more recent study. Reis et al. designed an experimental study by randomly assigning 63 teachers and 1,192 second through fifth-grade students across five elementary schools. The findings revealed that SEM-R significantly increased reading fluency in two out of five schools. Moreover, in only one of these two schools (high-poverty urban), there was a significant increase in reading comprehension, while no achievement differences were reported in the remaining schools. Furthermore, none of the control classrooms in the study significantly outperformed the treatment (SEM-R) classrooms, suggesting that differentiated instruction and content works as well or better than regular curricular instruction and content (Reis et al., 2011).

In another experimental study, Little et al. (2014) examined the effects on the achievement of the same differentiated instructional model for reading, SEM-R, in four middle schools with a corresponding elimination of regular reading instruction. A multi-site cluster-randomized design with 2,150 students and 47 teachers was conducted. Findings revealed similar patterns with Reis et al.'s (2011) study in elementary schools in that the intervention resulted in similar or higher scores for fluency and similar scores for comprehension while the treatment group outperformed the control group on reading fluency in only two schools.

Similarly, Shaunessy-Dedrick et al. (2014) examined the effectiveness of SEM-R in eight Title I schools within one urban district. Shaunessy-Dedrick et al.'s (2014) experimental study included 786 students to compare their test scores when measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) comprehension scores (Dunbar et al., 2008) based on their assignments to either

control or treatment groups. Results paralleled with the earlier studies as that SEM-R students had significantly higher scores compared with the students in the control schools.

As a part of the international literature in differentiated instruction, Valiandes (2015) conducted a quasi-experimental study to evaluate the effect of differentiated instruction on students' learning, in mixed ability classrooms with 24 teachers and 479 fourth grade students. Valiandes (2015) reported that there was a statistically significant difference between the achievement levels of students in literacy and reading comprehension who were exposed to differentiated instruction in contrast to students who were not. The most striking finding in this study was the corresponding effects of the quality of differentiated instruction on students' achievement.

In addition to studies focused on reading and literacy, Brighton et al. (2005) conducted a three-year mixed-method study in nine middle schools across four school districts in three states. As an experimental part of this more extensive study, researchers compared the learning outcomes of 724 students who were assigned the participating teams, including 79 teachers serving in these schools. These schools were divided into three groups. However, two of these groups were both the treatment groups for differentiated instruction while there was only one comparison group where teachers used a more traditional approach.

Brighton et al. (2005) stated that differentiated instruction led to improved gains for all students in the some of the following categories of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills; "reading comprehension, usage and expression, math concepts and estimation, math problem solving and data interpretation, social studies, science, maps and diagrams, and reference materials" (p. 63). However, the results were not consistent for each subject or outcome for each participant. The researchers highlighted that the students who benefited the most from the differentiated teaching

style were students who had a history of performing below the expected level, and those students with special needs (Brighton et al., 2005).

As for the focuses on students' academic achievements in mathematics, Goddard et al. (2015) examined the relationship between school instructional climate with an emphasis on norms for differentiated instruction and students' fifth-grade mathematics and reading achievement. Goddard et al.'s (2015) study included 5,031 students nested in the randomly selected 78 schools from a large midwestern state's public schools. The findings of this study showed that school norms for teaching practices consistent with differentiating instruction were positively and significantly associated with differences among schools in mathematics and reading achievement. Although Goddard et al.'s (2015) study was not an experimental study to provide causal relationships, it provided a school-level understanding of the effectiveness of differentiated instruction on both mathematics and reading by applying rigorous statistical methods.

In 2005, Tieso conducted a pretest-posttest, quasi-experimental design study using a stratified random sample of 31 teachers and their 645 students to examine the effects of differentiated instruction on mathematics achievement. Tieso (2005) randomly assigned teachers and their students assigned to the comparison or 1 of 4 treatment groups (further subdivided into low, middle, and high subgroups of prior knowledge levels). The effects of grouping arrangements (whole, between, and within-class) and curricular design (textbook, revised, and differentiated) on the treatment and comparison group posttest scores were examined. Tieso (2005) reported her findings of the effects of the revised curriculum based on the whole-class grouping and between- and within-class grouping. Overall Tieso (2005) revealed the following findings for the whole-class grouping that:

1. students in the revision groups demonstrated significantly higher posttest scores than comparable students in the comparison groups without adjustment for grade-level differences;
2. students who scored highest on the pretest made the most significant gains among the low, middle, and high groups;
3. students who receive an enhanced and revised curriculum can demonstrate gains in student achievement over students who receive instruction from a comparable textbook unit without additional grouping practices; (p. 77)

and based on with between- and within-class groupings:

4. students who were exposed to differentiated curriculum, combined with within- and between-class ability grouping, experienced significantly higher mathematics achievement than students exposed to their regular textbook unit on data representation and analysis; and,
5. grouping by ability for specific instruction may result in significant achievement gains. (p. 78)

Tieso (2005) provided a piece of experimental evidence that both ability grouping and differentiated curricular design have demonstrated significant improvement in students' mathematics achievement. In addition, Muthomi and Mbugua's (2014) more recent experimental study contributed the empirical evidence by showing that differentiated instruction significantly improved the secondary school students' achievement in mathematics in Kenya.

Evaluating Teacher Performance on Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is an expected teacher performance indicator in almost every state's teacher evaluation system in the U.S. (Lang, 2017). Similarly, according to Kappler et al.

(2012), aligning teacher evaluation practices to the differentiation instruction plays a vital role to facilitate the implementation of differentiated instruction into regular teacher practice. Teacher evaluation systems in almost every state are designed to assess teacher performance in predetermined performance standards. Moreover, statewide teacher evaluations systems rely on the major commercialized frameworks, such as Danielson (2013), Marzano (2013), or their own state-developed teacher evaluation frameworks to define teacher performance standards. These teacher evaluation frameworks as well as the state-developed models are generally supported by a document that illustrates how well these systems aligned with the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) model core teaching standards (Leon & Thomas, 2015). Georgia's state-developed model TKES's is one of the models that includes differentiated instruction and well aligned with the InTASC standards based on a comparison of the two most commercialized teacher evaluation models, TKES as well as the InTASC standards with a focus on differentiated instruction (See Appendix G).

TKES includes assessment of teacher performance on differentiated instruction in its two main components: Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS) and Professional Growth (PG). While the evaluation of a teacher related to differentiated instruction standard is a requirement for the TAPS component, the PG component may include differentiated instruction as a part of the teachers' professional growth goals/plans which are informed by the teachers' ratings on self-assessment checklist. The TAPS and professional growth goal(s)/plan(s) are determined based on 10 predetermined teacher performance standards that include a specific standard to address the differentiated instruction explicitly.

TAPS component of TKES relies on two data sources- observations and documentation to evaluate teachers for each teacher performance standard, including differentiated instruction.

Professional Growth component of the TKES is rated based on progress toward or attainment of the goal(s) and/or completion of the plan(s) which are determined as a result of teachers' reflection of their strength and weakness on the self-assessment checklist. Therefore, in the following sections, academic literature related to classroom observations, documentation, and teacher self-assessment are examined to understand deeply the methods used to evaluate teacher performance on differentiated instruction.

Classroom Observations

In many teacher evaluation systems, the classroom observation is the costliest component in terms of principal and teacher time, with an estimated cost of between \$1.4 and \$4.2 billion per year (Kane et al., 2019). However, across states and districts, classroom observations are the most frequently used measure of teachers' on-the-job performance (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). These measures typically represent the highest weighted component of a teacher's summative evaluation rating such as TAPS comprises half of the teacher effectiveness scores in TKES (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Classroom observation in a teacher evaluation system has two critical purposes: a summative function to understand (evaluation) and a formative function to improve teaching (professional development) (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Marzano, 2012; Ponticell et al., 2019). As such, the classroom observation is a key tool for teacher professional development and evaluation for providing teachers with a well-defined standpoint of expected classroom instructional practices by examining teaching and learning through the systematic processes of data collection and analysis (Bailey, 2001; Martinez et al., 2016; Millman & Darling-Hammond, 1990; Ponticell et al., 2019).

In post-NCLB teacher evaluation systems, classroom observations using standards-based observation protocols have become the cornerstone (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016; Zepeda, 2013). As a measurement approach, classroom observations are used to characterize teaching quality through the use of an observation protocol (Gitomer, 2018). Observation protocols are often considered as a sheet of paper with categories or rubrics which includes a set of concepts, processes, and procedures that describes the design, training, implementation, scoring, and quality control of a classroom observation measurement system (Bell et al., 2019; Gitomer, 2018).

Today's teacher evaluation systems require an application of a scoring rubric to a sample of teaching (Gitomer, 2018). The protocol design embedded in the teacher evaluation systems mostly specifies how teaching is sampled to create observation scores. For example, TKES recommends at least one walkthrough observation typically to apply rubrics to some observer-selected performance standards, and at least one full class observation to measure all ten performance standards for veteran and highly effective teachers while requiring four walkthrough and two full class observations for other teachers as the samples of teaching (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Research on classroom observations substantially focuses on reliability and validity (Curby et al., 2016; Ho & Kane, 2013; Jimenez & Zepeda, 2017). Historically, the reliability-related research mostly focused on the consistency of teachers performance scores with different raters (Casabianca et al., 2015; Cash et al., 2012; Floman et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2012; Jimenez & Zepeda, 2017; Park et al., 2014), in different lessons throughout the school year (Muijs, 2006), and with the method used for observations such as video-based or synchronous (Curby et al., 2016; Hintze & Matthews, 2004; Kane et al., 2019). As for validity,

studies have mostly focused on structural validity (Pianta et al., 2012; Sandilos, et al., 2016), and relationships to other measures of teacher effectiveness such as different observation protocols, student surveys, and/or value-added measures (Bell et al., 2012).

Reliability

The human rating of teaching is subject to being unreliable, “especially when coding certain aspects of teaching practice such as intellectual challenge or cognitive activation” (Bell et al., 2019, p. 5). As such, the concept of reliability for observations focuses on the “consistency of scores obtained under different conditions” (Gitomer, 2018, p. 290). Several studies mentioned that when observers are trained on one of the major observational rubrics, they can apply them reliably by achieving a reliability coefficient greater than 0.7 (Blazar 2015; Jimenez & Zepeda, 2017; Kane et al., 2013; Kane et al., 2019). However, regardless of the training and certification requirements of many classroom observation measures, raters’ bias may still play an important role even for expert judges (Redelmeier & Baxter, 2009). Some recent studies argued that rater reliability analyses, in which a single rater reliability coefficient is used to summarize the quality of rater judgments, are not sufficient enough for informing the interpretation of raters’ ratings (Casabianca et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2012; Wind et al., 2018).

The inconsistencies of observation scores across different raters may be driven by several underlying factors. Casabianca et al. (2015) listed potential factors as the intended severity of the raters, halo effects, raters’ tendency to assign an average score, or tendency to replicate the scores from previous years are the main reasons for low interrater reliability. Moreover, recent studies revealed more systematic factors that contribute to inter-rater reliability construct such as emotional bias. According to Floman et al. (2017), a rater’s emotion during the classroom observation may play at least a small role even conducted by trained and certified raters using a

validated observation tool under near-ideal assessment conditions. Furthermore, Ho and Kane (2013) found that administrators rate the teachers in their own schools higher on classroom observations than administrators from other schools. Hence, despite the fact that raters training and certification requirements provide a capability for consistent ratings, even shortly after training (and more so as time passed), raters use “reasoning strategies not supported by their training to make scoring decisions” (Qi et al., 2018, p.1).

The sampling of lessons to observe adds as another challenge for classroom observation reliability. Overall, multiple observations are highlighted as the requirements for successful teacher evaluation systems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012). Moreover, as an application of the Multi-Facet Rasch models, Jones and Wind (2018) revealed that “increasing the number of rating occasions significantly improves the precision of examinee and rater parameter estimates” (p. 1). However, “there is no optimal number of observations or raters that transcends specific instruments and rater populations” (Hill et al., 2012, p. 62).

Moreover, the modes of observations from either live or video recorded lessons examined in terms of reliability. Casabianca et al.’s (2013) study revealed that observation of a live lesson is more reliable than observation of a video recorded lesson under 2 conditions (1) the same observer conducted 2 or 4 observations over a year, or (2) 2 different observers conducted 4 observations by distributing the roles as 1 conducted 3 observations, and other one conducted 1 observation. Furthermore, Curby et al. (2016) found that “no observation type was uniformly better,” while the difference between reliability scores of each mode was significantly significant but not consistent between domains of the classroom observation rubrics (p. 1).

Validity

Validity is known as the “most fundamental consideration in assuring the quality of any assessment” (Millett et al., 2006, p. 11). For the context of classroom observations, validity refers to “the quality of evidence supporting the interpretation and use of observation scores” (Gitomer, 2018, p. 291). The assumption for the content validity of the classroom observation is that the dimensions of teaching included in observation systems reflect the quality of teaching where a critical criterion for teaching quality depends on how much students learn and develop (Bell et al., 2019). To address this criterion to measure the validity of the observation protocols, Decristan et al. (2015) chose to align the observation scores with elementary school students’ understanding of two scientific concepts to measure how much students learn, while Bell et al. (2012), and Kane and Staiger (2012) chose to align with value-added models as a statistically derived measure to assess how much students develop.

According to Goe et al. (2008), to confirm the validity of a teacher effectiveness measure, “evidence must support the argument that the measure actually assesses the dimension of teacher effectiveness it claims to measure and not something else” (p. 13). However, many empirical studies claimed that classroom observation systems are measuring many unintended characteristics of teachers while attempting to measure the effectiveness of their practice.

Related to teacher characteristics, based on the data from Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Jacob and Walsh (2011) found that principals’ ratings are correlated with experience for young teachers, education credentials, and teacher absenteeism as well as several teacher demographics. In this study, white female teachers get higher scores than other teachers, and Black and Hispanic male teachers receive the lowest ratings. In a more recent study of CPS, Jiang and Sporte (2016) found that

- observation scores have a stronger relationship with school characteristics, such as the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, than value-added scores;
- there are some differences in teachers' evaluation scores, depending on experience and credentials;
- minority teachers have lower observation scores than white teachers, but no significant differences on value added;
- male teachers have lower observation and value-added scores than female teachers. (p. 2)

Drake et al.'s (2019) study in Michigan revealed that teachers of color, male teachers, and novice teachers were more likely to receive low ratings than same-school peers. In addition to low ratings of teachers based on their racial background, the racial disparities comprise a higher risk where teachers of color are working in comparatively in White-faculty contexts.

As for student characteristics, Campbell and Ronfeldt's (2018) study with MET data showed that teachers in classrooms with high concentrations of Black, Hispanic, male, and low-performing students receive significantly lower observation ratings regardless of the random or nonrandom assignment of students to teachers. They further found that these differences are unlikely due to actual differences in teacher quality. Moreover, Steinberg and Garrett's (2016) experimental study concluded that students' incoming academic performance is positively related to observation ratings of their teachers. Thus, the classroom observation systems measuring more than they designed to measure may be considered as low validity protocols due to the potential systematic errors embedded in their designs.

Documentation

In TKES, documentation of teacher practice is used as a supplemental data source for classroom observations. The requirement of the documentation of teacher practice solely depends on the evaluators. In general, an evaluator needs supplemental sources when a standard is not observed during a Formative Observation(s), Walkthrough(s) or when the consistency of a teacher’s practice cannot be established. However, teachers can decide to submit some documentation about their practice, but it is not required for an evaluator to consider every supplemental document submitted (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Documentation of a teacher practice may be considered as a part of portfolio supervision in the academic literature. Zepeda (2017) described the portfolio as “a way to examine what teachers learn from their work” (p. 375). Moreover, she believed that “the portfolio’s strength lies in the opportunity for teachers to collect artifacts over an extended time—an entire school year, even from year to year” (Zepeda, 2017, p. 376). However, choosing the documentation of teacher practice to include in a portfolio is a messy process (Shulman, 1998). Zepeda and Mayers (2000) listed the potential topical areas that an artifact can be chosen as:

- Personal (e.g., statement of beliefs concerning teaching)
- Curricular (e.g., sample lesson plans and tests)
- Classroom (e.g., samples of student work)
- School as a learning community (e.g., committee work, interdisciplinary lesson artifacts)
- Professional growth (e.g., career goals, journals, videotapes). (p. 168)

Self-assessment

As a part of TKES, teachers complete a Self-Assessment checklist prior to their Pre-Evaluation Conference. The same 10 Performance Standards used for classroom observations will be used to determine professional strengths and areas for growth (See Table 2.1). Following

the review of the self-assessment by evaluator and teacher in the pre-evaluation conference, the information from the self-assessment checklist is used to inform Professional Growth Goal(s) or Professional Growth Plan(s) (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Akram and Zepeda (2015) described self-assessment as “a process in which teachers make judgments about the adequacy and effectiveness of their own knowledge, performance, and pedagogical skills for the purpose of self-improvement” (p. 138). In addition, it is important to note that “reflection and self-assessment must occur by the teacher as a part of the process in order to make teaching more purposeful and rewarding” (Nielsen, 2014, p. 69). Therefore, using self-assessment as a prerequisite of teacher professional growth may be helpful in creating more purposeful goals as planned in the TKES.

Moreover, classroom observation ratings of teachers on the basis of limited observations to decide on overall teaching performance provides limited evidence of reliability (Akram & Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda, 2014). In contrast, teacher self- evaluation is a frequently advocated data source for teacher evaluation (McGreal, 1983; Peterson, 2000). As such, self-assessment is a very powerful tool for measuring teacher quality as side by side using the teacher evaluation data from classroom observations (Akram & Zepeda, 2015; Danielson, 1996; Peterson, 2000). Moreover, self-assessment evidence can portrait of teacher’s teaching that is unobtainable from any other source (Berk, 2005).

Chapter Summary

Reviewing and analyzing the relevant research studies on teacher evaluation and differentiated instruction revealed that measuring effectiveness of the teacher performance related to differentiated instruction is a complicated process. Historically, national trends shaped the teacher evaluation in the U.S. Classroom observations were a constant component of the

teacher evaluation history at any given time despite their stylistic and philosophical evolution, and notable rises and falls in their popularity.

Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory that stems from a belief that a diverse student population has diverse instructional needs, and these needs should be addressed by tailoring the planning, delivery, and assessment of the instruction. The empirical evidence suggested that addressing the diverse needs of students by differentiated instruction is associated with positive student outcomes. However, there were several philosophical approaches to define and address the diverse instructional needs of the students. Moreover, the dynamic and context-dependent nature of the educational practices in K-12 school settings makes it harder to provide a unified definition of differentiated instruction that works.

Although there has been not any standardized definition of differentiated instruction or a clear explanation of the differentiated best practice to be applicable in every classroom, almost every state in the U.S. measures teachers' effectiveness on differentiated instruction by using a standardized evaluation instrument. The most common method to measure teacher effectiveness related to differentiated instruction has been the classroom observations by using a rubric. However, the review of the literature pointed out that using classroom observations to evaluate teacher effectiveness have faced with reliability and validity related concerns.

Therefore, measuring the effectiveness of a teacher's performance for differentiated instruction is a complex process. However, almost no research conducted on how to evaluate teachers' performance related to differentiated instruction. Therefore, this study aims to examine how teachers and principals constructed understandings of teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. In the next chapter, research methods for examining this objective are discussed.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. In particular, the aim of this study was to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to content of teacher evaluation instruments to describe their teacher evaluation experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

This chapter provides a comprehensive description of the research methodology used in this study. This chapter consists of the following sections: theoretical and conceptual frameworks, design of the study, research methodology, the research site, data collection methods, data management, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethics, assessment of benefits and risks, subjectivity statement, and limitations of the study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Given the importance of both teachers' and principals' understandings about the teacher effectiveness for implementation of new teacher evaluation policies, this study sought to examine teachers' and principals' understanding of teacher evaluation process in differentiated instruction performance standard in the state of Georgia's Teacher Keys Effectiveness System

(TKES). As such, the conceptual framework of this study drew from sensemaking theory (Spillane, 1995) and differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014) frameworks. Moreover, in this research, the theoretical framework was grounded in social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969).

Theoretical Framework

Crotty (1998) directed researchers to consider four basic elements while framing research: epistemology (theory of knowledge), theoretical perspective (philosophical stance), methodology (the plan of action), and methods (procedures). Creswell (2013) also further added ontology, which he described as the nature of reality. In the case of this study, the ontology was driven by an assumption that reality is constructed, in part, by multiple perspectives of individuals experiencing a phenomenon.

The epistemological perspective used for the purposes of this study was interpretivism, and the axiology was defined based on this perspective. Crotty (1998) defines interpretivism as understanding and explaining reality through “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (p. 67). Given this perspective, the phenomenon of teacher evaluation was further examined the context in which teachers’ and principals’ interpretation of the teacher evaluation process in their school settings. Similarly, it was expected based on this epistemology that the different background of teachers and principals could create unique perspectives on how to interpret the teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction.

The theoretical perspective in this study was rooted in the social constructivism and symbolic interactionism. As a paradigm to guide social science research, social constructivism reflects a set of beliefs about the world and how it can be understood and suggests various

approaches to the study of human phenomena based on these beliefs (Brydon-Miller & Coghlan, 2014). For the participants in this study, the reality was labeled as the individual understandings based on the teachers' and principals' past and current schooling experiences as a teacher and student. Lincoln and Guba (2013) described constructivism as entities are matters of definition and convention that exist in the minds of the people contemplating them. As such, the phenomenon was the sensemaking of the perceived meaning of the differentiated instruction as a performance standard to be evaluated in this study.

In this study, the constructed understanding about a process, namely evaluation of teachers for their differentiated instruction practices as articulated by the teachers and the principals were considered as their constructions of multiple realities. The use of those interpretations during the daily teaching practices of teachers, classroom observation, and/or pre and post-observation conferences was seen as the implications of the constructions.

Through subjectivism, a basic presupposition of constructivism allowed the researcher to understand how knowledge is created through highly person- and context-specific interactions during the teacher evaluation process (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The concept of constructivism focuses on the way people create meaning in the world through a series of first-hand experiences with their environment. Consequently, teachers' and principals' experiences as educators, their assigned roles during the pre-observation conference, classroom observations, and post-observation conferences, as well as their formal and informal communication with their colleagues, were considered as ways to create meaning about the teacher evaluation process.

Another segment of the theoretical framework guiding this study, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), assisted in exploring the participants' experiences and interpretations of the teacher evaluation instruments' content and then assisted the researcher in

analyzing the participants' definitions and descriptions of these processes within the teacher evaluation system (Denzin, 1992). Blumer (1969) presumed:

1. human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them;
2. this attribution of meaning to objects through symbols is a continuous process, and
3. meaning attribution is a product of social interaction in human society. (p. 338)

Through these presumptions, human beings interpret or define each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their response is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions (Blumer, 1969).

Hence, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions (Blumer, 1969).

In the context of this study, teachers' and principals' definition of differentiated instruction, their practices of differentiated instruction on the basis of the meanings of differentiated instruction, and the attributed meanings to actions during classroom observations for differentiated instruction were examined through a lens of symbolic interactionism. Thus, teachers' and principals' interactions during the classroom observation were considered as their responses to or about one another driven by rubricization of teaching practice using and interpreting teacher evaluation instruments.

Conceptual Framework

To understand how teachers and principals interpret differentiated instruction within the teacher evaluation process, the researcher relied on Spillane et al. (2002)'s sensemaking framework to examine teachers' and principals' sensemaking process. Sensemaking theory has been widely used in the field of education, including studies explicitly focusing on the teacher evaluation policies (Halverson & Clifford, 2006; Halverson, et al., 2004; Rigby, 2015;

Wieczorek et al., 2018). Moreover, Spillane et al. (2002) developed a cognitive framework to characterize sensemaking in the implementation of recent education policy initiatives, such as standards-based reforms that press for tremendous changes in classroom instruction.

According to Evans (2007), sensemaking is generally accepted as the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using this information to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meanings for individuals. In particular, teachers' preexisting knowledge and practices (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002), structural conditions of their schools (Coburn, 2005; Siskin, 1994; Spillane, 2000), leadership (Coburn, 2005), school norms (Lin, 2000; Siskin, 1994), teachers' perceptions to policy messages (Hill, 2001), and their willingness to implement a policy (Coburn, 2004), were the factors influencing teachers' sensemaking of the instructional policy messages. As for principals, findings of sensemaking research revealed two broad themes:

- principals' prior experiences significantly influence their understanding and sensemaking of new policies (Harris et al., 2014; Jacob & Lefgren, 2008; Nelson et al., 2001; Reid, 2019); and,
- the local context influenced principals' sensemaking and hence the implementation of policies (Coburn, 2005; Reid, 2019; Spillane et al., 2002).

Sensemaking, according to Weick (1995), "is the process by which people give meaning to experience" (p. 4). Considering teachers' vital role in almost every aspect of the educational reforms (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995), the attributed meanings to a teacher performance standard must be clearly understood by teachers and principals. More importantly, educational change is often shaped by what teachers do and think because, in the history of U.S. education, regardless of what policy was forcing teachers to change their pedagogical practice, teachers have been able

to carve out some autonomy to teach their students with their self-defined best practices (Cuban, 2008; Fullan, 2015).

Similarly, Weick (1976) described schools as loosely coupled systems with the presumption that “coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness” (p. 3). Moreover, as a part of the sensemaking and communication in such organizations, Weick (1976) asserted there were two conditions as the potential reasons to produce loose coupling in schools:

1. If there are several diverse intending components all of whom are dependent on the same actor for implementing action, then the relationship between any one intention and any one action will be imperfect. The teacher in the classroom may well be the prototype of this condition.
2. The process outlined in the preceding item can become even more complicated, and the linkages between intention and action even looser, if the single acting component has intentions of its own. (p. 15)

In this study, Weick’s assertion of schools as loosely coupled systems has led the researcher to examine logical separateness in the understandings about the teacher evaluation process. To see if these standards produce loose coupling, the present study intended to focus on a specific performance standard through the differences between intentions and actions during the classroom observations and pre and post-observation conferences.

The concept of sensemaking offers the approach to analyze “how teachers wrestle with issues of coherence, as it considers how local actors negotiate meaning from a variety of, often conflicting, messages they encounter in their local environment” (Allen & Penuel, 2014, p. 137). Sensemaking also portrays the ways that actors “structure the unknown” within organizational

settings (Waterman, 1990, p. 41). When this framework is applied to examining impending changes in organizational settings (Jensen et al., 2009), it helps to conceptualize that practitioners rely on their past experiences, their working knowledge, and the information immediately available to them to determine their responses (Marsh et al., 2005; Spillane et al., 2002).

The response determination process was the main reason to use the sensemaking theory to guide this study. Within the sensemaking framework, ‘sense’ corresponds to interpretation and ‘making’ to the how events are processed to generate such interpretation (Coburn, 2001; Evans 2007; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Jensen et al., 2009). In this study, by applying a sensemaking theory framework, the researcher was able to examine the teachers’ and principal’s sensemaking of the teacher evaluation instruments’ content related to differentiated instruction in the teacher evaluation system as a possible way to understand the similarities and differences through their individual and perhaps collective sensemaking lenses.

As for education in general, teachers’ sensemaking shapes classroom practices. Lee (1991) explains sensemaking in the teaching and learning process as

arguments in favor of supporting teachers in the conscious articulation of their own assumptions, reasoning processes, formulations of problems, and understandings of teaching and learning are based on the view that successful teaching and learning processes cannot be simplistically captured and reduced to recipes, formulas, or foolproof steps. (p. 86)

Lee’s approach to sensemaking was also contemplated in the seminal work of educational scholars such as Shulman (1987) and Berliner (1986), which focuses on better understanding exemplary classroom teaching practices and better preparing future educators.

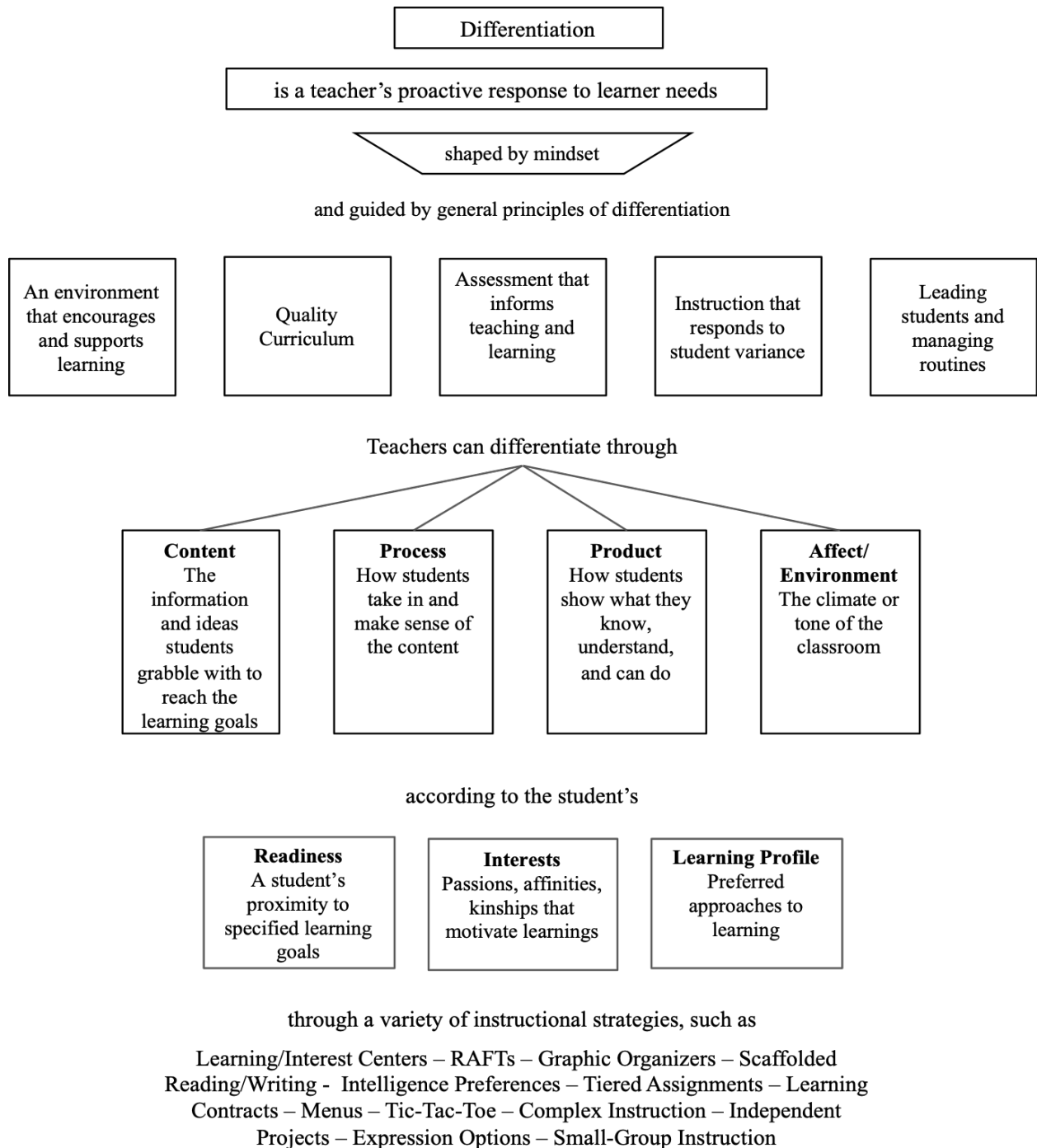
Lee's (1987) approach also included that teaching practices are seen as an ill-structured domain (Spiro, 1988) characterized by complex, daily situations that cannot be addressed by the simple application of formal principles. Regarding situated learning, the cognitive complexity of teaching and the lack of simple algorithms for applying theoretical knowledge to real-world were another reason why the sensemaking framework was chosen for this study to understand the real-world teacher evaluation experiences of teachers and principals holistically (Brown et al., 1989; Perkins & Salomon, 1989).

In addition to sensemaking theory framework, Tomlinson's (2014) differentiated instruction framework conceptually guided this study. Tomlinson (2014) defined differentiated instruction as a comprehensive teaching theory that accounting for the tailoring content, presentation, and assessment to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom. In Tomlinson's (2014) pedagogical framework for data-driven teaching, differentiation is defined as "a teacher's proactive response to learner needs shaped by mindset and guided by general principles of differentiation" (p. 20). Based on Tomlinson's (2014) model of differentiated instruction, teachers can differentiate through; (1) content, (2) process, (3) product, and (4) environment according to student's readiness, interests, and learning profile (see Figure 3.1).

Overall, Spillane et al.'s (2002) sensemaking theory and Tomlinson's (2014) differentiated instruction framework guided this study in terms of research questions, interview guides, and data analysis. In the following section, the researcher provided an explanation regarding why qualitative research was chosen for this study.

Figure 3.1.

Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Model.



Note. Adapted from Tomlinson (2014).

Qualitative Research

The choice of qualitative methods for this study was mirrored in the research questions and aligned with the study's purpose: to examine teachers' and principals' constructed understandings of teacher performance evaluation process about differentiated instruction. This study used a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the teachers' and principals' experiences during the teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. This study reflected five features of qualitative research listed by Bogdan & Biklen (2007) as; naturalistic, descriptive, concerned with process, inductive, and concerned with meaning. The present study:

- was conducted in schools as the natural settings where teacher evaluation related to differentiated instruction happens;
- was interpretive in its general nature;
- was concerned with process of teachers' and principals' sensemaking and teacher evaluation process;
- despite the fact that sensemaking theory bring some themes of data analysis process, inductive coding was the center of data analysis process; and,
- meaning making was the center of the study's purpose.

Qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher to examine situations where little is known about the topic, the issues, and the key players (Gillham, 2000).

Considering there was not enough evidence in the literature about evaluating teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction (Prast et al., 2018), and teachers and principals sensemaking on teacher evaluation practices related to differentiated instruction, using qualitative research design was particularly useful for this study.

According to Firestone (1987), in qualitative methods, “rich description persuades by showing that the researcher was immersed in the setting and giving the reader enough detail to make sense of the situation” (p.16). In the current research study, the qualitative method was an appropriate way to ascertain teachers’ and principals’ understanding of differentiated instruction as well as to learn more from participants about how to evaluate teacher performance in the differentiated instruction.

Quantitative research methods could facilitate the explanation of trends of what teachers and principals think but would not provide the room to explore how and why they think in the way they thought. In addition, a quantitative approach would not have allowed participants to provide rich narrative data regarding the understanding of differentiated instruction and various applications of the approach for teacher evaluation purposes. Hence, qualitative inquiry best aligned with the objective of this study because this approach is more concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the actors' perspectives (Firestone, 1987; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

The Case Study

A case study was selected as the methodology because it is aligned with the purpose and objectives of the study. Yin (2018) defined a descriptive case study as “a case study whose purpose is to describe a phenomenon in its real-world context” (p. 380). As such, to describe teachers’ and principals’ sensemaking of teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction in three K-12 school settings, this study adequately situated in a descriptive case study as its research methodology.

A unique strength of the case study is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence to ensure that the phenomena are not examined through a single lens (Merriam, 1998;

Yin, 2018). Hakim (2000) noted that related to case studies, “[u]sing a variety of data collection techniques and methods allows a more rounded, holistic study than with any other design” (p. 58). Moreover, the boundary between a case and its context may not be sharp because real-world affairs do not readily fall into clear-cut categories; therefore, the ability to appreciate any such blurring as part of a case study is considered a strength of case study research (Yin, 2018).

Furthermore, regarding the focused phenomena of this study, the case study is a useful design for studying organizations such as schools to gain insights into the knowledge of individuals and groups within their organizational, social, and political contexts (Hakim, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). As such, examining teachers’ and principals’ understanding of teacher evaluation process including the organizational and social dynamics of the school in the boundaries of school context provided an additional depth to analysis of each case. In addition to providing boundaries, case study design facilitated the identification of common themes and patterns across cases, enabling the researcher to draw broader conclusions about the nature of knowledge in these educational organizations.

The case study design was a common method in the research related to teacher and principals sensemaking on teacher evaluation and other areas of educational policy implementation. For example, Ingle et al. (2011) used a case study design to examine how school leaders make sense of hiring and subjective evaluation of on-the-job teacher performance. Rigby (2015) focused on the first-year principals to investigate their engagement with and sensemaking of specific messages of instructional leadership around teacher evaluation by using the cross-case approach. Allen and Penuel (2015) used the sensemaking framework to examine teachers’ responses to teacher professional development related to the Next Generation Science Standards within two schools in the United States by employing a multiple-case study method. Halverson

et al. (2004) examined how local school leaders make sense of complex programs designed to evaluate teachers and teaching in the context of the case study. Vekeman et al. (2014) used a case study designed to examine how principals make sense of and implement a new teacher evaluation policy reform in Belgium.

Moreover, Carraway and Young (2015) examined principals' experiences implementing a program designed to help principals become effective instructional leaders through training them for more targeted classroom observation guided by the notion of sensemaking in a multiple case study. Goldstein (2004) examined the sensemaking of teachers and principals by the single-case design during the implementation of the Peer Assistance and Review program, which involves teachers in the summative evaluation of other teachers. Reid (2019) examined how two first-year elementary school principals become socialized to their new roles as school leaders by examining how these individuals make sense of new teacher evaluation policies using a comparative case study approach.

Overall, given the alignment of the case study methodology with the current study's nature, purpose, objectives, and the prior studies in the relevant literature, the researcher chose the case study as the methodology.

The Effect of COVID-19 on Research

The COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly and abruptly forced humankind to engage in a transformation of their daily life. As a tested way to slow down the spread of an infectious disease (Cauchemez et al., 2008), schools were closed one by one across the world and moved to online instruction with little or no warning. Accordingly, Governor Kemp announced the first temporary closure of the state of Georgia's public schools on March 16, 2020, and later a

statewide closure of public schools was announced for the remainder of the school year (GADOE, 2020).

This study was initially designed to be conducted in another charter school system in Georgia during late Fall 2019. The initial school system was contacted and received permission to collect data for this study in Spring 2020. However, in the spring of 2020, when I was preparing to recruit participants for this study, most schools, including the schools I was planning to collect my dissertation study data, were closed. In addition to school closures, the workload and ambiguity that arise because of the pandemic attract the resources and attention of this school system. As such, the expected time frame for this study was skewed, and I started collecting my dissertation data in another charter school system during the late Fall 2020 and early Spring 2021 semesters.

Regardless of the change to a new school district, the pandemic was still a key factor for educational decision-making during the Fall 2020 semester in Hangleton County School District (HCSD). HCSD started the 2020-2021 school year as an entirely virtual school district on August 4. Later in the Fall semester, this school district implemented a gradual reopening plan which starts with 2 days per week in-person instruction for grades PreK-2 and Special Education K-5. On Monday, November 9, HCSD started providing an option for in-person learning to all students in grades PreK-12 as a part of the reopening plan (see Table 3.1 for the details). Also, as of November 9, students were receiving 4 days a week in-person classes. The data collection process for this study was under these terms where the HCSD offered 4 days a week in-person classes for all students.

Considering the changing nature of instruction because of school closures and hybrid models, teachers' practice of differentiated instruction was utterly different from their pre-Covid

practices. For the purpose of this study, I asked participants to share their pre-Covid differentiation practices and their evaluation experiences regarding those practices. This shift did not cause any changes in my research and interview questions that were prepared before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3.1.

Hangleton County School District’s School Reopening Plan

PHASE I	PHASE II	PHASE III	PHASE IV
Grades PreK-2 2 days per week in person	Grades PreK-5 4 days per week in person	Grades PreK-5 4 days per week in person	Grades PreK-5 4 days per week in person
Grades 3-12 virtual learning	Grades 6-12 virtual learning	Grades 6-8 4 days per week in person	Grades 6-12 4 days per week in person
Special Education Grades K-5 (low-incidence classes) 2 days per week in person	Special Education Grades K-12 (low-incidence classes) 4 days per week in person	Grades 9-12 virtual learning Special Education Grades K-12 (low-incidence classes) 4 days per week in person	Special Education Grades K-12 (low-incidence classes) 4 days per week in person

Note. Adapted from Hangleton County School District.

In addition to changes on the timeline and research site, I had to pivot data collection procedures. Due to COVID-19 school closures and 6-foot social distancing precautions, the face-to-face semi-structured interviews with participants, which were the main data collection method for this study, were replaced with the virtual semi-structured video interviews to eliminate potential infections risks for participants and to provide stable data for the research study.

Finally, another challenge related to the COVID-19 pandemic for this study was about the teacher evaluations. The year prior to the data collection year, Georgia suspended the teacher evaluations and related classroom observations. Therefore, the participants’ perspectives on teacher evaluation were about their evaluation experiences from two years ago.

The Research Site

This study was situated in the context of one charter school system in the state of Georgia. The nature of the study directed the selection of the site for this case study. Gathering data and analyzing the background information about suitable school systems was the first step in selecting the research site (Stake, 2010). The following criteria were key factors in selecting the research site: located in the state of Georgia, defined as a charter system, and had the size of a typical charter school system.

