



Differentiating instruction in mixed-ability settings: A case study of strategies used by Grade 6 teachers in Amathole East District, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Nondumiso Mnyamana¹, Samson Matope¹ & Clever Ndebele¹

¹ Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the strategies employed by Grade 6 teachers in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, to differentiate instruction within mixed-ability classrooms. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the research explored the challenges educators face in implementing effective differentiated practices. The data were collected from eight primary schools in the OR Tambo Inland, Mqanduli Cluster. Four Grade 6 teachers for Mathematics and Reading to Learn were selected from each school, which gave 12 participants. This selection was based on the teachers' expertise in Mathematics and Reading to Learn. Questionnaires were used in the data collection procedure to gather information on how teachers used differentiated instruction during class activities. Additionally, to investigate how Grade 6 teachers used differentiated instruction to meet learner variety in the classroom, semi-structured interviews were undertaken. The findings indicate a predominant reliance on group work as a differentiation strategy, and a notable absence of varied and learner-centered instructional methods. Teachers reported limited benefits from differentiation due to pressures of content coverage and insufficient understanding of individualised approaches. The research study examined the need for targeted continuous academic professional development for teachers on the instructional differentiation strategies to adopt in multi-ability classrooms. Recommendations include the implementation of ongoing capacitation programmes, fostering a shift towards learner-centric practices, and enhancing flexible grouping strategies to better meet diverse learner needs. Finally, this study emphasizes the fundamental need to capacitate educators with the necessary skills and resources to facilitate differentiated teaching strategies to ensure that no learner is left behind.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Multi-ability Classes, Teaching Strategy, Diverse Needs, Professional Development, Learner-centric Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Differentiated instruction emerged as an essential strategy in contemporary education, particularly in diverse classrooms characterized by varying learning abilities and styles.¹ The Amathole District in South Africa's Eastern Cape has a distinct educational landscape, with Grade 6 educators facing a lot of challenges whilst teaching diverse learners with varying learning needs. As highlighted by educational

¹ Brian Tomlinson, *Developing Materials for Language Teaching* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

theorists advocating for tailored learning, teachers need to use a variety of learner centred teaching strategies.² Research indicates that effective differentiation not only enhances learner engagement and understanding but also promotes academic success across varying ability levels.³

Differentiation, as articulated by Osae and Tomlinson & Imbeau, asserts that teachers should strategically tailor the content, methods, and assessment to accommodate individual learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles.⁴ Nevertheless, many educators still face challenges in implementing these techniques in practical settings.⁵ Factors such as teacher misconceptions about differentiated instruction, lack of resources, high learner-to-teacher ratios, and insufficient professional support impede effective classroom practices.⁶

Implementing differentiated instruction methodologies in multi-ability classrooms is an ongoing challenge for educators, especially in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Many Grade 6 teachers struggle to properly meet their Learners' varied educational requirements, frequently depending on traditional teaching approaches that may not adequately accommodate individual learners' readiness, interests, or learning profiles. Although group work is a typical differentiation method, it is often implemented without the appropriate pedagogical understanding or flexibility, limiting its ability to improve student engagement and academic success. Teachers commonly report feeling unprepared and unsupported in their efforts to adopt differentiated instruction, compounded by structural difficulties such as high learner-to-teacher ratios, pressure to meet specified curricula, and a lack of professional development opportunities. As a result, existing procedures not only impede the academic growth of learners of diverse ability levels but also perpetuate a cycle of injustice and inefficiency in the educational system. This study focuses on the differentiated teaching strategies used by Grade 6 teachers in the Amathole District. The study also aims to unpack the benefits and challenges observed during the implementation of these educational practices. This study aims to evaluate the differentiated teaching and learning strategies employed by Grade 6 teachers in the region, focusing on both the obstacles they face and the possible benefits of good differentiation, thereby filling a significant vacuum in the existing body of literature on inclusive education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on differentiated instruction reveals a growing consensus among educators that adaptability within the classroom is crucial to fostering inclusive learning environments. This adaptability aligns with the differentiation theory originally posited by Washburne and later expanded by Tomlinson, which emphasizes the necessity for tailored educational approaches that consider individual differences among learners.⁷

Research has established that learner-centered teaching methods, including group work and differentiated assessments, are particularly effective in meeting the diverse learning needs in multi-ability classes.⁸ However, many teachers still rely on one-size-fits-all teaching as a result of systemic

² Carol Ann Tomlinson, "Mapping a Route toward Differentiated Instruction," *Educational Leadership* 57 (1999): 12–17; Mariyam Shareefa et al., "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers," in *3rd International Conference on Special Education (ICSE 2019)* (Atlantis Press, 2019), 44–49.

³ Stephen Joseph, "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and in-Service Trained Teachers," *Caribbean Curriculum* 20 (2013): 31–51; Mazen Muhieddine Kotob and Malak Ali Abadi, "The Influence of Differentiated Instruction on Academic Achievement of Students in Mixed Ability Classrooms," *International Linguistics Research* 2, no. 2 (2019): p8–p8.

⁴ Akinyi Christine Osae, "Differentiated Instruction in Second Language Teaching: Educators' Perspectives, Practices and Challenges in Rwanda" (Unicaf University in Zambia. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, 2024); Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B Imbeau, *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom* (Ascd, 2023).

⁵ Nondumiso Mnyamana, Samson Matope, and Clever Ndebele, "Examining Grade 6 Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Differentiated Instruction in O.R. Tambo Inland District in South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, May 3, 2024, 593–610, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2024553>.

⁶ Mnyamana, Matope, and Ndebele, "Examining Grade 6 Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Differentiated Instruction in O.R. Tambo Inland District in South Africa"; Raesetja Gloria Ledwaba, "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme" (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2017).

