



The impact of curriculum differentiation on learner performance, participation, and engagement among foundation phase learners in rural South African Public schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of curriculum differentiation on learner performance, participation, and engagement among Foundation Phase learners in rural South African public schools. Despite policy commitments to inclusive education, many rural classrooms continue to implement uniform teaching approaches that inadequately address diverse learner needs, resulting in uneven achievement and limited participation. Guided by an interpretivist research paradigm, the study employed a qualitative case study design to gain in-depth insights into classroom practices and learner experiences. A qualitative research method was adopted, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The population comprised Foundation Phase teachers in rural public primary schools, from which participants were purposively selected. The final sample comprised 12 Foundation Phase teachers from 4 schools. Data were analysed thematically. The study was delimited to the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The findings revealed that curriculum differentiation enhanced learner engagement and participation when teachers adapted content and teaching strategies, but inconsistent implementation limited its impact on learner performance. Overall, curriculum differentiation was found to be a viable approach for promoting inclusive learning in the Foundation Phase when adequately supported. The study recommends targeted professional development and improved resource provision to strengthen differentiated practices in rural classrooms. The study contributes to scholarship by providing empirical evidence on how curriculum differentiation is enacted in resource-constrained rural Foundation Phase classrooms and by extending understanding of the contextual factors that facilitate or hinder inclusive pedagogical practices in rural South African schools.

Keywords: Curriculum Differentiation, Learner Performance, Learner Participation, Rural Schools

INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase remains a central priority in South Africa. The early grades are critical for developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills that

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shape learners' long-term academic success. However, national and international assessments continue to reveal persistent underperformance among South African learners, particularly in reading and mathematics.¹ These challenges are more pronounced in rural public schools, where socio-economic constraints, limited resources, and diverse learner needs create complex teaching environments. In this context, curriculum differentiation has emerged as an important instructional approach to improve learner performance, participation, and engagement.

Curriculum differentiation refers to the deliberate adaptation of content, teaching methods, learning activities, and assessment strategies to accommodate learners' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles.² It is grounded in inclusive education principles, which emphasise equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities.³ South African education policy, including the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), encourages teachers to respond to learner diversity and to implement strategies that support inclusive classroom practice. In theory, differentiation enables teachers to provide appropriate levels of support and challenge so that all learners can access the curriculum effectively.

Empirical studies suggest that differentiated instruction can positively influence academic achievement and learner motivation when implemented consistently and thoughtfully.⁴ By using flexible grouping, scaffolding, varied tasks, and continuous assessment, teachers can create opportunities for active learner involvement. Engagement, which includes behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, plays a significant role in promoting sustained learning and academic progress.⁵ In the Foundation Phase, where learners are developing essential skills and attitudes toward schooling, meaningful participation and engagement are particularly important.

Despite clear policy support and theoretical justification, the implementation of curriculum differentiation in rural Foundation Phase classrooms remains uneven. Many teachers continue to rely on whole-class, teacher-centred approaches that treat learners as a homogeneous group. Such approaches often fail to address differences in ability, pace, and learning style. As a result, some learners struggle to keep up with grade-level expectations, while others are insufficiently challenged. This contributes to uneven academic performance and limited classroom participation, reinforcing existing educational inequalities.⁶

The situation is especially concerning in rural districts such as Vhembe in Limpopo Province, where schools often operate under resource constraints and large class sizes. Although curriculum differentiation is promoted in policy and professional discourse, its practical application in these contexts remains poorly documented. There is limited context-specific research examining how Foundation Phase teachers in rural schools understand and implement curriculum differentiation, and how such practices influence learner performance, participation, and engagement. Without empirical evidence from rural settings, it is difficult to determine whether curriculum differentiation is achieving its intended impact or to identify the support teachers require to implement it effectively.

The problem addressed in this study is therefore the persistent gap between policy expectations regarding curriculum differentiation and its inconsistent implementation in rural Foundation Phase classrooms, which may contribute to low learner engagement, limited participation, and uneven academic performance. While inclusive education policies advocate for responsive teaching, many rural classrooms continue to experience instructional practices that do not adequately accommodate learner

¹ Department of Basic Education, *National Diagnostic Report on Learner Performance* (Department of Basic Education., 2023); I. V. S Mullis et al., *PIRLS 2021 International Results in Reading* (Boston College: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2023).