However, as described in previous section, the researcher needed to change the initial research site because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the researcher selected another research site, namely the Hangleton County School District (a pseudonym) which has similar characteristics with the initial research site. Prior to collecting data, initial contact was made with the superintendent of the Hangleton County School District (HCSD) to explain the research project; gain possible background information about the school district; receive official permission to easily enter public schools and meet with participants.

The Hangleton County School District is one of the Georgia's first charter systems. At the time of the study, there were approximately 8,900 students and 1,200 employees, and the system includes eleven schools: seven K-5 elementary schools, one sixth grade academy, one middle school, one high school, and one grades 3-5 elementary magnet school. HCSD's student to teacher ratio was 14:1 at the time of the study. Moreover, the school system consisted of the following student demographics: 25% English Learners (ELs); 60% Economically Disadvantaged; 10% Students with Disabilities (SWD); 35% African American; 2% Asian; 39% Hispanic; 20% White; and 4% Multi-Racial students. Three-quarters of the schools also identified as Title I schools in this school district. Furthermore, this school system has lower

four-year graduation rates than the state average and higher College and Career Ready Performance Index scores than the state's average score.

Recruitment and Sample Size

In this study, participants were recruited through purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 2015). This sampling technique uses the judgment of an expert in selecting cases, or the researcher selects cases with a specific purpose in mind (Ishak et al., 2014). Purposeful sampling is claimed as useful by Ishak et al. (2014) for a case study in the following three situations:

1. when a researcher wants to select unique cases that are especially informative;
2. when a researcher would like to select members of a difficult-to-reach, specialized population; and
3. when a researcher wants to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation.

(p. 32)

Purposeful sampling involves selecting qualified individuals who are knowledgeable and experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). In this manner, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) indicated vital factors to be considered while using purposeful sampling as the availability and willingness of participants. They also claimed the importance of participant's ability to articulate understandings and views in the given phenomena expressively and reflectively (Bernard, 2002; Spradley, 1979).

Purposeful sampling can function at an optimum, especially when the selection criteria determined optimally, which is important in choosing the best fit individuals for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case study, a specific design of purposeful sampling was employed, namely, criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). Each group of participants went through a vetting process. Principals' selection criteria to be considered as a participant included:

1. Having experienced TKES at least one year (not including the current year) as a summative teacher evaluator;
2. Being willing to share and contribute to reflective conversations about personal experiences.
3. Representing each school level (elementary, middle, high)

As for teachers, participants selected from the schools where the principals were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Being evaluated through TKES at least one year (not including the current year)
2. Being willing to share and contribute in reflective conversations about personal experiences.

For recruiting teacher participants, invitations to participate in the study sent individual teachers in these schools. Three teachers were selected based on the reputational sampling methods by asking principals to choose the best-fit teachers for the given purpose of the study.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection in a case study was a recursive, interactive process between data sources (Merriam, 1998), and researcher was mindful of Yin's (2014) three major principles to achieve a high-quality case study that includes (1) examining phenomenon using multiple data sources; (2) establishing a case study database; and (3) keeping a chain of evidence. As such, for this case study, interviews, documents, and field notes were chosen as complementary data sources (Yin, 2018). These sources were deemed appropriate for the research objectives and summarized in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2.

Data Sources

Data Sources	Description
Interviews	Two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each teacher and one interview with each principal were conducted as the primary data source of this study.
Documents	Teachers' records of their previous year's self-assessment scores and previous year's teacher evaluation ratings in differentiated instruction were collected from each teacher participant. Teachers were also asked to share classroom pictures, lesson plans, and a sample of students work if they felt comfortable to share.
Field Notes	The notes were taken during the interviews and researcher's reflective journal diary during data analysis by memoing were used as two types of field notes.

The primary aim of using a complex and multiple-angle data collection process was to support and corroborate different lines of inquiry being pursued in the study by acknowledging not all data sources would be able to provide answers to every research question.

Semi-Structured Interviews

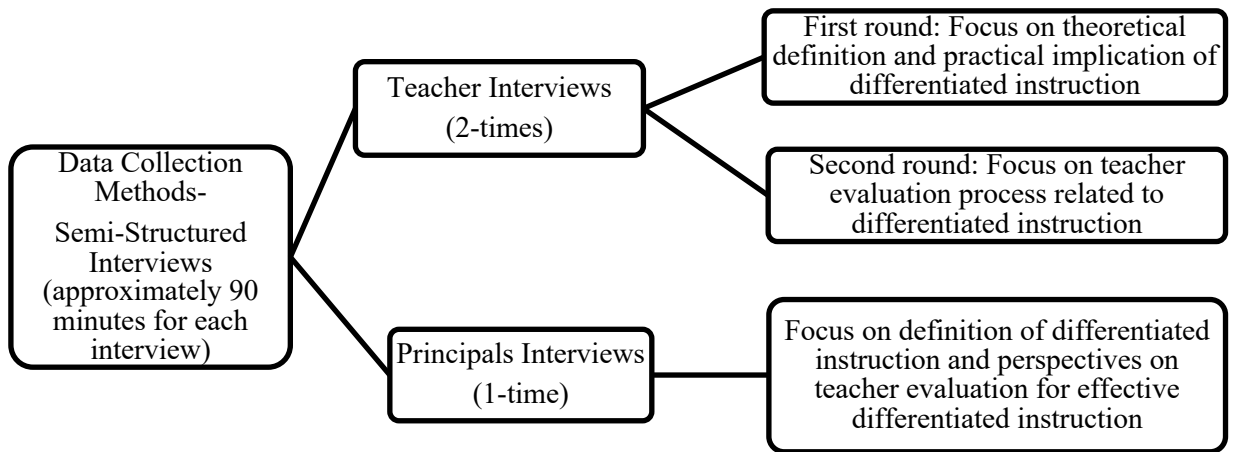
Interviews were defined as purposeful conversations to find what is in and on someone's mind (Merriam, 1998). Similarly, the interview was also a necessary data collection method when feelings, behavior, or participants' interpretations could not be observed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, semi-structured interviews further allowed researchers to gather insights on particular topics in detail to overcome the time-constrained data collection process, so it has been a highly preferred method of data collection in qualitative research (Patton, 2015).

As Seidman (2012) stated, the purpose of interviews was not to test hypotheses; instead, it was to understand the experiences of other people and to make sense of them. Similarly, Kvale (1997) highlighted the purpose of qualitative interviewing as an effort to describe the meaning of central themes in the world of each participant. To gather more in-depth information about teachers' and principals' sensemaking of the teacher evaluation process in differentiated

instruction, individual semi-structured interviews used as the primary data source for this case study (See Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2.

Semi-Structured Interview Process



Prior to each interview, the researcher contacted participants via email to send the consent forms (see Appendix F) to complete and inform them the interviews would be recorded. Setting the interview date and time was mostly based on the availability of each participant. Later, a reminder was sent to let participants know that the interview was voluntary, that they were not required to answer any questions they did not want to answer, and that they could end the interview at any time.

At the beginning of the interviews, the researcher provided each participant with a brief introduction about himself, the purpose of the interview, and the goals to be discussed therein. All interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Moreover, to maintain confidentiality, all identifying information from the interview was removed and supplanted with pseudonyms during the transcription process.

Critical aspects of collecting stable data were reliant on asking questions that use clear language and asking questions in a manner that is easily understood by those being interviewed. The researcher's in-depth knowledge in differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation policies was instrumental in asking meaningful questions. In this study, the researcher followed an interview guide (see Appendix C) to steer the questions toward the experiences of teachers on differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation.

A similar guide (see Appendix D) was used during the interviews with principals. The questions were flexibly worded in the interview guide to allow the interviewer to chronicle the emerging views of the interviewees (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015). The semi-structure interviews by using interview guides for teachers had been piloted with two teachers from different school districts to improve the interview guides that used for actual interviews.

In this study, every teacher participant was interviewed twice using different interview protocols. The first round of these interviews was focused on the teachers' demographic information, their philosophical understanding of differentiated instruction, and their differentiation practices. In the second round of the interviews with teachers, the conversations were shaped around the teacher self-assessment checklist related to differentiated instruction and overall teacher evaluation process, including orientation, pre-evaluation conference, classroom observation, feedback, and post-evaluation conference. The conversation in the second round of interviews was also formed around the classroom observation rubric related to differentiated instruction. A sample of interview questions used when interviewing teachers and principals is presented in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3.

Sample of Interview Questions

Principal Interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you describe your understanding of differentiated instruction?• Can you explain the reasoning behind your definition of differentiated instruction?• How does your school evaluate teachers' use of differentiated instruction practices?• Can you describe your understanding of the given standards in the differentiated instruction rubric?• Can you provide what specific evidence do you look for to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness in differentiated instruction during classroom observations?• Can you describe an example of a successfully implemented differentiated instruction practice that you have observed during a classroom observation? (Follow up: Why?)• Can you describe an instance where a teacher attempted to implement differentiated instruction, but it did not work? (Follow up: Why?)
First Round of Teacher Interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you describe your understanding of differentiated instruction?• Can you explain the reasoning behind your definition of differentiated instruction?• How do you differentiate your instruction through content? (Same question for differentiation through process, product, and environment)• How would you describe your level of confidence in your capacity to offer or demonstrate differentiated instruction to your students (Follow up: Why?)• How do your views about differentiated instruction influence or inform your teaching practices or pedagogy?• Can you describe an example of your successful implementation differentiated instruction practice? (Follow up: What makes it successful for you?)• Can you describe an instance where you attempted to implement differentiated instruction, but it did not work? (Follow up: Why?)
Second Round of Teacher Interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does your school evaluate teachers' use of differentiated instruction practices?• Can you explain this process chronologically? (orientation, self-assessment, pre-assessment conference, observations, mid-year conference, summative conference.)• Can you provide an interpretation of the 17 criteria outlined in the Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist for differentiated instruction, which is provided to you, under the four respective categories? Specifically, could you read each statement aloud and share your personal understanding of what it entails?• What do think about what kind of specific evidence your principal were looking for to evaluate your effectiveness in differentiated instruction in your last classroom observation?• Recalling your most recent classroom observation, can you identify the specific techniques you used to demonstrate your skills in differentiated instruction? (Follow up: Did you implement these techniques solely for the purpose of the observation or are they regularly incorporated into your teaching practice? If so, can you describe how you typically apply differentiated instruction in that particular classroom?)

As a part of the interviews, learning about the participants' sensemaking about two of the evaluation instruments related to differentiated instruction was targeted. The first instrument, the self-assessment checklist, was a document that includes the policy message from the State Department of Education to describe differentiated instruction in detail with four subcategories of differentiated instruction. During the second round of teacher interviews, participants asked to read aloud 17 items in these checklists to describe their understanding on individual items and their differentiation practices related to each item (see Appendix B). This process helped researcher to confirm what teacher participants shared in their first interview about their overall practice of differentiated instruction.

The second instrument, the performance appraisal rubric (see Appendix A), was the primary data source of the formative and summative teacher evaluation process in the teacher evaluation system. As a part of the second round of teacher interviews, participant asked to describe their practices to address the expected differentiation during classroom observations as defined in this rubric. Similarly, principals asked to share their expected differentiated instruction practices based on this rubric during the classroom observations.


Documents

Including documents as a data source to this study was essential to triangulate data to strengthen evidence from the interview data. Yin (2018) highlighted several advantages of using the documents as a part of the case study as stability, unobtrusiveness, specificity, and extensiveness. Upon the agreement of participants, two main documents were collected for this research from teachers, (1) the previous year's self-assessment checklist, and (2) previous year's teacher evaluation ratings in differentiated instruction. As the final step, teachers were asked to share classroom pictures, lesson plans, and a sample of students work that showcase their

differentiated instruction. Table 3.4 presents a sample of categories from the documents gathered from teachers.

Table 3.4.

A Snapshot of Sample Documents


Document	Sample								
Self-assessment checklists	<p>Instructional Delivery</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Level IV</th> <th>Level III</th> <th>Level II</th> <th>Level I</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>3. Instructional Strategies - The teacher promotes student learning by using research-based instructional strategies relevant to the content to engage students in active learning & to facilitate the students' acquisition of key knowledge & skills.</p> <p>4. Differentiated Instruction - The teacher challenges and supports each student's learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences.</p>	Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I	A			
Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I						
A									
Teacher evaluation ratings	<p>Instructional Delivery</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Level IV</th> <th>Level III</th> <th>Level II</th> <th>Level I</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>3. Instructional Strategies - The teacher promotes student learning by using research-based instructional strategies relevant to the content to engage students in active learning & to facilitate the students' acquisition of key knowledge & skills.</p> <p>Comments: [redacted] continually provides techniques to students to facilitate memorization by using random name callers, clicker/squeaker devices, and pickers. These student-focused activities help students have a high success rate.</p> <p>4. Differentiated Instruction - The teacher challenges and supports each student's learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences.</p> <p>Comments: [redacted] uses instructional strategies such as tiered questioning, learning devices, and task cards (pickers) to identify student understanding and adjust instruction.</p>	Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I	A			
Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I						
A									
Classroom pictures									

Planning a Three-Dimensional Science Lesson

Jeremy Peacock, Northeast Georgia RESA

Lesson to Redesign or Plan: Briefly describe a favorite or upcoming lesson that you would like to redesign or plan.

Thermal physics



Core Ideas: IB Understandings and Application of skills on which your lesson will focus.

Understanding:

- Pressure
- Equation of state for an ideal gas
- Kinetic model of an ideal gas
- Mole, molar mass and the Avogadro constant
- Differences between real and ideal gasses

Application of skills:

- Obtain the answer(s) using algebraic and/or numerical and/or graphical methods for problems using the equation of state for an ideal gas and gas laws
- Represent by means of a diagram or graph and interpret changes of state of an ideal gas on pressure– volume, pressure–temperature and volume–temperature diagrams
- Investigating at least one gas law experimentally

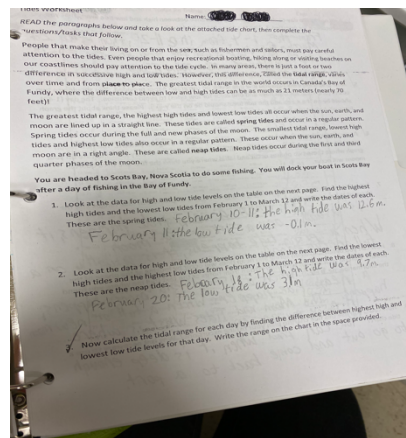
PS1: Matter and Its Interactions

PS2: Motion and Stability: Forces and Interactions

PS3: Energy

PS4: Waves and Their Applications in Technologies for Information Transfer

Student work



Artifacts for
Differentiated
Instruction

3. Please answer the teacher's question. How can I support you?

Charlie

I could use more practicing with graphing more of the graphs such as x^2t and v^4t

Kasey

I normally need some time to think. because the topic is new I need more time when thinking. We go a little fast sometimes.

Nazareth

i could use more practice in generating my own v-t graphs

Field Notes

Field notes were another data source used in this research. Field notes are the record of ongoing experiences and evolving thoughts during the qualitative research period. They are created by the researcher to track the development of the project, to later visualize how data

collection affected the research plan, and to better guide the process of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The first type of field notes for this study was detailed as notes taken during the interviews with the participants. These descriptive notes supplemented the digitally recorded interview by capturing the nuances of the participants that might be useful later in the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). These notes were reviewed and expanded immediately after each interview with the participants. The second type of field notes used in this research was the reflective journal diary to illuminate individual belief systems and subjectivities (Ahern, 1999). Keeping a reflective journal is an effort that promotes meaningful refinement, learning development opportunities, and accuracy to highlight to potential errors and confusion for the researcher (Ortlipp, 2008). Table 3.5 provides an illustration of examples for each type of field notes.

Table 3.5.

Field Notes

Type of Field Note	Sample
Field notes during the interview	She recognized that her experience of working in various school levels and serving in different roles in these schools was essential for her unique understanding (A note from Sylvia’s first interview)
Memo during the data analysis	Update the interview guide for the second interview by reflecting Sylvia’s emphasis on her career.

Data Management

Building a data storage structure for intensive case studies is crucial (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2014). In this study, all data forms—audio files, interview transcriptions, and field notes—were password-encrypted and stored in ATLAS.ti (qualitative data analysis and research software). Moreover, all identifying information was coded to protect the confidentiality of the participants from various schools. For example, a labeling system was created to provide

information about audio files and field notes for easy retrieval and usage. Furthermore, process notes were formatted using codes.

Aside from storing and managing data, the researcher used ATLAS.ti with the purpose of uncovering and systematically analyzing the complex phenomena hidden beneath the unstructured data. ATLAS.ti was used as the primary storage method for all basic components of this study, offering highly efficient control, ease, and comfort in dealing with data.

Data Analysis

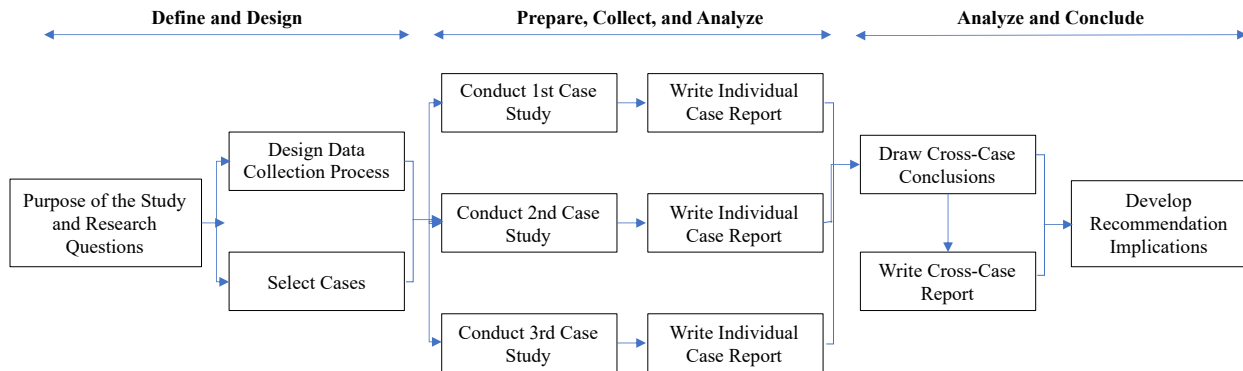
Considering the numbers of interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, the conventional coding and analyzing practices seem to not very feasible to handle a large amount of the qualitative data (John & Johnson, 2000). Hence, interview transcripts and field notes were coded by using the ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software program (QDAS) (ATLAS.ti, 2016, Version 1.0.49). The analysis of data was completed throughout the study by commencing with taking field notes during the interviews as a cue for the subsequent data analysis (Collier & Collier, 1986). This approach to data analysis provided the opportunity to inform the next steps in the data collection process.

Given the overall research methodology of qualitative case study that devoted to identifying how teachers and principals made sense of teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction, the researcher examined each school as an individual case and compared the findings from each school in a cross-case analysis (see Figure 3.3.). The narrative analysis type of narrative inquiry approach involved in the mapping the plots of story for each school that includes narratives from one school principal and three teachers (Freeman, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995) based on the belief that “find[ing] and construct[ing] meaning in our lives by telling our stories” (Johnson-Bailey, 2003, p. 124). In this phase of the data analysis, case

study approach combined with the narrative analysis to construct a “storied analysis” by setting the stage, and relating or sequencing the events, happenings, and experience, conveying a sense of meaning and significance (Kramp, 2003, p. 120).

Figure 3.3.

Multiple-Case Study Procedure



Note. Adapted from Yin (2018).

The researcher started to analyze the data by reviewing the field notes for the teacher interviews from one school which are simply the notes the researcher took during the video interviews to better guide the process of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Then, the researcher repeated same process with the field notes from principal interviews. The researcher decided how to label the units of meaning in the field notes to classify or sort these units (Freeman, 2016) to present the plot of narrative by creating a deductive codebook. This codebook created based on conceptual framework which was the combination of sensemaking theory and differentiated instruction framework (see Table 3.6).

Since the field notes were responses to targeted questions from the interview guide that was organized based on the conceptual framework, the categories were easy to recognize after a careful review of the codes. These codes from the field notes are used to refine data, sort them, and give the researcher an “analytical handle” to make comparisons with other parts of data as

well as data from other sources (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4). At this point, the researcher memoed these categories in the reflective journal diary to explain how they were supported by the codes (Birks et al., 2008).

Table 3.6.

Deductive Codebook

Code	Description
Content	If a participant states how to differentiate through the content or curriculum, or not.
Context	If a participant states how school or classroom context shaped the understanding and/or practice of differentiated instruction.
Definition	If a participant states how to define differentiated instruction as a pedagogy or practice
Environment	If a participant states how to differentiate through the environment, or not.
Experience	If a participant states how their lived experiences as a student, teacher, parent etc. shaped their understanding of differentiated instruction or not.
Orientation	If a participant states what was the orientation process for teacher evaluation
Post-Observation	If a participant states what was the post-observation conferences for differentiated instruction in teacher evaluation
Pre-Observation	If a participant states what was the pre-observation conferences for differentiated instruction in teacher evaluation
Process	If a participant states how to differentiate through the process, or not.
Product	If a participant states how to differentiate through the product, or not.
Professional Goals	If a participant states how they set professional goals for differentiated instruction in teacher evaluation

Later, by targeting the emergent categories from the field notes, the researcher applied the same deductive codes to the interview transcripts as well as coding them inductively. In this part of the analysis, the nuances in the responses to interview questions were better captured since transcripts are more information rich sources of data than the field notes. Again, in the light of the emergent categories from the field notes, the researcher triangulated these categories from

the interviews by comparing codes and relevant supportive documents (if they existed) that were collected from the participants (Nowell et al., 2017). After triangulation, the researcher reviewed the codes and combined them as more meaningful chunks as a fundamental part of the process of narrative employment which is used to “transform complex events into coherent, organized accounts” (Freeman, 2016, p. 43).

The conceptual framework and research design helped the researcher to guide data analysis in a more organized way (Yin, 2018). As a starting point, each of the teacher interviews were designed to address different research questions. In the first teacher interview, the researcher asked questions related to how they define the concept of differentiated instruction comparing with Tomlinson’s (2014) model (see Appendix A) by following three key aspects of sensemaking theory to understand how their definition of differentiation evolved over time. As such, when seeking the data to plot narratives for definitions and practices of differentiated instruction, the researcher focused on the first teacher interviews and the principal interview.

For the second round of teacher interviews, the researcher asked questions related to how they practice differentiated instruction for teacher evaluation process. In this part, the researcher asked teacher participants to talk about their memories from their best and worst classroom observations on differentiated instruction. In addition to asking memories for capturing their experience in detail, the researcher asked them to think aloud about their perceived understanding of each indicator of differentiated instruction and rate themselves as described in self-assessment checklist (see Appendix C). As such, when seeking data to plot narratives for practices of differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction, the researcher focused on the second teacher interviews and the principal interview.

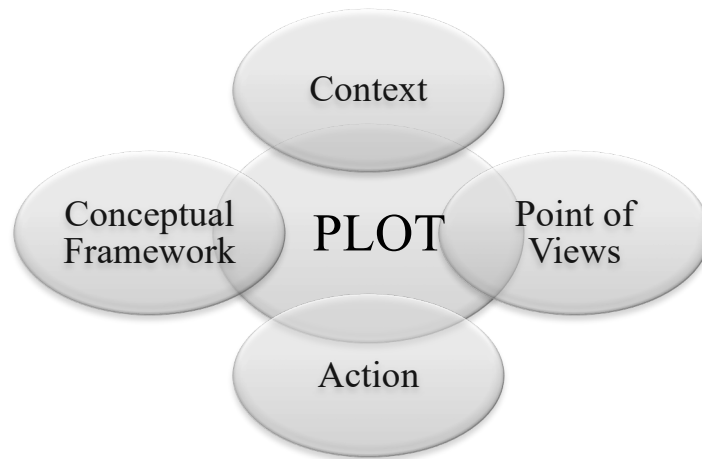
Moreover, each interview guide was organized to address different components of the theoretical frameworks, as such similar patterns of data emerged from each participant in a similar order with the interview guides. Therefore, it was easy to organize and compare codes between participants based on their answers. Likewise, principal interviews were designed as the combination of two teacher interview guides with less details. Hence, the comparison of the teachers' and principal's responses was also convenient.

After categorizing interview data to configure narrative plot, the researcher developed individual case reports as individual case studies bounded in the context of each school. Narrative in all three case studies mapped the plots of each story as (1) description of the overall school context and individual participants, (2) participants' definition of differentiated instruction, (3) participants' practice of differentiated instruction, (4) participants' understandings of teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. The plot in this study was the manifestation of sensemaking of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction.

As it described in Freeman (2016), the narrative plot was the way a sequencing of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction (action) unfolds in regard to particular or global circumstances such as participants' definitions and practices of differentiated instruction (conceptual frameworks) in a particular time, place, location (context) from one or more point of views and for one or more audiences (point of view). Figure 3.4 depicts these four dimensions of the plot for narrative analysis.

Figure 3.4

Dimensions of Plot



Note. Adapted from Freeman (2016).

After detailed examination of each school as unique cases as reported in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, the researcher applied categorical thinking approaches to understand similarities and differences between the schools in the same school district by conducting a comparative cross-case analysis (see Figure 3.3.). Creswell (2013) provided a summary of the within-case and cross-case analyses, suggesting that when analyzing multiple cases, a common approach is to begin with a comprehensive description of each case and its themes, followed by a thematic analysis across cases, and culminating in assertions or an interpretation of the overall meaning of each case. Following this method, the researcher examined the data collected from each teacher participant within each school to conduct within analysis, and later concluded the analysis process with an evaluation of all cases as a whole and reported the findings from cross-case analysis in Chapter 7.

Data analysis in the cross-case analysis included thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns [themes] within data” (p. 79). In particular, exploratory data analysis is described as “the

researcher carefully reads and rereads the data, looking for key words, trends, themes, or ideas that will help outline the analysis before any analysis takes place” (Guest et al., 2012, pp. 7-8). In this study, the researcher followed the phases of thematic analysis and the required procedures to establish trustworthiness, as illustrated in Table 3.7 (Nowell et al., 2017).

Table 3.7.

Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness

Phases of Thematic Analysis	Means of Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prolong engagement with data • Triangulate different data collection modes • Document theoretical and reflective thoughts • Document thoughts about potential codes/themes • Store raw data in well-organized archives • Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflexive journals
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher triangulation • Reflexive journaling • Use of a coding framework • Audit trail of code generation
Phase 3: Searching for themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher triangulation • Diagramming to make sense of theme connections • Keep detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher triangulation • Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher triangulation • Documentation of theme naming
Phase 6: Producing the report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing process of coding and analysis in sufficient details • Thick descriptions of context • Description of the audit trail • Report on reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study

Note. Adapted from Nowell et al. (2017).

In particular, as the first step of the thematic cross-case analysis, the researcher reread the created narratives in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 by applying a categorical thinking approach. After

coding the narratives from each case that aligned with the research questions, the researcher created sub-themes (findings from individual cases) as the second step of thematic analysis. Later, the researcher combined these sub-themes to create themes that address three research questions of this study (see Table 3.8).

Table 3.8.

Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Analysis (to be read from the bottom up)

<i>Research Question 3</i>	
How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?	
<i>Third Iteration: Themes</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • principals made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on their experience as a teacher and leader, the context they worked in, and their role as an accountability policy enforcer. • teachers made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on a combination of their personal beliefs and experiences, as well as their administrator expectations. 	
<i>Second Iteration: Sub-Themes</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals expected good enough differentiated instruction that defined as teachers address as many student differences as possible in the given context and teacher proficiency. • Principals' expectations from teachers reflected in their own differentiated instruction experiences as a teacher and student. • Principals believed the effectiveness of differentiated instruction for overall student achievement and expect teachers to differentiate instruction for higher student test scores. • Principals intended to use teacher evaluation for teacher professional development in differentiated instruction, however, teachers perceived their evaluation for only accountability purposes. • Principals tended to assign high ratings on differentiated instruction to teachers (1) who teach gifted student, (2) who serves as a coach, (3) whose students have high test scores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers who teach in classrooms that exclusively serves homogenous student body such as gifted students, students with disabilities, ELs, do not differentiate their instruction. Teachers and principal have different views for what was the expected practices for effective differentiated instruction. • Differences in teachers' level of implementation of differentiated instruction shaped their understanding of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction • Teachers accepted the teacher's evaluation process as a part of their job that principal had to complete. • Teachers who think they cannot effectively address their students' differentiating needs, change their differentiation practices during the classroom observations.

First Iteration: Sample of Initial Selective Codes

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| • Definition | • Expected differentiation | • School context |
| • Teachers' practice | • The purpose of teacher evaluation | • Classroom context |
| • Good enough differentiation | • Impact on student test scores | • In-class homogeneity |
| • Self-expectation | • Years of experience | • Opportunity to differentiate |
| • Changes in practice for observation | | • Ability to differentiate |
-

Units of Relevant Meaning from 3 Case Studies

Trustworthiness

Case studies have been criticized for the lack of accuracy caused by the investigator not following systematic procedures or influencing the findings (Yin, 2014). Patton (2015) highlighted the importance of the researcher's trustworthiness for the qualitative studies by claiming "for better or worse, the trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to the trustworthiness of the person who collects and analyzes the data and his or her demonstrated competence" (p. 706). To establish trustworthiness in the findings to ensure high data quality, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four steps: the maintenance of credibility (with preference given to internal validity); dependability (in partiality to reliability); transferability (in predilection to external validity); and confirmability (in favor of objectivity) of the study.

To address credibility, the data from interviews, field notes, and artifacts were used to achieve triangulation in this study. As for the dependability, the "established dependability" audit contained thorough documentation of the data collection and analysis processes similar to Yin's (2014) "chain[s] of evidence" and "the development of [a] case study database" (p. 49). To address transferability, the researcher provided detailed descriptions of the cases, participants, and findings of the research context as well as the assumptions of the study. By these descriptions, it is intended to describe the potential transferability of the findings beyond the context of this study. To address the confirmability, the researcher attempted to express personal

bias in the subjectivity statement section later in this chapter as a self-bias detecting tool. Moreover, peer debriefings with several educational researchers when presenting the findings from individual case studies in the annual conference of AERA (Margaret High School) and AEFB (Mitchell Elementary School) in 2022, provided an opportunity to uncover any bias that may have remained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethics

Ethical issues are critically challenging in qualitative research due to interactions between researchers and participants (Bassey, 1999; Patton, 2015). The primary potential ethical considerations in this study may be considered as data confidentiality, participant and site anonymity, and informed consent of the participants. To ensure addressing these ethical considerations, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to the school district's, schools', and participants' names.

The interview sessions were digitally recorded to capture critical responses. Then, the interview sessions' audio files were stored in a password-protected computer for transcribing. Field notes were taken by pen and paper during the interviews, and then converted a Microsoft Word document that were also be secured in the same computer with the interview files.

This study was submitted to and approved by both the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, and the central office research committee of the district studied. Participants signed an informed consent form that explained the research protocol before their interviews. The participants were assured that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and they understood that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Subjectivity Statement

Considering my qualitative research efforts in this study to investigate the sensemaking of educators related to the teacher evaluation practices associated with differentiated instruction, it is important that I acknowledge and address my own subjectivity as a researcher. I am trained as a high school mathematics teacher and originally from a small town in Türkiye. I grew up in a small and not culturally diverse part of Türkiye. I moved from that environment to the U.S. as an international student and experienced the identity shift while getting used to a new culture in a culturally more diverse environment. During that time, I experienced several challenges and then gained first-hand experiences about how to manage identity shift related challenges. Thus, I ended up researching the similar experiences of a group of people with the purpose of helping them go through their journey. I studied in my Master's Degree in an educational leadership program the cultural adaptation of Syrian refugees through the educational system in Türkiye.

After experiencing several challenges to study a remote context during my master's studies, I changed my focus from education in Türkiye to the U.S. due to my desire to be in close proximity to my research settings. Despite my belief that my changed focus helped me to overcome some challenges related to proximity, it may carry several other challenges. Having an international/foreign identity is a potential challenge during qualitative data collection procedures. Participants may assume less contextual awareness of an international researcher comparing with a native researcher in terms of the "experiences of teachers." Also, I have not taught in the classroom both in the U.S. and in my country of origin; consequently, my assumptions related to teachers' classroom experiences are all coming from secondary sources.

During my coursework, I have learned many of the different concepts and approaches related to teachers' experiences from both policies, research, and practitioner perspectives.

Examining several teacher-related educational outcomes leads me to reconsider my initial research interest in helping children by improving their own experiences. Therefore, I decided to focus on the experiences of teachers to help students to improve their academic and non-academic outcomes instead of focusing on students' own experiences.

In an interview project, I had a chance to communicate with several teachers of culturally diverse students related to their experiences with the current teacher evaluation system. As a result of these conversations, I have realized that regardless of their students' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, teachers are frustrated about recent changes in teacher evaluation practices in many ways. However, these conversations were limited to a specific group of teachers who are not representative of any larger teacher population.

Another striking takeaway from this project broadened my horizon to reshape my research interests. All the teachers I interviewed explicitly asserted that they are not satisfied with current teacher evaluation practices. Teachers claimed that they do not value feedback from their classroom observations. Interestingly, I also realized that most of the suggestions the teachers made as potential solutions for a better evaluation system were already a part of the current system, but they were not aware of their existence. As the main underlying factor of such a misunderstanding, I started to think about the lack of clarity of the instructions related to recent changes.

As a former mathematics teacher, I am familiar with the problematic concept of contradiction in terms. It is my belief that when a mathematical term misinterpreted by a learner due to lack of clarity in instruction, any concept related to that term will more likely be misunderstood in the future. Hence, I decided to study the potential differentiation of the perceived meaning of the concepts by teachers and administrators in the teacher evaluation

practices. However, I am well aware of the differences in adult learners and K-12 learners in mathematics education as well as the different nature of professional learning than K-12 educational attainment.

Overall, my academic journey has been shaped by a quest to help students overcome challenges. Then my focus has broadened to help teachers to help their students. I have not been a rater or a teacher who is being rated in any teacher evaluation system; hence, it is hard for me to make assumptions about what teachers and raters think about effectiveness related concepts during the teacher evaluation process. Thus, in particular, I was resolute to examine the differentiation of the perceived meaning of the concepts in evaluation instruments between teachers and their principals to understand the mechanism behind ineffective teacher evaluation practices.

Assessment of Benefits and Risks

There were no direct benefits of this study to participants. However, several teacher and principal participants shared during the interviews that they gain a deeper understanding of how they interpret and reflect on “good” teaching, comparing how it is described in the teacher evaluation system. Also, findings may guide principals to develop or refine further teacher professional development programs, which may be necessary for teachers to differentiate instruction in a way that substantively improves the academic outcomes of their students. There were no anticipated risks for participating in this study for both teachers and principals.

Limitations of the Study

This study has some limitations from which the findings need to be carefully interpreted. The sample of the study and data collection site presented its significant limitations. The school system selected as a research site was not representative of all systems in the state of Georgia.

Although every school level in the school system was included, the participants were not representative of all teachers and principals in the school system. Furthermore, the selection of teacher participants was based on recommendations from principals, within the given criteria, which introduces the possibility of potential bias on the part of the principals in the sampling process. Hence, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to any larger population but may be transferrable to similar educational settings in Georgia and other states.

It is also agreed that the weaknesses of the interview as the main method of data collection is acknowledged. By acknowledging the importance of observations as a supportive data source for this study, the context of the research was not appropriated to conduct observations due to COVID-19 restrictions in the school system.

Regarding the use of semi-structured interviews as the main source of data, it is important to acknowledge that certain questions might have been posed in a leading manner, potentially influenced by the researcher's bias in the formulation of those questions. Furthermore, participants could have responded in a manner that aligns with social expectations rather than expressing their true thoughts or experiences.

Chapter Summary

The research study was grounded in the theoretical framework that combination of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer,1969). That framework coincided with a social constructivist epistemology. The researcher saw the acquisition of knowledge as constructed through highly person- and context-specific interactions during the teacher evaluation process. As such, the chosen methodology was a case study to understand the teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction in the Hangleton County School District through the perspectives of those involved process. Data generation

methods included interviewing 12 participants, once or twice during the study, document analysis, the field notes, and researcher's journal.

The following three chapters, Chapters 4, 5, and 6, describe the findings of the within-case analysis, where each case was explored in-depth as a stand-alone entity. Each case was treated as comprehensive and provided a wealth of contextual data to illustrate individual uniqueness. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are divided into two sections to include 1) the contextual information about the school and the participants' profile in the given school, and 2) the findings of the within-case analysis for the given school.

CHAPTER 4

MITCHELL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of the teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. In particular, this study aimed to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to content of teacher evaluation instruments to describe their teacher evaluation experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

To address these questions, this study sought to understand teachers' and principals' experiences of and perspectives about differentiated instruction both as a part of their instructional practice and their teacher evaluation. This chapter focused on the context of one school in the study— Mitchell Elementary School and examined participants' perspectives individually. To comply with the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, the system, schools, and the participants were given pseudonyms.

In this chapter, details about the school context and background information for each participant are provided. Next, the teachers and the principal's interpretation of differentiated instruction in terms of their philosophical standpoints, teaching practice, and the purpose of the

teacher evaluation processes are examined and reported in the context of Mitchell Elementary School.

School Context

Mitchell Elementary School is 1 of 11 Hangleton County School District (HCSD) schools. There were 745 students enrolled at Mitchell Elementary School at the time of the study, which was a little higher than the average state enrollment for the same grade cluster. The average class size was 22 before COVID-19. Nicole, one of the teacher participants, summarized the student demographics at Mitchell Elementary School as “majority Hispanic population, it would be like his Hispanic and then Black, and then maybe a tiny, white, Caucasian student here or there.” Similar to Nicole’s description, Tracy, the principal, further detailed the student demographics as:

I am Title I, so I have a very low socioeconomic status school. What is interesting about where we are is that my poor children are very poor. I also pull from one section in Hangleton that is upper middle class. I have one apartment complex that is not subsidized. So, you would just say good middle-class families. My student population comes from extremes.

In addition to the participants’ narrative, Table 4.1. provided more detail about Mitchell Elementary School’s student demographics.

Mitchell Elementary School had a higher share of students of Color (91%), Hispanic students in particular (55%), compared with the district and state in general. Moreover, 74% of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged, which was higher than both state and district averages. Furthermore, the share of students who enrolled in Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) was almost four times higher than the state and double the district

average at Mitchell Elementary School. However, regardless of the challenging school context, Mitchell Elementary School had been identified as an effective school (Grade B) with a higher College and Career readiness score than district and state average.

Table 4.1.

School Characteristics for Mitchell Elementary School

<i>Variables</i>	State		HCSD		Mitchell
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Value</i>
	828.2				
Total Enrollment	7	555.16	871.09	678.52	745.00
Percentage of Asian Students	3.35	7.13	2.45	1.97	3.00
Percentage of Native Students	0.10	0.33	0.27	0.47	1.00
Percentage of Black Students	39.01	30.24	33.18	10.79	28.00
Percentage of Hispanic Students	15.20	16.01	37.91	18.15	55.00
Percentage of Multiracial Students	3.98	2.24	3.91	1.38	4.00
Percentage of White Students	38.25	28.53	22.18	20.69	9.00
Percentage of ED* Students	65.42	27.83	60.55	23.81	74.00
Percentage of Students with Disabilities	12.91	6.34	10.15	4.12	7.20
Percentage of Students enrolled in IEP**	9.98	13.87	27.55	18.09	46.00
Mobility	22.67	243.34	16.81	7.97	24.50
College and Career Readiness Score	74.33	11.83	77.31	8.24	80.50
<i>N</i> =	2,254		11		1

Note. Data from 2019-2020 school year.

ED*: Economically Disadvantaged; IEP**: Individualized Educational Plan.

The administration included the school principal and two assistant principals. The administrative team has between 21-30 years of experience. All administrators were female. While two of them identified as White, one self-identified as a Black administrator. The average salary for administrators was \$99,495, and all of them held a Master’s or higher degrees. In addition to administrators, there were eight full-time and one part-time paraprofessionals at Mitchell Elementary School.

The teaching workforce at Mitchell Elementary School consisted of 54 full-time and 3 part-time teachers in 2019, and 37 of these teachers were gifted certified. The average years of

teachers' experience were 13.49, and many teachers (n=26) have between 1-10 years of experience. A vast majority (n=54) of teachers were female. The racial/ethnic composition of teachers was 44 White, 10 Black, and 3 Hispanic teachers. A majority (n= 31) of teachers have a Master's or higher degrees, and the average annual teacher salary was \$61,750.

The teachers at Mitchell Elementary School were more effective than the state and district's average as determined by the statewide teacher evaluation system (see Table 4.2). When rated by their principal, teachers at Mitchell Elementary School unambiguously overachieved their peers in the district and state. These measures include their observable teaching abilities and their professional development efforts. However, when measured by standardized student tests, teachers' ability to increase student achievement was lower than both the state and district average at Mitchell Elementary School.

As for the teacher effectiveness in differentiated instruction at Mitchell Elementary School, the average teacher rating was 3.24 out of 4, which was considerably higher than the state and district average. Moreover, only one teacher was rated as "needs development," while 98% of teachers were categorized as either proficient or exemplary in the differentiated instruction standard.