⁷ Carleton W Washburne, "Adjusting the Program to the Child," *Educational Leadership* 11, no. 3 (1953): 138–47; Tomlinson, "Mapping a Route toward Differentiated Instruction."

⁸ Endang Darsih, "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective," *Indonesian EFL Journal* 4, no. 1 (2018): 33–42.

constraints, lack of understanding of differentiation principles, and operational challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and limited time for lesson preparation.⁹

Teaching strategies that accommodate learner diversity in multi-ability contexts

a. Learner-centred methods

Darsih defines learner-centered teaching techniques as an approach that employs multiple teaching approaches to engage learners progressively and moves to the position of facilitator.¹⁰ He conducted a study on what makes learner-centred teaching effective; the findings revealed that (1) Teachers are not conveyors of information and learners are not empty vessels, (2) Learners do most of the work and are not passive in the classroom, (3) Learners are prepared to be accountable for their own learning; this is done to address the requirements of learners, (4) Teachers provide feedback to develop them, (5) lastly, teachers employ a variety of teaching approaches to suit the learning orientations of learners.¹¹

Du Plessis examined trainee teachers' attitudes, experiences, and barriers to learning-centered instruction in South Africa.¹² The results align with Darsih, who states that learner-centred teaching generally involves teachers giving more responsibility to learners for their learning and encouraging them not to be passive recipients of information.¹³ Du Plessis's study explains that trainee teachers have a poor understanding of learning-centered instruction, which poses major issues. To reduce this, Du Plessis suggests intensive support by academics and tutors.¹⁴ If the capacity to use learner-centred teaching methods is not incorporated into the curriculum of training institutions, there will be many challenges in schools.

Learner-centred teaching prioritises the learning abilities, learners' interests and learning styles.¹⁵ This seems to suggest that learner-centred approaches are also for learners who are collaborative and interactive in nature. Good teachers try various learning-centred instructional approaches in the classroom. The advantage of these interactive learning styles is that much learning takes place when learners are fully involved in the learning process.¹⁶ According to Johnson et al., "teaching strategy where carefully structured groups are formed for learners to work together maximizes their learning and that of fellow group members".¹⁷ The advantage of the learner-centred teaching method is that it develops learners' ability to discover different solutions to problems.¹⁸

b. Methods for differentiated instruction in mixed-ability learning contexts

Multiple differentiated education strategies have been identified in the literature.¹⁹ One crucial method is to conduct continuous oral and written assessments to measure learners' current levels of preparation and interest. Instead of making assumptions based on previous performance, differentiating classroom teachers use assessment data to modify assignments and provide focused support.

Assessment results should be used to tailor assignments and provide targeted assistance. Flexible grouping is also required and should be modified frequently. Learners can work alone, in pairs, or in groups, depending on their interests and readiness.

⁹ Shareefa et al., "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers."

¹⁰ Darsih, "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective."

¹¹ Darsih, "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective."

¹² Elize Du Plessis, "Student Teachers' Perceptions, Experiences, and Challenges Regarding Learner-Centred Teaching," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 1 (2020): 1–10.

¹³ Darsih, "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective."

¹⁴ Du Plessis, "Student Teachers' Perceptions, Experiences, and Challenges Regarding Learner-Centred Teaching."

¹⁵ Darsih, "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective."

¹⁶ S Senthamarai, "Interactive Teaching Strategies," *Journal of Applied and Advanced Research* 3, no. S1 (2018): 36–38.

¹⁷ David W Johnson, Roger T Johnson, and Karl A Smith, "Cooperative Learning Returns to College What Evidence Is There That It Works?," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 30, no. 4 (1998): 26–35.

¹⁸ Du Plessis, "Student Teachers' Perceptions, Experiences, and Challenges Regarding Learner-Centred Teaching"; Nicholas Bremner, "From Learner-Centred to Learning-Centred: Becoming a 'Hybrid' Practitioner," *International Journal of Educational Research* 97 (2019): 53–64.

¹⁹ Tomlinson, *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*; Weiping Hu et al., "Increasing Students' Scientific Creativity: The 'Learn to Think' Intervention Program," *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 47, no. 1 (2013): 3–21; Joseph S Renzulli and Sally M Reis, *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A How-to Guide for Talent Development* (Routledge, 2021)..

Wu et al. identify flexible grouping as a critical method that allows teachers to detect where Learners are failing or ready to proceed.²⁰ Some scholars agree that whole-group training can be effective in introducing new concepts.²¹ In a differentiated classroom, the instructor acts as a facilitator, encouraging Learners to take responsibility for their own learning and promoting independence.

Compacting is a differentiation approach in which teachers credit Learners for prior knowledge and adapt exercises to include higher-order questions for those Learners. (5) Tiered lessons where teachers differentiate by providing instruction at various levels of precision, varying the rates at which Learners work, giving several possibilities for expression, providing Learners with alternative topics on which to focus, and designing activities that cater to learners' learning styles.²² Aldossari explains that 'tiered activities' means that the teacher designs activities that have the same concepts and skills, but the difference is in the route, abstractness, complexity and open-mindedness.²³ (6) Learning stations are also useful for differentiation as learners go to certain areas in the room to do specified work with the teacher or individually using instructive, interactive approaches.²⁴

Learning contracts are another useful strategy for effective differentiation, as these allow teachers to design tasks targeted at meeting a variety of learners' needs and, at the same time, give all learners common tasks. Wu et al. suggest providing all forms of support to encourage instructors to use current teaching practices, including differentiated instruction.²⁵ Differentiated instruction tactics include learning centres, interest groups, group investigations, learning contracts, and tiered activities.²⁶