² Carol A Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms* (Ascd, 2017).

³ UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All." (Paris: UNESCO, 2020).

⁴ Marjolein I. Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education," *Educational Research Review* 24 (June 2018): 31–54, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.02.002>; C. A Tomlinson and T. R Moon, *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom* (ASCD, 2018).

⁵ Jennifer A. Fredricks, Amy L. Reschly, and Sandra L. Christenson, "Interventions for Student Engagement: Overview and State of the Field," in *Handbook of Student Engagement Interventions* (Elsevier, 2019), 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-813413-9.00001-2>.

⁶ Department of Basic Education (DBE)., *Learning Recovery Programme: School Management Teams (SMT) Guidelines*. (DBE, 2023); Mullis et al., *PIRLS 2021 International Results in Reading*.

diversity. This gap raises critical questions about the effectiveness of curriculum differentiation as a strategy for improving learning outcomes in rural public schools.

In response to this problem, this study investigates the impact of curriculum differentiation on learner performance, participation, and engagement among Foundation Phase learners in rural South African public schools, with a specific focus on the Vhembe District. The study explores how teachers interpret and implement differentiation in their classrooms, examines the perceived and observed influence of differentiated practices on learner outcomes, and identifies the challenges teachers encounter in rural contexts. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do Foundation Phase teachers implement curriculum differentiation in rural classrooms?
2. What is the impact of curriculum differentiation on learner performance?
3. How does curriculum differentiation influence learner participation and engagement?
4. What challenges do teachers encounter when implementing curriculum differentiation in rural Foundation Phase schools?

By integrating policy perspectives, theoretical understandings of differentiation, and the lived realities of rural classrooms, this study seeks to contribute contextually grounded knowledge on how curriculum differentiation can support inclusive and effective learning in the Foundation Phase.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on inclusive education emphasises the importance of teaching approaches that accommodate learner diversity in the classroom. Curriculum differentiation has been widely identified as a strategy that enables teachers to address varied learning needs, abilities, and interests. This review explores key scholarly perspectives on differentiation, learner performance, participation, engagement, and the influence of rural school contexts.

Curriculum Differentiation in Inclusive Education

Curriculum differentiation is widely recognised as a central strategy for advancing inclusive education in mainstream classrooms. Inclusive education seeks to ensure that all learners, regardless of ability, background, or socio-economic status, have equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities.⁷ Differentiated instruction aligns with this goal by adapting teaching to accommodate learners' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles.⁸ Rather than treating learners as a homogeneous group, differentiation acknowledges diversity as a normal and valuable aspect of classrooms.

Recent research highlights that effective differentiation involves deliberate planning across content, process, product, and learning environment.⁹ Teachers may vary the complexity of tasks, use flexible grouping, provide scaffolding, and offer multiple ways for learners to demonstrate understanding. A systematic review by Smale-Jacobse et al. found that differentiated instruction can positively influence academic achievement when implemented consistently and supported by teacher training.¹⁰ However, the review also noted that many teachers struggle to apply differentiation effectively due to limited professional development and contextual constraints.

In the South African context, inclusive education policy frameworks encourage teachers to accommodate learner diversity within ordinary classrooms.¹¹ Despite this policy emphasis, studies indicate that implementation remains uneven, particularly in under-resourced schools.¹² Teachers often express uncertainty about how to differentiate effectively while managing large classes and curriculum

⁷ UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All."

⁸ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

⁹ Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

¹⁰ Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

¹¹ Department of Basic Education, "Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement: Foundation Phase," *Department of Basic Education*, 2022.

¹² E. Walton and P. Engelbrecht, "Inclusive Education Policy and Practice in South Africa," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 26, no. 2 (2022): 1–15.

demands. This suggests that while differentiation is conceptually aligned with inclusion, its success depends on teacher competence, institutional support, and contextual realities.

Therefore, the literature positions curriculum differentiation as both a pedagogical and ethical imperative within inclusive education. When thoughtfully applied, it has the potential to reduce barriers to learning and promote equitable participation.