Table 4.2.*Teacher Effectiveness at Mitchell Elementary School*

Variables	State		HCSD		Mitchell	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Differentiated Instruction	3.08	0.37	3.08	0.39	3.24	0.47
TAPS Rating	3.05	0.28	3.04	0.28	3.19	0.43
SGP Mean	50.80	9.18	51.62	8.75	45.86	10.17
SGP Rating	2.94	0.45	2.97	0.42	2.60	0.63
Non SGP Rating	2.97	0.39	2.91	0.29	3.00	0.00
Student Growth Rating	2.96	0.41	2.92	0.33	2.90	0.35
Professional Growth Rating	3.06	0.30	3.10	0.33	3.21	0.41
TEM Rating	3.05	0.29	3.06	0.25	3.16	0.41
<i>N</i> =	91,722		602		62	

Note. Data from 2018-2019 school year.

Mitchell Elementary School Participant Profiles

Four educators from Mitchell Elementary School were selected to participate in this study including three teachers and the school principal (see Table 4.3). The school principal was selected because of her position in relation to teacher evaluation. The school principal was ultimately responsible for teacher evaluation regardless of her participation in classroom observations. Teachers were selected based on the principal's insight about their willingness to share their experience with teacher evaluation related to differentiated instruction.

Table 4.3.*Participant Profiles*

Name	Title	Highest Degree	Experience (years)
Nicole	Teacher	B.A.	3
Pearl	Teacher	M.A.	9
Tracy	Principal	M.A.	27
Travis	Teacher	M.A.	10

The experience level of the participants ranged from 3 to 27 years, with teachers described as early/mid-career educators and the principal as a veteran educator. In the next section, each participant's background is examined in detail.

Tracy

Tracy, the school principal, is a veteran educator and administrator. She was in education for 27 years at the time of the study, and she had been an administrator for 9 years. Tracy took an alternative certification route to education in which her initial degree was not education. After she started teaching in a school, Tracy took education courses and then completed her teaching certification. Her education, first teaching job, and initial teaching certification were from a different state than Georgia.

After two years of teaching, Tracy left teaching for one year and worked in a political campaign. She started teaching again and taught in the same state by 2001. In 2001, Tracy moved to Georgia and started working in HCSD. After moving to Georgia, she completed her Master's in the subject that she taught, and she did an add-on certificate for leadership.

Tracy taught in two different grade clusters and seven different grades in total. She worked as a subject coach for three years and as an intervention teacher before becoming an assistant principal. Throughout her career, Tracy had always worked in school districts that were similar in size and characteristics. Moreover, Tracy had always worked in Title I schools.

Travis

Travis is a mid-career teacher with 10-years of experience. She started teaching as a long-term substitute teacher in a nearby school district. After a couple of months working as a substitute teacher, Travis transferred to HCSD but not to the Mitchell Elementary School. She

taught the same grade in that school for five years and transferred to the Mitchell Elementary School to teach another grade.

After two years of teaching at Mitchell Elementary School, Travis stepped out of the classroom and started mentoring two new teachers as a part of the Early Intervention Program (EIP). As a part of her role as EIP teacher, Travis supported one teacher in the first half of the day and another teacher in the second half of the day for one year. After her one year of mentorship experience, Travis stepped back into the classroom but taught the same grade as in her previous school.

Travis is a highly educated/credentialed educator. Travis received her Bachelor's Degree in education. She was frequently exposed to inclusion classes in her early teaching years and decided to be a special education certified teacher. This certification allowed her to work with both general education students and special education students in her classroom without needing to be the special education teacher. She described this opportunity as "have the best of both worlds."

Travis later obtained her Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and she pursued this degree by "just knowing that she wanted to continue to further her education." At the time of the study, Travis was working on her Specialist in Education Degree in Education for media and technology. Although she stated she was not planning to seek further degrees after her Specialist in Education Degree, she also had held endorsements in reading, English to Speakers of Other Languages, science, and gifted education.

Pearl

Pearl is a mid-career teacher with a nine-years of experience. She always taught the same grade in the same school, and she spent her entire teaching career at Mitchell Elementary School.

Pearl expressed her feeling of privilege in remaining in the same position throughout her entire career, believing that it allowed her to become an integral part of the school community. Pearl decided to be a teacher in her early years because her mother was a teacher, and she thought “it was kind of just in her blood, and something she always wanted to do.”

Pearl studied her undergraduate and Master’s in Early Childhood Education. Pearl also shared that she recently completed her Tier 1 leadership certificate through a district supported program. At the time of the study, she was actively working on her Specialist in Education Degree.

Nicole

Nicole is a novice teacher with a three-years of experience. She always taught the same grade in the same school and spent her entire teaching career at Mitchell Elementary School. Nicole studied her undergraduate in the field of the specific subject she taught. She was working on her Master’s Degree in Elementary Education at the time of the study.

Nicole, the least experienced teacher participant in this study, brought unique perspectives due to her limited instructional experience in Title I schools and diverse classrooms. Her contribution was valuable in enhancing the study's insights. In the next section, findings from the Mitchell Elementary School case study were presented.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of the teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. To understand the sensemaking process of teachers and principals, the researcher examined three topics related to differentiated instruction and evaluating teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction related to: (1) understanding differentiated instruction,

(2) practicing differentiated instruction, and (3) evaluating teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction. Analysis of the interview data revealed the plot of the narrative presented next in this chapter.

Understanding Differentiated Instruction: Differentiation as a Way of Thinking

Although differentiated instruction is well-known as an instructional practice, it has also been conceptualized as the teaching philosophy behind teachers' daily practices (Tomlinson, 2014). To better understand how teachers and the principal make sense of differentiated instruction, the researcher initially tried to understand their philosophical standpoints, which they used for justifying their differentiated instruction practices. Examining different approaches of teachers and the principal was an essential part of this study to capture nuances to understand how participants conceptualized differentiated instruction and how these nuances were implemented in their teaching practices.

Overall, at Mitchell Elementary School, everyone understood that differentiated instruction was one of the most effective ways to “get the students from where they are to where they can go.” According to the school principal, Mitchell Elementary School prioritized differentiation across the school including how the front desk differentiated based on the parents when they walked into the building. Participants from the Mitchell Elementary School highlighted their schoolwide approach as “what's doing right by kids” to declare their emphasis on flexibility, fairness, and student-centered instruction. The definitions provided by teachers and the principal at Mitchell Elementary School were informal in nature and mainly emphasized the philosophical tenets of differentiated instruction. In the following subsections, the principal and teachers' perspectives are presented.

Principal

Tracy broadly defined differentiation as “differentiated instruction can be a whole myriad of ways.” She detailed her definition as differentiation included teaching practice of a music teacher who must differentiate in music class, a first-grade teacher who had to differentiate with levels of reading or levels of understanding in math similar to how teachers had to differentiate the same thing in high school. Overall, for Tracy, differentiation is

the heartbeat of where everything else lives... really is knowing your kids, and if you know your kids and where they are, you can push them or you can remediate for them, and cause that's all part of that differentiation piece as well ... I think it is what everything else should revolve around.

Tracy explicitly highlighted differentiated instruction as the most crucial aspect of teaching and learning at Mitchell Elementary School.

As an educational leader, Tracy emphasized students’ academic levels in her definition. She believed that differentiated instruction was mostly focused on “all aspects of content” and “knowing where a child is relevant to the content” that a teacher teaches. For Tracy, the main objective of differentiated instruction is “to make sure that a child understands what it is we're trying to get across.” To accomplish this objective, teachers sometimes have to “dial it down” or “dial it forward.” In addition to academic levels, Tracy explained “teaching to different strengths of students” as another form of differentiation. As a different approach from the teachers’ understanding, Tracy is not only focused on the support for the student who needs extra help, but also focused on the types of differentiation for the academically highflying students.

Teachers

Teachers at Mitchell Elementary School justified the theoretical approach behind their differentiated instruction practices by expressing the necessity to focus on "students' individual needs" and providing "appropriate support" to address these needs. However, teachers' descriptions of "needs," "individuality," and "support" varied in their definitions. After a follow-up question, what they meant by these constructs, teachers provided a more nuanced definition of differentiated instruction.

As a teacher who also had a special education certification, Travis' definition of differentiated instruction was "being able to meet the students' needs at their independent levels." Travis conceptualized differentiated instruction at the student level by highlighting, "differentiated instruction can be as wide, or it can be as narrow as necessary for that student." Travis also mentioned the different learning styles of students by including "providing visuals for some students" to meet their "learning styles" and to address "their learning needs" in her definition.

For Pearl, a mid-career teacher, differentiated instruction was "really just providing what students need based off of where they are." By highlighting the increasing diversity in today's classrooms, she highlighted the differentiating needs of students from different backgrounds as "especially in this day and age, every kid is different, and they all have different needs." Moreover, she mentioned the importance of differentiated instruction for classroom-level academic diversity and student backgrounds. In terms of non-academic outcomes, Pearl emphasized the non-academic aspects of differentiated instruction as "just making sure that students are receiving instruction on what they need in order to learn exactly where they are by

developmentally or emotionally.” Pearl’s emphasis on the emotional needs of the students was a unique insight across all participants when asked about their philosophical perspectives.

Nicole, the only novice participant in this school, defined differentiated instruction as “supporting all students and their learning needs.” Nicole brought up and built her definition around the learning styles of her students. Nicole implied non-academic needs as learning styles and academic needs as academic achievement levels. Although she explicitly stated the term “not academically,” her definition was centered around the academic needs of students. She highlighted that “every student learns differently, and they have different needs, not only academically, but whether they learn through music or movement.”

As for academic differentiation, Nicole typified students’ subject preferences as “whether they are more skilled in math or reading or science or art or whatever.” Moreover, she described academic support as “the interventions that they need in order to move and learn.” However, overall, Nicole expressed her struggle to define differentiation by highlighting its complex nature as “differentiation is one word, but there is so much to it. I just have a hard time describing it. There is so much that goes into differentiation that a sentence could not possibly grasp what differentiation is.” Nicole believed that differentiation is a subjective concept based on “who you are and what you think about it.”

Overall, with some nuances, all participants at Mitchell Elementary School have a similar philosophical understanding of differentiated instruction. When asked how they came up with their definition, the participants, on the whole, demonstrated a common sense that their experience shaped their understanding as a classroom teacher. All teachers and the principal also unanimously shared that their undergraduate education did not contribute to their understanding of differentiated instruction. The only formal education that helped participants build their

understanding of differentiated instruction was the post-graduate courses they took after becoming classroom teachers. At the informal level, while two mid-career teachers believed that their school provided enough support to understand what was expected with differentiation, the novice participant believed that she did not receive such support from anyone.

In the next section, how teachers and the principal at Mitchell Elementary School enacted their philosophical views of differentiated instruction in an actual classroom setting is examined.

Practicing Differentiated Instruction: Putting Theory into Practice

At Mitchell Elementary School, teachers enacted their definition of differentiated instruction in various ways. Regardless of the differences in the practice, they all know that “differentiated instruction has to happen.” Based on Tomlinson’s (2014) model of differentiated instruction, teachers can differentiate through; (1) content, (2) process, (3) product, and (4) environment according to student’s readiness, interests, and learning profile.

To explain the main similarities and differences of teachers’ differentiation at Mitchell Elementary School, the researcher categorized teachers’ differentiated instruction practices according to this model in the following subsections. Although not all teachers were practicing all components of differentiated instruction in their daily practice and the principal had not taught in a classroom since becoming an assistant principal, all participants had an insight into how these components look like in the classroom settings.

In the following part of this section, the researcher examined teachers’ and the principal’s perspectives about practicing differentiated instruction under four subsections based on the Tomlinson model. To better serve the purpose of this study based on teacher evaluation, these four subsections were structured starting with what was the school principal’s expectations for

differentiation practice and continued with what teachers were doing in their daily teaching practices for the components of differentiated instruction.

Content

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the content is related to “the information and ideas students grapple with to reach the learning goals” (p. 20). As the learning goals in HCSD, teachers were required to teach districtwide standards; however, they still had to differentiate the content while teaching these standards according to their students’ readiness, interest, and learning styles. At Mitchell Elementary School, teachers have the autonomy to decide their own curriculum, with some exceptions.

There was a districtwide implementation of a new program in one subject, and it was expected to be taught in an identical/similar format throughout the district. Teachers were strongly encouraged to use districtwide resources that they have access to for any other subjects, but it was not mandatory. Nicole further clarified that

we do have a pre-planned curriculum..., but the great thing about our school and our district is even those pre-planned and scripted curriculums exist, our district and our school always calls it and labels it as a resource. So, there is an expectation to be using it, but there is flexibility in supplementing other materials and making changes to what I think best fits my class.

As such, it was expected to see a broad spectrum of differentiated content across classrooms at Mitchell Elementary School, even in the same subject in the same grade levels.

Tracy, the school principal, explained her practice of differentiating content based on her experience as a teacher. As an administrator and a veteran educator, her objective to differentiate the content was more about getting the job done which is the teaching standard to all her students

at Mitchell Elementary School. However, Tracy's approach had not always been like that throughout her career. She explained how her practice of differentiating content shaped over time as

I became a teacher and really learned how to do running records in different inventories, I learned about my students that everybody was at a different place, even within our high group of kids, they were in a different place and my low groups of kids were in a different place. So, I had to figure out ways to teach them, knowing that I had a standard that I was being held to and that they were supposed to know as they left my classroom. Tracy realized the within-group differences later in her career. In her earlier years, she tended to group students as high, middle, and low based on their academic abilities.

After attending a series of the professional development opportunities, Tracy realized the importance of the individual differences and their individual needs within her "high" and "low" achieving group of students. She underscored how she differentiated the content by emphasizing the importance of knowing her students and knowing what it is that they needed to be working on. Tracy further added "even if within the activity, the activity may have been the same, but the content should have been somewhat different."

Revisiting her philosophical view of differentiated instruction, Tracy believed that differentiation should have primarily been ability-based. Tracy's differentiation expectations from her teachers regarding the content were mainly about making sure the content in front of a student is on each student's ability level. Moreover, Tracy also highlighted the complex and challenging nature of differentiating content for the teachers. According to Tracy:

It is still very abstract for teachers to understand that while you are teaching a standard, you have low kids and you have high kids, and everybody has to have that level of

understanding and how do we make sure that students have that level of understanding within that standard.

In Tracy's approach to differentiating content, teachers had to use prior year's assessment data to understand students' needs and then provide appropriate content for each academic ability level to meet students where they are and move them on.

Teachers' practice of differentiating content at Mitchell Elementary School was mostly parallel to what Tracy expected. Overall, teachers at Mitchell Elementary School differentiated the content primarily based on their students' academic differences. Teachers differentiated the content based on the small groups they created. While only Pearl explicitly mentioned differentiating the content based on students' learning styles, Nicole added that she considered students' communication patterns while grouping them based on their academic achievement. Next in this subsection, how each participant differentiated the content was examined in detail.

The process of differentiating content had different starting points across the teacher participants at Mitchell Elementary School. As the earliest, Travis highlighted that differentiation for content began before she met her students. Travis believed that she got to know her students and had a general idea of how to initially group them based on their prior assessment data and the standards addressed earlier. Later, at the beginning of each year, she conducted surveys and observations in her classrooms about "how her students learn best and what they learn best with" and adjusted her teaching continually.

Travis preferred to group her students into similar groups in terms of academic ability and learning styles. She always started grouping based on academic abilities that were measured by common assessments. She further elaborated that "I try to cluster them together so that I can meet as many needs at once." However, Travis highlighted her consideration of the within-group

differences as “I still know that even within those small groups that have their [own individual] needs.” As a result of creating homogenous groups based on the ability level, for most of Travis’ teaching, English Language Learners or gifted students often “find themselves with similar students.”

Further, Travis pointed out the importance of students’ previous academic attainments for content differentiation to serve students who had learning gaps versus students who did not. While some teachers, who needed to differentiate instruction to fill students’ knowledge gaps for students who brought from the previous years, were tend to “teach down,” teachers with higher achieving students were focusing on the “teaching up.” For example, in Travis’ content differentiation experience this year, she shared:

There are only a few students that are on level. Most of them are below grade level and so a lot of [planning for content] is filling in gaps. So, what I present to them, yes, I have standards, but I have to differentiate and bring it down levels depending on the child to fill in gaps ... I have students with disabilities, and they're below grade level. I have another teacher across the hallway who have students who are on grade level and above so how she differentiates is going to be different than how I have to differentiate.

Accordingly, regardless of the content pacing guide that dictated which content should be covered in which timeline, Travis differentiated the instruction based on her students’ needs by ignoring the formal content expectations in a certain timeline.

Travis stated that she did not follow formal pacing guides because she was spending a lot of time filling in student knowledge gaps. She justified her practice by stating “even if my content pacing guide said that I need to be on X right now, but I cannot teach them X if they do not know Y.” In the later phases of content differentiation, after starting a new semester with her

initial grouping approach according to the prior year's assessment and early semester surveys, Travis made changes based on how students were doing in the given content through "evaluating herself and reflecting on herself as a teacher" to make sure that she was addressing the student needs.

While reflecting on how Travis differentiated earlier on his career, she remembered those times as "I have fooled myself early on when maybe I thought differentiation was on grade level content. I just had them answer less questions, choose the ones that you want to answer type of thing." Travis further explained that lowering the expectations was not a good practice of differentiating content because she had not differentiated the content for her students to meet their learning needs. Travis clarified that making all the content less of a requirement could not address her students' needs because the offered content still might have been too difficult for them.

In contrast, Pearl's approach differentiating the content was more towards remedial teaching practices. However, Pearl stated that she considered students' personalities in her small group strategies. She summarized how student personalities apply in her grouping strategy in two different ways by "not grouping those kids together who are like oil and vinegar" and "making sure do not group all kids that are outspoken, so shier students can feel safe and share what they are learning."

Pearl tried to present materials in different ways that included technology to keep her students motivated in terms of differentiating the content. She also expressed that her students needed to be up and moving, which helped them make kinesthetic connections. Pearl also highlighted that she was aware of the different learning styles of her students and taught accordingly for those students who are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners.

Pearl's daily teaching practice was almost always starting as a whole class regardless of her awareness of different learning styles and student personalities. Pearl always targeted to teach all the standards to all students by expressing “our curriculum obviously looks all of the standards, so really like nailing down and drilling down and making sure that each student understands that part of the standard and it builds on itself.” Pearl did not group her students until she met them, but she stated that she “does a ton of small groups” in her classroom.

Pearl preferred not to differentiate the content until “actually” teaching the content. In her practice, she planned what to teach and created groups for each lesson and based on students' academic abilities in a given standard after starting to teach the standard. In Pearl’s classroom, students had assigned small groups that they worked on, and sometimes the groups were alike based on their achievement level. Sometimes the groups were purposely academically diverse as they had a higher student in a lower student group to balance off of each other. She described her practice of differentiating content as:

Just basing it off what we're learning that week ... I really think that the most important thing is to take those informal assessments. At the start of every lesson, I do a spiraled review of what we have been learning. Then, I jotted note on a clipboard to see like who is getting it, who's not, and even like what skills, so that is something that we can roll back on our spiral review.

Pearl’s approach to differentiating content also included “pulling students who did not learn in the first attempt aside to reteach” the parts of the content that students did not understand.

Nicole also planned her instruction standard-by-standard just before delivering the content instead of at the beginning of the semester. She differentiated to content based on what she was trying to achieve or what she was trying to teach, considering her students’ needs.

Nicole also used a flexible grouping approach as sometimes homogeneously splitting the groups based on their academic level and then sometimes mixing students up to where they were heterogeneous. In her teaching practice, there might be students that are higher academically that can support the “lower students,” but also the “lower students” supporting the academically higher students.

Similar to what Pearl shared, Nicole also focused on the academic needs first, but involuntarily. Nicole further elaborated

I hate that this is like my first go-to, but I would think about academic needs first. What do I need to provide as background knowledge? What do I need to provide when I am instructing different learning styles, what do I need to address? And then what are different ways that I could help develop their skills throughout the process of teaching?

Later, Nicole highlighted that her teaching practice must try to get to know her "students inside and out whether it's academically or personally." Although Nicole mostly grouped her students based on their academic levels, she also mentioned that sometimes she focused on non-academic traits of the students that make them communicate better within the group.

Overall, teachers at Mitchell Elementary School differentiated the content in a way that they could address the differentiating students' needs after they placed their students in the small groups. However, their grouping strategies for the purpose of differentiating the content were almost all based on students' readiness. As such, teachers at Mitchell Elementary School prioritized differentiating the content for the students who had learning gaps from previous years. To fill learning gaps by providing missing academic background knowledge, teachers at Mitchell Elementary School had an academic grouping strategy where they grouped the students who had similar needs.

Teachers' approaches for differentiating the content were aligned with their principal's approach of making sure all students learned the standard as they were supposed to learn. However, as opposed to Tracy's emphasis on both "dial-up" and "dial-down," teachers' practice of differentiating content heavily focused on remedial practices for struggling learners with previous learning gaps and providing support on grade level students when needed. In contrast, advanced learners were hardly mentioned in teachers' practices.

In the following subsection, in addition to what they differentiate, how teachers differentiate their instruction to meet the student differences were examined.

Process

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the process is considering "how students take in and make sense of the content" (p. 20). As much as their varying practices on what to teach in the content component, teachers and the principal at Mitchell Elementary School had varying approaches for how to differentiate based on the student needs. Since teachers' grouping practices were examined in the content section, this section was mostly about how teachers tailor their teaching in their daily practice as well as what their principal expected from them.

Tracy, the principal, did not explicitly mention how she differentiated as a teacher and did not talk about the expectations from teachers in terms of how they teach. Overall, for Tracy, the biggest challenge for a teacher to effectively differentiate was understanding the student differences. She elaborated that

Understanding where their kids are and understanding that everybody learns at a different rate is the key. I think that once that becomes coherent in their classroom, it is easy. I think differentiation is hard because you do not always see it in the beginning, especially

new teachers. It is easier just to put kids in groups and teach, but if you really want a student to thrive and strive, they have to be pushed at their level. I think that once they get a great understanding of it, then the limits are off.

Tracy's perspective for differentiating through the process was more of an outcome-driven approach. Later, instead of explaining the differentiation through the process, Travis explained what differentiated instruction through the process is not.

For Tracy, regardless of how teachers differentiate, if they did not provide content that was on students' academic ability level, it did not seem like a differentiated instruction. For Tracy, the only difference between small group teaching and differentiating instruction through small groups was the content. Suppose a teacher grouped the students by considering all of the needs, interests, and learning styles but provided the same content for each group. In that case, such a teaching practice could not be accepted as the differentiated instruction for Tracy.

As for teachers, differentiation through the process was the heart of differentiated instruction. One of the most common approaches for differentiating the process at Mitchell Elementary School was focusing on the fluidity and flexibility of teaching. Teachers explained how they differentiate instruction through the process by highlighting the different activities and tools they used during their teaching.

For Travis, who preferred to place her students into small groups homogeneously based on their readiness and learning styles, the first step for differentiating through the process seemed like "constantly looking around the room and the reading the room." By thinking about what Travis had to teach, she kept asking herself the same question "is this going to trigger anything in students' brains for them to be interested to keep learning with me." It is also

important to note that Travis started teaching a new standard by targeting the whole class as one-size-fits-all.

Travis intended to incorporate many different resources while introducing a new topic, whether a video, a picture, or an object. Travis believed that it is essential to have a visual with a voice because she thought “the long-term memory holds onto visuals so much more.” Hence, she always intended to include

visuals for her students instead of just saying, today, we are going to talk about the X, because they are [students] [and] going to be like, I have no idea what you just said. If we are reading about the X, then having a visual of some kind of the waking up their mind and triggering their engagement is going to be important.

Starting with this approach, Travis explained her role as a differentiating teacher to teach like a “circus performer.” She further elaborated this visual of circus performer as “always remember who needs what, to make sure I had a visual prior to talking about a new topic for certain group of students.”

Travis added how she defined a successful differentiated process as "teaching as differentiating" because the success of a lesson depended on differentiating the instruction based on student learning styles, so the students do not stare straight at her with confused faces. She reemphasized the circus performer analogy later as “have to think of what their background knowledge is and their prior knowledge is, what can they tap into.”

Regardless of her explanation of how to differentiate the process ideally for all students, Travis also highlighted that, in reality, it might not be possible to practice differentiation every day. She later stated that her daily practice of differentiating depended on many other factors. Travis elaborated these factors with an example of how her day-to-day practice looks like

I think ideally you go in with the best intent that you could be this circus performer and like always have a bag of tricks to be like, you get this and you get that, I am going to remember what I gave you, and I am going to remember how to assess it on that, but there are 24 different personalities. You can differentiate the gamut of things, the spectrum of things, but the reality is sometimes here is a worksheet and you just do 10 of them instead of doing 20 of them. And then on that case, the hope was that I provide something glorious and then the reality is this is what I have to do for now.

Travis further clarified how to navigate between what she thought was best and what she could do daily by relying on "flexibility" and "grace."

Travis believed the importance of not giving up as long as she knows she could have done better. When she decided she could not achieve her self-expectation from her daily teaching practices, Travis knows that she could improve on it next time. Travis believed that continually reflecting on her own "bust moments" was the key for effective differentiation where she could decide "that was still too much" or "I did not quite hit the nail on the head."

Pearl shared a similar analogy with Travis' circus performer by saying, "I feel like an octopus" while differentiating through the process. Since time was a concern for Pearl, she had to differentiate the process based on student differences while trying to teach what she was supposed to teach in a specific timeframe. Regardless of her differentiation efforts, Pearl highlighted her strategy to differentiate through the process as "a unique way to run things."

Pearl believed that students thrive on structure in a routine; however, at the same time, she still differentiated the process in this well-structured classroom setting. As part of her daily practice, her students were going from small group to whole class to individual learning all day long. She stated that some students thrived on the individual, especially those below grade level.

Pearl believed that those students who were below grade level needed individual attention. In addition to individualized instruction, those students needed small group interactions created based on their interests.

In terms of monitoring and pacing instruction based on the student needs, Pearl explained her practice and claimed how challenging this can be for novice teachers. She clarified her approach as being able to see where her students were and knowing when to accept that she needed to stop and reteach a specific lesson and rework this another way because students did not get it. In contrast, when Pearl realized all students understood a concept, she started to dig deeper into the given content and quickly went on to the next piece. Pearl believed this aspect of differentiation as “the most challenging” based on her experience as a teacher and her observation of her novice colleagues. Pearl further elaborated that

Administrators want you to stay on pacing guides with everything so that we do not fall behind in the curriculum, but then at the same time, you feel the pressure of oh no, I cannot get behind. Then, I need to stop because my kids do not understand, and they are not going to understand it, and they are not going to be able to go further until they understand this concept.

By highlighting the challenges related to pressure, Pearl believed that balancing differentiation and pacing is something that new teachers and all teachers struggle with because of so much pressure from the top down that enforce teachers to stay on their pacing guide.

By confirming Pearl’s point about new teachers, Nicole, the only novice participant from Mitchell Elementary School, expressed her struggle with differentiating through the process. Nicole believed that she was better at “planning things out than doing that in the midst of things.” For Nicole, differentiating through the process was about “explicitly teaching the

content or learning it through a video, or so many different things, and then activities whether they are doing a computer program or making something by hand.” Nicole summarized her daily teaching practice as working one-on-one with her students, working in different types of small groups, various times a day. Then she also stated that she used different types of whole group instruction various times a day.

Overall, at Mitchell Elementary School, the expectation from the principal to differentiate through the process was more of an organic one that depends on knowing students well and setting them up for success by pushing them within their academic level. While two mid-career teachers explained how they differentiate through the process by highlighting continuously adapting their teaching during a class by focusing on student differences, a novice teacher expressed her struggle to tailor practice during a class.

The following subsection examined differentiation through the product by focusing on the principal's expectations and teacher practices.

Product

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the product is considering “how students show what they know, understand, and can do” (p. 20). Differentiating through the product was one of the most common differentiation practices across the teachers at Mitchell Elementary School due to a specific accreditation program HCSD had been a part of for years. This accreditation program required students to work on the end of the year projects for many subjects. As such, almost all teachers practiced differentiation through the product by assigning different projects to students based on their academic readiness.

In terms of the expected practices in differentiating the product at Mitchell Elementary School, Tracy, the principal, did not expressly state her expectations from her teachers. However,

while she shared her experience of successful differentiated instruction, she exemplified differentiation through the product. When asked about a memory of observing successful differentiated instruction, Tracy brought up a classroom observation from several years ago where the teacher was doing a book study.

In this observed class, the teacher grouped her students into four groups mainly based on their interests and somewhat their ability levels. Each group had selected their own book from a specific author's list of books based on their interest, and all group members became an expert on their selected book. Later, Tracy pulled students based on their ability level and made them present their findings of the book study or what their book was about. These presentations were the part that Tracy liked most related to differentiated instruction. She further described this lesson as

[the teacher] had some students, they were the high kids, really delve in deep, not only into book that they were reading, but more about the author himself. Then they wrote about it. Whereas some of those low-level kids really took the book and then to retell the book, they worked together making sentences on sentence strips, and they were able to present to the class what the beginning, middle, and end was.

Considering what Tracy described as one of the "best ever" observation, it can be interpreted that Tracy expected teachers at Mitchell Elementary School to "differentiate through the product" based on students' academic level and interests. Turning now onto teachers' practices on differentiating the content, the rest of this subsection is about how teachers use student assessment as a part of their differentiated instruction.

As for teachers, differentiation through the product was the primary strategy to get to know their students and to tailor their instruction. Teachers at Mitchell Elementary School also

used student assessment as a part of their differentiation through the content and product.

Teachers at Mitchell Elementary School believed that informal assessment to monitor students' daily progress was the essential part of their reflection as a teacher. However, while teachers use differentiated assessment techniques for their students, the level of differentiation and the nature of differentiating instruction through the product varied across their daily practices.

Travis, the most experienced and credentialed teacher among the participants, gave her students as much autonomy as possible to show her “what they know while her still being able to receive what she needs to know.” Travis used choice boards where students could choose an activity related to the concept that was being taught. While assessing student achievement, Travis also wanted it to be their personalized work. She wanted how students present their learning through a product that they are proud of and take ownership of this work. Therefore, Travis frequently allowed her students to work alone or in small groups on projects as a way to present their learning. As someone who personally struggled to work on group projects, Travis encouraged her students to work on group projects while encouraging some students to work individually because she thought they might be better individually instead of working within a group.

Regardless of her widespread practices for differentiating through the product, Travis believed that she was not as good at creating and using rubrics as she should have been. She was aware that a different group of students, especially advanced students, wanted to see exactly what they needed to do to get all the points they could get. Travis underscored that she could not create rubrics to track her students' achievement given the time constraints. Moreover, Travis highlighted that she used student assessments to differentiate constantly; as such, she mostly

relied on informal day-to-day assessments that are “like a quick check, answer these three questions, show me what you know by drawing a picture, or thumbs up, thumbs down.”

Pearl’s practice of differentiating through the product depended on the standard that she taught. She highlighted that “obviously” students in her classroom could present what they have learned in different ways, but not always. She stated that “with some of our standards, I like to have this as an option and with other standards, not so much.” Also, her approach was similar to Travis’ in allowing students to work as a group or as individuals to create their own product. Pearl valued the skills that help her students work in a group, but she rarely allowed students to create their own products to present their learning.

Pearl also emphasized that using rubrics for students' assessments was important for her practice. Regardless of her awareness of rubrics’ benefits for a specific group of students, Pearl did not differentiate the rubrics based on students’ individual needs. Instead, she preferred to use standardized rubrics provided as a part of curriculum “resources.” Pearl believed that rubrics were "particularly powerful for the gifted kids" to explain what they could do better when not getting a 100.

Nicole, who earlier stated her struggle in differentiation through the process, also expressed her dissatisfaction in differentiating through the product. She highlighted that her assessments were very standardized due to what was expected to present student progress. Nicole further explained her attempts to differentiate through the process as “although I've given them choice in like a presentation, it doesn't happen.” In addition to standardized assessments, she also shared that she used her observations of students during individualized or small group learning as an informal assessment.

As for using rubrics for students' assessment, Nicole also emphasized her standardized approach as

If I use a rubric for my students, I would say I would have one rubric for all my students and I would not have rubrics that would match their type of ability. Especially when I think of my ESL students, I should make a rubric that matches their ability level based on their speaking and their listening and their writing and their reading skills. But I am just going to, I usually will give them a grade level, normal rubric, whereas I am probably ineffective that way because I should think about what they are capable of doing and match what we are teaching to their ability level.

Nicole further assessed her ability for differentiation through the process with a self-critic as "I need to do it more. It is not that I do not do it at all, but I do not do it enough."

Overall, at Mitchell Elementary School, the principal highlighted the importance of differentiating through the product for a successful class. Similarly, teachers also emphasized the importance of differentiated products and rubrics for their student's improvement. However, in practice, only one teacher could implement what she thought was the best. For the other two teachers at Mitchell Elementary School, regardless of their awareness that they must do better for differentiation through the product, they relied on more standardized instruments for assessing their students' learning.

In the following subsection, the environment component of differentiated instruction was examined from both the principal and teachers' perspectives.

Environment

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the environment is considering tailoring "the climate or tone of the classroom" that is positive and invitational (p. 20). The

environment component of differentiated instruction is mostly about setting a tone that “everyone feels welcomed and contributes to everyone else feeling welcome” regardless of their academic and non-academic differences (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 43). At Mitchell Elementary School, as a part of the districtwide social-emotional learning intervention program, teachers were heavily invested in the emotional well-being of their students. However, as someone who was earlier described as outcome-driven, the principal briefly mentioned how classroom climate could be a part of differentiated instruction.

When asked about the strategies for differentiated instruction, Tracy, the principal, mentioned separating students “who are mean to each other” as a solution. Based on what she shared, this classroom placement strategy was the only practice that can be categorized as differentiating through the environment. Later, as a part of an unusual but “a successful,” in her opinion, differentiation example, Tracy emphasized building a strong bond between students as a wonderful practice. For this example, she shared

we did an all-boy class in X grade a couple of years ago, and it was wonderful, and it was, they called themselves the brotherhood and they were African American and Hispanic and white. They were all different ability levels. It worked beautifully. Those kids made gains. It was a small class. We wanted to do it for a long time. I had a male teacher, so he was up for the challenge. I think those boys still have that bond.

Tracy did not explicitly state any expectations about the classroom environment. She stated the importance of “knowing students” several times during the interview, but what she meant by this was more focused on getting to know students based on their academic levels. In turn, teachers were more specific about their teaching practices in differentiating through the environment.

For teachers, the classroom environment was more than a strategy to differentiate instruction. Per se, the classroom environment was more about what differentiated instruction is at the core. Differentiated instruction creates a positive classroom environment where students thrive and strive for some teachers. In contrast, in some other teachers, such an environment was the only option to differentiate their instruction freely. As such, teachers' perspectives were very different when they asked how they differentiate through the environment.

For example, Travis separated the environment component of differentiated instruction and described creating an environment as an independent teaching practice which is the main prerequisite of differentiated instruction. According to Travis, having relationships or having a relational community within a classroom is the most effective part of teaching. She believed that if the students do not trust her or feel safe in her classroom, they will not learn from her. As such, Travis thought that creating a positive classroom environment comes first, and after teachers have that, they can differentiate better.

Travis elaborated her thoughts about differentiating the instruction through the environment as

you could wear yourself out tired and completely exhaust all your resources, your time, and your ideas, but if you do not maintain an environment within your classroom where your students feel safe, heard, and important, then as much effort as you try to give them for their learning needs, they are not going to connect with you. They are not going to receive the gift of differentiation.

Travis further added that it is imperative for her to know and understand students as individuals in terms of ability, achievement, learning styles, and needs because she needed to know them on

an individual level to differentiate what their needs are and then teach them as a whole group as well.

To provide an appropriate environment to differentiate instruction, Travis emphasized the importance of knowing students for creating such an environment and once again highlighted how she got to know her students

I like to know people's stories, and this involves what type of learner that they are. I like to know what kind of support they have at home... situations their family is dealing with. Just knowing if I ever have to reach out to the family, is that something that will be a burden to them or something that can help benefit the student. I like to figure out what their learning styles are by doing different learning inventories and just kind of observation as well. There are different things if I put in front of them, I know if they flock to them or if they are attracted to those different opportunities that are put in front of them.

As such, creating a classroom environment by knowing her students was an essential part of Travis's differentiation. In addition to noticing student differences from the beginning, Travis also observed her students regularly to collect and to use the new information to reshape her classroom environment throughout the year.

For Pearl, the classroom environment was important, but her approach was more static than Travis. Pearl stated that she worked "really hard" at the beginning of the year to create her learning environment and did not continuously try to shape during the school year. Moreover, in the same manner as Travis' approach, Pearl highlighted the environment component as a prerequisite for differentiation by commenting

I create my learning environment at the beginning of the year to get to know my kids and really like feed off of their interests, show that to them they can be a part of our classroom ... you have got to know your kids and you have got to know how they learn what they can achieve and what they need, whether that is academically or socially, emotionally.

Overall, Pearl was aware of the importance of the classroom environment for differentiation, but her reliance on the routines and structures prevented her from serving in an evolving classroom environment that is shaped based on fluctuating student needs and interests.

For Nicole, the environment was the component of differentiated instruction that she felt most comfortable with. Similar to Travis' dynamic practice, Nicole also valued continuously updating her knowledge about her students. She elaborated her approach as:

We take about the first month to really get to know each other, and we continue to do this throughout the year through our morning meetings. That is where we sit and talk in the morning for about 20 minutes and about experiences that we have at home ... throughout the year through how we celebrate different holidays and what that means to us as our family and our backgrounds. And then also things that we are interested in and things that we value and that drive our motivations.

Later, Nicole explained how she used this information as "taking the time" when she could relate her teaching with "something when [students] are like, oh, I do that at home, or I have an experience in that." In addition to using student background for instructional purposes, Nicole's practice of sparing a time block to reflect on students' personal lives signaled a positive environment where students are welcomed.

Overall, at Mitchell Elementary School, the principal highlighted the importance of “knowing students” for teachers to differentiate their instruction. However, her approach to knowing the students was more of an academic-ability oriented practice. In contrast, all teachers valued knowing their students by focusing on both their academic and non-academic individualities. By knowing their students, two mid-career teachers planned their year-long instruction based on their students’ individual differences and as a whole class, while the novice teacher instrumentalized this knowledge for taking time to relate students’ background with the content that she taught.

In sum, as reflecting her philosophical approach to differentiated instruction, the school principal expected teachers to differentiate their instruction through all components mainly based on students’ academic differences that enable students to be academically successful. In contrast, teachers’ practice of differentiated instruction through each component varied based on their philosophical understanding and their ability to implement differentiated instruction at Mitchell Elementary School.

In the next section, teacher evaluation practices related to differentiated instruction were examined by focusing on both the principal and teachers’ experiences.

Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness in Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction has been located at the forefront of the teacher evaluation system in Georgia, and thus Hangleton County School District (HCSD). Even if differentiated instruction was assigned as only 1 of the 10 teacher performance standards in the state’s teacher evaluation system, the rest of the 9 standards were closely aligned with the philosophical and practical tenets of differentiated instruction in the academic literature (see Appendix G). Through examination of the sensemaking of teacher evaluation experiences related to differentiated

instruction, the analysis of interview data revealed varying nuanced perspectives across the participants at Mitchell Elementary School.

In this section, the principal and teachers' experiences related to the evaluation of teachers' practices related to differentiated instruction were examined. To present these experiences in detail, principal and teachers' teacher evaluation experiences were reported with the same timeline suggested in the TKES Implementation Handbook issued by the state of Georgia.

Principal

For Tracy, the school principal, the teacher evaluation process on differentiated instruction started with the pre-evaluation conferences. In these conferences, mostly held together with the same grade level teachers, the principal and teachers mainly discussed the standardized test scores. Considering Tracy's undoubted reliance on the power of differentiated instruction to increase student achievement, differentiated instruction was the center of almost any conversation related to student achievement. She further elaborated her point

I think differentiated instruction actually has effects on student growth. So, if you are not differentiating for your children and meeting them where they are and moving them on, then you are not going to get the [student achievement] growth that you want for your TKES score. So, I think it is imperative and that is probably the number one thing.

According to Tracy, even if not always specifically on differentiated instruction, the nature of the pre-evaluation conversations was more structured about the instructional interventions by focusing on how to move lower and middle-level students to a higher level while keeping higher-level students where they were.

After the initial conversations in the pre-evaluation conferences, the next step for Tracy was classroom observations to observe teachers' effectiveness on differentiated instruction. For Tracy, the main signal for effective differentiation was the small group instruction where each group of students was engaged with an appropriate activity for their academic ability level. Also, Tracy looked at the "center work," which she described later as what students were doing when the teacher was working with another group of students.