The literature reviewed makes it clear that a variety of teaching methods, combined with the differentiated teaching strategies mentioned above, will surely help teachers to respond to learner diversity effectively. Effective implementation of needs training is followed by classroom support. This is what the researcher sought to achieve to support Grade 6 teachers to respond to learner diversity through differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. As teachers differentiate instruction, it should be noted that the approaches used are learner centred as well as learning centred. Learner-centred education, as defined by Bremner, is a

*...teaching approach in which learners cease to be passive receivers of knowledge and become more active participants in their own learning process; learning is contextualised, meaningful, and based, wherever possible, around learners' prior knowledge, needs and interests; finally, learning is more dialogic and democratic, and learners have more control with regard to what and how they learn.*²⁷

c. Benefits of differentiated instruction

Differentiation in teaching and learning helps teachers adapt to the individual demands of learners in mixed-ability classes and therefore achieve equality for all learners.²⁸ In the same way, research explains differentiated instruction as a strategy that increases learner motivation and brings about increased

²⁰ Hu et al., "Increasing Students' Scientific Creativity: The 'Learn to Think' Intervention Program."

²¹ Hu et al., "Increasing Students' Scientific Creativity: The 'Learn to Think' Intervention Program"; Tomlinson, "Mapping a Route toward Differentiated Instruction"; Joseph, "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and in-Service Trained Teachers."

²² E Abodey and J A Ansah, "Differentiated Curriculum: The Perspectives of the Special Educationist," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 7, no. 21 (2017): 38–45; Kristina J Doubet and Jessica A Hockett, *Differentiation in the Elementary Grades: Strategies to Engage and Equip All Learners* (Ascd, 2017).

²³ Ali Tared Aldossari, "The Challenges of Using the Differentiated Instruction Strategy: A Case Study in the General Education Stages in Saudi Arabia," *International Education Studies* 11, no. 4 (2018): 74–83.

²⁴ Ruben Gentry, April P Sallie, and Carrie A Sanders, "Differentiated Instructional Strategies to Accommodate Students with Varying Needs and Learning Styles," *Online Submission*, 2013.

²⁵ Hu et al., "Increasing Students' Scientific Creativity: The 'Learn to Think' Intervention Program."

²⁶ Gentry, Sallie, and Sanders, "Differentiated Instructional Strategies to Accommodate Students with Varying Needs and Learning Styles."

²⁷ Bremner, "From Learner-Centred to Learning-Centred: Becoming a 'Hybrid' Practitioner."

²⁸ Panagiotia Konstantinou-Katzi et al., "Differentiation of Teaching and Learning Mathematics: An Action Research Study in Tertiary Education," *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology* 44, no. 3 (2013): 332–49; Charity Neejide Onyishi and Maximus Monaheng Sefotho, "Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms: Implication for Teacher Education," *International Journal of Higher Education* 9, no. 6 (2020): 136–50.

academic achievement, showing improved collaboration among learners.²⁹ Joseph et al. conducted a study in Trinidad and Tobago on the impact of differentiated instruction in a teacher education setting. The results of this research revealed that through differentiated instruction, learner involvement improved, and the academic performance of learners improved.³⁰ Abodey and Ansah concur that using different routes to assist learners in accessing the curriculum increases the chances of their success.³¹ Similarly, Prast et al. conducted research on the effects of teacher development on learner achievement.³² Their results were in agreement with those of Joseph et al., who found that differentiated instruction has the potential to improve the academic performance of all learners.³³ Furthermore, Joseph et al. maintain that the relationship between teachers and learners also improved in differentiated classrooms. Schools begin to pay particular attention to the development of higher-level cognitive skills by providing an academically challenging curriculum. Reports from studies conducted indicate that differentiated instruction benefits all ability levels in the classroom.³⁴ Onyishi and Sefoko believe that differentiation is the most successful teaching strategy in an inclusive classroom setting.³⁵ Marishane indicates that differentiated instruction removes feelings of isolation from the teaching and learning process.³⁶

The reviewed literature above regards differentiated instruction as a strategy that teachers can use to reach out to every learner in the classroom, thereby improving learner performance. The researcher aimed to support schools so that they benefit from what curriculum differentiation has to offer.

Effective teaching and learning using differentiated instruction strategies, followed by additional support for pupils in low-attaining groups, leads to reduced signs of withdrawal in class. This implies that differentiation of instruction during teaching and learning increases the confidence levels and helps learners overcome their weaknesses. Differentiated instruction assists gifted learners to reach their full potential and develops their skills, motivation and perseverance.

Challenges in implementing differentiated instruction

Previous studies, such as the study done by Aldossari, investigated the challenges that hamper teachers' effective implementation of instructional differentiation. The results revealed that the nature of differentiated instruction itself was a challenge for teachers and that teachers' ineffective implementation was attributed to challenges related to learners.³⁷ The issues were connected to the educational setting, and it was discovered that teachers contributed to the lack of implementation. As a result, Aldossari recommends workshops for teachers on how to implement a differentiated curriculum. This is crucial, especially if the support given to teachers is classroom-based as opposed to theory-based. Munro and Joseph thus opine that teachers do not always receive support or guidance from the SMT and, too often, management has limited knowledge of how to provide effective provision for differentiation.³⁸ The researchers agree that there might not be trainers and workshop facilitators in each school, and bringing SMTs on board means that there will be sustainable implementation of differentiated instruction. Similarly, Logan asserts that successful use of differentiation requires greater expertise, knowledge, and highly specialised instructional approaches; however, teachers lack adequate training, mentoring, and

²⁹ Pablo Rojo, "Studying the Effects of Differentiated Instruction in the Science Classroom" (Montana State University, 2013); Joseph, "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and in-Service Trained Teachers."