Learner Performance in the Foundation Phase

Learner performance in the Foundation Phase is shaped by the quality of instructional practices and the extent to which teaching responds to learners' developmental needs. The early grades are critical for establishing literacy and numeracy foundations that influence long-term academic trajectories.¹³ However, national and international assessments continue to reveal low levels of achievement among many South African learners in the early years.¹⁴ These findings underscore the importance of effective and responsive pedagogy.

Instructional strategies that scaffold learning and provide appropriate levels of challenge are associated with improved learner performance. Differentiated instruction enables teachers to adjust tasks according to learners' readiness levels, thereby preventing both under-challenge and cognitive overload.¹⁵ Research indicates that when learners receive instruction aligned with their current understanding, they are more likely to demonstrate progress and mastery of key competencies.¹⁶

Formative assessment also plays a significant role in supporting learner performance. Continuous assessment allows teachers to identify learning gaps and adjust instruction accordingly.¹⁷ In differentiated classrooms, assessment informs targeted support and enrichment activities. However, in many rural schools, teachers face constraints such as large class sizes and limited resources, which may restrict the consistent use of differentiated strategies.¹⁸

The literature therefore suggests that learner performance in the Foundation Phase is closely linked to instructional responsiveness. Differentiated teaching, when effectively implemented, provides a framework for improving academic outcomes by aligning curriculum demands with learners' abilities and needs.

Learner Participation in Classroom Activities

Active learner participation is fundamental to meaningful learning and is widely regarded as an indicator of inclusive classroom practice. Participation involves learners' behavioural involvement in activities such as discussions, group work, questioning, and task completion.¹⁹ When learners participate actively, they are more likely to internalise concepts and develop critical thinking skills.

Teaching approaches that are responsive to learner diversity enhance participation by ensuring that tasks are accessible and appropriately challenging. Differentiated instruction allows teachers to provide multiple entry points to learning, thereby increasing opportunities for learners to contribute.²⁰ For example, flexible grouping and scaffolded questioning can encourage hesitant learners to engage, while enrichment activities can sustain the interest of advanced learners.

Research also indicates that inclusive classroom climates foster participation by promoting respect, collaboration, and a sense of belonging.²¹ When learners feel valued and supported, they are more likely to take academic risks and share ideas. Conversely, uniform teaching approaches that do not

¹³ Department of Basic Education, *National Diagnostic Report on Learner Performance*.

¹⁴ Ina V.S. Mullis, Michael O Martin, and Martin Hooper, "Measuring Changing Educational Contexts in a Changing World: Evolution of the TIMSS and PIRLS Questionnaires," in *Cognitive Abilities and Educational Outcomes: A Festschrift in Honour of Jan-Eric Gustafsson* (Springer, 2016), 207–22.

¹⁵ Tomlinson and Moon, *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom*.

¹⁶ Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

¹⁷ P Black and D Wiliam, *Classroom Assessment and Pedagogy* (Routledge, 2018).

¹⁸ Department of Basic Education, *National Diagnostic Report on Learner Performance*.

¹⁹ Fredricks, Reschly, and Christenson, "Interventions for Student Engagement: Overview and State of the Field."

²⁰ Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

²¹ UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All."

account for diverse abilities may discourage participation among learners who struggle or feel marginalised.

In rural contexts, factors such as language diversity and limited exposure to formal learning may affect learners' confidence in participating. Differentiated strategies that incorporate peer collaboration and contextualised examples can help bridge these gaps.²² Thus, the literature highlights the strong link between responsive teaching and active learner participation in Foundation Phase classrooms.

Learner Engagement and Motivation

Learner engagement is closely connected to motivation and plays a crucial role in academic success. Engagement encompasses behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, including effort, interest, persistence, and investment in learning tasks.²³ In the Foundation Phase, fostering engagement is particularly important because early learning experiences influence long-term attitudes toward schooling.

Instructional practices that promote relevance, variety, and accessibility enhance learner engagement. Differentiated instruction supports engagement by aligning tasks with learners' readiness levels and interests.²⁴ When learners perceive tasks as meaningful and achievable, their intrinsic motivation increases. Smale-Jacobse et al. found that differentiated practices can positively affect learners' motivation, particularly when combined with supportive classroom environments.²⁵

Engagement is strengthened when learners experience autonomy and competence. Providing choices in learning activities and opportunities for collaborative work can enhance learners' sense of ownership.²⁶ However, engagement may decline in classrooms where teaching is predominantly teacher-centred and uniform.