Tracy always tried to conduct classroom observations by having the standards teachers taught in front of her. In the classroom observations, she wanted to know what the teacher was teaching to see what the teacher was doing with those different groups of students. Tracy believed that while observing a well-differentiated instruction, she should have easily told "which group has lower kids and which group has higher kids," and what was differentiated to address their needs. She further mentioned the signals for concerning differentiation as "pet peeves" moments in classroom observations and clarified that "everybody doing the same thing, just in a different group."

Tracy also believed that all the teachers at Mitchell Elementary School were aware of what observers were looking for during a classroom observation in terms of differentiated instruction. She shared that

I think they know exactly what we are looking for. I will also tell you that there are times when we get specific, like we want to come in during a certain lesson ... I think they know exactly what our expectations are.

Tracy also believed that regardless of teachers' awareness of expectations, they might feel different about certain classroom observers. She further elaborated

I will say out of the three of us, one of my APs, the teachers kind of get a little nervous because ... she has been out of the classroom the least amount of time. So, they feel like a little tougher as an evaluator than the other two of us, but they certainly know what our expectations are, and I think especially around differentiation, because we talk about it all the time, what are you going to do for John that you did not do for Dajanae? We, as an administrative team, know our students as well, and we get really specific with people. So, I think they absolutely know what our expectation, and we are all on the same page about it as well.

Tracy was aware that if teachers know the observers' expectations well, they might teach accordingly during the observations to meet expectations. To prevent these potential "dog and pony" moments during the classroom observations for differentiated instruction, she also instrumentalized the unannounced walkthroughs to get a sense of differentiation in the teacher's everyday practices.

As for the rating teachers' effectiveness on differentiated instruction using the classroom observation rubric, Tracy claimed that all her teachers were differentiating at least at the expected level which categorized as Level 3 in TKES. As such, it was easy for Tracy to rate her teachers who are proficient in differentiated instruction. As for Level 4, Tracy was very cautious about rating her teachers as exemplary. Tracy shared her perspective about teacher ratings in detail as follows:

Level 3 is what we strive for. So, I would say all of my teachers are level three teachers, easy smaezy I got the best teachers in the system right here. Level 4 is where you visit where you do not live. You cannot live in level four. That means you are perfect at every single thing that you do. That also means you do not have anything to work on. And I just

feel that we all have things to work on. So, I do have a few teachers that they do not just visit level four, but I really feel like as it is my job to remind you that we all have something to work towards, so you can be a really high level three. I think it is standard a differentiation ... [but], you got to have something to work towards, or you are going to burn out. So, and you got to have something to read about.

After conducting a classroom observation, the next step for Tracy was the post-observation conferences.

Tracy highlighted that the post-observation conferences might seem different across the three administrators at Mitchell Elementary School. Tracy stated that one of the assistant principals was very effective on classroom observations as well as the post-observation conferences. She also added that Tracy herself might be not as effective as others in this part of the teacher evaluation process as a result of having other duties as a principal by sharing

Because of the nature of what it is that I have to do, I do not quite meet with every teacher after every observation within a 48-hour period. I do try to do that with my new teachers. So those who are on the full TKES evaluation, just kind of that, Hey, how did it go? What would you do differently? Let me tell you what I saw. And usually that is before it is even written up. My veteran teachers, it is sometimes just an email and then we do not even talk about it.

Bringing more clarity, Tracy continued her thoughts highlighting the importance of having a stable teaching workforce by focusing on more experienced teachers by sharing

So, you have to remember I have got a staff that has been together a long time. Now, if I saw something that was concerning in that lesson, then yes, we have a conversation. So always with our new teachers and I do have an assistant principal that she is very good at

just what she does. She meets with them diligently. I meet with my new teachers, anything that I saw concerning, but we always, all three of us, give some form of a communication email or note while we are in there to that teacher to let them know what we saw. If we thought it was great, if we need them to stop by and see us and have a further conversation, or if it is an email, Hey, these are the three top things I saw in your lesson today, prior to that actual observation record.

In addition to post-observation conferences, Tracy also held post-evaluation conferences where she shared her feedback with all the teachers in her school. She explained what these individual meetings looked like

[w]e teach the whole child, and we have got to evaluate the whole teacher. So, I think a lot of our feedback, it is a conversation of let's talk through this I script a portion of what I see in there, if it is really good, I try to find examples of that. ... I know that scripting is a big part of TKES, but I think how you script is different. I think we do try to be really specific as best we can that the teacher can reflect on that and, move on from it.

Tracy also emphasized that the content knowledge about the subject was an essential aspect of the feedback during the post-observation conferences. She added that she felt more comfortable with giving feedback on the subjects she taught previously.

When asked the steps she followed for the teacher evaluation, Tracy did not mention how she used the data from the teacher self-assessment instrument to set professional growth goals. Later, when asked about what she thought about the self-assessment checklist, she described this instrument as "ridiculous" because she thought that teachers rate themselves "really high" in that instrument. Tracy further highlighted that she did not even read the self-assessment checklist until she met with teachers for their conferences.

In the following subsection, the teachers' experiences of the teacher evaluation process on differentiated instruction were examined.

Teachers

Travis explained the teacher evaluation process by starting from the pre-evaluation conference. According to Travis, this conference was mostly completed in a group setting at Mitchell Elementary School, so administrators could get as much done as possible and relay the information without meeting with so many people. In the most recent pre-evaluation conference, teachers from the same grade level were spread out in the cafeteria to learn "lowdown" of what will happen and when it will happen in an informal setting. Travis also added that there was an option to have an individual more formal meeting with administrators if teachers have any questions.

During the pre-evaluation conferences, teachers also set their professional goals as a part of their teacher evaluation. According to Travis, these goals were set as a school, and further they were discussed the biggest needs that teachers were seeing and how teachers could relay that within their classrooms and grade level. Often, teachers work with their grade-level teams to discuss strategies for student growth in terms of percentiles as determined by data from the previous year. Moreover, Travis added that teachers could also set personal goals if teachers "really want to do something professionally such as introduced to a new program or personally getting better at something. After deciding their personal and professional goals, teachers sent their goals to administrators to approve them.

Also, before or during the pre-evaluation conferences, administrators expected teachers to complete their self-evaluations on all ten standards. By focusing on the standards in the self-assessment checklist that teachers rated themselves lower, administrators consider that

information during the classroom observations to see if a teacher worked on that standard to improve her practice.

As the next step of teacher evaluation, Travis believed that administrators visited her classroom hoping to see a natural learning environment where they did not want her to stop what she was doing and put on a show or a performance to meet the standard. Particularly for differentiated instruction, Travis explained the nature of classroom observations as

they are hoping to see from start to finish opportunities for students to kind of be met where they are ... a whole group lesson so that you can introduce something and keep that short and then they are hoping that students can break off into smaller groups. In those smaller groups, they are hoping for an opportunity of guided instruction that is different for each group that comes along. They should not see this same activity or the same worksheet ... because they know that is just not realistic for all the students to be at that learning level. They should see the independent studies portion of their rotation also differentiated for their needs. So, when students move through that independent part, they are not all going to be completing the same activity as the previous group. So, they are hoping that as the groups transition in and out, it is different for them as they move with groups.

Travis also claimed that her understanding and differentiated instruction practices were mostly aligned with what her administrators expected from her during the classroom observations.

Travis firmly believed that Travis and her evaluators were always on the same page for what needs to be seen in observation for differentiated instruction. However, she highlighted the importance of reality and realistic expectations for her and her students. Regarding this point, Travis stated that she gave herself and her students some grace by knowing that not everything

can be accomplished every single day. By reminding Tracy's "dog and pony" analogy, Travis acknowledged that there might be some teachers who stop what they are doing, and they put on the show for the evaluators during the classroom visits, however, Travis expressed that she is not that type of a teacher.

According to Travis' experience, teachers and administrators met to discuss what they should not observe next time, once out of three to six observations. Teachers had an option to have more than one post-observation meeting if the teacher disagreed with the feedback or had further questions. Travis also mentioned that administrators had a five to ten days window between the post-observation conferences and their following observation because teachers needed time to reflect on the feedback and had an opportunity to improve it or ask questions.

As for the feedback after the classroom observation for differentiated instruction, Travis highlighted the differences in the feedback across administrators. Travis believed that some administrators took the feedback component seriously by believing teachers would improve their professional development through the feedback. They provided very detailed feedback, including the verbatim script of what Travis did in the observed class.

On the other hand, Travis believed that some other administrators kept a word document somewhere and just copied and pasted the feedback because she experienced once where she received the exact same comment with that were provided to her for an earlier evaluation. Another time, Travis received verbatim feedback with one of her colleagues. As such, Travis believed, based on her experience, that "if all administrators walked into the same room at the exact same time and watch the same lesson, the feedback would be different. It might also be positive, but some may not be as sincere as the others."

Travis had similar feelings about the post-evaluation conferences that value of these conferences depended on who the evaluator was. She believed that the post-evaluation conferences were not always intended to help teachers to be better educators. In most cases, in these conferences, even if they were rated as proficient, Travis had seen it firsthand where not all teachers have been given the opportunity for that growth and improvement to be exemplary.

In addition to teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction, Travis brought a very critical insight into teacher evaluation experiences in general. Although she felt fortunate to have positive experiences for evaluations, she mostly did not believe in the effectiveness of teacher evaluations for several reasons related to its objective nature. Travis shared that she had colleagues who have been rated differently because of their relationship differences with the evaluator. That had been an unfortunate realization for Travis because she thought that she could do the same thing and deliver it mostly the same way, but she could get a lower rating because of her relationship with an administrator.

She also believed that if she is not on the administrators' bad side, like somebody else might be, the evaluation comes out differently. Travis also highlighted that evaluators' differing understandings of what is good teaching make a difference for the teacher evaluation process by sharing

Evaluators find things that are just important or not important. Like if you even think about a classroom, some teachers are really distracted by negative behavior and then there are some teachers who are like, I am just going to ignore this and keep going so they do not see it as a problem. The same thing happens within the evaluation system is that there is some room for how the observer is discerning the situation. So, they may not see it as a problem. They may not see it as an area of growth. They may not see it as a

distraction or something that is going to hinder or help them as a professional. So, they may rate it differently than what their colleague might write it as.

Overall, Travis's teacher evaluation experience related to differentiated instruction was a positive one. She was aware of what evaluators were expecting to observe, and that was aligned with Travis' understanding of differentiated instruction. However, she was not always satisfied with the feedback she received in terms of helping her to improve her differentiated instruction practice.

Pearl described the pre-evaluation conference in the same way Travis explained it. As for the evaluation of differentiated instruction, Pearl's insights were more informative. According to Pearl, differentiated instruction was one of the toughest standards. Pearl believed that the differentiation standard on TKES had the "most gray area" while other standards were mostly "black and white." Moreover, she stated that the differentiation standard was so broad that especially newer teachers do not really know how they document it. Therefore, Pearl believed that if there was one standard in TKES that teachers struggle with, it was the differentiated instruction standard.

As for the classroom observations for differentiated instruction, Pearl was aware of what her evaluator expected to see in her classroom. However, she further explained that she had experience with all three administrators as her evaluators throughout her career, and all were very different. Pearl further elaborated her point by sharing a recent anecdote about evaluator differences as

...we have a new teacher on our team this year and we were talking to her the other day and she was like, well, I have Ms. X as my person. And so, we were like, well, make sure that she is very detail oriented. You need to make sure that you have everything detailed,

mapped out. But then the other administrator, instead of having everything submitted and turned in on a nice, pretty piece of paper, she would rather just come in and sit and literally talk to your kids and see if your kids can explain what they are doing. So, I think their observation styles are different and that sometimes, not confuse teachers, but just not know how they want to document what they are doing.

Pearl also believed that her administrators know her very well, and they know the observation day is a normal day in Pearl's world that they are going to come to live it whether differentiated instruction happens or not.

Pearl added that when she differentiated in a way that was not clearly observable, she provided documentation on how she differentiated instruction in the observed classroom. As her daily practice, she wanted her evaluators to observe her differentiation as

I always try to make sure what is seen in my room is that when students are in centers. I feel like a lot of teachers, or some newer teachers just rotate their kids through the same groups, and it is the same activity. But to me, that is not really meeting all the needs of your kids. So, to be able to show that what each group is doing and what that kid needs or what that group needs.

Pearl's perspective on presenting her differentiation versus how others differentiate was very similar to what Tracy explained as her "pet peeves" moments.

As for the feedback, Pearl also highlighted the differences across administrators. She described the feedback from one of the administrators as very thorough. Pearl believed that this administrator gives detailed feedback based on what the teacher presented on every certain aspect of differentiated instruction during the observation. In contrast, Pearl shared that another administrator provided verbatim feedback, which was obviously copied and pasted from the

TKES guidelines. However, for this particular administrator, Pearl later described her as a “people person and conservationist” who preferred to share her personal feedback during the post-evaluation conferences. Overall, Pearl believed that she received the feedback she needed, but the way that she received this feedback was different from one evaluator to another.

Nicole, a novice teacher, had a relevantly different teacher evaluation process than the other two participants. After completing the online orientation, she met with her principals to talk about her personal and professional goals. These goals were set to align with her team and the school goals. For example, the previous year's goal was "60% of her class will meet a or grow within a hundred" in a standardized assessment. Similar to what other participants shared, Nicole explained that administrators did not observe the differentiated instruction standard in walkthroughs. The administrators preferred to observe differentiated instruction in a full 45-minute observation.

In the classroom observations for differentiated instruction and walkthroughs, Nicole believed that the administration looked at “was her class all doing the same thing, are there different levels of instruction that students were receiving, or different activities that they were doing.” She thought that if administrators came in and observes a class where some students were doing something on the computer, some students are working in a small group or at Nicole’s table, administrators would automatically decide that Nicole was differentiating the instruction.

When asked how administrators observe the quality of differentiated instruction, Nicole highlighted that “it would depend on who it is and what their definition of differentiated instruction would be.” She further elaborated her point

...my assistant principal might be looking for one thing, whereas my principal would be looking for something else, depending on what they define differentiated instruction as and what they really think how it looks and how it is implemented in a classroom.

Nicole stated that teachers mold themselves to practice their teaching accordingly by meeting administrators' varying expectations. In contrast to what two other teacher participants shared about Tracy's "dog and pony show" analogy, Nicole expressed that "this sounds really bad, but depending on who is my evaluator and who is going to be walking in my room, I am going to try to meet their expectations and what they think differentiated instruction is."

Nicole explained the differences between her evaluators. While one of them wants to see exactly what TKES said about differentiated instruction as "black and white," the other evaluator mostly focused on the process with a growth mindset. While one evaluator wanted them to differentiate every day and make it visible, the other understood that even for all students working in the same activity, the instruction might still be differentiated. Moreover, in general, how Nicole tailors her practice for the observation was based on the evaluator. She described this process as

I would not say that I am really changing anything, but since we do have to sit down and write out the lesson plan and send it to them beforehand. I think it makes me think of things that maybe I would not have thought about if I was not as thorough in my planning. So, I am always planning for differentiation in small groups and different activities, but when I sit down and want to make a thorough lesson plan to send to my administrator, it makes me double think things and taking more time for that planning. It makes me think of more things to add or more things to do based on who is observing.

Whereas like maybe I did not take the time or did not have the time to plan day to day, second to second as I would for just that one lesson.

Furthermore, Nicole believed that just because administrators were able to see a 45-minute part of her teaching, she crammed into the differentiated instruction that she would have throughout the week into the observed segment to show her observers what she can do as a teacher and how she was supporting her students all the time, “but in a very magnifying way.”

As for the feedback she received, Nicole thought that the feedback was more about meeting the differentiated standard. She did not believe that she had received any depth and actionable feedback for her practice of differentiated instruction yet. For example, when asked about an unpleasant classroom observation experience related to differentiated instruction, Nicole shared a memory that during a walkthrough all of her students were working on the exact same activity and worksheet. The feedback from the administrator for this observation was briefly saying that her students needed to do different things. As such, Nicole believed that she did not receive the support she needed to improve her differentiated instruction practices.

Overall, the teachers at Mitchell Elementary School were aware of their administrators' expectations in terms of differentiated instruction which was broadly explained as "being able to see students doing different things based on their academic levels." All teachers also highlighted that all three administrators had different styles for classroom observations, and teachers' evaluation experiences might be very different based on which administrator assigned them as an evaluator. Two of the more experienced teachers were organically applying differentiated instruction practices that were mostly aligned with administrators' expectations; as such, they did not make any changes to their teaching for the observation day.

However, one of these teachers shared that she presented how she taught differently based on the different administrators. As for the novice teacher, she was polishing her practice of differentiation for the observation day where she can present what she is capable of as a teacher instead of what she does daily. Overall, the teachers' teacher evaluation experiences for differentiated instruction at Mitchell Elementary School were determined by their administrators' expectations.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the teachers' and school principal's perspectives about differentiated instruction and measuring teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction were examined in the context of one school—Mitchell Elementary School. After providing a detailed explanation of the school context and participants' background, educators' perspectives were examined by focusing on how they gave meaning to the construct of differentiated instruction, how they understood the practices around differentiated instruction, and how they made sense of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction at Mitchell Elementary School.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews, which was further triangulated by the supporting documents and field notes, revealed that educators made sense of differentiated instruction mostly based on their teaching experiences and academic training after becoming classroom teachers. Accordingly, participants' differentiated instruction practices were typically driven by their philosophical standpoints for what good teaching is and how they serve their students to meet their needs depending on the school and classroom context. Moreover, the differentiated instruction practice at Mitchell Elementary School was also shaped by what administrators expected from teachers.

As for the teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction, the administrators' expectations regarding how a differentiated classroom should look were the main drivers of how teachers gave meaning to their teacher evaluation process. For the more experienced teachers who also feel more comfortable with their differentiated instruction practices, teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction was an opportunity to show how they taught daily. On the other hand, for the novice teacher participant who was also not as comfortable as other teacher participants, teacher evaluation was the process where she attempted to showcase what she is capable of as a teacher for differentiated instruction.

In the next chapter, the same analysis of the teachers' and school principal's perspectives about differentiated instruction and teacher effectiveness was examined at the Munnerlyn Middle School context that serves a different grade cluster of students in the Hangleton County School District.

CHAPTER 5

MUNNERLYN MIDDLE SCHOOL

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of the teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. In particular, this study aimed to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to content of teacher evaluation instruments to describe their teacher evaluation experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

To address these questions, this study sought to understand teachers' and principals' experiences of and perspectives about differentiated instruction both as a part of their instructional practice and their teacher evaluation. This chapter focused on the context of one school in the study—Munnerlyn Middle School and examined participants' perspectives individually. To comply with the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, the system, schools, and the participants were given pseudonyms, and school grade levels omitted to ensure confidentiality.

In this chapter, the details on the school context and background information for each participant were provided. Teachers and the principal's interpretation of differentiated instruction

in terms of their philosophical standpoints, teaching practice, and for the teacher evaluation process are examined and reported in the context of Munnerlyn Middle School.

School Context

Munnerlyn Middle School was 1 of 11 Hangleton County School District (HCSD) schools. There were 668 students enrolled at Munnerlyn Middle School at the time of the study, which was lower than the average state enrollment for the same grade cluster. Table 5.1. provided more detail about Munnerlyn’s student demographics. Student demographics in Munnerlyn had a similar pattern with the school district’s overall student population. This pattern presented a similar share of students with different racial backgrounds, percentage of economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.

Table 5.1.

School Characteristics for Munnerlyn Middle School

<i>Variables</i>	State		HCSD		Munnerlyn
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Value</i>
Total Enrollment	828.27	555.16	871.09	678.52	668
Percentage of Asian Students	3.35	7.13	2.45	1.97	2.00
Percentage of Native Students	0.10	0.33	0.27	0.47	0
Percentage of Black Students	39.01	30.24	33.18	10.79	36.00
Percentage of Hispanic Students	15.20	16.01	37.91	18.15	38.00
Percentage of Multiracial Students	3.98	2.24	3.91	1.38	2.00
Percentage of White Students	38.25	28.53	22.18	20.69	21.00
Percentage of ED* Students	65.42	27.83	60.55	23.81	59.00
Percentage of Students with Disabilities	12.91	6.34	10.15	4.12	13.20
Percentage of Students enrolled in IEP**	9.98	13.87	27.55	18.09	28.00
Mobility	22.67	243.34	16.81	7.97	15.00
College and Career Readiness Score	74.33	11.83	77.31	8.24	80.60
<i>N</i> =	2,254		11		1

Note. Data from 2019-2020 school year.

ED*: Economically Disadvantaged; IEP**: Individualized Educational Plan.

Overall, Munnerlyn's students can be considered as a representative group of the district's student characteristics. Regardless of the alignment for overall student characteristics, Munnerlyn Middle School had been identified as an effective school (Grade B) with a higher College and Career readiness score than the district and state average.

In administration, there were a school principal and two assistant principals at Munnerlyn Middle School. While the male school principal had between 21-30 years of experience, two female assistant principals had between 11-20 years of experience. While two of them identified as Black administrators, one self-identified as a White administrator. The average salary for administrators was \$102,730, and all of them held a Master's or higher degree. In addition to administrators, there were four full-time support personnel at Munnerlyn Middle School.

The teaching workforce at Munnerlyn Middle School consisted of 53 full-time teachers in 2020. The average years of teachers' experience were 13.25, and many teachers (n=22) had between 1-10 years of experience. A vast majority (n=40) of teachers were female. The racial/ethnic composition of teachers was 30 White, 19 Black, 3 Hispanic teachers, and 1 Multiracial teacher. A majority (n= 36) of teachers had a Master's or higher degree, and the average annual teacher salary was \$64,854.

Munnerlyn Middle School's teachers were more effective than the state and district's average when determined by each component of the statewide teacher evaluation system (see Table 5.2). When rated by their principal, teachers at Munnerlyn Middle School unambiguously overachieved their peers in the district and state. These measures include their observable teaching abilities and their professional development efforts. As for the teacher effectiveness in differentiated instruction at Munnerlyn Middle School, the average teacher rating was 3.23 out of 4, which was considerably higher than the state and district average.

Table 5.2.*Teacher Effectiveness at Munnerlyn Middle School*

Variables	State		HCSD		Munnerlyn	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Differentiated Instruction	3.08	0.37	3.08	0.39	3.30	0.46
TAPS Rating	3.05	0.28	3.04	0.28	3.22	0.42
SGP Mean	50.80	9.18	51.62	8.75	53.91	7.05
SGP Rating	2.94	0.45	2.97	0.42	3.08	0.28
Non SGP Rating	2.97	0.39	2.91	0.29	3.00	0.00
Student Growth Rating	2.96	0.41	2.92	0.33	3.04	0.20
Professional Growth Rating	3.06	0.30	3.10	0.33	3.24	0.43
TEM Rating	3.05	0.29	3.06	0.25	3.23	0.42
N=	91,722		602		48	

Note. Data from 2018-2019 school year.

Munnerlyn Middle School Participant Profiles

Four educators from Munnerlyn Middle School were selected to participate in this study, three teachers and the school principal (see Table 5.3.). The school principal was selected because of his position in relation to teacher evaluation. The school principal was ultimately responsible for the teacher evaluation regardless of her participation in classroom observations. Teachers were selected based on the principal’s insight about their willingness to share their experience with teacher evaluation in differentiated instruction.

The years of experience for the participants ranged from 7 to 29, with teachers consisting of two early career educators and a veteran educator, and the principal as a veteran educator. In the next part of this section, each participant’s background was examined in detail.

Table 5.3.

Participant Profile

Name	Title	Highest Degree	Experience (years)
Allan	Teacher	M.A.	29
Catherine	Teacher	Ed.S.	7
Lauren	Teacher	B.A.	8
Martin	Principal	M.Ed.	24

Allan

Allan, the only veteran teacher participant at Munnerlyn Middle School, graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Education in 1990. Then subsequently, he went directly into a Master's Program in Curriculum and Instruction and graduated in 1992. After his Master's Degree, he went straight to work in HCSD. Allan had been with this school system since 1992. After teaching for a while in HCSD, Allan returned to school for his Specialist in Education Degree and graduated in 1999. While teaching in HCSD, he earned his Ph.D. Degree in 2012 in teaching and learning.

Allan worked as a “regular” classroom teacher for the first 15 years of his teaching career. Later, he switched over and started working with the gifted population. For the last 10 years of his teaching, Allan worked with accelerated or enhanced students. Throughout his career, Allan only taught two different grades which were in the same grade cluster.

Catherine

Catherine, as the least experienced teacher participant from Munnerlyn Middle School, started her teaching career as a paraprofessional before investing time and money to be a certified teacher. After working as a paraprofessional for two years, Catherine received her teaching certificate in special education through her Specialist in Education Degree in curriculum

and instruction. At the time of the study, Catherine was completing her Ph.D. studies in curriculum and instruction with a focus on special education.

Teaching was Catherine's second career. Her undergraduate and Master's Degrees were not in education. Catherine served as an active military member and law enforcement officer. She stated that her experience as a law enforcement officer was the main reason why she sought a second career in education. During her duty as a police officer, Catherine observed that many of the inmates were illiterate and struggled with some type of a learning disabilities. By having two children with learning disability, Catherine empathized with the inmates she encountered and wanted to be in the education system as a change maker. She shared a memory

I was sitting there one day, and an inmate had asked me to help write a letter for him because he could not write. I said right there that I need to be in education because I was going through the process with my son getting an IEP. I thought this could be my son because he has a learning disability. He could easily end up in jail or prison because somebody takes advantage of him. I thought, you know what? Somewhere we must change.

However, becoming a teacher and being on the other side of the table exacerbated her frustration. Being a teacher was very disheartening for Catherine because she saw how it works on the other side of the table. She believed that education system was moving students with disabilities through elementary and middle school but precipitating their dropouts in high school because students could not maintain schooling.

In her second career as a special education teacher, Catherine started as a paraprofessional where she served in the students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) in a self-contained classroom. Catherine described a self-contained classroom as where anybody

that has issues or deficits who cannot maintain in a normal classroom or a small group classroom. At the time of the study, Catherine had one team-taught classroom where she co-taught with another teacher and two small-group classrooms where she taught two different subjects. Catherine was teaching three different subjects in team-taught and small-group classrooms. She also explained the team-taught environment as a classroom that has two teachers, a general education teacher who is the teacher of record for that classroom, and a certified special education teacher.

Lauren

Lauren, another early-career teacher participant at Munnerlyn Middle School, started her career in HCSD a day after she graduated with her B.A. in education. She only worked at Munnerlyn Middle School throughout her entire career. Lauren started her career by teaching the general population, and later she co-taught English Learners in a team-taught classroom for two years. Later, Lauren began teaching special education students.

Moreover, Lauren shared that she decided to be a teacher during her junior year of high school. Lauren described her early ages as a “really school-friendly kid,” which was why she decided to be a teacher. Lauren further shared an anecdote about her teacher training as she was the only person in her cohort who came to her undergraduate college wanting to be a teacher.

At the time of the study, Lauren had been teaching in the magnet program for four years where she taught advanced/gifted students. She later explained that in the magnet program

We are basically a stem-focused team. In Munnerlyn Middle School, a lot of times they team everybody, so on my team, there is the science teacher, the math teacher, the ELA teacher, and the social studies teacher, and we share all those students. The magnet program is that you apply to get in, you got to have certain test scores, and you got to

have a certain GPA. Once you get into that program, you have more math and science-focused. We also do a lot of interdisciplinary stuff, so we take a lot of things from each other's classes. It is just a little bit of a harder program, more rigorous.

Lauren described the change in career from teaching ESOL and Specialized Education population to the magnet program as a “big flip.” In the next section, the findings from Munnerlyn Middle School case study were presented.

Martin

Martin, the school principal, is a veteran educator and administrator. He had been in education for 24 years at the time of the study, and he had been an administrator for 16 years. All of Martin’s administrative experience was in HCSD. His education, first teaching job, and initial teaching certification were from a different state than Georgia. He earned his Bachelor’s Degree in psychology with a double minor in psychology and education. Later, Martin completed his Master of Education program in educational leadership. He received certification in all content areas at Munnerlyn Middle School’s served grade level except for special and physical education.

Martin highlighted that he took an alternative certification program because his undergraduate studies were in clinical psychology. Martin took the National Teachers Exam before taking his first education course other than the courses he took for his minor in education. He started teaching with a provisional certificate and completed his Master’s Degree in a three-year program to be a fully certified teacher.

Martin taught three different subjects for eight years. Before becoming a full-time school principal, he worked as a part-time teacher, part-time education specialist, and part-time assistant

principal. Martin served as a school principal for nine years in another school in HCSD. At the time of the study, it was his 6th year at Munnerlyn Middle School as a school principal.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of the teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. To understand the sensemaking process of teachers and principals, the researcher examined three topics related to differentiated instruction and evaluating teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction: (1) understanding differentiated instruction, (2) practicing differentiated instruction, and (3) evaluation of teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction. Analysis of the interview data revealed the plot of the narrative presented next in this chapter.

Understanding Differentiated Instruction: Differentiation as a Way of Thinking

In this section, the researcher sought to understand the participants' philosophical standpoints, which they used to justify their differentiated instruction practice to learn how the teachers and the principal made sense of differentiated instruction. Examining the different approaches of teachers and the principal was an essential part of this study to capture nuances to understand how participants conceptualized differentiated instruction, and how these nuances were based on personal and professional factors.

Overall, at Munnerlyn Middle School, the school principal prioritized differentiated instruction as the most important part of effective teaching. As such, Martin, the school principal, was aware of the theoretical tenets of differentiated instruction as described in the Tomlinson model. Two of the three teacher participants, a veteran, and a traditionally trained teacher, internalized the theoretical aspects of differentiated instruction. However, one teacher participant

at Munnerlyn Middle School had a generic understanding of differentiated instruction as “untraditional” instruction. In the following subsections, the principal’s and teachers’ perspectives were presented in detail.

Principal

Martin defined differentiation by referencing Tomlinson’s (2014) definition and mostly focusing on the data-driven aspects of differentiated instruction as

... using grouping strategies that are flexible across the instructional content, the products that you would like students to deliver. In other words, it is a way to meet the individual developmental needs of the student using what I would consider to be valid and reliable diagnosed formative, informal, formal, and summative assessment techniques and using that data in an ongoing/informed way to really make any type of accommodations or modifications for any individual students. The entire time, the teacher will be implementing strategies that challenges the thinking of the students at the different levels, and also setting a high bar for, reasonable, yet attainable expectations.

Martin explained that he synthesized this definition from his academic background as a clinical psychologist, his experience as a teacher and leader, and a two-day course that Carol Ann Tomlinson provided. His definition also had an emphasis on the expectations from students that can be implied related to his work as a principal.

Martin further elaborated on how he built this definition chronologically. He started with a point in his teacher preparation years that differentiated instruction was not as practical during his alternative certification years. Martin’s alternative certification program required him to get field experience in K-8 settings, so he was constantly in different levels of classrooms. During

his field experiences, he realized that there was more grouping and more use of diagnostic data at the elementary level than at the middle grades level. He explained

At the middle grades level, I saw that the majority, if not all, of the teachers were core content experts, and so there was not a lot of experience or even expectation for them to use data to inform instruction other than test scores. That was in any type of setting in the middle grades.

As such, this observation shaped his perspectives on how to practice differentiated instruction. Martin also applied his undergraduate skills into differentiation instruction. Martin's ability to pretest and posttest his students that was not being done at the school that he first started teaching in leveraged his ability to practice differentiation.

In addition to his pretest/posttest approach to get some type of gauge for his instruction, Martin was always doing weekly temperature checks on the content. He used this achievement data to create competitive but meaningful challenges for his students. So, Martin started practicing differentiation in this way very early on in his teaching career. He also stated that there were some parts of the challenge, but supporting his students' learning by looking at their individual needs naturally connected his line to some of the most prominent differentiated instructional theorists and practitioners.

Martin also shared a memory about when he met with Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson at a conference during his third year as a school principal. As a part of this conference, he attended a two-day course in differentiated instruction. Martin described his takeaways from this course as "feeling validated, but also very motivated to lead my school staff to put some critical pieces in place."

As a principal, Martin always prioritized differentiated instruction in the schools he led. For example, he highlighted that during the late 2000s, he used all American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding to invest in differentiated instruction and Response to Intervention programs for resources and additional training. As a part of the investment in differentiated instruction, Martin hired a differentiated instruction expert for two years who worked with his staff in the field of differentiated instruction. In addition, Martin's school helped this in-house differentiated instruction expert to pilot and fine-tune a learning sequence of resources. Martin thought that as a result of such an experience, he and his staff became a lot more proficient in what differentiated instruction could look like in a real school setting.

Overall, Martin was a school principal who developed his philosophical stance on differentiated instruction over the years as a combination of formal training and experience in the field of education. In the following subsection, the researcher presented the philosophical standpoints of teachers on differentiated instruction at Munneryn Middle School.

Teachers

Teachers in Munneryn Middle School justified the theoretical approach behind their differentiated instruction practices by expressing the necessity to focus on "students' specific needs" and "tailoring the instruction" to address these needs. However, teachers' descriptions of "how to assess student needs" and "how to tailor instruction" varied in their definitions. After a follow-up question about what they meant by these constructs, teachers provided a more nuanced definition of differentiated instruction.

As a veteran teacher who taught in both regular and gifted classrooms, Allan defined differentiated instruction as "tailoring learning for the specific needs of students." He further explained that sometimes he tailored a lesson to meet students' specific needs while sometimes

differentiating based on a handicap that students have. Moreover, by emphasizing differentiation in his experience with gifted students, Allan stated that he sometimes differentiated for the entire class. Sometimes Allan had to differentiate for a group of profoundly gifted students, and sometimes he had more than one of them, so he believed that students in such instances might need their lessons compacted a little bit more, or they might need their lessons to be accelerated a little bit more. Furthermore, Allan believed that gifted classrooms were exceptional cases for differentiated instruction because they are pre-differentiated through the intellectual levels of students. Allan summarized his philosophical standpoint for differentiated instruction through gifted education

I am already planning my lessons to target that particular group [gifted students], and they are already high-level lessons, so high-level learning, high-level activities, and high-level discussions. So, there is all forms of the differentiation, and the way lessons designed from the very base, my very foundation is differentiated. Because I am not for everybody, and I am not teaching the average student, and I am teaching the above-average student, so I begin differentiated already.

Regardless of his final definition, which was centralized around gifted education, Allan's definition evolved over time through his experiences with different groups of students.

At the beginning of his career, Allan remembered that he was overwhelmed by expectations to differentiate. However, he did not understand how he would be able to meet all the varying needs in his classroom. Allan described those times as

...it was very difficult, and I know that students respond to structure and discipline because there is just an inherent structure and discipline in what we do. So, I really had to learn some humility that I did not have it when I was first trying. I needed them to

conform more to me. So, I think there had to be a mindset change where I needed to learn some conformity to their needs when I could but balancing that with the needs of the entire class and my own needs as a teacher. So, there has to be sort of a balance of needs, and I think that is always going on. I think it is just continuous in the classroom.

After his initial struggle to find a good balance for differentiation, Allan's theory and practice around differentiated instruction started to change through a combination of his education, his experience as a teacher, his experience as a 504 coordinator, and his experience as a mentor.

Allan stated that he started with trial and error by emphasizing there were things that he had discovered because he had to discover them. For example, he believed that he needed to find another way if he was not reaching a student and having some issues. His approach in such situations was that nothing is better than just going out and trying it. As such, throughout his career, Allan just tried different things until he could find something that was going to work and learning what he could conform to meet student needs and help them understand that they were going to need to conform to some of the needs of the general classroom as well.

Similarly, Allan's experience of coordinating 504 plans had a major influence on his own teaching. His work with children with disabilities and their parents to design classroom accommodations for students helped him realize some accommodations that can also be useful for his gifted students. Allan further detailed this with an example that he realized that if something is going to work for an Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder student, it will work for someone who simply does not pay attention. In addition to his role as a 504 coordinator, his role as an instructor for a certificate program helped him better understand differentiated instruction. He shared this experience as

I taught certification classes for how to be gifted certified so they could also teach gifted students. And there were sections of that class devoted to differentiation. In teaching it, I had to further define it for myself. Some of my understanding of what differentiation comes from trying to really help other teachers apply it and not be so scared of it because the teacher tendency is to run it to the extreme that I found. They think that every student is going to now be treated individually, and that is almost impossible.

Overall, Allan developed an understanding of the concept of differentiated instruction through a combination of four components: his doctorate coursework, experiences as a 504 coordinator, trial and error in his own teaching, and training other gifted education teachers.

As for Catherine, a teacher who had and taught students with disabilities, differentiated instruction was “a way for students to gain the curriculum in an untraditional way.” While explaining the untraditional ways, Catherine mostly referred to the modes of learning for students and scaffolding practices for content. She further elaborated her definition from a special education teacher perspective as

some kids pick it up through auditorial ways, a teacher might have given them a handout, so students are seeing it visually. And then it is also the kinetics part of it because they get to touch the piece of paper. But certain kids cannot get it even with that, and it was not enough for them. So, you might have to give them X or Y, so they can pick and choose things from. So, they have got to have a little bit more in-depth than just a generalized way of hearing it or seeing it.

Compared with other participants’ differentiation, Catherine’s definition was not very structured and mostly emphasized alternative instructional delivery to lecturing.

Lauren, a traditionally trained teacher participant, defined differentiated instruction as

“what I was told is basically where you cater your instruction to what your students need.” She further emphasized the importance of student needs by stating

... looking at their test scores, formative assessments, and how they interact with you to understand they may perform differently in different situations. So, you need to either give them different learning opportunities, different ways to express themselves, and look at what strengths and weaknesses they have to decide how to cater your instruction.

Lauren’s definition was parallel to the school principal’s approach in a way that leveraging several data points to get to know students better before differentiating the instruction.

Overall, participants’ philosophical understanding of differentiated instruction at Munnerlyn Middle School varied based on their teaching and personal experiences. When asked how they came up with their definition, the participants demonstrated a common sense that their experience as a teacher shaped their understanding. All teachers and the principal also unanimously shared that their academic training did not contribute to their understanding of differentiated instruction. While some participants highlighted the importance of training after becoming a teacher contributed to their philosophical understanding of differentiated instruction, others stressed that they did not receive any training or professional development on differentiated instruction after becoming a teacher.

In the next section, how teachers and the principal at Munnerlyn Middle School enacted their philosophical views of differentiated instruction in an actual classroom setting was examined.

Practicing Differentiated Instruction: Putting Theory into Practice

At Munnerlyn Middle School, teachers enacted their definition of differentiated instruction in various ways. Based on Tomlinson’s (2014) model of differentiated instruction,

teachers can differentiate through the; (1) content, (2) process, (3) product, and (4) environment according to student's readiness, interests, and learning profile. To explain the main similarities and differences of teachers' differentiation at Munnerlyn Middle School, the researcher categorized teachers' differentiated instruction practices according to this model in the following subsections. Although not all teachers were practicing all components of differentiated instruction in their daily practice, and the principal had not taught in a classroom since becoming an assistant principal, all participants had an insight into how these components look like in the classroom settings.

In the following part of this section, the researcher examined teachers' and the principal's perspectives about practicing differentiated instruction under four subsections based on the Tomlinson model. To better serve the purpose of this study based on teacher evaluation, these four subsections were structured as starting with what was the school principal's expectations for differentiation practice in the given component of differentiated instruction and continued with what teachers were doing in their daily teaching practice for the given component of differentiated instruction.

Content

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the content is related to "the information and ideas students grapple with to reach the learning goals" (p. 20). As the learning goals in HCSD, teachers were required to teach districtwide standards; however, they still had to differentiate the content while teaching these standards according to their students' readiness, interest, and learning styles. In Munnerlyn Middle School, teachers had no autonomy to decide their curriculum. Martin, the school principal, was very strict about having a scripted curriculum that all teachers must follow. Moreover, teacher participants at Munnerlyn Middle School

thought that a scripted curriculum was limiting their ability to differentiate content to serve their students' varying needs. Next, these opposing views of participants were discussed in detail.

Martin, the school principal, explained his practical view for differentiating the content with an emphasis on rigor by revisiting the “high bar” element of his theoretical definition. He elaborated on what he thought about how to differentiate the content as

... everybody is going to get exposed to the same level of rigor based on what they need...if there is going to be a standard, that has being taught every single student, regardless of if they are learning disabled, if they are a second language learner, if they are White, they are Black, they are American Indian, Latino, whatever. They are all going to approach that standard using the same resource. There is no reason for access to the grade level text should be taken away from them just because a student is reading on a [lower] grade level.

After providing his expectations on differentiating the content, Martin provided a detailed example on how to differentiate the content related to English Language Arts content.

In Munnerlyn Middle School, there was a curriculum that guarantees every student, regardless of their learning need, was going to be exposed to the same level of rigor. If a grade level book used as a part of the curriculum, every child in the building is going to be exposed to that text. According to Martin, in such example, the differentiation begins how teachers ask them questions about what is in the text, how teachers work with the standards that teachers trying to teach using that text. Besides such questions where the accommodations came in, there was no way a teacher can tell Martin that a “book is too high for certain students; therefore, they have to read this non-chapter book.” He clarified his reaction to such an approach from a teacher as “that's not how I do things. That's not what I expect my teachers to do.”