³⁰ Joseph, "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and in-Service Trained Teachers."

³¹ Abodey and Ansah, "Differentiated Curriculum: The Perspectives of the Special Educationist."

³² Emilie J Prast et al., "Differentiated Instruction in Primary Mathematics: Effects of Teacher Professional Development on Student Achievement," *Learning and Instruction* 54 (2018): 22–34.

³³ Joseph, "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and in-Service Trained Teachers."

³⁴ Matseke Alinah Marishane, *Capacity Building for Curriculum Differentiation in the Teaching of Foundation Phase Mathematics in Ngwaritsi Circuit, Limpopo Province* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2013).

³⁵ Onyishi and Sefotho, "Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms: Implication for Teacher Education."

³⁶ Marishane, *Capacity Building for Curriculum Differentiation in the Teaching of Foundation Phase Mathematics in Ngwaritsi Circuit, Limpopo Province*.

³⁷ Aldossari, "The Challenges of Using the Differentiated Instruction Strategy: A Case Study in the General Education Stages in Saudi Arabia."

³⁸ John Munro, "Session G-Effective Strategies for Implementing Differentiated Instruction," 2012; Joseph, "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and in-Service Trained Teachers."

professional development to guarantee that differentiated methods of teaching are used appropriately and effectively.³⁹

Similar research on challenges of differentiated instruction was conducted in Brunei in Asia by Shareefa et al., exploring teachers' understanding of differentiated instruction and the challenges they experience during implementation. The study revealed six challenges that hamper effective implementation of a differentiated curriculum, including time, resources, knowledge, class size, support, and workload.⁴⁰ According to research, misunderstandings and a lack of awareness of differentiated instruction indicate the urgent need for continued professional development, teacher training, and support. They promote educational demonstrations and practical exercises using peer coaching, action research, and workshops.⁴¹

These findings are consistent with those of Ledwaba in the South African context, who notes that teachers' capacity to implement differentiated curriculum is frequently hampered by contextual challenges such as limited parental involvement, inadequate resources, insufficient preparation time, and overcrowded classrooms.⁴² These hurdles highlight the need for politicians, educators, and support practitioners to devise specific ways to address these issues. Shareefa et al. provide practical ideas for overcoming these barriers and improving the successful implementation of differentiated education.⁴³

As previously noted, important barriers to effective differentiated instruction include teachers' low expertise, insufficient support from school management teams (SMTs), and a variety of learner and contextual issues.⁴⁴ As a result, research from various contexts consistently advocates for focused and ongoing professional development, teacher training, and structured support.⁴⁵ These studies also promote practical tactics, including lesson demonstrations and hands-on learning through peer coaching, action research, and workshops.

However, previous studies did not investigate teachers' responses to support when professional development, practical demonstration and hands-on activities through mentorship coaching have been provided. Therefore, this study examined Grade 6 teachers' support to promote learner diversity through curriculum differentiation in multi-ability classrooms.

Training and support in the implementation of differentiated instruction

Previous studies investigated teachers' professional knowledge in relation to the implementation and understanding of differentiated instruction. For example, Ledwaba did a study on Foundation Phase instructors in South Africa and discovered that even those with a Bachelor of Education Honours degree in Learning Support frequently struggled to understand and effectively implement differentiated instruction. Despite their credentials, many lacked experience and did not employ government guidance papers aimed at promoting inclusive teaching practices.⁴⁶ Similarly, Mnyamana et al. and Ledwaba underline that good training, whether through school-based professional development or pre-service programmes, provides teachers with the skills and tools they need to meet the unique needs of all Learners.⁴⁷

³⁹ Brenda Logan, "Examining Differentiated Instruction: Teachers Respond.," *Research in Higher Education Journal* 13 (2011).

⁴⁰ Shareefa et al., "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers."

⁴¹ Verena Letzel-Alt and Marcela Pozas, *Differentiated Instruction around the World: A Global Inclusive Insight* (Waxmann Verlag, 2023); Shareefa et al., "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers."

⁴² Ledwaba, "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme."

⁴³ Shareefa et al., "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers."

⁴⁴ Ledwaba, "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme"; Aldossari, "The Challenges of Using the Differentiated Instruction Strategy: A Case Study in the General Education Stages in Saudi Arabia."

⁴⁵ Marcela Pozas and Verena Letzel-Alt, "Teacher Collaboration, Inclusive Education and Differentiated Instruction: A Matter of Exchange, Co-Construction, or Synchronization?," *Cogent Education* 10, no. 2 (December 11, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2240941>; Shareefa et al., "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers"; Kevin Brentnall, *Believing Everyone Can Learn: Differentiating Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms* (College of Saint Elizabeth, 2016); Thelma de Jager, "Guidelines to Assist the Implementation of Differentiated Learning Activities in South African Secondary Schools," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 17, no. 1 (2013): 80–94; Logan, "Examining Differentiated Instruction: Teachers Respond."

⁴⁶ Ledwaba, "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme."

⁴⁷ Mnyamana, Matope, and Ndebele, "Examining Grade 6 Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Differentiated Instruction in O.R. Tambo Inland District in South Africa"; Ledwaba, "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme."