In rural schools, contextual challenges such as poverty and limited resources may affect motivation. Responsive and differentiated teaching can mitigate these effects by creating inclusive and stimulating learning environments. The literature therefore underscores the importance of differentiated instruction in fostering sustained learner engagement and motivation.

Rural School Contexts and Teaching Practices

Rural schools operate within unique socio-economic and structural contexts that shape teaching practices. In South Africa, rural schools often face limited infrastructure, scarce teaching resources, large or multigrade classes, and constrained access to professional development.²⁷ These factors influence how teachers implement instructional strategies, including curriculum differentiation.

Research indicates that contextual constraints may limit teachers' capacity to adopt innovative or resource-intensive approaches.²⁸ For example, large class sizes can make individualised support challenging, while limited access to learning materials may restrict differentiated task design. Nevertheless, some studies suggest that teachers in rural settings often demonstrate creativity and adaptability in responding to contextual challenges.²⁹

Socio-economic conditions in rural communities may also affect learner readiness and prior knowledge, increasing the need for scaffolded and responsive instruction. Differentiated teaching can help address these disparities by adjusting tasks and expectations to learners' contexts.³⁰ However, effective implementation requires sustained professional support and institutional commitment.

²² Elizabeth Walton and Peter Engelbrecht, "Understanding the Meaning of Inclusive Education: A Human Rights Perspective," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 27, no. 3 (2023): 311–28.

²³ Fredricks, Reschly, and Christenson, "Interventions for Student Engagement: Overview and State of the Field."

²⁴ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

²⁵ Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

²⁶ UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All."

²⁷ Department of Basic Education, *Education Statistics in South Africa 2021* (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

²⁸ Walton and Engelbrecht, "Inclusive Education Policy and Practice in South Africa."

²⁹ UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All."

³⁰ Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

The literature, therefore, highlights the interplay between rural contextual realities and classroom practice. Understanding these dynamics is essential for examining how curriculum differentiation operates in rural Foundation Phase schools and how it influences learner outcomes. The literature demonstrates that curriculum differentiation plays a significant role in supporting inclusive learning environments and improving learner outcomes. Effective implementation depends on teachers' understanding of differentiation as well as the availability of institutional support and professional development. Understanding these factors is important for examining how differentiated teaching influences learner performance, participation, and engagement in rural Foundation Phase classrooms.

CONCEPTUALISING CURRICULUM DIFFERENTIATION

This study conceptualises curriculum differentiation as a responsive instructional approach designed to address learner diversity in Foundation Phase classrooms. Curriculum differentiation refers to the intentional adaptation of content, teaching strategies, learning processes, classroom environments, and assessment methods to accommodate learners' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles.³¹ Although differentiation is rooted in inclusive education, recent scholarship emphasises its role in promoting equitable learning opportunities and improving learner outcomes, particularly in diverse and resource-constrained contexts.³² In rural South African public schools, where classrooms often include mixed-ability learners, language diversity, and socio-economic challenges, differentiation is especially relevant.

In this study, curriculum differentiation is framed through four interrelated dimensions: content, process, product, and learning environment. Differentiated content involves modifying what is taught by adjusting the level of complexity or the way information is presented. Differentiated process refers to adapting how learners engage with content, such as through flexible grouping, scaffolding, and varied teaching strategies. Differentiated product allows learners to demonstrate their understanding in different ways, recognising diverse strengths and abilities. Differentiated learning environments focus on creating supportive, inclusive classroom conditions that encourage collaboration and active participation.³³ These dimensions interact to shape meaningful learning experiences.

The study further conceptualises learner performance, participation, and engagement as interconnected outcomes of differentiated practice. Learner performance refers to academic achievement and mastery of grade-level competencies, particularly in early literacy and numeracy. National reports indicate that many South African learners struggle to meet expected standards in the Foundation Phase, highlighting the need for more responsive instructional approaches.³⁴ Differentiation is therefore positioned as a strategy to align instruction with learners' developmental needs and improve achievement.