Martin further emphasized his expectation from teachers in differentiating the content that the floor is built to be high for everybody. A teacher could easily enrich for students that were beyond the grade reading level from that same text, just like a teacher could remediate students that were reading below that Lexile level, but students must have been exposed and taught from the same text.

Overall, Martin was expecting to see less differentiation on content while focusing on the accessibility for every student to the same learning material in their grade level. His “a high bar for everyone” and “providing every student an opportunity to expose same grade-level instructional materials” approaches further clarified his practical view of differentiated instruction through the content.

In contrast, teacher participants at Munnerlyn Middle School embraced and practiced differentiation through the content in various ways that were not always aligned with what Martin expected from them. While teachers of advanced teachers were able to follow what was expected from them through the curriculum and pacing guides, the special education teachers were struggling the keep up with what was expected from her.

As for Allan, a veteran teacher who taught gifted students, the scripted curriculum limited the breadth of the material that he could use. However, Allan also stated that he even further compacted the curriculum and oftentimes “cherry-pick” things out of the scripted curriculum to highlight. By compacting the scripted curriculum, he believed that he might be “decreasing the breadth of the learning materials, but it enhances the learning.”

Regarding differentiated instruction through the content, Allan emphasized his role as a teacher of gifted students. He believed that gifted students tend to be unsatisfied if they were not challenged. As for challenging the students through differentiating the content, Allan preferred to

provide additional resources to their students. However, he believed that his own curriculum limited him because he could not always offer the complexity that he wanted to with the content. He believed that there were certain ways that he could deepen it, but he could only deepen it so far sometimes. In addition to deepening the content to provide complexity, Allan also differentiated the instruction through the content by tailoring the learning materials to the students' learning style preferences.

Catherine, a special education teacher, had similar concerns with Allan about having a scripted curriculum that hindered her ability to serve and differentiate through the content for the students' varying needs. Catherine, who also taught in the team-taught environment, also expressed her disappointment with the incongruency between having to differentiate instruction while following a pacing guide for a scripted curriculum. She shared her perspective as

That has been my chief complaint about differentiated instruction. If you want me to follow a pacing guide in this team-taught environment that moves at a high pace, GenEd kids who are not labeled disabled have a hard time following it, but now you want my kids to follow it on top of the gap we already have. Most of them cannot even read at the grade level, but you think I am going to be the miracle worker and come in with some type of differentiated instruction, which if I have got one class that has 12 kids and all of them have different disabilities, they all might need a different type of instruction.

Since Catherine had to keep up with the pacing guide and scripted curriculum that the general education teacher follows, she highlighted that she could not differentiate the content as much as she needed in the team-taught classrooms.

Catherine felt that she could not deviate from the pacing guide because she cannot tell her GenEd teacher to slow down and give enough time for her SPED students. Catherine believed

that there was not enough time to differentiate the content in team taught environment because she thought it is not realistic to provide her SPED student enough information in 180 days where it was the same timeline for the GenEd students.

In contrast, Catherine expressed that she taught in her special education classroom differently than how she taught in a team-taught environment. Catherine stated that she could not follow her special education classroom's scripted curriculum and pacing guide. She almost always revisited the basics of the subjects that she taught to prepare their students for the assessments in her special education classroom to provide her students flexibility in the content.

As for Lauren, differentiating the instruction through the content was central to the educational standards that Lauren needed to teach. Lauren also added that the subject and student characteristics she taught shape how she differentiated the content. She accepted standards and descriptor words in her curriculum as the bare minimum for the students she taught because Lauren was teaching advanced students. After all her students learned the standards as described in the curriculum, Lauren would push them further because she taught that she was teaching “a very cool and interesting subject where the interesting stuff comes on with a deeper level of knowledge.”

Later, Lauren further detailed how she differentiated the content for her advanced students as

...I usually look at that kind of descriptor word. I am teaching students who are struggling, I stay with that surface level and then just keep on moving, but with my kids who are really great or are really interested in the topic or have the ability to go further, I try to push them for further. So not every student is going to get the kind of pushed further content, if it is a bare minimum standard and that's what they can handle, then I

give them that bare minimum and keep it moving. So, with content, I never go below the standard. I will push further. So, I guess that is how I would differentiate of my content. Lauren also mentioned that she differentiated through the content by offering materials based on students' learning preferences.

Overall, teachers at Munnerlyn Middle School differentiated the content by focusing on the educational standards they had to teach. Having a scripted curriculum was seen as a limitation for the teacher participants. At the same time, the principal was straightforward about teachers' requirements to provide the same level of rigor for all students in the same grade by letting them be exposed to the same instructional materials. Teachers who taught advanced students could provide the same learning materials to all students first, then offer more advanced materials based on the students' needs and interests.

Meanwhile, the special education teacher was struggling to follow the scripted curriculum and pacing guide for her students. Teachers' approaches to differentiating the content were somewhat aligned with their principal's approach of ensuring all students access the same grade level materials. However, as opposed to Martin's emphasis, teachers' practice of differentiating content heavily changed based on the characteristics of students whom these teachers taught.

In the following subsection, in addition to what they differentiate, how teachers differentiate their instruction to meet the student differences was examined.

Process

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the process is considering "how students take in and make sense of the content" (p. 20). As much as their varying practices on what to teach in the content component, teachers and the principal at Munnerlyn Middle School

had varying approaches for how to differentiate based on the student differences. Two teachers who taught advanced students predominantly differentiated their instruction based on the Tomlinson framework which also aligned with Martin's approach. However, the special education teacher stated that she did not differentiate through the content based on her students' differences. Teachers' student grouping practices were also examined in this subsection.

Martin, the principal, did not explicitly mention how he differentiated the process as a teacher; however, Martin's memories from observed classrooms had clues about what he expected from the teachers in terms of differentiating the process. For Martin, grouping was at the heart of differentiating through the process. Martin further detailed what differentiation through the process looks like in real life by sharing a memory from an observed mathematic class where the teacher was in the back of the classroom with three or four students in a classroom for 12 to 15 students total.

In this classroom, the teachers are in the rear of the classroom with a small board, next to a dry erase board. The interactive whiteboard is on their students, and they were up there working through problem sets. There were individual students on the other side of the room, and they were on their Chromebooks, completing some problems on Khan Academy. There were also some other students who were also on Chromebooks. They were working inside of an intervention program that Martin's school purchased.

The teacher in the back with groups of students, she was modeling, and those students had sets of manipulatives out that were using to solve the problem and record the answers on their whiteboard. The students up at the front, they were actually working through problems that look completely different. For example, the kids working with the teacher, they were talking

about actual geometric shapes, the kids at the board, they were doing problems on area and the Khan Academy students were working on individual lessons that look like on their level.

Simultaneously, the intervention students were working on a program that was designed to show growth from week to week because they were being probed inside of this program. All of that was happening inside of this classroom. And then, after about 20 minutes, the students at the board switched places with the students that were with the teacher, the kids on the computers continued to do what they were doing. After this observation, Martin had the impression that if he ever came back to this classroom, he would always see different students engaged in different activities based on their needs and interests.

This praised differentiated classroom observation memory revealed Martin's key expectations from teachers regarding how to differentiate. Relative to what was expected, Martin further explained what was not expected and considered as an ineffective differentiation through the process. Martin stressed that if a teacher attempted grouping in a classroom where the students were not properly trained, and not modeled consistently enough to clarify what was expected from students, it was the kind of classroom that Martin described as not good kind of chaos. It would be the kind of chaos where kids were just off task. Another hint for ineffective differentiation through the process for Martin was the static grouping where students did not change their groups for a long period of time.

Overall, Martin was expected to see a well-designed ability grouping practice with an emphasis on fluidity across groups based on students' academic level and using varying tools such as Chromebooks, small boards, and interactive boards to serve students' different learning styles.

As for teachers, Allan started to describe how he differentiated instruction through the process from his grouping strategies. He mentioned several different strategies to group his students based on ability level, interest, and behavioral aspects. The behavioral aspect in Allan's approach was a unique strategy comparing with the other participants in this study. As a part of this practice, Allan would place a student who struggles with certain behaviors in a group with other students who do not struggle with that behavior to make his grouping practices more harmonious.

In addition to his unique approach that considers behavioral differences, Allan prioritized the random grouping in his differentiation through the process because he believed that students respond the fairness very well in the grade level he taught. Allan used a combination of grouping strategies to provide sense of fairness to his students, such as teacher selected groups based on behavioral aspects, random grouping, and self-selected groups. Later as a follow-up question, Allan was asked to explain more about self-selected student grouping.

He elaborated that process by highlighting overall student rationales to self-selection into the groups. Allan emphasized two separate logics that students use while self-selecting their groups as friendship and competition. He detailed that some students wanted to be with their friend to work together while other students choose groups which they thought the group will be the best group with all the smart students in it.

After the detailed explanation of his grouping strategies, Allan described his teaching practices that can be considered as differentiation through the process as switching his daily plans up every 15 minutes or so. Allan summarized his daily teaching practice as "let's start off whole class, and let's work individually, then let's go to group, let's come back, let's move, move, move." He switched his teaching up just like the instructional modalities he would switch up. He

explicitly emphasized his desire to switch up his teaching to point that all students were learning.

Allan further shared a point related to differentiating the process in a gifted classroom by stating his empathy for people that are introverted which he believed that a lot of gifted people are introverted. He added that introverts sometimes got run over in school because everyone wanted them to be in a group all the time, and it worn them out and their ability to intake information. Allan applied his empathy to gifted introvert students in his classroom setting by letting them be quiet in the isolation because he thought that these students recharging with that.

As Allan mentioned earlier in the content section, he revisited his concerns related to curriculum as “sometimes the pace is not dictated by student need, sometimes the pace is dictated by the curriculum.” He further added “I am not criticizing my own curriculum, but I am just saying that is true across the board.” Allan shared how he balanced curricular requirements and student needs as a part of his differentiation through the process.

Allan understood there are needs of the students, but there are the needs of the system as well. To balance these two sets of needs, Allan leaned on his personal relationship with students to save time for the system’s needs. Allan shared an example where he applied a personalized scaffold as

There is a student of mine who really likes this particular sports figure. And I went up to him the other day and I said, I want you to write this paper, like you are this particular sports figure. And I swear I got two paragraphs out of him just for that, from that statement, but it was a very personalized statement that just had meaning for him. So, he was able to go with that. So, it was just based on my experience with him and just little conversations that we have had in the hall, or when he comes in in the morning.

While Allan described how he differentiated, he shared his belief that people needed structure to learn regardless of their differences. However, Allan also believed that it is essential to provide the right amount of structure based on individual differences.

He expressed his enlightenment about the similarities among adult and K-12 learners while he was teaching teachers for their gifted endorsement. Allan believed that there was not really a lot of difference in the amount of structure that his gifted K-12 schoolers wanted and that his adult students who were learning about gifted learners. They both wanted about the same amount of structure. With his adult learners, Allan felt he could give them more independence, but he knew they needed differentiation too.

Allan described the nature of differences between adult and K-12 learners by emphasizing the somehow different needs of adults. Allan believed that adult learners had needs, and sometimes adult learners would have needs that were not necessarily their need such as it might be a need generated by someone in their family. To address the unforeseeable needs of all learners, Allan preferred to provide a certain amount of structure in his teaching which he believed structure was really desire of all learners to get going on something. As such, Allan thought that he had become a little more structured over the years, but also he learned when to let off for individual differences.

Overall, Allan, a veteran educator who taught gifted students, believed that differentiating through the process was about finding the right balance between the students' and systems' needs, providing the right amount of structure based on student needs, and empathizing with the students based on their varying needs.

As for Catherine, a special education teacher who taught both in the regular special education environment and team-taught environment, differentiated instruction through the

process looked different based on the classroom where she taught. For example, while Catherine described her grouping strategies in her team-taught classroom, she always mixed her SPED (special education) students with non-SPED students because she believed that if she put three SPED students together, they were going to talk everything but the task they were assigned. As such, Catherine's grouping approach in team-taught environment was mostly heterogenous.

However, she later shared that this model also did not work for her students. Based on Catherine's grouping experiences, when she put an ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) student, a general education student, and a student with a disability in the same group, the group always pulled apart in about 15 minutes because the general education students did not have the patience and they had already labeled their SPED classmates as "you are beneath me." Catherine believed that grouping practices was mostly harmful for her students with disabilities because once she grouped her students in a heterogenous group, general education students had gone off by themselves and left SPED group members by him/herself.

In contrast, Catherine stated that she did not often practice grouping in her special education classroom because she thought her students were not ready to work independently. She elaborated that

I do not group them in there. When in my small group class, we do everything together. Like for the first 18 weeks, for the first half of the year, most of it I do with them. I ask them all the leading questions. I ask them probing information and I put it up on the board, and it is based on upon the details that they gave me, or I might get up on the board and I will put all the details up there that we talked about ... And I tell them now that we have all these details, I want you to complete the task. So, it is at a very slower

pace, and it is very concentrated because a lot of them that are in small group do not even know how to write a sentence.

However, Catherine further explained that she sometimes grouped her students when some of her students started to be more independent.

In such instances, Catherine let her more proficient students work independently while she kept working with the students in a group who needed extra support. Catherine also believed that what she was doing by letting some students work independently and keeping others with her in a group could be considered differentiated instruction.

Catherine also emphasized that she sometimes used alternative learning materials such as Legos to serve the different learning styles of her students. However, she highlighted that curriculum-related pressures prevented her from offering more opportunities. Catherine expressed her frustration with having to teach certain grade level standards. Most of the time, she was able to cover only the basics of the required standards because she thought, at the moment, it was so over her students' head. She claimed that she would rather take all the extra time to use teaching what she had to teach the basics that students did not have instead of covering more details of a standard.

Overall, Catherine mostly did not differentiate her instruction through the process as much as other teacher participants did because she believed that her students needed individualized instruction instead of differentiated instruction. Moreover, Catherine highlighted that while differentiating through the process in her team-taught classroom, she complained about the limitations of the heterogeneous grouping of students with disabilities with their GenEd peers. Therefore, Catherine's academic goal-oriented teaching practices did not align with what Tomlinson described as differentiated instruction through the process.

As for Lauren, differentiated instruction through the process was central to her teaching. Lauren stated her strong belief for different learning styles among students. As such, Lauren emphasized that she always tried to give her students opportunities to practice different modalities with the content. Lauren differentiated her instruction through the process by providing her students a small chunk of her talking and then touching a lot of different learning styles of her students.

For example, when her students simply do not want to read the content, Lauren provided them opportunities to either research on their own, discuss with their groups, do a puzzle, or do some sort of game with the content. Lauren further added that in a perfect world, she would do something for each type of learner with each piece of content because she believed that it is never good to do or never bad to do something out of your learning style. However, in her practical world, process was simply “just trying to give a variety of ways or deliver the message in a variety of ways” for Lauren.

Lauren also explained how she differentiated through the process by applying different grouping strategies. Lauren added that she learned how to group students during her gifted endorsement and used these strategies in her teaching. When asked to share how she differentiated instruction through the process, Lauren provided an example that includes student grouping as

...a scaffolding group where these kids are going to be probably the leaders of the group and these kids are good at X ... I think it is the six hats where basically one is a leader. They have to wear this hat where, okay, you are the negative one. Like you got to pick out all the problems. And it was just fun because the kids were actually role playing, I feel like a higher level of understanding where it is I have to put this hat on and play this

role. And they were all in these groups based on their personalities and their likes, their interest and what they are good at....

Lauren later expressed her feelings about this example as “it was exiting, I just won teaching today, a big win that I have.”

Overall, at Munnerlyn Middle School, the expectation from the principal to differentiate through the process was aligned with what is described as best practice in the Tomlinson framework. Two of the teachers who taught advanced students explained how they differentiate through the process by tailoring their instructions and applying grouping strategies based on student needs, interests, and learning styles. However, a special education teacher who taught both in a team-taught classroom and a special education classroom pointed out that she did not apply grouping strategies and did not believe in the effectiveness of differentiation through the process for her students. Teachers’ beliefs on the limitations of having a scripted curriculum and pacing guide were also revisited in the process component of differentiated instruction.

The following subsection examined differentiating through the product by focusing on the principal’s expectations and teacher practices.

Product

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the product is considering “how students show what they know, understand, and can do” (p. 20). In terms of the expected practices in differentiating the product at Munnerlyn Middle School, Martin, the principal, did not expressly state his expectations from his teachers. Regardless of the weight on formal/informal data and summative/formative assessment in Martin’s definition of differentiated instruction, he did not explain what was the expected practices in terms of differentiating through the product.

However, Martin stated that his school was set up based on the addressing the complexity of the work or the instruction for students by always looking to have the right or as close to the right fit for student's particular level of attainment. Also, Martin added to what he expected was that teachers cannot be solely dependent on to small group instruction to address that complexity for each student. He thought that there must be times when teachers level or tier assignments for students. Turning now onto teachers' practices on differentiating the content, the rest of this subsection was about how teachers use the student assessment as a part of their differentiated instruction.

As for Allan, a veteran teacher who taught gifted students, differentiated instruction through the product was limited because of the standardized assessment requirements. He described differentiation through the product as a sore subject with a lot of teachers because of all the standardized assessment that teachers had to do. However, in his gifted classroom, differentiation through the product was just something that he really practiced at building in the creative aspect of his teaching to some extent.

Allan added that even if he believed the power of providing flexibility for the product, his students sometimes had to do the same product for him. Also, when Allan provided the flexibility, he provided an array of choice, and he further stated that he never gave it to them as "you can do whatever you want or unlimited amount of choice" because he thought that it would not be productive.

Related to differentiation through the product, Allan believed that true differentiation is in his feedback. He used his feedback to the individual student, which he expressed as highly differentiated, but not in a rubric format. Regarding rubrics, Allan complained about the overrated opinions of people outside of the classroom that rubrics are great because they sound

like they are objective. In contrast, Allan did not believe that objectivity was ever exist. As such, he positioned his objectivity as “all for being fair, and students intuitively know that a teacher care for them and that teacher are really trying to be fair” for his differentiation through the product. Allan further added that his students “pretty much move the earth for him” if they believe the fairness of the assessment but trying to achieve it with a piece of paper and a lot of squares on it was simply not Allan’s ideal approach to fair assessment.

Allan also shared his experience with using rubrics by emphasizing his students’ reactions to rubric based assessment. Allan highlighted that every time he used a rubric, students looked at the bottom of the rubric to see what they made and file the paper in their notebook. Based on his experience, Allan believed that students were not paid attention to rubrics because he never saw any student who come to him with their rubric to talk about it in his 29 years of teaching career. As such, Allan shaped his assessment practice to go with commentary to his students that is very individual and spent more time on commentary than he did setting up rubrics. Overall, Allan differentiated the instruction through the product by providing choices for his students and providing individual feedback to each student assignment.

Catherine, the special education teacher, differentiated her instruction through the product by emphasizing the academic needs of her students. In terms of differentiating the product, Catherine started with explaining the limitation of the standardized assessment practices and questioning the practices in team-taught environment as

In our school district, we are only required to give one grade a week. So, in theory, we have a nine-week grading period. And in those nine grades, two of those grades have to be an assessment grade. Now as a special education teacher in the team-taught environment, I can tell you, 90% of my kids, maybe even higher, are going to fail the

assessments. Because those assessments are written at a X grade level. My kids are not there. If you only give them one grade a week, which now is seven grades, because two of those grades are assessments and they fail both of those assessments, which is 60% of their grade.

After stating her frustration with the standardized assessment, Catherine explained how she tailored her assessment strategies to protect her students from the school system's grading requirements starting with a conversation with her co-teacher in the team-taught environment.

As a part of this conversation, Catherine explained how hard the general assessment for her SPED students, and they needed special adjustment for their assessment to maintain their phase of learning. After this conversation, Catherine started to balance the school system's requirements with her SPED students' needs by providing her students more assignment to complete. By increasing the number of assessments, Catherine was able to start very easy for her students to build their knowledge bases while having good grades until they receive more challenging assessment to fulfill school district's assessment requirements for the team-taught SPED students.

Overall, Catherine targeted to increase her students' average grade by assigning three times more product to grade that includes tasks as easy as a notebook check to as challenging as the same level assignment with the general education students have. Catherine strongly believed that all this extra grading and all this extra work that she had to do was the only feasible way to be able to get her SPED students a passing grade in a team-taught environment.

Lauren was also a teacher participant who complained about limitations of standardized assessments. However, she stated that she tried to provide flexibility on the learning products as much as she can. By emphasizing his dissatisfaction with the standardized assessments, Lauren

stated her responsibility to have test-based assessments and quizzes as a part of her assessment. However, Lauren always tried to give her students the opportunity to choose how they want to show what they learned if it is not a test. For example, if students wanted to send her a video message, a visual that they have created, a PowerPoint, or any other creative product, she would gladly accept it if they met the assignment requirements.

Lauren further shared an example of the RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic) method which she used to provide opportunities for her student to be creative while they are producing their learning outcomes. In this strategy, Lauren provided her students three of the tasks, and expected them to choose something about it to be creative. However, Lauren expressed that she could not always use such strategies because her department required her to administer very specific student assignments. Therefore, Lauren felt that she did not usually have a control over the big grades, but she had her students design materials, build models, do experiments to provide her students with choices regarding the method to express required learning.

In addition to her balancing efforts between the expectations from her subject department and her differentiation through the product, Lauren also shared how she was balancing the grouping strategies during the differentiation through the product based on the students' preferences. She allowed her students to work alone or in small groups on projects. However, depending on the task, she sometimes required students to be in groups. For example, if Lauren gave her students an assignment that they have to play their role, they cannot just opt out to work alone.

Overall, teacher participants at Munnerlyn Middle School were heavily prioritized the product part of the differentiated instruction. However, their strategies and practices varied across the participants. Particularly, the teachers of advanced students were differentiated

through the product based on students' preferences, while the special education teacher only tailored the product for all of her students to provide leverage against the school system's accountability requirements.

In the following subsection, the environment component of differentiated instruction was examined from both the principal and teachers' perspectives.

Environment

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the environment is considering tailoring "the climate or tone of the classroom" that is positive and invitational (p. 20). The environment component of differentiated instruction is mostly about setting a tone that "everyone feels welcomed and contributes to everyone else feeling welcome" regardless of their academic and non-academic differences (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 43).

At Munnerlyn Middle School, Martin, the school principal, prioritized the aspect of meeting the students at their individual learning levels which starts with looking at the data that teachers collected on the students. Martin believed that as a leader, it is his responsibility to provide consistent opportunities for teachers to know where their students are both academically, socially, and emotionally through conversations and intentional actions from the school counselors, as well as the support staff members who work with students in Response to Intervention (RTI), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and special education programs.

Martin initially focused on the academic segments of the environment while emphasizing that he accepts the academically challenging environment and differentiated instruction standards as one component of teacher effectiveness. In addition to an academic achievement-oriented environment, Martin also explained how to build a classroom environment that welcomes every

student could be difficult for teachers from a time perspective. According to Martin, process of building a classroom environment that welcomes everyone started at the beginning of the school year by administering interest inventories on all students.

Martin believed in the power of these inventories to engage the students in his school, however, he did not value the discussion around learning modes to create a welcoming classroom environment because he believed that this approach was not practical in K-12 settings. By reflecting his opinion on being practical with the use of strategies for differentiating through the environment, Martin quoted Carol Ann Tomlinson as “use all the strategies you can but use them effectively because you are not broad stroking everything.”

Martin also believed that differentiation for the non-core courses had been significantly left out of the conversation when differentiating through the environment. He emphasized that the sensibilities that teachers included when planning instruction for a student was centered around academic core courses. Martin also argued that it was just effective to incorporate differentiated instruction strategies in the courses such as band, drama, visual arts, PE and health, and orchestra.

In turn, teachers’ perspectives about their teaching practice in differentiating through the environment were mostly aligned with Martin’s expectations. Allan, a veteran educator who taught gifted students, described how he differentiated the instruction through the environment by emphasizing the relational aspects of his teaching as

there is a relational aspect to differentiation. So, for me, just a practicing teacher, it is just every part of my practice to build relationships with students. So, part of the differentiation is that I have a student right now, she is on the basketball team. She plays basketball. She is very much into basketball. So, I have been talking to her. And so, we

will converse in before class or in the hall or whatever. And as I build a relationship with her, I will put weave into certain lessons, some things about basketball because I know that she is into that.

Allan further added the importance of building individual relationships with his students to leverage these relationships to build a classroom community.

Allan believed that he builds the rapport in his classroom to facilitate students by building a classroom community and applying his relational insights with students into his grouping strategies. He emphasized that the relational aspect of his teaching, which helps to bring their student together as a community, strengthened his instructional practices to serve his competitive students in the gifted classrooms. As such, Allan highlighted that differentiated instruction through the environments was an essential part of his teaching practices.

Catherine described her special education classroom as a nontraditional setting when asked about environment component of the differentiated instruction. In this classroom, she provided flexibility in where her students could stand, walk around, or lay on the floor. Moreover, Catherine stated that she even let her students listen to music while completing some tasks. In contrast, Catherine did not believe the effectiveness of differentiated instruction through the environment by focusing on students' social-emotional needs and differences. She emphasized that her special education students are in the school for learning, not for social purposes. Catherine elaborated her point as

Students are not in school to make friends because you and I both know that the friends that you have in high school and middle school, you may never see them again once you graduate. Especially if you go to different colleges and go down to different paths. My

students are not in school to make friends. I could care less about them sitting next to his peers. That was irrelevant to me.

After stating a highly controversial insight about the irrelevance of social-emotional components of schooling for her students with disabilities, Catherine explained the purpose of schooling as

What was relevant to me was that my student was in a class where he could learn how to read, how to write, and where somebody would not take advantage of them. I do not need you to have friends in school. I need you to go to school to get an education, not to sit here and come up with your friends and talk about who likes what girl and who has what tennis shoes. No, I did not care that, and that was always my approach. And that is how I approach the kids that I teach.

In addition to her approach to building a classroom environment by not prioritizing the relationships among her SPED students, Catherine shared her point about how dysfunctional to place her SPED students into team-taught classrooms by referencing her experiences as a parent. Catherine elaborated her approach to role of the policies for SPED students as

If we just keep passing these kids along and putting them in a team-taught environment, because a piece of paper says they should be sitting next to their peers because somewhere, some years ago, somebody turned it into a segregation thing. ... separate can mean equal because end of the day it is about them getting an education, not about segregating them. If my son needs to be segregated, then segregate my son that is how I looked at it. And that is how I explained it to the parents. Please stop hand holding them, stop letting them just go through this system and not know what they need to do, especially the basics. Because if you cannot read, how do you expect to get a job?

Overall, most likely, Catherine's controversial approach to differentiation through the environment was driven by her personal experiences as a parent. As such, regardless of the requirements and expectations from her school principal, she tried to apply what she thought best for her students by not trying to provide a classroom environment where students can build a sense of community.

As for Lauren, she emphasized her flexible seating practices when asked about differentiation through the environment. Lauren believed that the physical classroom environment was essential for differentiated instruction. Moreover, Lauren emphasized the importance of getting to know her students to build a positive classroom environment. To learn about her students, Lauren frequently administered a questionnaire every year that called "big 20." This questionnaire included 20 questions that spans from "what's your favorite color" to "what's something you want to tell your teacher."

In contrast to Catherine's perspective, Lauren believed that a school is a social place. She also mentioned that Lauren uses the information from "big 20" to let their students know each other better. Lauren believed that she could make connections among students by applying her knowledge on students from the questionnaire to group them and let her students to get to know each other.

Overall, at Munnerlyn Middle School, the principal highlighted the importance of differentiation through the environment for academic purposes. In contrast, two of the teachers who taught advanced students valued knowing their students by focusing on their non-academic individualities. By knowing their students, these two teachers tried to make connections between the content and their students' different personalities to build a positive classroom environment. One teacher participant, who taught students with disabilities, deprioritized students' individual

personalities, and did not try to build a positive classroom environment based on the students' nonacademic differences. She simply did not believe in the importance of the social role of the school for her students.

In sum, reflecting her philosophical approach to differentiated instruction, the school principal expected teachers to differentiate their instruction through all components mainly based on students' academic differences that enable them to succeed academically. In contrast, teachers' practice of differentiated instruction through each component varied based on their philosophical understanding, personal experiences as a parent, and ability to implement differentiated instruction at Munnerlyn Middle School.

In the next section, teacher evaluation practices related to differentiated instruction were examined by focusing on both the principal and teachers' experiences.

Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness in Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction has been located at the forefront of the teacher evaluation system in Georgia, and thus Hangleton County School District. Even if differentiated instruction was assigned as only one of the ten teacher performance standards in the state's teacher evaluation system, the rest of the nine standards were closely aligned with the philosophical and practical tenets of differentiated instruction (see Appendix G) in the academic literature. Through examination of teachers and the principal's sensemaking of teacher evaluation experiences related to differentiated instruction, the analysis of interview data revealed varying nuanced perspectives across the participants in Munnerlyn Middle School.

In this section, the principal and teachers' experiences related to the evaluation of teachers' practices related to differentiated instruction at Munnerlyn Middle School were examined. To present these experiences in detail, the researcher reported the principal's and

teachers' teacher evaluation experiences with the same timeline suggested in the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) implementation handbook.

Principal

For Martin, the school principal, the teacher evaluation process on differentiated instruction started with the pre-evaluation conferences. For these conferences, Martin met with a small group of teachers that were grouped each year differently based on the PLC they are in, teachers who taught the same subject, or teachers from different subjects. Martin highlighted that he does not meet the same group of people every year and differentiate the pre-evaluation conference for each group.

Moreover, Martin always had a prepared agenda for the pre-evaluation conferences. In that agenda, every single year, Martin included some look-fors that he shared with the teachers a way ahead of time in terms of the standards that he focused on when he came into the classrooms. He emphasized that differentiated instruction is always on that agenda. Particularly for differentiated instruction, Martin stated that the key look-fors are the challenge and support. Also, Martin believed that differentiated instruction either shows “rigor or it does not” by emphasizing that rigor has nothing to do with something being hard for a student. Martin always reminded in these meetings that “the easiest way to remember what rigor is that it is something that is going to keep this student engaged at a level that challenges them.”

Martin explained how he used these conferences to explain using artifacts for teacher evaluation to the teachers. In these conferences, Martin provided examples of artifacts that teachers can use to showcase an intervention. Martin further described his reasoning about using artifacts as he could see an instructional practice in picture form because a teacher snapped a picture of it when differentiated instruction was happening, he could see it in written form, a

teacher could describe it to him very succinctly, or it could be a document which is either something that the teacher created or a result of student work. In addition to explaining his clear reasoning why he valued the artifacts, Martin stated that it is important for him to lay his expectation out in the very beginning.

The artifacts were an essential component of Martin's teacher evaluation practices. He believed that when it comes to ratings, what he observed should have been supported by additional artifacts and evidence. Martin believed that an evaluator cannot take an observation to reach a conclusion on an instructional practice by observing a 10 to 15 minutes of a snapshot. As such, he stated that Martin needed artifacts to perceive that something is happening consistently, not something that can happen once or twice in a semester.

In addition to look-fors and the artifacts, Martin always gave a reminder in the pre-evaluation conferences that "there are no gotchas" in his style of teacher evaluation. After setting the expectations in the pre-evaluation conferences, the next step for Martin was classroom observations to observe teachers' effectiveness in differentiated instruction. For Martin, the main source of information for teachers' effectiveness in differentiated instruction was students. He believed that "getting insight directly from the students can help form what is probably either happening or not happening on a consistent basis" whether he was observing or not. He further explained that

I know this seems almost like I am being somewhat facetious by saying this, but I interview the students. I talk, I question them, that is where I get the most reliable information because I will ask them in very kid like terms. Hey, does this make sense? What are you doing right now? They will either say yes or no. Hey, do you understand like what you are supposed to get out of this? Yes or no. Is this connected to something

else that you all were doing before this? Are you also studying parts of this concept in some of your other of classes?

In addition to information from students, Martin believed that moving patterns of a teacher in the classroom provide a clear clue about the existence of differentiated instruction in a classroom.

Martin labeled the teachers physical movements around the room as “a dead giveaway.” He further explained some of the hints related to teacher movements as “typically, if a teacher is differentiating with the students, they are actually sitting, listening, and monitoring and giving timely feedback right then and there.” Moreover, Martin emphasized that if the only time he sees the teacher getting up is when Martin walks into the door, it implies the differentiated instruction is not there most of the time.

Martin also paid attention to student works as an indicator of the rigorous differentiated instruction. Martin believed that if there had been differentiated instruction in a classroom, there should have been a culminating component of the learning that can be on display. He further elaborated what he meant by the display as “something that a student can present to the teacher, or the observer, or it could be somewhere on a wall or in the building.” Martin emphasized the importance of a visible learning outcome because he thought that if enough of the learning outcomes were made visible, it meant that it solidifies and legitimizes that there was something challenging that student experienced, and they can show other people or be able to explain it. In brief, Martin paid extra attention to students’ insights and teachers’ movement patterns in the classroom observations.

As for the rating teachers’ effectiveness on differentiated instruction using the classroom observation rubric, Martin shared that

... the golden level, obviously the minimum expectation is that teachers do this kind of work consistently, but the one connection that I see that happens that you cannot look at differentiated instruction in and of itself, but it is clearly connected to other performance standards.

Also, Martin interpreted the rating levels in the teacher evaluation rubric in detail. By highlighting that he also shared this interpretation with the teachers as

... you can get a four every once in a while, so that can happen, but you cannot live at a four because to say that you are living at a four in any particular standard means that not only do you have expertise in it, but you can be the model of it every single time you are in front of students, or, you have anything to do with delivering instruction or working with parents etc.

For Martin, everybody should be working, implementing, teaching, and learning at a three. A three, the golden level, meant that teachers are not just proficient, but they are proficient at a level of consistency that is expected day in and day out.

By comparison, what a level two meant for Martin was that there are some growth opportunities that are being missed that are inconsistent that need to be remediated addressed, or even fixed prior to the next observation, so that teacher could reach a three status, but over time. Martin emphasized that it is easy for a teacher to move from level two to three by working with another colleague, a coach, with Martin himself to show that there is the actual development of skills that are addressed by reaching individual student's learning needs.

As for level one, it meant for him that differentiated instruction was never observed, or there had been no evidence collected on differentiated instruction. Martin further explained that getting a one cannot be a one-time opportunity; in order for a teacher to get a one, this particular

teacher had been given several opportunities, and she had not been able to adequately demonstrate or prove that the teacher either understood or had any type of working towards a level of mastery for that particular standard. When it comes to differentiated instruction to get a one, Martin detailed how to get a one in differentiated instruction as that if every time an observer walked in and saw the teacher while providing whole group instruction regardless of the expectations were clearly defined as to try small groups.

As for the feedback, Martin believed that the magic of the feedback is based on its alignment with the performance standards. He used the rubrics and the sample performance indicators only as a guide because he believed that there is no way to have a concise list or measure of everything that is expected to happen. For Martin, these instruments were a guide to have some common language and focus on anything that will drive the improvement and implementation of any of the standards, including differentiated instruction.

In reality, the feedback that Martin gave to his teachers was based on what he observed, what the students had told him, based on what he had heard parents say, and how teachers were communicating and connecting with students. As a leader, Martin thought that he could constructively provide feedback that was in the form of either growth statements or guiding questions that could help them move to a level that equals consistency.

In the post-evaluation conferences, along with the feedback from classroom observations, Martin always provided feedback related to the standardized test scores of students. Martin valued the data and data-driven instruction and created actionable steps using student achievement data. However, Martin had some concerns about using student test scores as a part of summative teacher evaluation due to the lagged achievement data for several years. In addition to what and how Martin did to evaluate teacher effectiveness, he believed that his

content expertise across almost all subjects helped him to be more effective and reliable for the teachers.

In the following subsection, the teachers' experiences of the teacher evaluation process on differentiated instruction at Munnerlyn Middle School were examined.

Teachers

Allan, a veteran teacher who taught gifted students, positioned the teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction at Munnerlyn Middle School as a part of the overall instructional effectiveness. Allan believed that when his administrators came in his classroom, they were looking around to see an overall big picture for effective instruction which the differentiation is a component underneath that umbrella of big picture for Allan.

When asked to describe the teacher evaluation as a chronological process, Allan started with the orientation. According to Allan, in the orientation, teachers received general instruction about what is the teacher evaluation system; however, they did not receive any specific guidance about how differentiated instruction would be evaluated within this system. After the orientation, Allan stated that he completed his self-assessment checklist as the next step which included his self-assessment on differentiated instruction. After completing the self-assessment, Allan stated that they set goals for the professional growth component of the teacher evaluation system.

As a part of this component of the teacher evaluation, Allan described the goal-setting process for professional growth by separation of the main goals as department goals and a personal goal. Allan claimed that he did not include the differentiated instruction in his personal goal because he considered himself "fairly proficient" at differentiated instruction. As such, he stated that he usually set goals in other areas where he wants to do more to grow.

Allan also highlighted that sometimes teachers steered to certain in areas for goals, however, these areas were almost always connected to differentiated instruction. Allan provided an example by focusing on his most recent goals as “this year was mostly around the social and emotional learning.” When he framed this goal on social emotional learning with differentiation, he had to start looking at “really truly individualized differentiation” as far as how he was trying to reach certain students.

Allan further connected his personal goal-setting process with his approach to the self-assessment rubric. He believed that there is always room to grow; therefore, he tended to rate himself three out of four and set his goals to get better in almost all components of teaching. Allan further shared that if the Likert scale provided out of ten instead of four, he would rate himself nine instead of three.

As for the classroom observations, Allan stated that he did not know the exact expectations of the evaluators. Allan further shared that he was aware of neither any signal or nor straight up expectations from the evaluators. Allan emphasized that anytime anyone was in his classroom or not in his classroom, he was already differentiating his instruction regardless of the circumstances. As such, he believed that if a trained observer visits his classroom, they should be able to see it without relying on the signals or expectations. He detailed his view as “if you are coming in at the right time, if you stay long enough, you are going to see some differentiation take place.”

In addition to Allan’s emphasis on non-circumstantial aspects of his differentiation practice, he also emphasized that the student characteristic whom he taught made his differentiation practices seems different than other teachers and hard to capture by a “not-well-trained” observer. Allan believed that as a teacher who taught gifted students, his instruction was

already differentiated from the beginning. He elaborated the challenges about observing the effectiveness differentiation in a gifted classroom as

... it is a little more homogeneous group than other people get to deal with. I have already differentiated the lessons for the high-end group. So, that is a layer. And so, I am layering other differentiation inside that already established layer of differentiation.

In addition to classroom observations that he experienced as a part of the teacher evaluation, Allan also conducted self-observations by video recording his own teaching.

Based on the analysis of his self-observation of the recorded lessons, he had a better understanding of what the evaluator might be looking at. He shared an example of his analysis of recorded lessons as

There are certain intangibles in a good teacher's classroom that are really factoring in too. If I'm walking over to certain students, and I can put my hand on the corner of their desk, they know that is a signal that could be differentiation for them. There were little subtle things like that going on all the time in a good teacher's classroom.

Allan believed that a teacher's view of effective differentiated instruction might be more rigorous than the evaluators. Moreover, as a contribution from his analysis of recorded lessons, Allan had a unique insight about what might be the differences between his and his evaluator's expectations in terms of what is effective differentiated instruction.

To further clarify his point regarding these differences of expectations, Allan used an analogy of camera lenses. Allan believed that evaluators did not necessarily have the thoroughness of thought about differentiation because they do not really have to. Allan also added that evaluators were there to evaluate it, but he was the one who were implementing it. Therefore, Allan resembled the evaluation process as evaluators' camera is pulled back farther

than him where he was close-up on certain students, even when he was teaching in a whole group setting.

Allan provided an example that an observer might think certain students' mindset were similar, but he, as the observee, knew the similarities and differences better because he is day to day with every single one of those students. Hence, Allan believed that his approach to differentiation in his classroom might be a little more rigorous than it seems to an observer. Thus, Allan expected his evaluators to focus more on the bigger picture because he thought he had already focused on something small to his detriment.

As for the feedback he received based on the classroom observations, Allan believed that the detailed feedback that describes the breakdown of what an evaluator saw in the observed lesson was the valuable feedback. Allan believed that instead of technical/formal feedback, he found the feedback that was focused on the craft of teaching was more valuable. Moreover, Allan emphasized that the feedback he received was limited because it was based on a snapshot of what could be observed in a small amount of time.

Catherine, a special education teacher who taught in both team-taught and regular special education classrooms, perceived teacher evaluation as a bureaucratic duty that principals had to complete. As such, Catherine did not believe in the effectiveness of the teacher evaluation practices and did not follow the teacher accountability procedures. According to Catherine, all the teacher evaluation procedures were about checking the boxes.

Catherine did not believe in the sincerity of the teacher evaluation system in Georgia. She stated that student test scores were the sole concern of her administrators and herself. According to Catherine, classroom observation should have been practiced when there was a problem with

student growth. Catherine observed that when her students' test scores were promising, teacher evaluation practices were just a procedural process. She further elaborated

Whether you come in my room or not, you are really looking at those test scores. Did my kids grow? If my kids did not grow, then you might come in there and you might look at the evaluation and say, okay, well, how are you teaching? Why are they not growing? But if my kids are growing every year, when they come in there to evaluate, it is just a process that they must do because that is what State of Georgia says. ... But I really do not think that TKES really serves a purpose, especially, when your kids are growing, because if your kids are growing, then that means you are teaching correctly.