Similarly, Brentnall explored the relationship between teachers' perceptions of their differentiated instruction training and the extent to which they apply differentiated instruction techniques in the classroom. Brentnall concluded that proper training leads to increased teachers' ability to successfully implement curriculum differentiation in the classroom.⁴⁸ Therefore, for schools to successfully implement differentiated instruction, Ledwaba and Holloway advise that universities, acting as training centres, should create pre-service programs that give aspiring teachers a meaningful understanding of the components of differentiated instruction that will equip them with the skills necessary to effectively engage all learners.⁴⁹ Holloway also recommends competent training and effective mentoring and suggests that these need to be conducted by experienced and skilled professionals.⁵⁰

According to Mnyamana et al., district authorities, teachers, and SMTs in South Africa do not appear to work together enough to provide equal learning opportunities for all Learners.⁵¹ According to Thornton, Crim, and Hawkins, adequate teacher preparation equips educators with the know-how to successfully address the varied backgrounds and ability levels of their Learners, in addition to programs for preparing teachers.⁵²

Govender emphasises that it is difficult for teachers to implement any curriculum transformation hurriedly and without proper training and support.⁵³ Furthermore, they accentuate that training should not be a one-off event; it needs to be followed by ongoing monitoring and support by circuit managers, district officials and SMTs since teachers play an integral role in the implementation stage. According to Taylor, "professional development should be provided by schools and training providers to support differentiation."⁵⁴ In addition to receiving mentorship, teachers should have the chance to see one another teach differentiated classes, provide comments afterwards, and spend time working together to develop resources for successful differentiation.

Carl Rogers' 1967 Facilitation theory

This theory is based on the premise that learning occurs when the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning and creates an atmosphere where learners can freely express their ideas, insights and experiences, and not only as the source of knowledge.⁵⁵ The modern classroom requires facilitative teachers who understand that learning is not confined to the space between the four walls of the classroom and, therefore, should not be the sole source of information and expect learners to just receive the information and learn through rote learning, but rather be a facilitator who provides a supportive environment for Learners' learning, taking cognisance of the fact that the learner should be at the centre of all the learning that takes place. Therefore, the teacher's roles and responsibilities have completely transformed in the new paradigm of education. He is expected to be the promoter, motivator and manager of Learners' learning. He is not anticipated as a mere lecturer; he is expected to be the facilitator who encourages the learners to reflect, discuss and construct knowledge on their own.

Hardika, Aisyah and Gunawan explain that when compared to other teachers, facilitative teachers are less protective of their ideas and beliefs and, therefore, can genuinely listen to and accept learners.⁵⁶ These teachers can also pay as much attention to their relationships with learners and attend to their

⁴⁸ Brentnall, *Believing Everyone Can Learn: Differentiating Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms*.

⁴⁹ Ledwaba, "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme"; John H Holloway, "Preparing Teachers for Differentiated Instruction," *Educational Leadership* 58, no. 1 (2000): 82–83.

⁵⁰ Holloway, "Preparing Teachers for Differentiated Instruction."

⁵¹ Mnyamana, Matope, and Ndebele, "Examining Grade 6 Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Differentiated Instruction in O.R. Tambo Inland District in South Africa."

⁵² Jenifer S Thornton, Courtney L Crim, and Jacqueline Hawkins, "The Impact of an Ongoing Professional Development Program on Prekindergarten Teachers' Mathematics Practices," *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 30, no. 2 (2009): 150–61.

⁵³ Samantha Govender, "South African Teachers' Perspectives on Support Received in Implementing Curriculum Changes," *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. Supplement 2 (2018): s1–12.

⁵⁴ Sasha Carine Taylor, "Contested Knowledge: A Critical Review of the Concept of Differentiation in Teaching and Learning," *Warwick Journal of Education-Transforming Teaching* 1 (2017): 55–68.

⁵⁵ Carl R Rogers, "The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning," *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning*, 1993, 228–42.

⁵⁶ Hardika Hardika, Eny Nur Aisyah, and Imam Gunawan, "Facilitative Learning to Improve Student Learning Creativity," in *3rd International Conference on Educational Management and Administration (CoEMA 2018)* (Atlantis Press, 2018), 186–89.

emotions, thus creating an atmosphere in which learners feel comfortable expressing their ideas and creativity. In this way, the confidence of the learners is boosted, and all the learners feel part of the team and freely engage in class activities.

This theory supports learner-centred approaches that cater for learners who are collaborative and interactive. Rogers's theory sees the teacher as the key person facilitating the learning process and not as the walking textbook transmitting all the information.⁵⁷ This helps the learners, as they will not feel overwhelmed by too much content from their teacher, and the content will be just a vehicle for skills development. During the teaching and learning process, learners learn how to read effectively, critically analyse information, write and summarise information, and work effectively in groups.⁵⁸

The facilitation theory supports differentiated instruction as it focuses on the importance of focusing on learners as individuals and in groups for their academic achievements.⁵⁹ This ensures that no learner is left behind during teaching and learning, as all learners can express their thoughts and ideas freely in these learning communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study, which was guided by a pragmatic paradigm, used a mixed-methods approach since it could concurrently integrate qualitative and quantitative data, using the advantages of both methodologies while minimizing their drawbacks. Exploratory research was chosen for this study because it focuses on first gaining an understanding and awareness of the subject area (curriculum differentiation) and then investigating it. An exploratory research design was chosen as the study sought to examine grade 6 teachers' responses to support for promoting learner diversity through curriculum differentiation in multi-ability classrooms.