Learner participation is understood as active involvement in classroom tasks and discussions, reflecting behavioural engagement in learning.³⁵ Learner engagement extends to emotional and cognitive investment, including motivation, persistence, and a sense of belonging. Research suggests that differentiated instruction can enhance both participation and engagement by recognising individual learner strengths and providing appropriate levels of challenge.³⁶

Therefore, curriculum differentiation is conceptualised as a multidimensional and context-sensitive practice that influences learner performance, participation, and engagement, while being shaped by contextual factors such as teacher expertise, class size, and resource availability in rural schools.

³¹ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*; Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

³² UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All."

³³ Tomlinson and Moon, *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom*.

³⁴ Department of Basic Education, *National Diagnostic Report on Learner Performance*; Mullis et al., *PIRLS 2021 International Results in Reading*.

³⁵ Fredricks, Reschly, and Christenson, "Interventions for Student Engagement: Overview and State of the Field."

³⁶ Deunk et al., "Effective Differentiation Practices: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Studies on the Cognitive Effects of Differentiation Practices in Primary Education."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by constructivist learning theory, which emphasises that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, experience, and reflection. Constructivism views learning as a process in which learners build new understanding based on prior knowledge and meaningful engagement with content.³⁷ In the Foundation Phase, where learners are developing foundational cognitive and social skills, active participation and guided support are essential for effective learning. Constructivist theory, therefore, provides a relevant lens for examining how curriculum differentiation influences learner performance, participation, and engagement.

Central to constructivism is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance or support.³⁸ Differentiated instruction aligns closely with this concept because it requires teachers to assess learners' readiness levels and provide appropriate scaffolding. By adjusting tasks to suit varying levels of ability, teachers create opportunities for learners to progress within their ZPD. Recent scholarship highlights that scaffolded instruction and responsive pedagogy are strongly associated with improved learner outcomes, particularly in early grade classrooms.³⁹

Constructivist theory also emphasises social interaction as a key component of learning. Knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue, collaboration, and shared problem-solving. Differentiated strategies such as flexible grouping, peer learning, and collaborative tasks reflect these principles by encouraging learners to engage actively with one another.⁴⁰ Such interaction enhances learner participation and fosters a sense of belonging, both of which are essential for sustained engagement. Fredricks et al. argue that behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement are strengthened when learners are actively involved in meaningful learning activities.⁴¹

Constructivism also recognises the importance of learner-centred teaching approaches. Instead of transmitting knowledge uniformly, teachers act as facilitators, guiding learning experiences and responding to individual differences. Curriculum differentiation embodies this learner-centred orientation by adapting content, process, and assessment to accommodate diverse learning needs.⁴² In rural South African classrooms, where learner diversity and contextual challenges are significant, constructivist principles underscore the need for flexible, responsive teaching practices.

By grounding the study in constructivist learning theory, the study positions curriculum differentiation as a mechanism that promotes active knowledge construction, meaningful participation, and improved performance. The framework, therefore, explains how differentiated instruction can enhance learner engagement and academic outcomes, while acknowledging that effective implementation depends on contextual support and teacher capacity.

METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by an interpretivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand participants' perspectives and interpretations of their practices and the meanings they attach to them.⁴³ An interpretivist approach was appropriate because the study aimed to explore how Foundation Phase teachers understand and implement curriculum differentiation in rural classrooms, and how these practices influence learner performance, participation, and engagement. The focus was therefore on gaining rich, contextual insights rather than producing generalisable findings.

A qualitative case study design was employed to enable an in-depth exploration of curriculum differentiation within its real-life rural school context. Case study research allows researchers to investigate contemporary phenomena within bounded systems and to draw on multiple sources of

³⁷ Lev S Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, vol. 86 (Harvard university press, 1978); D. H Schunk, *Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective*, 8th ed (Pearson., 2020).

³⁸ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

³⁹ Schunk, *Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective*; Tomlinson and Moon, *Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom*.

⁴⁰ UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All."

⁴¹ Fredricks, Reschly, and Christenson, "Interventions for Student Engagement: Overview and State of the Field."