When asked the chronology of the teacher evaluation process, Catherine talked about the self-assessment checklist as the first step. Like what she thought about the overall teacher evaluation process, Catherine thought that self-assessment is a formality. She believed that, especially at the beginning of her career, she had no idea what she was capable of, so she thought that she never gave herself enough credit on the self-assessment checklist.

Later, when asked about the pre-evaluation conferences, Catherine described this process as a mechanical and formal by sharing "it says 80% of your kids will have X amount of growth. That's the pre-conference." After the pre-evaluation conferences, Catherine mentioned the classroom observations as the next step in the evaluation process. Regarding her classroom observation experiences, Catherine described what happens during a classroom observation in the team-taught environment as "they come in the classroom, and when we are in there with two teachers, we do not know who they are evaluating and they got their computers, they sit down and do their things.

Catherine also explained why she thought classroom observations are ineffective by emphasizing the dynamic nature of classroom teaching practices. She further elaborated her reasoning as

Now the issue with TKES across the board, even from just the differentiate instruction, you might walk in the room one day and we are where maybe the day before we gave them the instruction and we used it and today they are working independently.

So, there might not be as much differentiated instruction because we have already done the instructional piece of it. Now you are applying it. So, we taught, we modeled it, and now they are doing it.

Catherine emphasized the timing of the observations might hinder evaluators observation of her differentiation by highlighting

I do not know if [the evaluator] walks in there and we are in the process of doing the instructional piece of it. And he hears me say to the kids what is the basics of this subject. So, can he quantify as differentiate instruction? I do not know what his perception is. I do not know what they think differentiated instruction is, so I can only do what I can do.

By highlighting the ambiguity of the expectations from the evaluators, Catherine expressed that she always differentiates as much as she can.

She further added that she did not do anything special for the day of the observation, but at the beginning of the year, Catherine told her students to watch their behaviors and be in their seats when someone comes in their classroom. Catherine also believed that her teaching would not change regardless of whoever was observing because she felt confident with her teaching. Moreover, Catherine's sense of job security helped her to be more open to classroom visits. She further emphasized that

... anybody can walk in my classroom, I do not care. The superintendent can walk in my classroom, but you see a bunch of kids that are laughing. They are having fun and they are learning. Is not that what it is all about? So, if you do not like the way that I teach, then I will go to another school district.

By expressing her option to work in another school district, Catherine elaborated her leverage as I am not changing who I am. Take it or leave it. Because fortunately as Special Education teacher, I can get a job anywhere. There is such a shortage of us. So, I am not going to put on some facade and be something that you want me to be just so you can evaluate me. No, I am going to let you evaluate me in the context that I am in and you can come back to me and tell me whether you like it or not.

In addition to ambiguity of the expectations and her confidence in her job security, Catherine shared that the post-observation conference would be beneficial if she could get one.

Catherine thought that she had received good ratings while she was not differentiating according to TKES' definition, and she did not know why she still got proficient ratings on that standard. As the overall feedback, Catherine also highlighted that her feedback was always generic, and it mostly included similar statements such as "you are doing a great job" and "you are fine."

In contrast to how Catherine felt about the TKES, Lauren was very satisfied with the teacher evaluation practices she had experienced. While describing the teacher evaluation process for the effectiveness of differentiated instruction, Lauren started with the self-assessment checklist. In the self-assessment, teachers rated themselves on standards, and their administrator would prioritize classroom observations around the standards that teachers rated themselves lower.

Lauren later explained her principal approach of focusing on the strengths of the teachers during the classroom observation. According to Lauren, the principal came into her classroom and saw three things that are going “really well” to rate these three components. Then, during the midyear conference, the principal explained the nature of instructional practices that were not effective during the observations and why he rated Lauren lower on these components. After the midyear conference where Lauren and her principal discussed her instructional effectiveness thus far, Lauren waited for her summative end of the year conference to discuss a full critique to go through each different standard including differentiated instruction.

Later, Lauren shared her perspectives about what evaluators expect to see specifically for differentiated instruction. Lauren compared her previous evaluation experiences based on the different evaluators’ expectations by expressing the reliance on principal’s subjectivity. For example, in her early career, one of Lauren’s principals perceived differentiated instruction as student choice. This particular principal was expecting students to lead differentiated instruction, and Lauren had to shape her instructional practices around this norm. In contrast, her current principal believed that teachers needed to lead the differentiation process, so Lauren had to realign her instructional approach based on this norm recently.

By emphasizing teacher-led differentiation, Lauren explained her current principal’s expectation on differentiated instruction as “give the students what they need, but at the same time, give them opportunity to express themselves the way they want to.” More specifically, in her current practice, Lauren believed that there is an element of choice in the differentiation and an element of the teacher, and the teacher’s role is assigning certain levels to certain students by either pushing the students further or scaffolding and remediating for them.

Moreover, Lauren stated that the experiences of teachers with different evaluators were mostly consistent in terms of principals' expectations for differentiated instruction. After acknowledging teachers' tendency to show their best teaching during the observations, Lauren emphasized the fairness and consistency of classroom observations as

I know when a person comes into the room that everybody gets on their best behavior. So that is when I am trying to pull things out and really push for, but I have never really had a principal come in and I feel like they are not being fair. It seems like they are all coming in and looking for the same thing I feel like people come in and they are usually pretty fair and they look for pretty consistent things either. They are just looking to see if you're providing the students what they need at the level that they need.

However, she also mentioned that when evaluators have an idea of a particular teacher's overall teaching effectiveness, they might shift their expectations for differentiated instruction. Lauren further elaborated her point as

I do think that some principals have favorites, because I know that I have done something in a classroom before and they are like, nice, you got a four, you are a great teacher. And then other teachers would be doing the same thing. And of course, I cannot see it, but they would give them a three. So, I do think there are some kind of favoritism with principals where they will look at a teacher and be like, this is not her best day, but I know she can do it. So, I will give her the good score anyway.

In terms of the evaluators bias on differentiated instruction based on the overall teacher effectiveness, Lauren believed that she had received the better version of this practice as an overall effective teacher.

Moreover, by affirming what Martin shared earlier, Lauren pointed out that when Martin did not see enough differentiation, he followed up with the teachers and provided them an opportunity to explain what they were doing to differentiate that he could not capture. Regarding this point, Lauren shared the importance of her relationship with his evaluators by emphasizing the benefits of building a good rapport. She stated that if she builds a good rapport with her principal and consistently differentiate her instruction in a rigorous way, she could receive a good rating even if she could not effectively differentiate during the time of classroom observation.

Regardless of her belief that her overall effectiveness as a teacher gave her leverage during teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction, Lauren also believed that her approach to “try what is best for the child” helped her to receive good ratings from different evaluators.

Lauren detailed this belief as

...definition of differentiation is abstract, and everybody looks at it a little bit differently. I think, overall, it's all about what's best for the child. So, depending on how you go about that is different. Probably [Martin] would probably teach in a different way that I would teach. He used to teach science so I am sure he taught in different ways than I did, but I think overall his goal in differentiated instruction is the same as my goal where it is how can we make this best for the child.

As for the feedback component of the teacher evaluation process, Lauren stated that different types of educators regularly provided her feedback throughout her career who are principals, assistant principals, and school improvement specialists.

By referencing a combination of the feedback from different evaluators, Lauren portrayed what is effective feedback for her by emphasizing the importance of reference point from her

actual instruction through verbatim notes. Lauren believed in the authenticity of the feedback when it was tied to her observed instructional practice and valued the type of feedback that acknowledge a certain practice over the feedback that are suggested in TKES platform. As such, in terms of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction, Lauren was satisfied with the process and the feedback she received. Hence, Lauren was a strong believer of the TKES' effectiveness in improving her teaching practices.

Overall, teachers at Munnerlyn Middle School did not have a clear understanding of their administrators' expectations in terms of differentiated instruction which was broadly explained as "student engagement in the level where students can grow." All three teacher participants at Munnerlyn Middle School had different perspectives about the teacher evaluation practices that are used for measuring their effectiveness in differentiated instruction.

While a veteran teacher who taught advanced students believed that evaluation practices were efficient but limited, another gifted teacher was very satisfied with all components of the process. In contrast, a special education teacher who taught in both team-taught and regular special education classrooms believed that teacher evaluation was inadequate and just a bureaucratic burden for principals to complete. In sum, teachers' teacher evaluation experiences for differentiated instruction at Munnerlyn Middle School were determined by their individual perspectives on what teacher effectiveness is and how it can be measured.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, teachers' and the school principal's perspectives on differentiated instruction and the measuring teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction were examined in the context of one school—Munnerlyn Middle School. After providing a detailed explanation of the school context and participants' background, educators' perspectives were examined by

focusing on how they gave meaning to the construct of differentiated instruction, how they understand the practices of differentiated instruction, and how they made sense of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction at Munneryn Middle School.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews, which was further triangulated by the supporting documents and field notes, revealed that educators made sense of differentiated instruction mostly based on their teaching and personal experiences. Accordingly, participants' differentiated instruction practices were typically driven by their philosophical standpoints for what good teaching is and how they serve their students to meet their needs depending on the school and classroom context. Moreover, the differentiated instruction practice at Munneryn Middle School did not completely reflect their administrators' expectations.

As for the teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction, the teachers' personal beliefs regarding what their students needed were the main drivers of how teachers gave meaning to their teacher evaluation process. For the gifted education teachers who mostly practiced differentiated instruction as instructed, teacher evaluation was valuable. On the other hand, for the special education teacher who did not believe in the effectiveness of some differentiated instruction components, teacher evaluation was a useless tool to contribute to her teaching practices.

In the next chapter, the same analysis of the teachers' and school principal's perspectives about differentiated instruction and teacher effectiveness was examined at the Margaret High School context that serves a different grade cluster of students in the Hangleton County School District.

CHAPTER 6

MARGARET HIGH SCHOOL

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of the teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. This study aimed to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to content of teacher evaluation instruments to describe their teacher evaluation experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

To address these questions, this study sought to understand teachers' and principals' experiences of and perspectives about differentiated instruction both as a part of their instructional practice and their teacher evaluation.

In this chapter, details about the school context and background information for each participant are provided. Next, the teachers and the principal's interpretation of differentiated instruction in terms of their philosophical standpoints, teaching practice, and the teacher evaluation processes are examined and reported in the context of Margaret High School.

School Context

Margaret High School is 1 of 11 Hangleton County School District (HCSD) schools. There were 2687 students enrolled at Margaret High School at the time of the study, which was

immoderately higher than the average state enrollment for the same grade cluster. Student demographics in Margaret High School had a similar pattern with the school district’s overall student population. This pattern presented as a similar share of students with different racial backgrounds, percentage of economically disadvantaged students, and student with disabilities. Regardless of the alignment for student characteristics, Margaret High School had been identified as an effective school (Grade B) with a higher College and Career readiness score than district and state average. Table 6.1. provides more detail about Margaret High School’s student demographics.

Table 6.1.

School Characteristics for Margaret High School

<i>Variables</i>	State		HCSD		Margaret
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Value</i>
Total Enrollment	828.27	555.16	871.09	678.52	2687.00
Percentage of Asian Students	3.35	7.13	2.45	1.97	2.00
Percentage of Native Students	0.10	0.33	0.27	0.47	0
Percentage of Black Students	39.01	30.24	33.18	10.79	37.00
Percentage of Hispanic Students	15.20	16.01	37.91	18.15	39.00
Percentage of Multiracial Students	3.98	2.24	3.91	1.38	3.00
Percentage of White Students	38.25	28.53	22.18	20.69	19.00
Percentage of ED* Students	65.42	27.83	60.55	23.81	53.00
Percentage of Students with Disabilities	12.91	6.34	10.15	4.12	10.10
Percentage of Students enrolled in IEP**	9.98	13.87	27.55	18.09	13.00
Mobility	22.67	243.34	16.81	7.97	12.20
College and Career Readiness Score	74.33	11.83	77.31	8.24	80.90
N=	2,254		11		1

Note. ED*: Economically Disadvantaged; IEP**: Individualized Educational Plan.

In administration, there was 1 school principal, and 9 full-time and 2 part-time assistant principals at Margaret High School. The average salary for administrators was \$104,200, and all of them held a Master’s or higher degree. In addition to administrators, there were 21 full-time and 2 part-time support personnel in Margaret High School.

The teaching workforce in Margaret High School consisted of 156 full-time and 5 part-time teachers. The average years of teachers' experience were 14.48, and many teachers (n=55) had between 1-10 years of experience. A vast majority (n=97) of teachers was female. The racial/ethnic composition of teachers was: 105 White, 37 Black, 12 Hispanic, 4 Multiracial, and 3 Asian teachers. A majority (n= 132) of teachers had a Master's or higher degree. The average annual teacher salary was \$65,453.

Margaret High School's teachers are less effective than the state and district's average when measured by the statewide teacher evaluation system (see Table 6.2). When rated by their principal during the classroom observations, the teachers in Margaret High School underachieved their peers in the district and state. However, when measured by their students' growth in standardized tests, the teachers were more effective than the state and district averages. As for the teacher effectiveness in differentiated instruction in Margaret High School, the average teacher rating was 3.05 out of 4, which was considerably lower than the state and district average.

Table 6.2.

Teacher Effectiveness at the Margaret High School

<i>Variables</i>	State		HCS D		Margaret	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Differentiated Instruction	3.08	0.37	3.08	0.39	3.05	0.21
TAPS Rating	3.05	0.28	3.04	0.28	3.02	0.18
SGP Mean	50.80	9.18	51.62	8.75	55.09	9.87
SGP Rating	2.94	0.45	2.97	0.42	3.11	0.45
Non SGP Rating	2.97	0.39	2.91	0.29	3.00	0.00
Student Growth Rating	2.96	0.41	2.92	0.33	3.03	0.24
Professional Growth Rating	3.06	0.30	3.10	0.33	3.11	0.31
TEM Rating	3.05	0.29	3.06	0.25	3.04	0.19
<i>N</i> =	91,722		602		133	

Note. Data from 2018-2019 school year.

Margaret High School Participant Profiles

Four educators from Margaret High School were selected to participate in this study, three teachers and the school principal (see Table 6.3.). The school principal was selected because of his role in the teacher evaluation process. The school principal was ultimately responsible for teacher evaluation regardless of her participation in classroom observations. The teachers were selected based on the principal's insight about their willingness to share their experience with teacher evaluation and differentiated instruction.

Table 6.3.

Participant Profiles

Name	Title	Highest Degree	Experience (years)
Carol	Teacher	Ed.S.	16
Floyd	Teacher	Ed.D.	17
Gary	Principal	Ed.S.	21
Sylvia	Teacher	M.A.	25

Carol

Carol was a mid-career teacher with a 16 years of teaching experience at the time of the study. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Education with a focus on social studies. Carol started her teaching career as a middle school teacher. After working three years in a middle school, Carol received her National Board Certification. She worked four more years in the same middle school while she was working on her Master's Degree in Educational Leadership. Then, Carol earned her Specialist in Education Degree (Ed.S.) in Curriculum and Instruction.

Right after receiving her Ed.S. Degree, Carol transitioned to a high school in a nearby school district to Hangleton County and taught three years at this high school. Carol started work in Margaret High School as an academic coach and a social studies teacher, and she had been

with Margaret High School for the last six years. Carol was teaching only one class at the time of the study, and that class had one period and one set of students. There was a total of eight students in this class who were all English Learners (EL).

Floyd

Floyd was a mid-career teacher with 17 years of teaching experience. He earned his Bachelor's Degree in philosophy and received his Master's Degree in secondary science education. Later Floyd earned his Doctor of Education Degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on educational technologies.

As for his teaching experience, Floyd started teaching "on level" physics and then after four years of teaching, he started teaching Advance Placement (AP) physics. Floyd always taught at the high school level and has been teaching AP physics since he started teaching. Floyd also was an instructional coach at Margaret High School and was teaching only one class at the time of the study.

Gary

Gary, the school principal, is a veteran educator and administrator. He was in education for 21 years at the time of the study, and he had been an administrator for 16 years. Gary earned his Bachelor's Degree in US History and Economics in teacher education. His Master's Degree was in advanced classroom training for social studies, and his Specialist in Education Degree was in administration and supervision. Gary was working on his English as a Second Language (ESOL) endorsement at the time of the study.

Gary taught social studies, primarily economics, government, and leadership in three different schools for five years. Later, he stepped into the administration and started to work as an assistant principal at a high school for three years in a nearby school district to HCSD. Then,

Gary worked as a principal for 10 years in 2 different middle schools. At the time of the study, it was his third year as principal at Margaret High School. Gary also added that he spent a year in a think tank on Wall Street for trying to solve the student loan crisis.

Sylvia

Sylvia was another veteran educator with 25 years of teaching experience. She earned her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees in secondary English education. Sylvia started teaching as a middle school language arts teacher. After working seven years in the middle school level, she moved up to a high school as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. Sylvia received her ESL and Instructional Coach endorsements while teaching sheltered literature classes in this high school. After receiving her endorsements, Sylvia quickly became the ESL Coordinator in this large high school. Later, Sylvia moved to another state and started to work as an educational associate in a public charter school where she was positioned as a testing coordinator and senior bridge project coordinator.

Then, Sylvia moved back and started teaching as the English Department head and the lead ESL teacher in a nearby school district to HCSD. Later, Sylvia was promoted in this district to a central office role to work as the ESL instructional coach for all the middle and high schools. As a part of this role, Sylvia supported 13 schools through coaching Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) for ESL. Later, Sylvia received an offer from Gary to teach 9th grade literature and to serve as the English Department instructional coach at Margaret High School. Sylvia worked together with Gary earlier in her career and accepted the offer because she thought Gary needed her to change the school around. At the time of the study, Sylvia was teaching English Language Arts to a diverse group of students in the same classroom that included advanced students, GenEd/on level students, and ESL students.

In the next section, the findings from Margaret High School case study were presented.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of the teacher performance evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. To understand the sensemaking process of teachers and principals, the researcher examined three topics related to differentiated instruction and evaluating teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction related to: (1) understanding differentiated instruction, (2) practicing differentiated instruction, and (3) evaluating teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction. Analysis of the interview data revealed the plot of the narrative presented next in this chapter.

Understanding Differentiated Instruction: Differentiation as a Way of Thinking

Although differentiated instruction is well-known as an instructional practice, it has also been conceptualized as the teaching philosophy behind teachers' daily practices (Tomlinson, 2014). To better understand how teachers and the principal made sense of differentiated instruction, the researcher initially tried to understand their philosophical standpoints, which they used for justifying their differentiated instructional practices. Examining the different approaches of teachers and the principal was an essential part of this study to capture nuances to understand how participants conceptualized differentiated instruction and how these nuances were implemented in their teaching practices.

Overall, at Margaret High School, all participants deemed differentiated instruction a very important practice for their students. Interestingly, the school principal's definition of differentiated instruction did not align with the definitions of teacher participants at Margaret

High School. In the following subsections, the principal and teachers' philosophical perspectives are presented.

Principal

Gary defined differentiated instruction as “the ability to differentiate either the content, the product, or the process” in addition to emphasizing “pure differentiation is not doing all three all the time.” He further detailed his definition from teachers' perspectives as “[differentiation] is really trying to find out in an effort to get the student to become successful or reach mastery” by applying which of the three components is the best or appropriate ones to change in instructional practices. Gary clarified why applying not all of the components of differentiated instruction were at the center of his definition by providing a context-specific example:

Sometimes you cannot change the content. Especially if you are teaching an AP or IB class. So, maybe the product or the process is the right approach. Sometimes the process should pretty static if you are using some type of science or math equation.

Considering such limitations, Gary stated that differentiated instruction was a teacher's ability to successfully figure out which component of differentiated instruction is the appropriate one to implement.

Gary's motivation to learn more about differentiated instruction was based on his K-12 years as a student and his dedication to be a better teacher than his teachers. He elaborated his experience as

[t]here are times I can remember sitting in a class, and the teacher was just either teaching to the middle and I was bored, or they were teaching down and I was bored, or they were teaching well over my head, and I was very confused and very lost. I never in my mind's eye or vocabulary thought about it as differentiated instruction. I really thought about it

as I wish you would just help me, or you would stop being so boring. So, it is acted as a catalyst where I also sat in that chair, as the students said, when I become a teacher, I need to do a better job of reaching my students.

Gary added that his academic training, his classroom observation experiences, and what he read about differentiated instruction were the main drivers of his definition. Gary also mentioned that his unique experience to be a part of the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System's (TKES) design process in a Race to The Top district that helped him learn more about differentiated instruction.

Overall, Gary's definition of differentiated instruction was missing an important component that the teachers' ability to differentiate their instruction through the learning environment. Moreover, Gary emphasized that differentiated instruction is "choosing" the best or most appropriate component of differentiation practices instead of trying to employ multiple components at the same time. However, Gary believed his approach to provide flexibility for teachers' differentiated instructional practices helped teachers to conceptualize instruction in a way that participating teachers enhanced their understanding of differentiated instruction.

In the following subsection, the philosophical standpoints of the Margaret High School teachers related to differentiated instruction are examined.

Teachers

Teachers at Margaret High School were aware of the formal textbook definition of differentiated instruction following the work of Tomlinson (2014). However, all three teacher participants expressed that they have a more evolved version of this definition based on their experiences with specific student groups over their years of teaching. All teacher participants' evolved definitions were focused on organic instructional approaches instead of forcing their

differentiation to fit in the content, process, product, and environment components as elaborated by Tomlinson (2014).

For example, Carol, the least experienced and mid-career teacher, defined differentiated instruction as supporting and accommodating students with a variety of different strategies and activities. She further detailed her definition as

meeting students where they are academically, also supporting students with interests. ... different strategies that can help with scaffolding and tiered instruction based on academically where the student is at. I also think of student interests as relates to maybe kinesthetic, visual, auditorial, or tactile learner.

When asked how Carol developed this definition, she explained that she did not learn anything about differentiated instruction during her academic teacher training in college except for different learning styles of students which were not connected to differentiated instruction at that time.

Carol recalled that she was able to make the connection between student learning styles and differentiated instruction in her third year as a teacher. Moreover, Carol believed that her process of getting national board certification helped her to better understand how to practice differentiated instruction. In addition to the national board teacher certification process, her gifted endorsement process was a focal point for her differentiation based on tiered instruction and scaffolding.

Carol further clarified that her process of acquiring the means of differentiation was mostly based on her 16 years of teaching experience. Carol believed that experiencing challenges and opportunities with different students made her think about how to address the different needs of students. She explained such moments as “the times when your training kicks-in” to make the

connections between her academic education and instructional practices. Carol also believed that asking how to define differentiated instruction across various stages of a teacher's career would yield different responses. For example, she believed that early career teachers are not ready to differentiate, and they are mostly learning to read the prior experiences of their students.

Regarding her belief of developing differentiated instruction skills through teaching experiences, Carol thought that teachers develop their pedagogies through their personal growth in their teaching. Based on how she advanced her differentiation skills, Carol believed that after teachers realize the importance of differentiated instruction for their students, they authentically invest time and energy to understand more about differentiated instruction. Consequently, teachers can make connections between the pedagogical tenets of differentiation and their own classroom practices only after they are convinced its effectiveness for their students. Hence, according to Carol, this process of learning about differentiated instruction and making meaningful connections with teaching practices takes time, and that is why she thought it is very unlikely for an early career teacher to implement differentiated instruction with fidelity.

Floyd, another mid-career teacher, expressed that he had two version for the definition of differentiated instruction. He claimed his first definition as the literature-based definition and quoted exactly as it appears on Tomlinson (2014) "modifying the content, the process, the products, the environment according to students' interests, readiness and learning style." Floyd expressed that he conformed this definition early around 2011.

Floyd shared his updated definition of differentiated instruction, as a more of an equity-based definition, that differentiated instruction is where he tries to give the students what they need. Floyd further elaborated this definition as

some students may need more than other students to achieve the same success. So, I do not try to go through that mechanism of content, product, process. I try to look at specific needs and just do organically, whatever I can do to help them succeed.

Floyd believed that whenever there is an opportunity for him to differentiate according to his evolved version, he differentiated his instruction.

As for Sylvia, the most experienced teacher participant at Margaret High School, differentiated instruction was hard to define. She believed that differentiated instruction stands for a large umbrella term for a lot of different practices and that people had attempted over decades to define what differentiated instruction is and what it looks like. After sharing this sentiment, Sylvia's explicit definition was that differentiated instruction is

where you are tailoring your instruction to meet the individual student needs. You are meeting their needs academically, socially through engagement in the classroom in any kind of way to make the content accessible for students and engage them in the content.

Sylvia was also aware of the formal definition of differentiation "where you differentiate through the product process or content" and it was always the definition that came to her through professional development sessions and training.

When asked how Sylvia developed her own definition, she expressed that being an ESL teacher had given her the greatest field experience training in what differentiation really is and should be. As a veteran teacher, Sylvia remembered the time when differentiated instruction became the buzz word in education in the late 1990s or early 2000s. She thought that the best way that teachers have been able to frame differentiation was making differentiation a series of tangible practices in their classrooms. Sylvia summarized how differentiated instruction evolved over time as

when differentiation first came out, it was about multiple intelligences and the learning styles of students. Trying to meet all their different learning styles. Then they moved into you can differentiate by content product process. So, teachers started to get ask are you differentiating your instructional process for kids based on their ability levels? Are you differentiating the content based on what they are ready to learn now or are they ready to move on, or do they need remediation, or are you differentiating the product?

For Sylvia, the conceptualization of differentiated instruction was more fully embedded in her practices when she started learning about what culturally responsive teaching was. Sylvia realized that culturally responsive teaching was true differentiation because teachers were learning about the assets that their students have, and they were having students draw on their cultural and social experiences to inform instruction.

Overall, participants' philosophical understanding of differentiated instruction at Margaret High School were very similar regardless of their varying backgrounds. However, it is important to note that the school principal and two of the teachers did not consider learning environment as a part of the differentiated instruction. When asked how they came up with their definition, the participants demonstrated a common sense that their experiences as teachers shaped their understanding. While some participants highlighted the importance of their academic training to make practical connections as contributing to their philosophical understanding of differentiated instruction, others stressed that their definitions were purely based on their experiences as teachers of students with varying needs and interests.

In the next section, how teachers and the principal at Margaret High School enacted their philosophical views of differentiated instruction in the classroom setting was examined.

Practicing Differentiated Instruction: Putting Theory into Practice

At Margaret High School, teachers enacted their definition of differentiated instruction in various ways. Based on Tomlinson's (2014) model of differentiated instruction, teachers can differentiate through the (1) content, (2) process, (3) product, and (4) environment according to student's readiness, interests, and learning profile. To explain the main similarities and differences of teachers' differentiation at Margaret High School, the researcher categorized teachers' differentiated instruction practices according to this model in the following subsections. Although not all teachers were practicing all components of differentiated instruction in their daily practices, and the principal had not taught in a classroom since becoming an assistant principal, all participants had insight about what these components looked like in classroom settings.

In the following part of this section, the researcher examined teachers' and the principal's perspectives about practicing differentiated instruction under four subsections based on the Tomlinson model. To better serve the purpose of this study based on teacher evaluation, these four subsections were structured as starting with what was the school principal's expectations for differentiation practice in the given component of differentiated instruction and continued with what teachers were doing in their daily teaching practices for the given component of differentiated instruction related to teacher evaluation.

Content

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the content is related to "the information and ideas students grapple with to reach the learning goals" (p. 20). As the learning goals in Hangleton County School District (HCSD), teachers were required to teach districtwide standards; however, they still had to differentiate the content while teaching these standards

according to their students' readiness, interests, and learning styles. At Margaret High School, teachers had the autonomy to differentiate the content they were teaching.

Gary, the school principal, believed in teacher empowerment for differentiated instruction through the content; however, he also framed his approach as "a teacher's autonomy in the limits of standards" that are set by the school district. Moreover, teacher participants at Margaret High School praised such flexibility because they thought that it provided them opportunity to address their students' needs while keeping up with the district expectations for instruction.

Gary, the school principal, explained his practical view for differentiating the content by focusing on teachers' autonomy to differentiate the content as much as they want. Gary further explained his expectation for the content as

one of the first steps is lesson planning and having written lesson planning per teacher that is done in a professional learning community. I do not dictate or require a specific template. The recipe does not have to be exactly the same, the choice menu items do not have to be exactly the same, nor should they be. If you are trying to get more rigor or depth or scaffolding in a particular lesson, you really need to make sure that what you are putting down on paper is going to be appropriate for your learners.

Gary believed that empowering teachers was the key for differentiated instruction through the content while facilitating professional learning communities as a supervisory mechanism to not "leave teachers to their own devices." Gary believed that it is not always feasible to modify the content for the students depending on the context, especially for high achieving groups.

Therefore, he empowered teachers at Margaret High School to have the flexibility in differentiating their instruction through the content by relying on their content or grade level PLC to supervise the differentiation of content.

Gary's emphasis on teacher autonomy reflected on teachers' practice of differentiation through the content. Carol, for example, focused on the accessibility of the content to set her students up for success regardless of the expected pace of instruction set by the school system. Carol further explained her practice of differentiated instruction through the content for her more advanced students as

...not reteaching everything extend and enrich. The thinking are skills of advanced learners. This is where you provide go further opportunities for the ones that have already mastered where we wanted them to be at. So, providing those opportunities to enrich the learning for that student is at the heart of my differentiation.

Carol also mentioned that such practices require additional instruction time and usually prevent her following the district level pacing guide for the subject she taught.

As for Floyd, a gifted education teacher, differentiating through the content was something he did not practice daily. Floyd stated that he created lesson plans and included differentiated content in these plans; however, he emphasized that "I do not wholeheartedly do this. It is really just putting something in there so my administrator can say, he is trying to differentiate." In terms of differentiating the content, Floyd translated differentiation through the content into his practice as "making different content available for his students when they wanted or needed to have additional resources."

Floyd believed that the subject and student group he taught did not require differentiation through the content because it was the highest level of learning materials that he needs to cover for the completion requirements of Advanced Placement courses. However, Floyd mentioned that he recently had to differentiate the content for two of his students because they wanted to learn more about the topic that he taught. Floyd prepared a "condensed study guide" to introduce

higher-level resources in the given topic. Overall, Floyd believed that his classroom context and the subject he taught required him to provide the content in a certain static way that makes differentiation through the content irrelevant for most of his teaching.

Sylvia, a veteran teacher, highlighted the content as a vital component of her differentiation practice. Sylvia differentiated her instruction through the content in a very organized and intentional way. Sylvia described that her journey to differentiate through the content starts with curriculum building before the beginning of the semester each year. During these planning periods, the subject team looked for the potential implicit and explicit biases on the curriculum materials to make sure what they teach and the messages that might be sending to their students comply with the diverse needs and interests of students in their classrooms.

For example, Sylvia was intentional to select the content that is not “with all white characters from old dead white guys as authors.” During the semester, Sylvia considered classroom dynamics to revisit the content. Moreover, Sylvia used progress monitoring tools to differentiate the content based on where her students were in the moment. However, in her current practice, Sylvia explicitly stated that she did not have to differentiate through the content during the year because of her earlier efforts to start with differentiated curriculum.

Overall, at Margaret High School, the principal (Gary) empowered the teachers to decide what to teach within the boundary of expected standards of their professional learning communities. This approach of teacher autonomy was reflected in various teacher practices. While some teachers were able to provide remedial content by paying little attention to the pacing expectations or relying on their pre-planning based on the classroom context, the teachers almost always offered static content because Gary thought there was no need to differentiate the content for students.

In the following subsection, in addition to what they differentiate, how teachers differentiate their instruction to meet student differences at Margaret High School were examined.

Process

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the process considers “how students take in and make sense of the content” (p. 20). As much as their varying practices on what to teach in the content component, the teachers and the principal at Margaret High School had varying approaches on how to differentiate based on student differences. Two teachers who taught in classrooms that were populated with specific group of students, exclusively ELL or gifted, claimed that differentiated instruction through the process was not applicable and effective practices for their teaching. However, the teacher who taught in an academically diverse classroom stated that her daily teaching relies on differentiated instruction through the process. In addition to teachers’ practice of differentiation through the process, teachers’ student grouping practices were also examined in this subsection.

Gary, the school principal, explicitly explained what his expectations from teachers were for differentiating through the process. From a school principal’s perspective, Gary believed the importance of differentiated process by highlighting the teacher’s ability to intervene when their lesson did not achieve what was written in lesson plans. As such, Gary’s expectation from teachers was showing the “ability to change, adapt, and be nimble to student needs during the learning process” before it became too late to create an achievement gap within and across classrooms.

Gary’s experience as a teacher helped him to portray what differentiated instruction through the process was in practice. He shared that his student-centered teaching practices

supported student learning by leading them learning from their mistakes. Consequently, Gary expressed that individual student failure provides teachers enough leverage to differentiate their instruction for addressing student needs before it creates a learning gap. Moreover, by referencing his previous point of teacher autonomy in what to teach, Gary stated a teacher could forget content and look it up. However, Gary believed that the “process of learning and the concept of learning and mapping out how students’ mind works in order to get to a specific conclusion” should be in the skillset of a teacher who differentiates instruction.

Regardless of Gary’s specific expectations on how to differentiate through the process, most of the teachers followed teaching to the middle approach because of their sense of their non-diverse classrooms. For example, Carol, a mid-career teacher who taught English Learners, stated that her teaching was mostly based on offering the same activities for all students by dividing them into small groups. Her main approach to differentiate her instruction through the process was based on scaffolding the content as

[t]his is what I think of academic innovation and looking at where the students are and putting them out to rebound, to reteach the content in a way so that they can get it. This may be something where you are looking at the specific standard or target that they struggled on.

As she mentioned in the content component, Carol intended to use all the time she needed to differentiate through the process to ensure students learn the content.

In terms of how she applied grouping strategies, Carol used random grouping, ability grouping, and self-selected grouping approaches. However, Carol shared that she mostly used direct instruction or intentional ability grouping to help her students to build proficiency and mastery for their standardized tests. In her ability grouping practices, Carol intentionally grouped

her students homogenously based on where they were strong and where they were weak. Carol also added she rarely used random and self-selected grouping techniques. For her self-selected grouping, Carol realized that her students from the same ethnic background grouped together, and therefore, her grouping practices became ineffective.

Floyd, another mid-career teacher who taught Advanced Placement, did not believe the effectiveness of differentiated instruction through the process. When asked to share something about differentiated instruction that failed, Floyd exemplified his thought about differentiated instruction through the process as

[i]n our PLC, we decided for this next unit, instead of direct instruction, which the students overwhelmingly say they prefer, we said, let's just have the students do self-guided inquiry where they learn the material on their own, through trial and error just to give the students more ownership of their learning, which I do not agree with at all. But anyway, we assigned this unit through that model and it was an abject failure. The students hated it. The test scores were low, and this change in instruction was a failure, and we went back to the direct instruction model afterwards.

Floyd further shared he differentiated through the process when he had to, but he never considered student learning styles. Floyd believed that learning styles do not exist, and he has been subscribing more to a movement among “legitimate psychologists” who support this view in teaching and learning.

According to Floyd, in his current teaching practice, he was “really heavy on direct instruction.” Floyd unpacked his daily teaching practice as

I start every class where they investigate a scientific phenomenon. For example, I might show them a video or a picture [of this phenomenon]. So, they have to craft a response,

using physics to explain that phenomenon ...after they write that response, then they investigate a simulation and that's related to the phenomenon ...Then with the simulation, they have to record three observations or three relationships that they see. ...

Regardless of his above-mentioned practices that might have been easily considered as differentiated instruction by his administrators, Floyd's reliance on direct instruction convinced him that "it is not differentiated instruction."

As opposed to Carol and Floyd, Sylvia, a veteran teacher, described her daily teaching practices based on differentiated instruction through the process. By amplifying the importance of constantly learning about students' academic and non-academic differences, Sylvia elaborated her approach to differentiation through the process as

my practice sometimes minute by minute changes in class. I never can tell well, this is a strategy that I use, because it is literally informed by my students from one day to the next. So, I always start the year off by learning about my students. I never do just a one-time get to know you activity and then move on. It is constantly assessing them in the middle of a lesson to find out where they are, how they're feeling about things. Do they understand this? Do they not understand this and then making an adjustment on the spot?

By emphasizing the dynamic nature of differentiation through the process, Sylvia was clear that it was almost impossible to standardize what is differentiated instruction due to its context dependent nature.

Also, Sylvia's understanding of differentiation through the process was completely about cultural responsiveness. Her approach to differentiated process changed drastically after she started learning about what culturally responsive teaching was. She believed that learning about the assets that her students have and having these assets to draw on their cultural and social

experiences to inform her instruction was the moment when she found true differentiation through the process.

As for Sylvia, her students being able to work collaboratively in groups was a must for her differentiation process. Sylvia intentionally grouped her students heterogeneously based on their academic ability levels by making sure “no one feels that they are in a group because they did not understand something or their level is lower than other groups.” Her reasoning behind mixed ability grouping was based on her belief that a higher-level student to be with a lower-level student can accelerate the process and the learning for a lower-level student.

Overall, at Margaret High School, the expectation from the principal to differentiate through “process” was a very important component of effective teaching. The teacher who taught in a “self-contained ELL” classroom limited her differentiation through the process to homogenous grouping, while another teacher who taught in a gifted classroom did not practice differentiation through process at all. However, the veteran teacher shared that differentiation through the process was at the heart of her teaching practices.

The following subsection examined differentiating through the product by focusing on the principal’s expectations and teacher practices.

Product

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the product is considering “how students show what they know, understand, and can do” (p. 20). In terms of the expected practices in differentiating the product at Margaret High School, Gary, the principal, did not expressly state what he was expecting besides the requirement to provide a non “one size fits all” assessment. In the same school context, while two teacher participants claimed that they were

differentiating their instruction through the product, one teacher explicitly stated that he did not differentiate through the product.

Gary, the school principal, did not explicitly state how differentiating through the product should look like in a classroom. He emphasized that assessment should not be reduced to traditional assessment where everybody did the same thing. To prevent that, Gary asked teachers several questions to measure their implementation of differentiated instruction through the product such as “Are you doing a writing prompt? What are students going to be able to show for the mastery of that content? What are students going to be able to show growth?”

In addition to questions he asked, Gary clearly stated that assessment should not be one size fits all. By reflecting from his own K-12 education as a student, he shared that he never understood an assessment where everybody did the same thing. Gary further clarified that non-differentiated products might be used during his K-12 years because it was easier for teachers. However, now, he thought that “differentiation is the complete opposite of what's in the best interest of a teacher.” Gary also believed that real life is multidimensional, so student assessment should be multidimensional as well.

As for Carol, a mid-career teacher, differentiated product should provide a choice of the different ways that students can showcase their learning. While sharing how she differentiated her instruction through the product, Carol emphasized the importance of using rubrics related to different learning activities. In her practice, Carol expected her students to work on different learning activities in their assigned groups, so she could use different rubrics to capture students' mastery level in the given standards. Carol also mentioned that she used technological tools such as Raft PowerPoint presentation and Google Slide to provide her students opportunities for creating their own mini assessments.

As for Floyd, a mid-career teacher who taught advanced level students, the classroom dynamics he taught in shaped his practice of differentiating instruction through the product. Even if he explicitly claimed he did not differentiate his instruction, his practices for differentiated product included components of differentiated instruction. Floyd explicitly claimed that “I am teaching AP physics, so the product is the AP exam. So, they need to do a practice, AP exam questions.” He supported his approach by referencing his students’ success on standardized tests and explained how he practiced, emphasizing “the bottom line is that I have to produce acceptable results on the standardized assessment. I just give them examples of old assessment questions as assessment.”

Floyd justified his lack of differentiating product because he thought he was teaching a standardized course. He believed that

everyone takes the same test and my proficiency in teaching is based on the student results on this test. So, I do not give them choices. It is basically labs. Everyone does the same lab. We all do the same practice problems. We do the same homework. They do not have choices for different modes to provide, present their knowledge.

Floyd also admitted that he heavily used direct instruction, but his end of the class assessment could be considered as differentiation through the product, explaining this daily assessment practice:

because of time constraints we do not usually talk about the phenomenon or the simulation, I lecture, lecture, lecture, show them an example problem. And then they do example problems. And I use an interactive whiteboard. So, as they do their example, problem, I can see it develop on my screen so I can check their work. And then at the end

of the class, they have an exit ticket. They rate their confidence level, they summarize a major idea, and then they tell me what else they need help with.

After detailed description of his daily teaching practices, Floyd was asked why he did not consider such practices as differentiated instruction. Floyd reemphasized the lack of student diversity in his current classroom and explained his previous teaching experiences where he was differentiating in his general education (not exclusively advanced) classroom.