This allowed the researchers to employ any available suitable approach to answer the research questions. The researchers used an embedded design to integrate quantitative and qualitative data. The embedded approach works well when one type of data plays a secondary role and would not be meaningful without being embedded within the primary data set.⁶⁰ The study used focus group interviews and questionnaires, as these are effective methods of data collection. In this study, the research population refers to all 73 Grade 6 teachers in Circuit 4 of the Mqanduli Circuit Management Centre in the OR Tambo Inland District. Mqanduli CMC was purposefully chosen because the PMET project schools are in that CMC. Data were collected from eight schools from cluster 4 in OR Tambo Inland District, Mqanduli CMC. Of the eight primary schools, the study focused on three schools that were randomly selected. Four Grade 6 teachers for Mathematics and Reading to Learn were selected from each school, giving rise to 12 participants. This selection was based on the teachers' expertise in Mathematics and Reading to Learn. Grade 6 was chosen because it is an exit grade in the intermediate phase, and more support is needed to produce good learners who will cope well in the senior phase and FET phase.⁶¹

Data collection

Questionnaires were used in the data collection procedure to gather information on how teachers used differentiated instruction during class activities. Additionally, to investigate how Grade 6 teachers used differentiated instruction to meet learner variety in the classroom, semi-structured interviews were undertaken. With the participants' permission, audio recordings of every interview were made. Both verbal consent and the signing of a written consent form at the start of the trial were used to achieve informed consent.

⁵⁷ Rogers, "The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning."

⁵⁸ Darsih, "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective."

⁵⁹ Marilyn Fleer and Mariane Hedegaard, "Children's Transitions in Everyday Life and Institutions," 2019.

⁶⁰ John W Creswell and Vicki L Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Sage publications, 2017).

⁶¹ Department for Education, *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy* (Report to Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy , 2019).

Data analysis

The first step in the analysis procedure was transcription, as data reduction requires written data.⁶² Original recordings and transcriptions were compared to ensure that no information was omitted or added. After that, the raw data was thoroughly examined to establish patterns or recurrent words in the data as well as relevant information related to the study's goals.⁶³ The researchers then categorized the data and developed themes to look for and identify trends.

Ethical considerations

First, permission to conduct research was sought from the provincial office, Circuit 4 manager and school principals. The researcher then gained access to schools to conduct the study. The researcher ensured that all relevant stakeholders were consulted before commencing the research. Secondly, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the rights of the respondents. Consent was sought, and a consent form was given to all participants to sign before interviews; observations were conducted, and access to teachers' documents was gained. Thus, in ensuring that respondents remain anonymous, the researcher used codes and pseudonyms for respondents and the research site. For example, schools were given pseudonyms PSA, PSB and PSC for primary school A, primary school B and primary school C, respectively. Teachers were also given pseudonyms and codes.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Implementation of Differentiated teaching approaches

In order to meet the requirements of Learners in mixed-ability classrooms, participants were asked how frequently they used differentiated teaching tactics. The purpose of this was to ascertain the frequency of implementation of such solutions to accommodate the diversity of learners. The following are the instructor responses that were gathered.

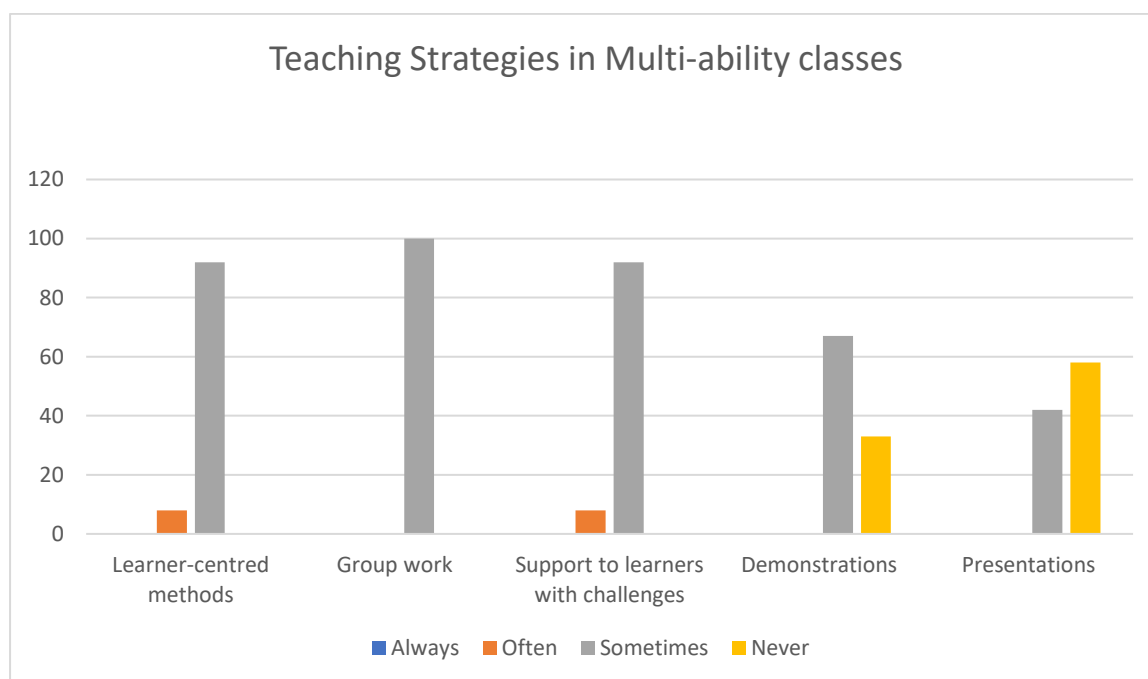


Figure 1: Teaching strategies in multi-ability classrooms

The different responses of the respondents are shown in Figure 1 above. The majority of them acknowledged that they occasionally employed diversified teaching techniques, such as group projects,

⁶² Burcu Leblebicier, "Learning through Differentiated Instruction: Action Research in an Academic English Class" (Middle East Technical University (Turkey), 2020).