⁴² Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

⁴³ J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2018); S. B Merriam and E. J Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed, 2016.

evidence.⁴⁴ The bounded system in this study consisted of four rural public primary schools in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. The qualitative approach was well-suited to examining classroom practices, teacher perspectives, and the contextual challenges influencing differentiated instruction.⁴⁵

The population comprised Foundation Phase teachers in rural public primary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience teaching in the Foundation Phase and were familiar with curriculum implementation. Twelve teachers from four schools participated in the study. To provide context for the participants, Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants (N= 120)

Participation Category	Frequency
Gender	
Female	10
Male	2
Teaching Experience	
1-5 Years	2
6-10 Years	4
More than 10 Years	6
Highest Qualification	
Diploma in Education	3
Bachelor's Degree	7
Postgraduate Qualification	2
Foundation Phase Grade Taught	
Grade R	2
Grade 1	4
Grade 2	3
Grade 3	3

The demographic information indicates that the participants possessed varying levels of teaching experience and qualifications, thereby providing diverse perspectives on the implementation of curriculum differentiation in rural Foundation Phase classrooms.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and assessment records. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.⁴⁶

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The process involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, and developing themes that addressed the research questions.⁴⁷ Trustworthiness was ensured through prolonged field engagement, triangulation of data sources, member checking, and the maintenance of an audit trail. Ethical considerations included obtaining institutional ethical clearance, permission from the Department of Education and school principals, informed consent from participants, and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the study's key findings based on data collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings are organised into themes that reflect teachers' understanding and implementation of curriculum differentiation in rural Foundation Phase

⁴⁴ R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Sage Publications, 2018).

⁴⁵ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

⁴⁶ L. S. Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1–13.

⁴⁷ Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria."

classrooms. The themes were generated through Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis process.⁴⁸ Following repeated reading of the transcripts and observation notes, initial codes were developed from recurring ideas and patterns in the data. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into themes based on their frequency, relevance to the research questions, and their ability to explain the impact of curriculum differentiation on learner performance, participation, and engagement. Three overarching themes emerged:

- (1) Teachers' varied understanding of curriculum differentiation;
- (2) The contribution of differentiated teaching to learner engagement and participation; and
- (3) The inconsistent influence of differentiation on learner performance due to contextual and implementation challenges.

These themes were selected because they represented the dominant patterns across the dataset and directly addressed the study's objectives and research questions. Each theme is discussed in relation to relevant literature and constructivist learning theory.

Theme 1: Teachers' Understanding of Curriculum Differentiation Varied Widely

The findings revealed that teachers had different interpretations of curriculum differentiation. While some participants demonstrated a clear understanding of adapting content, teaching strategies, and assessment to meet diverse learner needs, others associated differentiation mainly with giving extra work to fast learners or simplifying tasks for struggling learners. This variation influenced how differentiation was implemented in classrooms.

One participant stated:

"For me, differentiation means I must explain the work in different ways until all learners understand. Sometimes I group them according to ability so that I can help those who are struggling." (Participant 3)

Another teacher expressed a narrower understanding:

"I differentiate when I give stronger learners more exercises and allow slow learners to copy from the board. That is how I manage the class." (Participant 8)

These responses show that although teachers were aware of learner diversity, their approaches were not always aligned with a comprehensive understanding of differentiation. Some participants demonstrated practices consistent with adapting instruction, while others equated differentiation with classroom management strategies rather than purposeful instructional planning.

From a constructivist learning theory perspective, effective differentiation requires teachers to create learning environments where learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful engagement. Constructivism emphasises scaffolding, learner-centred activities, and the recognition of prior knowledge. Teachers who described grouping learners and adjusting explanations reflected constructivist principles by attempting to build on learners' levels of understanding. However, participants who focused solely on assigning additional work did not fully embrace the constructivist view of teaching as a responsive, interactive process.

The findings align with the existing literature, which suggests that teachers' conceptual understanding significantly shapes classroom practice. Differentiation is not merely about adjusting the quantity of work, but about modifying content, processes, products, and the learning environment to accommodate diverse needs.⁴⁹ Teachers with limited understanding may implement surface-level strategies that do not meaningfully improve learner outcomes.

The variation in understanding may be linked to differences in professional development exposure and teaching experience. Some participants reported attending workshops on inclusive education, while

⁴⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Toward Good Practice in Thematic Analysis: Avoiding Common Problems and Becoming a Knowing Researcher," *International Journal of Transgender Health* 24, no. 1 (January 25, 2023): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>.

⁴⁹ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

others relied on personal experience. This inconsistency underscores the need for structured, continuous professional support in rural contexts.