Floyd elaborated his previous experiences that he differentiated through the product when he was teaching in a general education classroom 15 years ago. As a part of this practice, for students who did not pass her test, he offered remediation opportunities. His mediation opportunity was that the student had developed a comic strip. In that comic strip, the student had to explain that physics topic through a comic strip, but it was just an unusual but differentiated opportunity.

Sylvia, a veteran teacher, explicitly stated that she differentiated the product for her students. She believed that teachers had to have a really good understanding of assessment uses to inform their instruction as well as strategies for assessment differentiation. In Sylvia's approach to differentiate the product, students must be doing different things to meet the same standard.

Sylvia further elaborated her practice of differentiating through the product by providing choice that includes either pop culture, history, or literature that serve student interests. She valued giving her students the flexibility to choose the topic they would create a product for. In most cases, Sylvia opted to provide a choice board for her students to pick their topic for assessment; however, she also provided flexibility to browse the internet on their own if they felt comfortable enough find their own topic. Sylvia added that her students also could either

construct a visual essay, write the essay, or create an eco-map of their analysis to showcase their mastery on the topic of their choice.

Overall, the school principal generically shared his expectation of a differentiated product as a student assessment at Margaret High School. Two teacher participants prioritized the product part of the differentiated instruction by emphasizing the importance of providing choice for students. However, a teacher of advanced students explicitly claimed that he did not differentiate the product due to the standardized test expectations from his homogeneously advanced student body.

In the following subsection, the environment component of differentiated instruction was examined from both the principal and teachers' perspectives.

Environment

According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiating through the environment is considering tailoring “the climate or tone of the classroom” to be positive and invitational (p. 20). The environment component of differentiated instruction is mostly about setting a tone that “everyone feels welcomed and contributes to everyone else feeling welcome” regardless of their academic and non-academic differences (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 43).

Gary, the school principal, did not include the environment component in his definition of differentiated instruction. Throughout the interview, he never made a comment that connected differentiated instruction and classroom environment. However, Gary mentioned a classroom observation tool that Margaret High School was using to assess student learning that includes classroom culture and climate. In this classroom observation tool, the environment is one that “embraces each learner, creates enthusiasm for learning, and treats students equitably” (Cognia,

n.d. para. 5). The teachers at Margaret High School valued the environment component of differentiated instruction as part of a school-wide social and emotional learning initiative.

As for Carol, differentiated instruction through the environment was a mindset that she has. Carol believed that she provided a positive and safe learning environment for all. She added that she was intentionally and critically providing a culturally responsive environment to every student. Carol thought that she really valued everyone in her classroom, using all the knowledge about students to reflect learning opportunities. She also claimed that she frequently went beyond the standards to make connections with different student backgrounds.

Carol also expressed that differentiated instruction was crucial for her to provide a positive learning environment by building rapport with her students and by letting them know that she cares about them and their learning. She believed that once students know that their teacher cares about them, they are going to do whatever their teacher asks of them. Carol provided an example to clarify her point

I have had students that for no other teacher would do anything but they are making “A”s in my class. So, I believe a large part of that providing that environment and letting them know that I really did care about them.

Carol also believed that teaching roles would need to shift to differentiating through the environment.

Carol thought that understanding the relationship between student and teacher must be based on a fluid role of “teachers as a student and students as teachers.” According to Carol, creating such environments requires teachers to be willing to give up some of their power. She further explained that “too many” teachers are “so scared that if they do not tell the content to students, then their students might not learn it.” As such, Carol thought that to create a learning

environment where each student feels appreciated, teachers must surrender some of their power to be a student for learning their students' cultural backgrounds.

Carol also shared a school-wide social emotional learning initiative as a helpful medium to learn about their students' non-academic life. She shared how she used this initiative for differentiating her instruction through the environment as

A couple of weeks ago for our SEL, I asked them to do a Padlet that basically they told me what was their favorite holiday dish that represents their culture. We later talk about it. They shared their information about it, and it allowed them to showcase their culture. Based on this information from her students, Carol reflected what she learned and tried to embed these holidays in her teaching practices to provide an environment where student heritage and background are appreciated.

Regarding this initiative, Floyd mentioned that teachers spent 10 minutes at the beginning of every class to provide social and emotional support. In this part of the class, Floyd posted a quote and had the students reflect on the quote. He intentionally chose a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion-based quote, and let his students talk about the quote and how it related to their lives. Floyd also regularly asked his students "what's the best thing that happened this week" to learn more about his students.

Floyd added that he is proud of his good relationship with his students. Floyd shared that his students always cite him as their favorite teacher. Floyd believed the reason behind his good relationship with his student was that he produced an environment where his students take risks, and they can fail without retribution. He was always intentional to create a positive classroom environment where students feel safe and do not feel threatened. Floyd tried to create an environment where errors are encouraged by not making the environment too judgmental.

However, he reasserted that he never differentiated the environment, but he justified why he did not by claiming that what he was doing has been working thus far.

As for Sylvia, a veteran teacher who found differentiated instruction after culturally responsive teaching, believed in the importance of providing a culturally welcoming learning environment for all students. As a part of her practice of differentiation through the environment, Sylvia shared that

[c]ulture is not always observable. There's that whole iceberg theory of culture. So, what is really underneath is where you need to start digging and mining that data from your kids to learn more about them.

Like the other teacher participants at Margaret High School, Sylvia praised the 10-minute social emotional learning initiative to learn more about her students' non-academic backgrounds.

Overall, the school principal detached the environment part of his expected practice of differentiated instruction. However, he acknowledged the importance of positive and inclusive learning environment at Margaret High School which was a norm that is established by a student learning-oriented classroom observation tool. All teachers expressed their beliefs about the importance of a welcoming environment for students. However, while one teacher believed a generic positive environment was sufficient to create a welcoming tone in his classroom, other teachers believed that teachers must prioritize collecting ongoing student data to create an environment that everyone feels welcomed and contributes to everyone else feeling welcomed.

In sum, reflecting his philosophical approach to differentiated instruction, the school principal expected teachers to differentiate their instruction by choosing whichever component of the differentiated instruction is the appropriate one to implement. In contrast, teachers' practice of differentiated instruction through each component varied based on their philosophical

understanding of differentiated instruction, the principal's expectations, their perception of the good teaching, and their classroom context.

In the next section, teacher evaluation practices related to differentiated instruction were examined by focusing on both the principal's and teachers' experiences.

Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness in Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction has been located at the forefront of the teacher evaluation system in Georgia, and thus the Hangleton County School District. Even if differentiated instruction was assigned as only 1 of the 10 teacher performance standards in the state's teacher evaluation system, the rest of the 9 standards were closely aligned with the philosophical and practical tenets of differentiated instruction (see Appendix G) in the academic literature. Through the examination of the teachers' and the principal's sensemaking of teacher evaluation experiences related to differentiated instruction, the analysis of interview data revealed varying nuanced perspectives across the participants in Margaret High School.

In this section, the principal's and teachers' experiences related to the evaluation of teachers' practices at Margaret High School were examined by focusing on differentiated instruction. To present these experiences in detail, the researcher reported the principal's and teachers' teacher evaluation experiences with the same timeline suggested in the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) implementation handbook.

Principal

For Gary, the school principal, the teacher evaluation process on differentiated instruction started with the orientation and familiarization of process. Gary believed that the orientation process that includes pre-evaluation conferences and self-assessment of teachers was more valuable than his classroom visits. He described the reasoning behind this thought as that

a reflective teacher's mind is a mature mind ... and they are the ones who are in the instructional design and trying to figure out the best way to reach their students and have them grow ... self-assessment part really gives them insight into what their professional development request should be, what resources do they need, questions and ideas they need to bring forward to their professional learning communities.

Resultingly, Gary told the teachers in his school to take as much time as they needed to focus on their self-assessment because he believed that the self-assessment is the only part of the teacher evaluation that is not "done to teachers." Gary further emphasized that a teacher's reflection on his/her own teaching practices was how teachers "ultimately" grow.

As for the pre-observation conferences, Gary described such conferences as a "very compliance driven" that were offered to a group of teachers with the purpose of providing the basics of teacher evaluation policy, the cut scores in observation ratings, and expectations for each standard and what it should look like in classroom settings. After these group meetings, Gary offered every teacher a one-on-one meeting; however, these meetings were not required, and many teachers chose not to have such a meeting.

While detailing the nature of group meetings for differentiated instruction, Gary described his approach in these meetings as "hypocritical" because he was not differentiating in these meetings. Rather, Gary tried to provide strategies and best practices to all teachers at the same time without dictating a very static and cookie cutter approach. Moreover, Gary believed that each standard gives teachers flexibility to work within them to ensure "their students are getting what they need." However, Gary thought that "sometimes teachers lose sight of that, and they try to meet the standard instead of the student where they need to be." He added that especially with differentiation, if a teacher meets the students where they are and takes them

where they need to be, it means this teacher would naturally meet the consistency of what the differentiated instruction standard is asking.

The next step of the teacher evaluation process in Margaret High School was classroom observations. Gary claimed that during classroom observations he always focuses on the type of questions that students ask and how the teacher chooses to address them related to differentiated instruction. Gary believed that a teacher should be able to analyze the nature of the student's response to the question to find out more about the knowledge gap. Gary thought that by pinpointing the knowledge gap and addressing it in a timely manner teachers can differentiate their instruction to prevent widening knowledge gaps.

Besides his focus on the type of questions and teachers' approaches to these questions, Gary did not look for any other indicator of effective differentiated instruction. However, Gary believed that student achievement in standardized test is an indicator of effective differentiated instruction. He believed that good teachers would do what it takes to have their kids learn, and then the by-product of good teaching would be increases in student achievement. Gary believed that if teachers focus on how students learn instead of what students need to learn, their teaching would include effective differentiated instruction that leads high student achievement in standardized tests.

As for the assigning ratings for teacher effectiveness, Gary shared how he interpreted the ratings in the teacher evaluation rubric for differentiated instruction. Gary believed that the difference between levels were very clear between the Level III and IV that was emphasized on the implementation of consistent and continuous differentiated instruction and becoming a teacher leader. According to Gary, Level IV teachers would be able to transfer their knowledge and share their expertise with other teachers. Gary also believed that it is very difficult to be a

Level IV teacher because such a teacher cannot be a standalone entity in that a Level IV teacher needs to be able to share specific information, reproduce that information, and use several techniques to help other groups of teachers work with their students in more focused ways.

Later, Gary shared how he interpreted the differences between Level II and Level III based on emphasizing the inconsistency of differentiated practices. Gary added that it is very difficult for a new teacher, who is either new to a subject or even new to a building, to have consistencies in their differentiation practices. He further explained why he expected inconsistencies in novice teachers practices as teachers learned differentiation through trial and error, and novice teachers could not have enough chances of trial and error until they master more instructional, classroom, and assessment skills.

After classroom observations, Gary claimed that he rarely conducted post-observation conferences by sharing “the instrument does not require obviously a post evaluation conference unless something catastrophic happened or went wrong in the classroom.” In terms of the feedback based on the classroom observations, Gary believed that “the whole point of feedback, especially on differentiation, is that it should translate into better teaching for the students.” As such, he reminded his administrators to provide smaller chunks of feedback and professional development on differentiated instruction to teachers that would be transferable into their teaching.

In the following subsection, the teachers’ experiences of the teacher evaluation process on differentiated instruction at Margaret High School were examined.

Teachers

Carol, a mid-career teacher who taught English Learners, started to talk about teacher evaluation on differentiated instruction by citing every technical aspect in the state teacher

evaluation policy. After explaining the rules and regulations, the researcher asked about the expectations that her evaluators held for her in terms of differentiated instruction. Carol believed that the evaluators mainly looked for small groups or cooperative group work for the differentiation by emphasizing “maybe different activities based on learning styles, tier readiness, and scaffolding.”

When asked to describe the teacher evaluation as a chronological process, Carol started with the orientation. She added that the orientation is a faculty/staff meeting where they were just briefly talking about which components are evaluated and a timeline of when things must be filled out or checked off in the TKES platform. During the orientation meetings at Margaret High School, administrators stressed the importance of the self-assessment which Carol described as something that she never experienced in any other schools throughout her entire teaching career. Moreover, she added that the administrators always explained the details about the self-assessment and encouraged teachers to not only just rate themselves, but also holistically to reflect who they are in terms of their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher.

Carol later shared her experiences during the classroom observations starting with the observers’ expectations. Carol believed that evaluators narrowly focused on student grouping as an indicator of differentiated instruction because she thought that it is the only part that they can observe. However, Carol also believed that focusing on the observable traits of teaching practices might have been misleading due to the limited duration of observations. Carol believed that an observer on a smaller scale can see if students are in groups and if they are working together on something; however, observers’ prediction of grouping outcomes depend on how long they have observed the interaction or differentiated activity of the student groups.

Carol also claimed that she had never “revamped” her teaching for the classroom observations. Carol was planning her instruction at the day of observation as how she would normally plan any other day; however, she added that she intentionally included more differentiated instruction and tier level grouping in her plans for the observed classes. Beside this small adjustment, Carol believed that her quality of teaching was already at a level that could easily showcase proficiency without any “dog and pony show.”

Carol further expressed that “I did not let that rating identify me as who I am as a teacher.” She explicitly stated that she did not need any rating to validate the effectiveness of her teaching. Moreover, Carol shared that what her students were producing for her gave more gratification than any evaluation results she could get. She believed that classroom ratings are just part of her job, and it is a bureaucratic process that must be done.

Although she had always received good ratings on differentiated instruction, Carol was also concerned about the teacher-centered nature of classroom observations. She believed that a teacher could hit all the indicators in the observation rubric and get a four in differentiated instruction, but the product of such teaching would not always end in learning for all students. Carol believed that designing effective lesson plans and implementing them effectively do not mean such processes must yield student achievement in every setting.

Moreover, Carol expressed that “the level of effectiveness varies based on understanding of differentiated instruction” and further elaborated

some teachers may only understand it as it relates to visual, auditory, kinesthetic... or they also scaffold their differentiation, meaning you start off maybe depending on where are your kids at, you may start off with just a basic to the building up to that finished product that learning had the differentiation in it to allow them to get to that end results.

Carol also believed that the only way to measure teacher effectiveness in differentiated instruction would be the careful examination of student artifacts. However, she also shared that she had never submitted an artifact of student learning as a part of her teacher evaluation in Margaret High School.

As for the feedback, Carol believed that most administrators did not take the time out to give a thoughtful and meaningful feedback. She continued “most of the administrators just copy and paste the information that is coming from the [TKES] website.” Carol thought that if it was authentic feedback, she would look at it more; however, she did not value the feedback based on what she had received thus far. Carol added that if she receives authentic feedback that comes from someone who is in her subject and had similar level of expertise in differentiated instruction, she would take such feedback seriously.

Floyd, a mid-career teacher who taught in advanced level courses, perceived his effectiveness in differentiated instruction through student grades, student AP test scores, and teacher evaluation results by highlighting his focus on “overall student success.” In contrast, Floyd defined the failure for his differentiation as “denying a student while there was a chance to work with the student to accommodate their situation.” Interestingly, Floyd thought that his practice and Tomlinson’s (2014) theory did not match, and he needed support in differentiated instruction, but he always received the highest ratings and was called a “master differentiator” in the schools he worked. After summarizing his overall insights about his effectiveness on differentiated instruction, Floyd started to chronologically explain his teacher evaluation experiences for differentiated instruction.

Floyd started to describe his teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction from the orientation meeting. Floyd explained that the school principal did not explicitly talk about

differentiated instruction in these meetings. However, the school principal set the school level instructional expectations in these meetings by emphasizing “we need to meet the student where they are, and we need to provide equity” which sounded like the definition of differentiated instruction to Floyd.

The next step in the teacher evaluation process was the self-assessment. Floyd recalled that he always rated him as a Level II in differentiated instruction because of his self-perceived lack of differentiation. Based on his self-assessment, Floyd created his professional development goal list, and differentiated instruction was always on the list. In terms of the classroom observation ratings, Floyd was confident that he would receive a four because it was the pattern since the first year of TKES implementation.

Floyd asserted that his administration believed that he is just exceptional, and they preemptively give him high scores without knowing what he does in terms of differentiated instruction. Floyd sincerely believed that his overall success as a teacher convinced his evaluators he was exceptional in differentiated instruction as in the other teacher effectiveness indicators. He also claimed that he knew what an evaluator was expecting to see for differentiated instruction during a classroom observation.

Floyd believed that the administrators would be satisfied if the observer just saw different modes of teaching. He shared that

If I started with a simulation and then went into a video, then did some lecture than had the students do problems, and then maybe had students summarize students’ work and collaborate with each other, I think that the observer would see that variety of instruction and variety of learning experiences as differentiating. I think that they would see that they

would qualify that as differentiating, which is not... I just think that they're looking for a variety, which is not really differentiating.

Knowing evaluator expectations and addressing them in his teaching still did not help Floyd to feel better about his effectiveness on his daily differentiation practices. However, Floyd later admitted that when some administrators told him that he has a level four on differentiation as the feedback from classroom observation, he felt that this feedback was useful in making him feel better about the way he teaches.

Moreover, Floyd claimed that he never received concrete feedback that indicates what was good about his differentiation. The feedback he had received was always vague, but always encouraging him to continue teaching in the way he always teaches. Related to encouragement, Floyd was surprised when one administrator told a developing teacher to watch him because he is the “master differentiator.” Overall, Floyd did not value the feedback he received for his differentiated instructional practices.

Sylvia, the most experienced teacher participant at Margaret High School, explained the teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction in a very formal way starting with the requirements of TKES. She believed the effectiveness of the teacher evaluation system for differentiated instruction to some extent. However, Sylvia claimed that the evaluation system was not helpful for her because she always received high ratings no matter how she taught.

When asked to describe the teacher evaluation process for differentiation, Sylvia started to describe her teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction from the orientation on the TKES platform where every teacher completed the self-assessment in the platform by rating themselves on a one-to-four-scale. Sylvia also added that teachers also provided a commentary on the different strands within differentiation or any other standards for an area of strength or an

area of growth. She strongly believed that there is always room for growth in her differentiation, as such, she always rated herself as Level III in differentiated instruction.

Sylvia asserted that she has not mastered the art of differentiation perfectly and her differentiation attempts were still fluid that changes year to year in terms of the different strategies and approaches that she used to differentiate her instruction. Sylvia thought that she needed to improve her differentiation skills to address the needs of students who are more advanced. Moreover, Sylvia identified providing her EL students with more culturally responsive instruction as an area for growth.

Sylvia explained that after completing the self-assessment as a part of the TKES orientation, teachers had a faculty meeting as a pre-observation conference. Similar to Carol's explanation, Sylvia confirmed that this meeting included logistical parts of the teacher evaluation such as formal policies and expectations. After the pre-evaluation conference, teachers started to have walkthroughs and formal classroom observations at Margaret High School. For this process at Margaret High School, there were five administrators. Four of the administrators were conducting walkthroughs in teachers' classrooms. The remaining one administrator was designated as evaluating administrators who does the formal formative classroom observation.

Sylvia continued to portray the evaluation process with the classroom observations and walkthroughs. Sylvia believed that evaluators looked to see if teachers were using data to inform instruction for a class period or lesson that they were observing. Teachers were expected to keep a binder that includes lesson plans, student work samples, a recent formative quiz, or a smaller assignment to highlight their logic behind the differentiation for the observed class. The classroom observers pushed teachers to make on paper versus practices observed the connection

between student data and differentiated instruction at the time of the observation. Sylvia lamented, “Everyone had their notebooks out.”

Sylvia was expecting the administrators to be able to recognize differentiated instruction in her classroom because they already have her lesson plan book in front of them that documents her differentiation attempts. According to Sylvia, these detailed lesson plans allowed the administrator to read the day's lesson that they were observing as well as what led up to that lesson. Sylvia added that she kept very explicit lesson plans to provide her evaluators the context of her classroom and overall information about expected student attainments for showcasing her differentiation in any observed lesson. However, Sylvia believed that it sometimes became problematic because she had met a lot of administrators throughout her 25 years of teaching experience who do not understand differentiation.

Sylvia further shared that teachers were frustrated when they must deal with an administrator who does not understand differentiated instruction, but still is observing their classrooms. She elaborated her point as

sometimes I think administrators walk in and they think differentiation is a physical, tangible thing you can actually see. So, they expect to see students in groups. They expect to see maybe each group doing a little bit different assignment or an assignment in a different way. And that is not always a standard. That is not always what differentiation is. So sometimes teachers are getting frustrated by that because they feel like if their kids are not in groups and they are going to get knocked down in differentiation on their TKES rating, but it is not necessarily the case. So, I think it is important that administrators who do observe classes understand exactly what differentiation is, all of its layers, and all of the complex ways that teachers can provide it.

Moreover, Sylvia believed that she always received higher ratings than she deserved in differentiated instruction.

Like what Floyd experienced, Sylvia's self-judgement on differentiated instruction was different than what her evaluators thought. Sylvia believed that she received better ratings than she expected because of her role as an instructional coach. She further detailed that

the administrators who do observe me understand that I have what is called the innovative model classroom. So, I have advanced students, GenEd on level students and ESL students all in the same room without a push-in teacher. So, they know that and they come in and they see how that is operating in the classroom. And it sort of automatically nudges me up to a four, but the four also comes from just my role as an instructional coach. So, when you preapprove or when you demonstrate teacher leadership in a certain area of TKES, then that warrants the four, at least in our principal's books. So, he is very much like if you're turning around and coaching other teachers on something in that standard or being a teacher leader in that standard, then you typically get a four.

Regardless of her belief that she was rated as a Level IV while she only deserves a Level III, Sylvia claimed that there was no difference between Level III and IV in the evaluation system because Level III is the proficiency level.

Sylvia further explained her point that if a teacher is proficient in differentiation, then it means they are doing "a good job" with differentiation. A Level IV meant that a teacher is doing a "good job" with differentiation every day, but evaluators only observe a teacher's classroom once a year. Therefore, if a teacher is proficient at the day of the observation, this teacher must be considered as proficient throughout the year because it is the only time that the teacher was observed for differentiated instruction.

Sylvia asserted that once administrators completed the walkthroughs, they conducted mid-year conferences. Sylvia further explained that mid-year conferences were not required, but if a teacher requested a mid-year conference, the primary evaluating administrator would go through all the walkthrough data and the feedback in the platform. The purpose of mid-year conference was explaining the feedback to improve teachers' performance before the full classroom observation(s) for formative assessment.

Based on the formative evaluation that includes 10 TAPS standards, the school principal or formally-assigned administrator must conduct a post-observation conference for the summative evaluation. In this conference, the school principal shares what went well and what did not go so well with the teacher as the feedback. However, Sylvia believed that

candidly, the feedback is not always that great because they just copy and paste from the standards on the TKES reference guide. And it is not specific to what they actually observed. ... they will literally copy and paste the sentence, differentiates the instructional content process, product, and learning environment to meet, but I have never known an administrator to give specific feedback. That is probably the reality of most schools.

Moreover, Sylvia shared that generic feedback affects novice teachers very negatively. Sylvia believed that novice teachers did not know what differentiation should look like in their classroom, so they were developing their practices through the feedback they received. Sylvia added that differentiation in terms of lesson delivery and content was the last thing to be developed in a novice teacher's instructional practice. Sylvia added that it took a new teacher at least three to five years to really become proficient in differentiation.

Overall, the teachers at Margaret High School claimed that they have a clear understanding of their administrators' expectations in terms of differentiated instruction. However, while the school principal expressed what he was expecting during the classroom observation as “the type of questions that students ask and how the teacher chooses to address them,” all teachers pointed out different expectations. For example, two mid-career teachers claimed the grouping as the main observer expectation, while one of the mid-career teachers pointed the use of different modes of thinking as an administrator look for. As for the veteran teacher, teachers’ use of student data to make instructional decisions was what she thought as the expected practice for effective differentiated instruction in the administrators’ mindset.

Moreover, almost all teacher participants believed that they were rated higher than what they deserved for differentiated instruction because of their overall effectiveness as a teacher and their role as teacher leaders. Furthermore, all teacher participant expressed that feedback was generic and copied and pasted from TKES platform. In sum, teachers' teacher evaluation experiences for differentiated instruction at Margaret High School were determined mostly by their principal’s approach to teacher accountability and autonomy.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, teachers' and the school principal's perspectives on differentiated instruction and the measuring teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction were examined in the context of one school—Margaret High School. After providing a detailed explanation of the school context and participants' background, educators' perspectives were examined by focusing on how they gave meaning to the construct of differentiated instruction, how they understand the practices of differentiated instruction, and how they made sense of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction at Margaret High School.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews, which was further triangulated by the supporting documents and field notes, revealed that educators made sense of differentiated instruction mostly based on their teaching and personal experiences. Accordingly, participants' differentiated instruction practices were typically driven by their philosophical standpoints for what good teaching is and how they serve their students to meet their needs depending on their classroom context. Moreover, the differentiated instruction practice at Margaret High School was shaped by the school principal's approach to instructional effectiveness through teacher autonomy.

As for the teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction, the teachers' personal beliefs regarding what their students needed were the main drivers of how teachers gave meaning to their teacher evaluation process. While all teacher participants expressed their thoughts about their ineffective or lack of differentiation practices, their principal still assigned them the highest possible ratings in differentiated instruction. Overall, teachers at Margaret High School practiced differentiated instruction without regard to teacher evaluation consequences.

Using cross-case analysis approaches, Chapter 7 examined the perspectives of the teachers and school principals about differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation related to differentiated instruction.

CHAPTER 7

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. In particular, the aim of this study was to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to content of teacher evaluation instruments to describe their teacher evaluation experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

This chapter focused on the comparison of the narratives in three schools participating in this study. The chapter includes four major sections: (1) detailed contextual information related to the Hangleton County School District (HCSD); (2) the similarities and differences in the schools' approaches to define and practice differentiated instruction; (3) the similarities and differences in the schools' approaches to teacher evaluation practices related to differentiated instruction; and (4) the major themes across the three schools.

School System Context

The Hangleton County School District (HCSD) is one of the Georgia's first charter systems and it is located in Hangleton County. Hangleton County's population was

demographically similar to the overall population in the state of Georgia (see Table 7.1.).

Moreover, HCSD was average in size of school districts across the United States.

Table 7.1.

Descriptive Statistics for Hangleton County Population

Fact	Georgia	Hangleton County
Population, Census, April 1, 2020	10,711,908	60,972
Female persons, percent	51.40%	51.60%
Population by Age		
Persons under 5 years, percent	6.20%	6.30%
Persons under 18 years, percent	23.60%	22.20%
Persons 65 years and over, percent	14.30%	12.90%
Population by Educational Attainment		
High school graduate or higher	87.10%	87.70%
Bachelor's Degree or higher, percent of	31.30%	42.00%
Population by Race/Ethnicity		
White alone	60.20%	55.20%
Black or African American alone	32.60%	30.50%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	0.50%	0.70%
Asian alone, percent	4.40%	2.60%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.10%	0.10%
Two or More Races	2.20%	3.90%
Hispanic or Latino	9.90%	15.70%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	52.00%	48.10%
Language other than English spoken at home,	14.00%	25.30%
Households, 2015-2019	3,758,798	24,554
Persons per household, 2015-2019	2.7	2.35
Persons in poverty, percent	13.30%	14.00%

Note. Source U.S. Census Bureau (2020).

At the time of the study, there were approximately 8,900 students and 1,200 employees in HCSD. The school system included 11 schools: 7 K-5 elementary schools; 1 sixth grade academy; 1 middle school; 1 high school; and 1 grades 3-5 elementary magnet school. HCSD's student to teacher ratio was 14:1 at the time of the study. Moreover, the school system consisted of the following student demographics: 25% English Learners (ELs); 60% Economically

Disadvantaged; 10% Students with Disabilities (SWD); 35% African American; 2% Asian; 39% Hispanic; 20% White; and 4% Multi-Racial students.

Three-quarters of the schools also identified as Title I schools in the district. Furthermore, this school system has lower four-year graduation rates than the state average and higher College and Career Ready Performance Index scores than the state’s average score. As for teacher effectiveness, HCSD had slightly better overall teacher evaluation scores than state averages while average teacher evaluation scores on differentiated instruction were identical to state average (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2.

Teacher Effectiveness in Hangleton County School District

<i>Variables</i>	State		HCSD	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Differentiated Instruction	3.08	0.37	3.08	0.39
TAPS Rating	3.05	0.28	3.04	0.28
SGP Mean	50.80	9.18	51.62	8.75
SGP Rating	2.94	0.45	2.97	0.42
Non-SGP Rating	2.97	0.39	2.91	0.29
Student Growth Rating	2.96	0.41	2.92	0.33
Professional Growth Rating	3.06	0.30	3.10	0.33
TEM Rating	3.05	0.29	3.06	0.25
N=	91,722		602	

Note. Data from 2018-2019 school year.

In the next section, teachers’ and principals’ experiences of teacher evaluation related to differentiated instruction was examined in this school district by comparing the findings from three different schools. The findings were grouped into salient themes—the practices that manifested themselves across all cases. The constant comparative method was used for discerning the common or most frequent constituent elements across cases. The themes are presented in this chapter aligned to the research questions.

Findings from the Cross-Case Analysis

A cross-case analysis approach was implemented after each case was examined individually using within-case analyses. In this study, the researcher examined each case by providing narratives that addressed (1) how educators defined differentiated instruction, (2) how they practiced it, and (3) how they evaluated teachers for their use of differentiated instruction in three different school contexts. During the cross-case analysis, the researcher examined the emergent codes and categories from each case narrative to capture common patterns within the overall data to address following three questions:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

The findings were grouped into salient themes as they manifested themselves across all cases aligned to the research questions. The constant comparative method was used as a means for capturing similarities and differences across the narratives, finding the links in the data, and identifying emerging themes. The findings from the cross-case analysis are aligned to the research questions.

This cross-case analysis was based primarily on data from interviews of the teachers and principals as found in the narratives of each case. The cross-case analysis yielded four themes that were consistent among the participant narratives in the study:

1. the sensemaking of differentiated instruction by the principals and teachers was informed by their personal experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional responsibilities;

2. the way teachers incorporated differentiated instruction into their teaching was influenced by two broad factors: their own understanding of the differentiated instruction and the specific academic environment in which they were teaching;
3. principals made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on their experience as a teacher and leader, the context they worked in, and their role as an accountability policy enforcer;
4. teachers made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on a combination of their personal beliefs and experiences, as well as their administrator expectations.

The following section is an exploration of key themes derived from the cross-case analysis. The first theme discusses the philosophical understanding of differentiated instruction as defined by teachers and principals.

Theme 1: The sensemaking of differentiated instruction by the principals and teachers was informed by their personal experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional responsibilities.

The teachers and principals perceived differentiated instruction as an overall pedagogy that targets meeting students where they are and supporting them to reach where they need to be. All participants acknowledged that differentiated instruction was one of the most effective ways to get the students from where they were to where they could go. Moreover, the participants deemed differentiated instruction an essential practice for their students.

The teachers and principals further shared their understanding of doing what is right by kids to emphasize the importance of flexibility, fairness, and student-centeredness provided by differentiated instructional practices. Regardless of a unified sense of the theoretical definition

for differentiated instruction across participants, there were nuances across participants' understanding of differentiated instruction. As such, common patterns that explain how participants' definitions evolved through different pathways were reported under this theme.

For the principals and teachers, the years of experience as a teacher and the differences in their classroom populations over their teaching careers were the main drivers of their definition of differentiated instruction. For example, despite all teachers sharing a similar understanding, the novice teachers declared a textbook definition of differentiated instruction while more experienced teachers tended to define it with their own words. Moreover, the teachers and the principals, even the least experienced ones, shared that their understanding of differentiated instruction as a pedagogy evolved throughout their careers. Furthermore, educators who taught students with different backgrounds in their classroom, such as students with disabilities, English Learners, and gifted students, indicated a deeper understanding of differentiated instruction.

Similarly, the teachers and principals who received training in differentiated instruction claimed that their training on differentiated instruction helped them shape their understanding of different instructional practices. While some participants expressed that such training helped them validate their senses, others shared that it enlightened their thoughts once they encountered a classroom incident requiring differentiation. Overall, all participants who received training in differentiated instruction indicated that only the pieces of training that they received after becoming a teacher were influential in shaping their understandings.

Participants' role as a teacher or a principal shaped their understandings of differentiated instruction. The principal participants heavily emphasized the academic differences by providing differentiated instruction for academically high and low-flying students to prevent achievement gaps. As for the teacher participants, they took a more holistic approach to differentiated

instruction by including non-academic differences in their definitions and emphasizing differentiation as a mindset rather than as a strategy.

Theme 2: The way teachers incorporated differentiated instruction into their teaching was influenced by two broad factors: their own understanding of the differentiated instruction and the specific environment in which they were teaching.

Teachers claimed they differentiated their instruction as much as possible to address student differences in their classrooms. Similarly, all teachers shared that they practiced differentiated instruction to some extent. However, teachers' practices within and between schools varied based on their sensemaking of differentiated instruction as pedagogy the classroom, school, district context, and the expectations set forth by their evaluators.

Teachers differentiated their instruction based on their beliefs of what is suitable for their students. As examined in Theme 1, there were differences and similarities between teachers' sensemaking of differentiated instruction as a pedagogy. Regardless of a similar understanding of differentiated instruction across the participants, some teachers emphasized certain aspects of differentiation in their definitions. As such, teachers' enactments of their philosophical views of differentiated instruction in their classroom reflected their specific emphasis on the definition.

Teachers' practices of differentiated instruction through "content," "process," "product," and "environment" was different based on their emphasis on "knowing their students as whole," "cultural responsiveness," "academic differences," or "remediation" in their definitions. For example, some teachers emphasized the importance of process monitoring to be able to adapt their instruction throughout the semester while other teachers also expressed their extra efforts for differentiation through the product to be able to make more meaningful decisions in their instructional practices.

In addition to teachers' practice of differentiated instruction based on their own definition, the contextual differences in the district, school, and classroom levels shaped teachers' practices by either encouraging or preventing them from implementing differentiation. Regarding context-dependent practices, the school and districtwide policies were essential drivers of teachers' differentiated instruction practices. For example, there was a districtwide social and emotional learning initiative that encouraged teachers to learn more about their students' non-academic differences and to differentiate their instruction to address these needs. In contrast, one school was implementing a new mathematics program that required all teachers to follow the same materials regardless of their student's needs. Hence, teachers were unable to differentiate through content in mathematics in this school.

However, the most important contextual factor that shaped teachers' practice of differentiated instruction was their classroom context. Teachers tended to differentiate their instruction whenever they saw an opportunity. However, teachers who taught in classrooms exclusively for students with disabilities, English language learners, and gifted students shared that they could not differentiate as much as they wanted to because the homogeneity in the classroom prevented them from capturing the opportunities to differentiate. These teachers also explicitly indicated that they had actively differentiated their instruction throughout their careers when serving heterogeneous student groups.

Similarly, teachers who serve in classrooms that consist of predominantly low-performing students, shared that they were unable to differentiate their instruction beyond their attempts to remediate the gaps between where students were and where they were supposed to be. To address these gaps under the pressure of standardized tests, teachers of such classrooms tended to use direct instruction because of the time constraints. As such, teachers who were

trying to teach their students to reach the expected proficiency level while trying to remediate previous learning gaps did not differentiate their instruction regardless of their ability to differentiate.

In contrast, teachers teaching or had taught in classrooms with an optimal level of academic student differences shared their differentiation experiences as a healthy amount of differentiation where every student benefitted. By pointing out such classrooms, teachers also shared that they could support their students' non-academic needs when they felt their students achieved their academic goals. Overall, teachers who taught in classrooms with academically and non-academically heterogeneous students practiced differentiated instruction differently than the teachers who exclusively taught students who were below grade level, had disabilities, were not proficient in English, or who were gifted.

Theme 3: Principals made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on their experience as a teacher and leader, the context they worked in, and their role as an accountability policy enforcer.

Principals were aware of the differences in teachers' practices of differentiated instruction based on the contextual factors that shift teachers' priorities in their instruction. As such, principals expecting teachers to differentiate their instruction as much as they could do in the given school and classroom contexts during the classroom observations. Hence, principals described expected classroom practices for effective differentiated instruction as "good enough differentiation" that optimized by teachers to balance the amount of their differentiation for all students in the classrooms based on the varying levels of student differences. However, principals' descriptions of good enough differentiated instruction shaped based on "their understanding of good teaching," "their own differentiation practices while they were teachers,"

“their classroom observation experiences for teachers’ differentiation,” and “their responsibility to ensure high student achievement in their schools.”

In particular, the differentiated instruction practices that principals expected teachers to demonstrate during classroom observations were determined by the principals' interpretation of what constitutes good teaching. Principals reported that they found it challenging to isolate differentiated instruction as a separate standard during classroom observations because it was intertwined with other standards such as instructional planning and instructional strategies for evaluating teacher effectiveness in the teacher evaluation system. As such, principals indicated that they made sense of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction based on their understanding of good teaching as defined in overall teacher evaluation system, and its position within the evaluation system.

As a further illustration, the goals of principals during classroom observations were defined as making sure that differentiated instruction was provided as needed. The principals often noted that there were some teachers who were not completely or partially obliged to differentiate their instruction due to various reasons, such as having a classroom specifically designed for students with certain needs, including those who are gifted, have disabilities, are below grade level, or are English language learners. Conversely, for teachers who taught in classrooms with students who have a diverse range of academic and non-academic differences, principals expected such teachers to differentiate almost every aspect of their instruction during every classroom observation.

Moreover, it was common for principals to share their own experiences as a classroom teacher when discussing their differentiated instruction expectations with teachers. They referred to differentiation techniques that they used successfully in their own teaching, as a way of

illustrating what effective differentiated instruction should look like. In addition to their own experiences as a teacher, when outlining their expectations for differentiated instruction, principals also emphasized techniques they have seen from observing other teachers' instructional practices.

Furthermore, principals emphasized the importance of ensuring student academic success in their schools for accountability purposes, and principals also expressed their beliefs that differentiated instruction was an effective way to improve student achievement. This was another key factor in their focus on “good teaching” when looking for evidence of differentiated instruction during classroom observations. Principals recognized that differentiated instruction is crucial for academic success and can be used to address academic differences among students. The principals approached student achievement level as an indicator of differentiated instruction because of their beliefs that differentiated instruction provides targeted support to help below-grade-level students reach to grade level.

Overall, the cross-case analysis of the principals' perspectives revealed that principals held expectations for teachers to practice differentiated instruction as the desired standard of "good enough teaching." The principals described these expectations in diverse ways based on the different classroom context, drawing on their experiences as both teachers and observers in a variety of classroom settings. Moreover, the responsibility of principals to attain high student test scores combining with their beliefs to achieving it through differentiated instruction in their schools resulted in their perseverance on the strict adherence to the implementation of differentiated instruction. Hence, principals made sense of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction based on their professional experience, the specific context in which they worked, and their role as school leaders accountable for ensuring high student achievement.

Theme 4: Teachers made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on a combination of their personal beliefs and experiences, as well as their administrator expectations.

Overall, teachers either make sense of their evaluation in relation to differentiated instruction as an opportunity to receive validation from their principals or as a bureaucratic procedure that their principals had to complete. The process of teachers' sensemaking regarding their evaluation for differentiated instruction was influenced by several personal and external factors. The personal factors that influenced teachers' sensemaking included their beliefs about the most effective instructional approaches for their students and their understanding of the evaluation process in general. Their principals' expectations for teacher evaluation related to differentiation also shaped teachers' sensemaking of evaluation. It is also important to note the interconnected nature of these factors with teachers' and their principals' sensemaking of differentiated instruction as a pedagogical approach.

In particular, teachers who were comfortable with their differentiated instruction practices welcomed teacher evaluation as an opportunity to highlight their daily teaching approaches and to seek confirmation. In contrast, teachers who were not as confident in their differentiated instruction practices viewed teacher evaluation as an opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities of differentiated instruction to match their principals' perceived expectations. Hence, teachers' sensemaking of the teacher evaluation process varied based on their level of expertise and comfort in using differentiated instruction techniques.

Teachers' personal beliefs regarding what their students needed also drove their sensemaking of the teacher evaluation process. Teachers who implemented differentiated instruction according to the state standards in teacher evaluation policy, based also on their belief

that these state standards were in the best interest of their students, found the teacher evaluation process to be affirmative of their efforts. However, for teachers who did not believe in the effectiveness of some differentiated instruction components and did not practice differentiated instruction based on the state standards, teacher evaluation was an impractical tool that did not contribute to their teaching practices. Overall, teachers' beliefs about what works in their classrooms and their alignment with differentiation requirements had a significant impact on their sensemaking of the teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction.

Despite some opposition to their effectiveness, teachers still had a positive attitude toward the teacher evaluation process as they recognized it as a mandatory responsibility of their principals. Moreover, teachers who did not implement differentiated instruction as per the state standards acknowledged that they implemented “visible enough” differentiation to satisfy their evaluators’ expectations. These teachers’ “enough” implementation involved creating lesson plans that allowed for differentiation, if necessary, but without actually providing such opportunities during their classroom practices.