⁶³ Kajsa Hallberg Adu, "Student Migration Aspirations and Mobility in the Global Knowledge Society: The Case of Ghana," *Journal of International Mobility* N° 7, no. 1 (June 17, 2020): 23–43, <https://doi.org/10.3917/jim.007.0023>.

learner-centered approaches, and assistance for Learners who needed it. Less than 10% of interviewees said they always employed learner-centered techniques and provided assistance to Learners who faced difficulties, which was alarming. In comparison, 58% of the respondents said they had never used presentations, while 32% said they had never used demonstrations. This signalled a lack of differentiated teaching strategies that are essential in multi-ability classrooms, which translated into ineffective responses to learner diversity and thus needed to support teachers to respond to that need. An analysis of the responses from educators produces the following sub-themes as presented below. For each sub-theme, verbatim accounts are presented as well.

(a) *Elements of differentiation*

Participants were asked to explain how often they designed activities that had the same concepts and skills but differed in the route, abstractness, complexity and open-mindedness. Table 1 below shows the responses of the respondents.

Table 1: Activities that have the same concepts and skills but differ in the route, abstractness, complexity and open-mindedness.

Never	Sometimes	Often	Very often
92	08	0	0

Evidently, a relatively high number of the respondents (92%) indicated that they had never designed activities that had the same concepts and skills but differed in the route, abstractness, complexity and open-mindedness. This implied that most teachers did not differentiate content. From this, it can be concluded that support in dealing with diversity in the classroom was a serious need.

(b) *Benefits of differentiating the instruction*

The question sought to establish the benefits gained by teachers and learners when differentiation is practiced. It is concerning that more than 50% of the teachers confessed that they could not say they benefited from differentiating instruction since they had not intentionally tried it out. The most dominant reason was pressure to complete annual teaching plans (ATPs). Some of their responses were as follows:
T3PSC – *It doesn't benefit me. I think that because of the pressure to be in line with ATP, it becomes difficult to attend to learners' needs.*

T1PSA – *Uhm ... Honestly, I can't say ... What can I say ...? I can't say there are benefits because I will be left behind in terms of content coverage. So, I still have a challenge with the implementation of differentiated teaching.*

It raised some concern that struggling learners are intentionally left behind because teachers want to cover the prescribed content per term.

Another group of teachers indicated that they did not benefit from differentiating instruction since they did not implement differentiated instruction at all.

T1PSC – *I can't say I am benefiting because I don't believe that I am differentiating instruction.*

T4PSB – *Nothing, to be honest; I haven't tried it out.*

T3PSA – *I have not tried it yet, so I can't say it benefited me.*

T4PSA – *Not sure.*

T2PSA – *Yes, there is some benefit because the lesson continues anyway; you move and do not remain in the same place. Even though you know that there are struggling learners, you attend to them later, but as for now, the lesson continues, you see!*

The findings in this area also showed that some educators made an effort to differentiate their instruction in order to accommodate the various requirements of their Learners, and they saw some degree of success:

T2PSB – *The learners understand the concepts better.*

T4PSC – *Discussion helps learners to understand better.*

The data revealed that there was no consensus on the benefits of differentiated instruction, as few teachers who responded to learner diversity reaped positive rewards from their practice, and most respondents did not see any benefits since they had not intentionally tried differentiated teaching.

(c) Lesson preparation that caters for the diverse needs of learners

To find out how teachers prepared their classes to meet the various needs of Learners, the researcher asked a question. The replies of the participants revealed that the majority of teachers did not consider learner diversity while planning their lectures.

T1PSA – *You do it on the side and don't have it planned*

T2PSA – *No, I just plan*

T3PSA – *I can't say I have, no*

T2PSC – *I plan, I just plan*

T3PSC – *I think I do when I think about resources that I will use*

Some participants showed that they knew they needed to carefully plan to successfully differentiate instruction; however, there were gaps in what exactly they needed to plan. These are some of their responses.

T1PSC – *No, I can't say I have. I only think about how to make my lesson easier for learners. In my lesson preparation, I think of the activities that I will ask learners to do.*

Their responses to this question did not show whether the activities they prepared and asked learners catered for the different needs of all the learners. It was evident that teachers did not have learner diversity or plans to differentiate instruction when preparing lessons.

There was a question that asked educators about the challenges they experienced when catering for learners' diverse needs. Some of their responses are cited below:

T4PSA – *Time factor for me is a challenge.*

T2PSB – *Time constraints are the most challenging factor in the implementation of differentiated instruction to meet learners' diverse needs.*

T1PSB – *For instance, in the subject improvement plan, you come up with strategies for improvement, but you will find out that it is difficult to implement because of time.*

T3PSB – *raised the issue of overcrowding as the major challenge that hindered the effective implementation of differentiation.*

T3PSB – *Overcrowding also makes it difficult to implement your plan, and it is difficult to execute your plans.*

According to the findings, most teachers identified time constraints as the main obstacle that prevents them from successfully implementing differentiated instruction. The findings also showed that teachers had difficulty putting curriculum differentiation ideas into practice when they were planning, indicating a critical need for assistance in meeting the varied requirements of Learners.

(d) Learner participation

A question asked how educators made sure that learners participated actively in the teaching and learning process. More than 50% of the educators indicated that they used the strategy of moving around in the class during teaching to encourage those learners who may have been quiet for some time to speak. The following were some of the responses to the question:

T2PSA – *I always move around the groups, checking if all the learners participate. I then instruct groups not to write for learners who do not participate as their group members. In that way, they become afraid and participate.*

T1PSA – *In those groups, I move around and I ask them about what their discussion was about one by one. I first give them the chance to discuss as a group, then ask them one by one. However, that is not easy either.*

T4PSB – *I move around and monitor.*

From the responses, it was deduced that educators believed that increasing their visibility by constantly moving around in the class helped to promote active participation by learners. It could therefore be concluded that educator visibility during group discussions can help promote learner participation.