The findings suggest that teachers' conceptual clarity regarding curriculum differentiation directly influences implementation quality. Within a constructivist framework, a deeper understanding enables teachers to design learner-centred experiences that promote meaningful knowledge construction. Without such understanding, differentiation risks becoming a procedural activity rather than a transformative pedagogical approach.

Theme 2: Differentiated Teaching Enhanced Learner Engagement and Participation

The data showed that when teachers intentionally adapted instruction, learners became more actively involved in classroom activities. Participants reported improvements in learner participation, confidence, and motivation when teaching strategies were varied to accommodate different learning needs.

One participant explained:

"When I use pictures, group work, and storytelling, even the shy learners start to participate. They feel free to talk because the lesson is not only about writing." (Participant 1)

Another teacher noted:

"After I started grouping learners and giving them activities at their level, more hands go up during discussions. They are no longer afraid of giving wrong answers." (Participant 6)

Classroom observations supported these claims, as learners appeared more attentive and willing to engage when lessons included interactive and varied activities. Teachers who incorporated visual aids, peer collaboration, and differentiated questioning created inclusive environments where learners could participate at their own level.

Constructivist learning theory supports these findings by emphasising active learner involvement in the learning process. According to constructivism, learners construct knowledge through interaction, dialogue, and hands-on experiences. Differentiated teaching strategies, such as group work, visual materials, and scaffolded questioning, create opportunities for learners to engage meaningfully with the content. By adjusting instruction to match learners' readiness levels, teachers facilitate deeper understanding and sustained engagement.

The findings are consistent with research suggesting that differentiation enhances learner motivation and classroom participation when learners experience tasks as accessible and relevant.⁵⁰ When learners perceive that activities are suited to their level of understanding, they are more likely to contribute and remain focused.

In rural Foundation Phase classrooms, where language diversity and mixed abilities are common, differentiated teaching appeared particularly beneficial. Participants indicated that learners who previously remained passive became more confident when tasks were adjusted to their needs. This reflects the constructivist view that learning occurs best in supportive environments where learners feel psychologically safe and intellectually challenged.

However, the positive impact on engagement was closely linked to consistent implementation. Teachers who differentiated occasionally did not observe sustained gains in participation. This suggests that engagement improves when differentiation becomes an integral part of daily instructional practice rather than an occasional intervention.

The findings demonstrate that curriculum differentiation positively influences learner engagement and participation when aligned with constructivist principles. By creating learner-centred and inclusive classroom environments, teachers enable learners to actively construct knowledge and participate meaningfully in learning activities.

⁵⁰ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

Theme 3: Inconsistent Differentiation Limited Improvements in Learner Performance

Although participants reported improved engagement and participation, the impact on learner performance was less consistent. Some teachers observed academic improvement among learners when differentiation was applied regularly, while others reported minimal changes in assessment outcomes.

One participant stated:

“When I plan different activities for different groups, I see improvement in reading and counting skills. The learners understand better because the work is not too difficult for them.” (Participant 4)

In contrast, another teacher remarked:

“Sometimes I try to differentiate, but because of time pressure, I go back to teaching everyone the same way. That is why performance does not always improve.” (Participant 9)

These findings suggest that while differentiation has the potential to enhance learner performance, its effectiveness depends on consistency and quality of implementation. Constructivist learning theory emphasises the importance of sustained scaffolding and meaningful engagement in promoting cognitive development. When differentiation is implemented consistently, learners are supported within their zones of understanding, enabling gradual academic growth.

However, when teachers revert to uniform teaching approaches due to time constraints or workload pressures, opportunities for personalised support are reduced. In such cases, learners who require additional guidance may fall behind, while advanced learners may not be sufficiently challenged. This disrupts the constructivist process of building knowledge progressively through guided interaction.

The findings align with research indicating that differentiation improves academic achievement when implemented systematically and supported by effective assessment practices.⁵¹ Sporadic or superficial application is unlikely to produce significant performance gains.

Participants also highlighted contextual challenges, such as large class sizes and administrative demands, that limited their ability to thoroughly plan differentiated lessons. These contextual realities in rural schools affected the sustainability of differentiated practices.

The findings in theme 4 indicate that curriculum differentiation can positively influence learner performance, but only when implemented consistently and supported by adequate planning time and professional capacity. Within a constructivist framework, sustained learner-centred instruction is essential for measurable academic improvement. Without consistency, the potential benefits of differentiation remain partially realised.