Similarly, some teachers who differentiated their instruction to comply with teacher evaluation system also adjusted their instructional practices on the day of classroom observations to align with what they perceived their principals were looking for. Interestingly, no matter what teachers think about their effectiveness in differentiated instruction or the level of their implementation fidelity, all the teacher participants received high ratings in differentiated instruction from their principal. Similarly, all teacher participants rated themselves as either needs development or proficient while principals always rated same teachers higher than their self-assessments as either proficient or exemplary. Therefore, many teachers believed teacher

evaluation process did not reflect the actual practices of the teachers' implementation of differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Teachers also provided various potential reasons to explain the disparity between their self-assessment and classroom observation ratings provided by their principals. These reasons included their general teaching effectiveness, their students' consistently high-test scores, their positive rapport with their administrators, and their demonstrated ability to differentiate even if they did not do so during the observation. The disconnect between classroom practices and their perceived effectiveness and the evaluations provided by principals has instigated a sense of skepticism among teachers concerning the effectiveness of the teacher evaluation process to effectively measure the standard of differentiated instruction.

Overall, the cross-case analysis of the teachers' perspectives revealed that teachers made sense of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction either as a way to confirm whatever they are doing to differentiate was the best practice or as a way to satisfy their principals' expectations for their perceived differentiated instruction. The main difference between these two groups of teachers was their confidence to provide what their students needed with or without differentiating. Moreover, teachers' personal beliefs, their experiences, and their administrator's expectations influenced how they made sense of their evaluation for differentiated instruction.

Chapter Summary

Following within-case and cross-case analysis, four themes regarding how teachers and principals made sense of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction reported as follows: (1) the sensemaking of differentiated instruction by the principals and teachers was informed by their personal experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional responsibilities; (2) the way teachers incorporated differentiated instruction into their teaching was influenced by two

broad factors: their own understanding of the differentiated instruction and the specific academic environment in which they were teaching; (3) principals made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on their experience as a teacher and leader, the context they worked in, and their role as an accountability policy enforcer; (4) teachers made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on a combination of their personal beliefs and experiences, as well as their administrator expectations.

This chapter delved into the detailed discussion of the themes that emerged from the case studies of individual schools. The final chapter expands on cross-case analysis by contextualizing these four themes in relation to the literature on differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation explored in Chapter 2. Moreover, Chapter 8 presents implications for research, policy, and practice.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The impact of teachers on their students' academic and non-academic outcomes is well established in research. As such, there has been substantial attention given to evaluating teacher effectiveness through policies and research, with classroom observations and Value-Added Measures (VAMs) serving as the primary methods of teacher evaluation. Classroom observations have been used for decades and are currently required in 48 states in the United States. The focus of classroom observations has shifted to evaluate teacher effectiveness standard by standard, which include the concept of differentiated instruction, regarded as a critical indicator for evaluating teacher performance.

Differentiated instruction is a teaching approach that relies on the promise that helping teachers boost the learning potential of all their students, who may have different learning needs, interests, and abilities. Having emphasized the individual needs, interests, and abilities of any group of students, differentiated instruction is not a one-size-fits-all approach and requires teachers to be competent in responding to the unique needs of each student. Despite the lack of a standardized formula for differentiated instruction, teacher evaluation regarding differentiated instruction often standardized through classroom observation rubrics.

As the context of this study, the state of Georgia's teacher evaluation system measures effectiveness of teachers' differentiated instruction as part of the Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards. As a part of the statewide teacher evaluation system, Georgia Department of Education created two documents to evaluate teachers' effectiveness in

differentiated instruction: a classroom observation rubric (see Appendix A) for principals to measure teachers' instructional effectiveness and a self-assessment checklist for teachers' professional development (see Appendix B). However, there has not been an attempt to establish a shared vision of teacher effectiveness and ensure that observation instruments reflect this shared vision between teachers and principals.

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers and principals in a charter school system constructed understandings of teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction. In particular, the aim of this study was to explore how principals and teachers made sense and gave meaning to content of teacher evaluation instruments to describe their teacher evaluation experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals and teachers make sense of differentiated instruction?
2. How do teachers practice differentiated instruction?
3. How do principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction?

In this chapter, a short overview of the research design is presented, and the findings of the study are compared to existing literature on teacher evaluation and differentiated instruction.

Moreover, potential implications of the findings for policy, practice, and future research are discussed. The chapter concludes by offering final thoughts on the study.

Summary of Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design that provided a rich understanding of teacher evaluation processes and practices related to differentiated instruction across three different schools in a school district. The embedded case study design included three schools—one elementary, one middle, and one high school—selected from each school level in the district.

By employing a comparative case study approach, this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the sensemaking processes used by teachers and principals in different school settings. Three teacher participants were selected from each school, based on their experience with the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) and willingness to share personal experiences related to implementation and evaluation of differentiated instruction.

To examine the sensemaking of teacher evaluation processes, the researcher used semi structured interviews, field notes, and document analysis as the main sources of data. In particular, data collection methods included two semi-structured interviews with each of the nine teacher participants, one interview with each of the three principal participants, and the use of self-assessment checklists and classroom observation rubrics with think aloud strategies during the interviews. The researcher also gathered various documents, including prior self-assessment checklists completed by teachers, records of classroom observations, exemplars of students' academic works, lesson plans, seating charts to illustrate classroom designs, and photographic representations of classroom settings.

The collected data were analyzed through deductive and inductive approaches using narrative inquiry and comparative cross-case analysis. First, the sensemaking of the teachers and the principal in each school were examined in detail and provided for narrative inquiry as individual case studies. Following the explication of the context and participants' comprehension of teacher evaluation in relation to differentiated instruction, a comparative cross-case analysis was employed to recognize recurring patterns and topics regarding the teacher evaluation process and differentiated instruction across the three schools. As such, this study provided insight into the ways in which teachers and principals make sense of the teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction in across three school settings in one school district.

In summary, the qualitative comparative case study design allowed for a detailed analysis of the sensemaking processes used by teachers and principals in three schools in a single district. The researcher aimed to enhance the transferability of the study to comparable educational contexts by including detailed descriptions of the school contexts and participants. The use of multiple sources for data collection and the liberal inclusion of direct quotes through narrative inquiry strengthened the credibility and dependability of the data analysis. The researcher attempted to address confirmability by disclosing personal biases in the subjectivity statement and by receiving feedback from educational researchers during presentations at academic conferences.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how principals and teachers make sense of teacher evaluation in relation to differentiated instruction. Therefore, this section will provide a brief summary of the main themes, followed by an analysis of these themes in the context of existing literature.

Theme 1: The sensemaking of differentiated instruction by the principals and teachers was informed by their personal experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional responsibilities.

All teacher and principal participants in this study used varying terms to define differentiated instruction, but they all viewed differentiated instruction as an effective pedagogy for meeting students at their level by addressing their differences and helping them progress to where they need to be. Additionally, their interpretation closely corresponded with the definition of differentiated instruction as described in the classroom observation rubric within the teacher evaluation system of the state (see Appendix A). Moreover, the existing literature on

differentiated instruction also varies in its specific terminology, but all definitions share the fundamental concept of tailoring instruction to meet individual student differences (Dack, 2019; George, 2005; Heacox, 2012; Subban, 2006; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2014).

Furthermore, according to the literature related to differentiated instruction, it aims to enhance the academic and non-academic progress of all students (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

Despite the existence of a broad consensus regarding the overarching definition among participants, there were small differences in how the concept was defined, and the epistemological pathways employed by participants to attain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of differentiated instruction. Participants shared that exploring the details, depth, and multifaceted nature of differentiated instruction helped them to gain a better understanding as a pedagogy. Likewise, according to symbolic interactionism and social constructivism, individuals derive meaning from their experiences and construct their perception of reality based on those experiences (Blumer, 1969; Creswell & Poth, 2017).

For example, experienced teacher and principal participants defined differentiated instruction based on their years of teaching experience and the different classroom populations they have taught. Novice teacher participants tended to rely on textbook definitions, while all educators' understanding of the pedagogy evolves over their careers, with those teaching diverse student backgrounds having a deeper understanding of differentiated instruction. This finding also aligns with the principles of sensemaking theory, which suggest that participants' personal and shared experiences influence how they comprehend the concept of differentiated instruction (Spillane et al., 2002).

Moreover, the participants' understanding of differentiated instruction as a teaching approach was shaped not only by their personal and professional experiences but also by the

professional development they received on differentiated instruction. However, participants' opinions on the effectiveness of training in differentiated instruction varied, with some reporting that it confirmed their beliefs while others reported that it expanded their perspectives on differentiation following a classroom incident that required differentiation. Overall, those who received training related to differentiated instruction after becoming a teacher found such training more impactful in shaping their understanding.

This finding also aligns with the academic literature that suggest the effectiveness of job-embedded professional learning when teachers are actively involved in creating knowledge and the content is directly related to and situated within their daily teaching practice (Creemers et al., 2013; Yoon et al. 2007; Zepeda 2014, 2017). Additionally, differentiating of the content of professional development to meet the individual needs of the teachers is directly related to effectiveness of teacher's professional learning about differentiated instruction (Croft et al. 2010).

Theme 2: The way teachers incorporated differentiated instruction into their teaching was influenced by two broad factors: their own understanding of the differentiated instruction and the specific environment in which they were teaching.

The study also examined how individual teachers implement differentiated instruction within their school context through three case studies. The analysis of teacher narratives on their differentiated instruction practice revealed that the way teachers put their understanding of differentiated instruction into practice varies based on their experience, teaching context, and the expectations of their evaluators. While existing studies well-documented that teachers' beliefs have an impact on their instructional practices (Buehl & Beck, 2015; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996), recent research on the connection between teacher beliefs about differentiated instruction

and their practices was in line with these previous standpoints (Pozas et al., 2020; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Whitley et al., 2019).

The findings suggest that teachers' understanding and interpretation of differentiated instruction played a critical role in their instructional practices. Teachers who had a deeper understanding of the pedagogy were more likely to implement it into their teaching practices. However, the way teachers incorporated differentiated instruction into their teaching was also influenced by the specific environment in the district, school, and classroom levels in which they were teaching.

In both the district and the school levels, teachers often faced constraints, such as limited time and resources about specific student needs because of the school context, which impacted their ability to implement differentiated instruction effectively (Gibbs, 2022). Moreover, the expectations of their school or district leaders, such as school administrators, also influenced their instructional practices (Park & Datnow, 2017). In this study, teachers who felt pressured to address the expectations regarding implementation of differentiated instruction stated that they were more likely to use differentiated instruction as a surface-level strategy rather than a deep and meaningful instructional practice as teachers who had a deeper understanding do.

Teachers' practice of differentiated instruction was affected by various contextual factors at the district and school levels, but classroom-level differences had the most noticeable impact. Teachers who had classrooms with a wide range of student differences felt more comfortable to practice differentiated instruction and advocate for it. On the other hand, teachers who taught classes with homogeneous student population reported that they did not use differentiated instruction in their teaching.

This finding also aligns with the contradiction in the literature between isolation of student groups and initial focus of differentiated instruction where students seated side by side in the same classrooms who are

students with identified learning problems; highly advanced learners; students whose first language is not English; students who underachieve for a complex array of reasons; students from broadly diverse cultures, economic backgrounds, or both; students of both genders; motivated and unmotivated students; students who fit two or three of these categories; students who fall closer to the template of grade-level expectations and norms; and students of widely varying interests and preferred modes of learning.

(Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 120)

The effects of specific classroom contexts on teachers practices of differentiated instruction in this study were supported with the existing literature on differentiated instruction in a homogenous classroom (Pozas & Schneider, 2019). For example, many teachers in this study stated that they did not differentiate in their classrooms because they thought their instruction was pre-differentiated in classroom levels similar to existing literature in teachers who exclusively teach gifted students (Laine & Tirri, 2016), English Learners (Ortega et al., 2018), or students with disabilities (Gibson, 2013).

Theme 3: Principals made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on their experience as a teacher and leader, the context they worked in, and their role as an accountability policy enforcer.

The principals in this study expected teachers to implement “good enough” differentiated instruction. However, the principals made sense of good enough differentiated instruction for evaluating the teachers in various ways, which was in line with what was predicted based on

previous studies on how principals make sense of teacher evaluation policies (Carraway & Young, 2015; Goldstein, 2004; Halverson et al., 2004; Ingle et al., 2011; Reid, 2019; Rigby, 2015). This theme also aligned with Spillane et al.'s (2002) sensemaking typology of the three concomitant elements: (1) prior knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, (2) the social context of the work, and (3) connection with the messages all gleaned from the perspectives of the participants.

In particular, the principals' personal experiences as educators were found to shape their sensemaking of the teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction. Similar to what has been found in earlier studies, principals drew on their experiences as classroom teachers to inform their evaluation practices (Goldring et al., 2015; Ingle et al., 2011; Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004; Shaked et al., 2017; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005) and translate the instruments into their expected classroom teaching strategies (Derrington & Martinez, 2019). Additionally, their experiences as school leaders influenced their approach what to expect in classroom observations in terms of differentiated instruction through previously observed classrooms (Harris et al., 2014; Jacob & Lefgren, 2008; Nelson et al., 2001; Reid, 2019).

Contextual factors also played a significant role in principals' understanding of the evaluation process (Coburn, 2005; Reid, 2019; Spillane et al., 2002). Particularly in this study, the principals expressed that effective teachers provide differentiated instruction as needed in the given classroom context. As such, the context of an observed classroom in terms of the expected level of differentiation was an important aspect of the principals' sensemaking of teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction. Moreover, the size and complexity of a school, and the demographics of its student population was indicated when examining how principals approached teacher evaluation (Ingle et al., 2011).

Finally, principals' roles as accountability policy enforcers shaped their understanding of the teacher evaluation process. School principals acknowledged that as part of their sensemaking of teacher evaluation policy, they are responsible for assessing their teachers' ability to implement differentiated instruction and ensuring that teachers in their schools meet the state's standards for teacher effectiveness. (Rigby, 2015). Moreover, in the view of school principals, differentiated instruction is an effective approach to increase student achievement. Hence, they regarded it as their responsibility to guarantee that teachers utilize it efficiently since they recognize that teachers are the most significant factor at the school level that impacts student achievement. (Harris, 2011).

Theme 4: Teachers made sense of teacher evaluation process for differentiated instruction based on a combination of their personal beliefs and experiences, as well as their administrator expectations.

The findings of this study indicate that teachers' understanding of the teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction varied based on their perceived ability to address students' differentiating needs in their classrooms. While all participants acknowledged the importance of their evaluation process for accountability purposes, they had different levels of confidence in their ability to implement differentiated instruction effectively that examined earlier as a part of their sensemaking and practice of differentiated instruction. Teacher participants who feel confident in their ability to differentiate instruction for their students daily basis are more likely to approach teacher evaluation with a positive attitude and a willingness to engage in the process.

Existing literature have highlighted that teacher self-efficacy plays a crucial role on how well teachers are able to cater to the diverse needs of their students (Suprayogi et al., 2017).

Moreover, Chao et al. (2017) found that teacher confidence and the type of school (i.e., primary or secondary) are significant predictors of teacher self-efficacy when it comes to addressing learner differences. Moreover, research has shown that collective teacher efficacy can also influence teachers' ability to adjust their instruction and content to meet the needs of different groups of students. De Neve et al. (2015) demonstrated that teacher self-efficacy, autonomy, and reflective dialogue are factors that can lead to changes in differentiated instruction (DI) practices, while teacher self-efficacy helps to mediate the relationship between collective responsibility and DI practices.

However, in this particular study, the teachers who were confident in their abilities to address the diverse learning needs of their students felt more comfortable with differentiating their instruction without any concerns about how it may impact their performance evaluation. Such teachers, who were mostly veteran teachers in this study, understood their principals' view of good enough teaching that principals expected of their teachers to provide the best instruction under the circumstances that teachers face in their classrooms (Allen & Penuel, 2015). Hence, these teachers were not inclined to change their instructional practices during their classroom observations.

On the other hand, teachers who lacked confidence in their ability to differentiate instruction viewed the teacher evaluation process as overwhelming or even punitive. These teachers tried to conform their instructional practices to align with what they perceived as their principal's expectations regarding differentiated instruction such as “using flexible grouping” or “avoiding lecturing” (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). This behavior is rooted in a sense of self-doubt and a desire to avoid negative consequences, rather than a focus on what is most effective for their students (Marshall, 2015).

Implications

Teacher evaluation has been a prominent focus in educational policy for many years. However, the literature on teacher evaluation related to the concept of differentiated instruction has remained limited. Therefore, the findings of this study hold significant implications for future research, policy, and practice regarding teacher evaluation and differentiated instruction. The implications of these findings are discussed in the following section.

Implications for Further Research

The findings of this study indicated that additional research is required to explore the relationship between concepts of teacher evaluation and differentiated instruction. While this study provided new insights by presenting the viewpoints of teachers and principals on this area, the findings were limited in scope and therefore can only provide a starting point for further investigation. Given the findings and limitations of this study, it is suggested that the following directions for future research be considered.

1. The present study highlighted that teachers' and principals' sensemaking of differentiated instruction through their individual experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional responsibilities, but there were varying degrees to which each of these factors played a role in their interpretation. Thus, future research could investigate the variations in the impact of these constructs on educators' sensemaking in a broader context, such as a district-wide survey study.
2. A potential avenue for future research is to examine the generalizability of the findings of this case study, which focused on a small charter school district in Georgia. To enhance the external validity of the study's findings, future research could explore this topic in

several different contexts, comparing the findings to those of the current study to identify any contextual differences that may exist.

3. In this study, principals were selected based on their role as the summative evaluators of the teachers. However, there were several other administrators in these schools who served as a formative evaluator by conducting several classroom observations and walkthroughs of the teacher participants. Even if teachers asked to reflect their experiences with their formal evaluators in this study, future research should include these actors to draw a more holistic picture of the teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction.
4. A limitation of this study was the researcher's inability to collect observational data due to COVID-19 related restrictions during the data collection. Therefore, future research could enhance the credibility of the findings by using observations as a data source and triangulating with other data sources to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Implications for Policy

If states intend to modify teacher evaluation policies to enhance student achievement and teacher accountability, they must consider the viewpoints of both teachers and principals regarding the teacher evaluation process and instructional practices. The results of this study suggest that policymakers should consider the following recommendations while making policy decisions:

1. Teachers and principals made sense of differentiated instruction based on several epistemological pathways and teachers practice it in according with their understandings. It must be acknowledged in the instruction related policies that differentiated instruction

is a not one-size-fits-all instructional practice and it is expected to see variations within its implementation.

2. Teacher evaluation policies should be adjusted to consider the contextual factors that can impact a teacher's ability to implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms. This could involve revising classroom observation rubrics to provide more flexible language that can be interpreted based on the unique circumstances of each classroom. By considering the various contextual factors that can impact a teacher's ability to implement differentiated instruction, policies can be more effective in supporting and evaluating teacher performance.
3. The study highlights the need for more personalized and specific feedback to support teacher development in differentiated instruction. Teachers in this study reported receiving generic feedback that was copied and pasted from the state's teacher evaluation handbook, which did not provide them with the detailed guidance they needed to improve their practices. Therefore, policy makers should consider providing an expectation for clearer and more specific feedback to teachers based on the standards for teacher effectiveness. This would help to provide teachers with more certainty in terms of their instructional expectations and enable them to better meet the needs of their students.
4. Teachers who serve only a homogenous group of students such as Gifted Students, English Language Learners, or Students with Disabilities must have a specific teacher evaluation process which is different than teachers who serve in general classrooms by emphasizing the differences in expected instructional practices.
5. In this study, despite not always adhering to classroom observation rubrics in terms of differentiated instruction, teachers received high ratings from principals who consider the

contextual factors that may impact their instructional practices. As such, classroom observation rubrics should be revised to acknowledge and reconcile teacher effectiveness on differentiated instruction regardless of the contextual factors that encourage or hinder teachers' ability to differentiate.

Implications for Practice

Considering there is no consensus about the theoretical or practical definition of differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation for differentiated instruction, findings of this study were able to provide a reason to explain why educators need multiple definitions to be able to differentiate teacher evaluation practices and related professional development of teachers.

The study's findings suggest the following practice recommendations:

1. This study's findings suggest that teachers who had positive attitudes toward differentiated instruction tended to use it more often in their teaching practices compared to those who had negative perceptions or misunderstandings about it. This also indicates that targeted professional development opportunities that focus on the fundamental principles and practical application of differentiated instruction could be beneficial in improving teachers' beliefs and instructional practices. Hence, schools and policymakers should prioritize providing such professional development opportunities to enhance teachers' teaching practices and thus, improve student learning outcomes.
2. All participants indicated that early career teachers may struggle with effectively implementing differentiated instruction due to the complex nature of differentiation which is developed over time through experience with different groups of students. As such, it is important for principals to provide differentiated and developmental support to their early career teachers aimed at improving their capacity for differentiated instruction.

3. Similarly, participants reported that the only formal education that helped participants build their understanding of differentiated instruction was the post-graduate courses they took after becoming classroom teachers. Therefore, it is important for teacher training programs to reconsider their curriculum related to differentiated instruction.
4. To ensure that teacher evaluation practices for differentiated instruction are effective, it is essential for principals to establish clear expectations and to provide regular individual feedback to teachers based on their observed practices. This can be achieved through frequent individual meetings between principals and teachers, where they can discuss expectations and strategies for effective implementation of differentiated instruction in the classroom before any given observation. Such communication and feedback can help align the understanding of differentiated instruction between principals and teachers, leading to more accurate and meaningful teacher evaluations.
5. Teachers who believed that differentiated instruction was an effective instructional practice were more likely to use it regularly in their teaching. However, teachers who had negative beliefs or misconceptions about differentiated instruction were less likely to use it in their teaching practices. Therefore, providing teachers with accurate and relevant professional development opportunities that focus on the core principles of differentiated instruction and its effective implementation could improve teachers' beliefs and instructional practices.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, the findings of this study shed light on the complexities and nuances involved in the sensemaking of differentiated instruction by both principals and teachers, as well as the impact of teacher evaluation on instructional practices. The study highlights the

importance of providing accurate and relevant professional development opportunities for teachers, as well as differentiated and developmental support for early career teachers to improve their ability to differentiate instruction. Moreover, this study reveals the importance of enhancing clear communication of classroom expectations for teacher evaluation, which can foster effective instructional practices according to the different needs of teachers. These findings underscore the importance of ongoing professional development and reflective practices for principals and teachers to continually improve teacher evaluation practices and ultimately, teacher effectiveness.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHER EVALUATION RUBRIC IN DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Performance Standard 4: Differentiated Instruction

The teacher challenges and supports each student’s learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences.

Sample Performance Indicators

Examples may include, but are not limited to:

The teacher:

- Differentiates the instructional content, process, product, and learning environment to meet individual developmental needs.
- Provides remediation, enrichment, and acceleration to further student understanding of material.
- Uses flexible grouping strategies to encourage appropriate peer interaction and to accommodate learning needs/goals.
- Uses diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment data to inform instructional modifications for individual students.
- Develops critical and creative thinking by providing activities at the appropriate level of challenge for students.
- Demonstrates high learning expectations for all students commensurate with their developmental levels.

Level IV <i>In addition to meeting the requirements for Level III</i>	Level III <i>Level III is the expected level of performance</i>	Level II	Level I
The teacher continually facilitates each student’s opportunities to learn by engaging him/her in critical and creative thinking and challenging activities tailored to address individual learning needs and interests. <i>(Teachers rated as Level IV continually seek ways to serve as role models or teacher leaders.)</i>	The teacher consistently challenges and supports each student’s learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences	The teacher inconsistently challenges students by providing appropriate content or by developing skills which address individual learning differences.	The teacher does not challenge students by providing appropriate content or by developing skills which address individual learning differences.

APPENDIX B

SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

Quality		Exemplary	Proficient	Needs Developme	Ineffective
Differentiating Content	Increase the breadth of learning materials to enhance student learning motivation.				
	Offer students choice regarding the complexity (depth) of content they want to start with so that they can experience academic success				
	Offer multiple modes of learning for students to be exposed to the target content through their learning-style preferences (such as reading, listening, or doing).				
	Re-teach an idea or skill in small groups of struggling learners.				
	Extend and enrich the thinking or skills of advanced learners.				
Differentiating Process	Vary instructional strategies and activities for students.				
	Vary types of assignment to assess student learning.				
	Routinely combine instructional techniques that involve individual, small group, and whole class instruction.				
	Monitor and pace instruction based on the individual needs of students.				
	Draw on a mental database of examples, metaphors, and enrichment ideas to provide personalized scaffold.				
	Offer optimal amount of support/intervention and structure learning tasks to ensure the learning demand is appropriately challenging.				
Differentiating Product	Provide students with choices regarding the method to express required learning, such as presentation, portfolios, or formal				
	Use rubrics that match and extend students varied ability levels.				
	Encourage students to produce their own product assignment.				
	Allow students to work alone or in small groups on projects.				
Learning Environment	Create an environment in which student differences in ability, cultural background, academic needs and interest are respected and treated as assets.				
	Know and understand students as individuals in terms of ability, achievement, learning styles, and needs.				

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Teacher Interview

Interview 1

Thank you for partaking in this study today. The interview should take about 60 minutes. During the interview, we will discuss your experiences with differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation. The interview will consist of questions that focus on: (1) knowledge and attitudes, (2) use and fidelity, (3) barriers and supports, and (4) solutions for improving performance evaluation on differentiated instruction. As a reminder, the consent form you signed acknowledges that your responses will remain confidential. If I ask any questions that you would rather not answer, feel free to say so and I will move on to a different question. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Before we get started, I am going to ask you some demographic questions.

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

What is current educational position?

What is grade and subject you teach?

How long have you held your current educational position?

How long have you taught?

What schooling level do you work with?

Have you taught levels other than your current level?

Knowledge and Attitudes

1. Can you describe your understanding of differentiated instruction? How familiar are you with this term?
2. Can you explain the reasoning behind your definition of differentiated instruction?
3. Can you remember any experiences of differentiated instruction during your time as a K-12 student? Did you find it helpful?
4. When and how did you first hear the term "differentiated instruction"? Can you describe how it was defined at that time?

5. Do you remember times you encounter the term with different definitions through your teacher preparation and teaching career?
 6. How would you describe your level of confidence in your capacity to offer or demonstrate differentiated instruction to your students (Follow up: Why?)
 7. How do your views about differentiated instruction influence or inform your teaching practices or pedagogy?
-

Practice and Teacher Evaluation

8. Can you explain how you implement differentiated instruction in your classroom? What specific student characteristics do you consider when determining whether differentiated instruction is necessary (e.g., ELL, gifted, low SES, special education, ethnic minority, gender, academic level)?
9. How do you differentiate your instruction through content?
10. How do you differentiate your instruction through process?
11. How do you differentiate your instruction through product?
12. How do you differentiate your instruction through environment?
13. Can you provide an example of a recent successful application of differentiated instruction in your classroom? What made it successful?
14. Have you ever attempted differentiated instruction that resulted in failure? Can you describe why you think it did not work?

Interview 2

15. How does your school evaluate teachers' use of differentiated instruction practices?
16. Can you explain this process chronologically? (orientation, self-assessment, pre-assessment conference, observations, mid-year conference, summative conference.)
17. Can you provide an interpretation of the 17 criteria outlined in the Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist for differentiated instruction, which is provided to you, under the four respective categories? Specifically, could you read each statement aloud and share your personal understanding of what it entails?
18. Did you have a pre-observation conference with your principal before your last classroom observation? If so, was differentiated instruction addressed in this conference? If so, how?
19. Can you describe what the given standards in the differentiated instruction rubric mean to you?
20. What do you think about what kind of specific evidence your principal were looking for to evaluate your effectiveness in differentiated instruction in your last classroom observation?
21. Recalling your most recent classroom observation, can you identify the specific techniques you used to demonstrate your skills in differentiated instruction? (Follow up: Did you implement these techniques solely for the purpose of the observation or are they regularly incorporated into your teaching practice? If so, can you describe how you typically apply differentiated instruction in that particular classroom?)

22. Can you describe what the given standards in the differentiated instruction rubric mean to you?
 23. How do your beliefs and views about differentiated instruction influence or inform your teaching practices or pedagogy?
 24. What actions have you taken to build your knowledge base pertaining to differentiated instruction?
 25. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your differentiated instruction efforts?
-

Barriers/Supports for Differentiated Instruction

26. What barriers impede your ability to implement differentiated instruction?
 27. Did you receive any feedback related to differentiated instruction in your last evaluation?
 28. Can you describe the best and worst feedback you received related to differentiated instruction as a part of teacher evaluation? (If so, what type of feedback it was? What was the feedback about? Did it make sense to you? Did you value that feedback? Did you use that feedback to improve your practice?)
 29. How does the current focus on standardized testing affect your ability or willingness to prioritize differentiated instruction?
 30. What kind of support does your school or district provide to help you improve your understanding and implementation of differentiated instruction?
 31. Do the supports you receive outweigh the barriers you face in implementing differentiated instruction?
 32. What space is made in your school for you to discussion/practice differentiated instruction skills?
-

Gap between what Differentiated Instruction looks like and what you hope it'll look like

33. In what ways can the approach to differentiated instruction in your school align more closely with your ideals for it?
 34. What types of support would be helpful to you in enhancing your differentiation skills?
-

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Principal Interview

Thank you for partaking in this study today. The interview should take about 60 minutes. During the interview, we will discuss your experiences with differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation. The interview will consist of questions that focus on: (1) knowledge and attitudes, (2) use and fidelity, (3) barriers and supports, and (4) solutions for improving performance evaluation on differentiated instruction. As a reminder, the consent form you signed acknowledges that your responses will remain confidential. If I ask any questions that you would rather not answer, feel free to say so and I will move on to a different question. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Before we get started, I am going to ask you some demographic questions.

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

What is current educational position?

What is grade and subject you teach?

How long have you held your current educational position?

How long have you taught?

What schooling level do you work with?

Have you taught levels other than your current level?

Knowledge and Attitudes

1. When was the first time you heard the term differentiated instruction? Do you remember how it defined at that time?
2. Do you remember times you encounter the term with different definitions through your principal preparation and teaching career?
3. Do you feel confident in your ability to model differentiated instruction to the teachers in your school?
4. How important do you deem to provide differentiated instruction to the students in your school?
5. In what ways does your school evaluate teachers' use of differentiated instruction related practices?
6. Do you believe teachers' observations and/or evaluations should feature differentiated instruction?

7. Can you describe your understanding of differentiated instruction?
 8. Can you explain the reasoning behind your definition of differentiated instruction?
 9. Can you remember any experiences of differentiated instruction during your time as a K-12 student? Did you find it helpful?
 10. When and how did you first hear the term "differentiated instruction"? Can you describe how it was defined at that time?
 11. Do you remember times you encounter the term with different definitions through your tenure as a principal or educator?
 12. What are the specific student characteristics for you that differentiated instruction is required? (Ell, gifted, low SES, special education, ethnic minority, gender, academic level).
 13. How would you describe your level of confidence in your capacity to offer or demonstrate differentiated instruction to the teachers in your school? (Follow up: Why?)
-

Teacher Evaluation

14. How does your school evaluate teachers' use of differentiated instruction practices?
 15. Can you explain this process chronologically? (orientation, self-assessment, pre-assessment conference, observations, mid-year conference, summative conference.)
 16. Can you describe your understanding of the given standards in the differentiated instruction rubric?
 17. Did you have pre-observation conferences with the teachers in your school before the classroom observations? If so, was differentiated instruction addressed in these conferences? If so, how?
 18. Can you provide what specific evidence do you look for to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness in differentiated instruction during classroom observations?
 19. Can you describe an example of a successfully implemented differentiated instruction practice that you have observed during a classroom observation? (Follow up: Why?)
 20. Can you describe an instance where a teacher attempted to implement differentiated instruction, but it did not work? (Follow up: Why?)
 21. How do your views about differentiated instruction influence or inform a teacher's practices or pedagogy?
 22. What kind of specific evidence are you looking for to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness in differentiated instruction during the classroom observations aligning with the techniques you mentioned in your previous answers?
-

Barriers/Supports for Differentiated Instruction

23. What barriers impede teachers' ability to implement differentiated instruction?
24. Did you have post-observation conference with the teachers after the classroom observations? If so, was differentiated instruction addressed in this conference? If so, how?

25. What strategies do you use to provide feedback related to teachers' effectiveness on differentiated instruction? What are the feedback about? Do you think the teacher value that feedback?
 26. How does the current focus on testing influence your ability or willingness to prioritize differentiated instruction?
 27. What supports are provided to you by your district to build your understanding of differentiated instruction and support your staff?
 28. What space is made in your school for you and your teachers to discussion/practice differentiated instruction skills?
-

Gap between what Differentiated Instruction looks like and what you hope it'll look like

29. How can the ways differentiated instruction is approached in your school better reflect the ideals you have for it?
 30. What supports might be helpful to you as you seek to further engage in developing teachers' differentiation skills in your school?
-

APPENDIX E

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD



Tucker Hall, Room 212
310 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
IRB@uga.edu
<http://research.uga.edu/hso/irb/>

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

August 31, 2020

Dear [Sally Zepeda](#):

On 8/31/2020, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Version VERSION00000585 - TEACHERS' AND PRINCIPALS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE TEACHER EVALUATION PROCESS RELATED TO DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION
Investigator:	Sally Zepeda
Co-Investigator:	Salih Cevik
IRB ID:	VERSION00000585
Review Category:	Exempt 2ii

Modifications: add external site, adjust research protocol and documents to allow for remote procedures.
Modifications approved.

Please note: research activities at an External Site may only begin once written authorization from an authorized representative of that External Site has been received and uploaded to the IRB Portal. Please submit the authorization/permission (via "Add Public Comment") when this becomes available.

We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 8/31/2020.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (<https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRB-Exempt-Review.pdf>). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

APPENDIX F

CONSENT FORM

I am asking you to participate in the research study titled "Teachers' and principals' understandings of the teacher evaluation process related to differentiated instruction: A cross case analysis" conducted by Salih Cevik from the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. This study is being conducted under the guidance of Dr. Sally J. Zepeda in the University of Georgia's Education Administration and Policy department. She can be reached by phone at (706) 613- 5245 or by email at szepeda@uga.edu.

This study employs a sensemaking approach to examine how teachers and principals constructed understanding of teacher performance evaluation process about differentiated instruction. I use semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals to gain a granular understanding of how teachers and principals made sense of instruments that are used for teacher evaluation process about differentiated instruction. The interview is anticipated to last approximately 1 hour and will be audio taped.

The following points will be explained to you:

1. You will be participating in an interview in which you will be asked to share your thoughts and opinions on your: (1) knowledge of and attitudes about differentiated instruction and teacher evaluation process in this topic, (2) use of and fidelity to differentiated instruction and the instruments to assess teacher performance in this topic, (3) barriers and supports related to differentiated instruction and its evaluation, and (4) solutions for improving teacher evaluation in your school.
2. No discomfort or stresses during the experiment are foreseen.
3. No risks are foreseen.
4. The results of this participation will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without your prior consent unless required by law.
5. Your interview will be audio recorded.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you can stop taking part without giving any reason and without penalty. You can refuse to participate or ask to have all of the information returned to you, removed from the research records, or destroyed. Further, a follow-up interview may be requested, which may take an additional 30 minutes. The purpose of this interview would be to further probe unanswered or underexplored questions and details in the initial interview.

Additionally, participating in this study is on the bases of confidentiality. To ensure this, indirect identifiers will be used throughout the study to ensure that your interview cannot be linked back to you. Pseudonyms such as, "Teacher 1", "Principal 1," " School Level A" and "School 1" will be used in place of exact references to the interviewee. The interviewer will also ensure that no reference to an interviewees' name, position, or school is made during the audio recording. Direct identifiers will be removed after the completion of data collections. Further, no efforts will be made to re-identify this data in the future. Lastly, de-identified Information obtained from this research may be used for future studies (or shared with other researchers) without obtaining your additional consent.

By participating in this interview, you consent to volunteer for this study. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research now or during the course of the project and can be reached by telephone at 737-999-1153 or by email at cevik@uga.edu

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator
Telephone: 737-999-1153
Email: cevik@uga.edu

PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES OF THIS FORM. KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Chairperson of Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.

Appendix G

COMPARISON OF TEACHER EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS FOR DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION STANDARDS

InTASC (2013) Model Core Teaching Standards	Danielson (2013)	Marzano Focused Teacher Evaluation Elements	TKES (2019) Performance Standards
<p>Standard #1 Learner Development: The teacher understands how learners grow and develop, recognizing that patterns of learning and development vary individually within and across the cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical areas, and designs and implements developmentally appropriate and challenging learning experiences.</p>	<p>Domain 1 Planning and Preparation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1b. Demonstrating Knowledge of Students • 1c. Setting Instructional Outcomes • 1e: Designing coherent instruction <p>Domain 3 Instruction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3c: Engaging students in learning 	<p>Element 1 Planning Standards-Based Lessons/Units</p> <p>Element 3 Planning to Close the Achievement Gap Using Data</p> <p>Element 15 Providing Feedback and Celebrating Progress</p> <p>Element 19 Establishing and Maintaining Effective Relationships in a Student- Centered Classroom</p> <p>Element 20 Communicating High Expectations for Each Student to Close the Achievement Gap</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard 1 Professional Knowledge • Standard 2 Instructional Planning • Standard 3 Instructional Strategies • Standard 4 Differentiated Instruction • Standard 5 Assessment Strategies • Standard 6 Assessment Uses • Standard 8 Academically Challenging Environment • Standard 10 Communication
<p>Standard #2 Learning Differences: The teacher uses understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards.</p>	<p>Domain 1 Planning and Preparation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1b. Demonstrating Knowledge of Students 	<p>Element 3 Planning to Close the Achievement Gap Using Data</p> <p>Element 19 Establishing and Maintaining Effective Relationships in a Student- Centered Classroom</p> <p>Element 20 Communicating High Expectations for Each Student to</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard 1 Professional Knowledge • Standard 2 Instructional Planning • Standard 3 Instructional Strategies • Standard 4 Differentiated Instruction • Standard 7 Positive Learning Environment

Standard #3
Learning Environments:
The teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation.

Domain 2
Classroom Environment:

- 2a: Creating an environment of respect and rapport

Domain 3
Instruction:

- 3c: Engaging students in learning

Close the Achievement Gap

Element 15
Providing Feedback and Celebrating Progress
Element 16
Organizing Students to Interact with Content
Element 17
Establishing and Acknowledging Adherence to Rules and Procedures
Element 18
Using Engagement Strategies
Element 19
Establishing and Maintaining Effective Relationships in a Student-Centered Classroom
Element 20
Communicating High Expectations for Each Student to Close the Achievement Gap

- **Standard 2**
Instructional Planning
- **Standard 4**
Differentiated Instruction
- **Standard 7**
Positive Learning Environment
- **Standard 8**
Academically Challenging Environment

Standard #6
Assessment
The teacher understands and uses multiple methods of assessment to engage learners in their own growth, to monitor learner progress, and to guide the teacher's and learner's decision making.

Domain 1
Planning and Preparation:

- 1a. Demonstrating Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy
- 1e: Designing coherent instruction
- Domain 3: Instruction 3c: Engaging students in learning

Element 14
Using Formative Assessment to Track Progress

- **Standard 1**
Professional Knowledge
 - **Standard 2**
Instructional Planning
 - **Standard 4**
Differentiated Instruction
 - **Standard 5**
Assessment Strategies
 - **Standard 6**
Assessment Uses
 - **Standard 8**
Academically Challenging Environment
-

Standard #7
 Planning for Instruction:
 The teacher plans instruction that supports every student in meeting rigorous learning goals by drawing upon knowledge of content areas, curriculum, cross-disciplinary skills, and pedagogy, as well as knowledge of learners and the community context.

Domain 1
 Planning and Preparation:

- 1b: Demonstrating knowledge of students
- 1e: Designing coherent instruction

Element 1
 Planning Standards-Based Lessons/Units
Element 2
 Aligning Resources to Standard(s)
Element 3
 Planning to Close the Achievement Gap Using Data

- **Standard 1**
Professional Knowledge
- **Standard 2**
Instructional Planning
- **Standard 4**
Differentiated Instruction
- **Standard 7**
Positive Learning Environment
- **Standard 8**
Academically Challenging Environment

Standard #9
 Professional Learning and Ethical Practice:
 The teacher engages in ongoing professional learning and uses evidence to continually evaluate his/her practice, particularly the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (learners, families, other professionals, and the community), and adapts practice to meet the needs of each learner.

Domain 4
 Professional Responsibilities:

- 4a. Reflecting on Teaching
- 4e. Growing and Developing Professionally
- 4f. Showing Professionalism

Element 21
 Adhering to School and District Policies and Procedures
Element 22
 Maintaining Expertise in Content and Pedagogy
Element 23
 Promoting Teacher Leadership and Collaboration

- **Standard 1**
Professional Knowledge
- **Standard 4**
Differentiated Instruction
- **Standard 9**
Professionalism

Note. Adapted from Marzano Learning Center (2017); Council of Chief State School Officers (2013); Danielson (2013); Georgia Department of Education (2019)