The findings demonstrate that teachers’ understanding of curriculum differentiation influenced its classroom implementation. When applied effectively, differentiated teaching enhanced learner participation and engagement, although improvements in learner performance were less consistent. These results highlight the importance of strengthening teachers’ knowledge and support systems to ensure effective and sustained implementation of curriculum differentiation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the implementation of curriculum differentiation in rural Foundation Phase classrooms. Firstly, ongoing professional development should be provided to Foundation Phase teachers to enhance their knowledge and practical skills in implementing curriculum differentiation. Although many teachers recognise the importance of addressing learner diversity, the study found that differentiated practices are not consistently applied. Regular training workshops, mentoring programmes, and classroom-based support can help teachers understand how to adapt content, learning activities, and assessment strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners. Professional development should also focus on practical strategies such as flexible grouping, scaffolding, and differentiated assessment to support inclusive teaching practices.

⁵¹ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

Secondly, improving access to teaching and learning resources in rural schools is essential. Many rural classrooms operate under conditions of limited instructional materials, which restrict teachers' ability to design varied learning activities. Providing appropriate teaching resources, including reading materials, visual aids, and differentiated learning materials, would enable teachers to create learning experiences that accommodate diverse learner abilities and learning styles. Adequate resources can also support active learner participation and engagement in classroom activities.

Thirdly, instructional support from district-level officials should be strengthened. Curriculum advisors and subject specialists can play a crucial role in guiding teachers on effective differentiation strategies and monitoring the implementation of inclusive teaching practices. Regular school visits, professional guidance, and feedback can help teachers overcome challenges associated with curriculum differentiation. Finally, schools should encourage collaborative planning among teachers. When teachers work together to plan lessons, share teaching strategies, and reflect on classroom experiences, they are more likely to develop effective differentiation strategies that support improved learner performance, participation, and engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of curriculum differentiation on learner performance, participation, and engagement among Foundation Phase learners in rural South African public schools. The findings indicate that curriculum differentiation can play a significant role in promoting inclusive and responsive teaching practices when teachers adapt instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learner needs. In the classrooms where differentiation was implemented effectively, learners demonstrated increased engagement in learning activities and participated more actively during lessons. These outcomes highlight the importance of flexible teaching approaches that recognise differences in learners' readiness levels, learning styles, and interests.

However, the study also revealed that curriculum differentiation in rural schools remains inconsistent. Several contextual challenges, including limited teaching resources, large class sizes, and insufficient professional support, restrict teachers' ability to apply differentiated strategies effectively. As a result, the potential benefits of curriculum differentiation for improving learner performance are not always fully realised. Addressing these challenges is therefore essential for strengthening inclusive teaching practices in rural classrooms.

The study concludes that curriculum differentiation offers a viable approach for enhancing learner participation and engagement in the Foundation Phase. When supported by adequate teacher training, resource provision, and instructional guidance, differentiated instruction can improve learning experiences and academic outcomes for learners in rural public schools. Strengthening teacher capacity and addressing contextual constraints will be critical in ensuring that curriculum differentiation becomes a sustainable and effective practice in rural South African education.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of curriculum differentiation in rural Foundation Phase classrooms, several areas remain open for further investigation. Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how curriculum differentiation influences learner outcomes. Quantitative data, such as learner achievement scores or assessment results, could complement qualitative findings and provide stronger evidence of the relationship between differentiated instruction and learner performance.

Future studies could also include learners' perspectives. The present study focused primarily on teachers' experiences and classroom observations; however, learners' voices are equally important in understanding how differentiated instruction affects their motivation, engagement, and participation in the learning process. Exploring learners' experiences could provide deeper insights into which differentiation strategies are most effective in supporting meaningful learning.

Further research could also investigate the long-term impact of curriculum differentiation on academic achievement across different phases of schooling. For instance, studies could examine whether

differentiated practices implemented in the Foundation Phase improve learning outcomes in later grades. Such longitudinal research would help determine whether early differentiated instruction has lasting benefits for learners' academic development. Moreover, comparative studies across rural and urban contexts could provide a broader understanding of how contextual factors influence the implementation and effectiveness of curriculum differentiation in South African schools.

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