Another strategy used by educators to ensure participation was the issue of random selection of learners to answer questions without only focusing on those who raised their hands in class, as shown in the following responses:

T2PSC – *I go around and ask questions to everyone, even if they are not indicating that they have the answer.*

T3PSC – *I group them and ask individuals randomly to present the group's ideas*

T4PSC – *I make sure that I ask questions to all the learners, even though there are learners who will never answer, but I force them.*

The findings suggested that when learners do not know in advance who will be asked to respond to the educator's questions, they will all participate actively to prepare themselves to be able to respond to any questions asked, and, in the process, learning takes place. Asking only for learners who raise their hands may mean that others hide and do not participate actively.

It was worrying to note that there were educators who used negative strategies that could damage learner self-esteem to make learners participate, as shown in this response:

T3PSA – *The group of learners who did not do well is taken out of the class and have their marks read out loud so that all other learners can hear that they are not doing well. Learners now try to work hard and participate because they are worried about being embarrassed.*

Such a strategy of embarrassing learners could have devastating effects on learner confidence and self-esteem, and may even lead to absenteeism and eventual dropout. In this sense, the strategies adopted should create an environment where learners feel free to learn without labels. These learners might not be as intelligent as the other learners, hence the need for differentiated instruction.

(e) Differentiated assessment

Teachers were asked to reflect on the differentiated teaching strategies they used to assess their learners. The responses of most teachers revealed that they found it difficult or did not know how to do it, and then became frustrated. The following is one of the examples from the responses:

T2PSA – *I'm not sure if I'm answering it correctly, though. The way we do it in the classroom, neh! The way we assess our learners, there will be a challenge because, let's say, you group your learners and they do not know anything; you force things.*

When applying product differentiation, educators must employ several methods to evaluate Learners' mastery of the material by having them show what they have learned, comprehended, and can perform following a prolonged period of study in various pathways. To find out if teachers administered the identical test to Learners, a follow-up question was posed. According to the comments, teachers typically administered the same assessment at the conclusion of the lesson rather than differentiating it. "Same work for all of them?" was the follow-up inquiry posed by the researcher.

Challenges of implementing differentiated instruction

Teachers experienced comparable difficulties, according to the statistics. The following categories were used to classify their answers to questions regarding the challenges they encountered while putting differentiated instruction into practice:

(a) Challenges related to time

T1PSA – *Time consuming*

T2PS – *Time to prepare*

The data revealed that 16% of the teachers mentioned the time factor as one of the challenges that hindered effective implementation. Teachers found the implementation of differentiated instruction strategies to be time consuming in the classroom during teaching and learning, and during the preparation stage.

(b) Challenges related to a lack of knowledge and support

A total of 75% of teachers ascribed the challenges they experienced to a lack of knowledge and support to deal with learner diversity through differentiated instruction. The following were their responses when asked to cite the challenges they experienced during the implementation of differentiated instruction in their classrooms:

T2PSA - *Lack of knowledge made it difficult for me to implement.*

T3PSA - *I have not tried to differentiate yet because I don't know where to start, so I have not experienced any challenges.*

T4PSA - *Lack of support; I don't know what to do.*

T3PSB - *Have never used differentiation, so no challenges.*

T2PSB - *Lack of support is the major challenge for me.*

T1PSB - *Lack of support, yes.*

T4PSB - *I do not implement differentiated instruction, so I am not sure about challenges.*

T1PSC - *I do not implement.*

T4PCS - *A lot of planning is needed.*

It could be noted that a lack of understanding and support hindered effective implementation by a substantial number of teachers. From this, it could be deduced that supporting teachers to effectively respond to learner diversity is a priority need.

(c) Challenges related to contextual factors

It also emerged from the study that differentiating instruction in mixed-ability classes is affected by some contextual factors. When asked to express the challenges, teachers stated that:

T3PSC - *Overcrowding in the classrooms made it difficult to try anything*

T4PSA - *Overcrowded classrooms*

From the data, overcrowding was regarded as another hindrance to the implementation of differentiated instruction.

T3PSB - *In most cases*

T4PSB - *Yes, it is the same*

T1PSC - *I assess them at the end of the lesson*

T2PSC - *I assess them orally and let them do classwork at the end of the lesson*

T3PSC - *I give them the same work to do at the end of the lesson*

T4PSC - *Oral assessment*

The narratives showed that teachers used the same assessments for all learners, not taking into consideration their readiness, interest or learning styles. This demonstrates that the varied needs of the Learners were not satisfied, indicating that a one-size-fits-all approach was still in place. As a result, teachers need assistance in differentiating assessments to meet the needs of the Learners. According to the findings, teachers found it challenging to apply diversified teaching techniques, including learner participation and varied evaluation.

DISCUSSION**Implementation of Differentiated Teaching Approaches**

The study revealed that the predominant strategy employed by teachers in the Amathole District is group work, reflecting a level of understanding of differentiated instruction principles. However, while group work can be effective, the lack of flexible grouping undermines its potential benefits. As Renzulli suggests, effective differentiation requires dynamic grouping tailored to learners' readiness and interests, rather than static configurations.⁶⁴ The reliance on fixed grouping may inhibit learners' opportunities for peer learning and collaboration, as highlighted by Golder and Bengal, who emphasizes the importance of facilitative discussions among diverse learners as a cornerstone of constructivism.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Joseph S Renzulli, "Intelligences Outside the Normal Curve," *Reflections on Gifted Education*, 2021.

⁶⁵ Joydip Golder and W Bengal, "Constructivism: A Paradigm for Teaching and Learning," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 5, no. 3 (2018): 678–86.

Teacher-Centred and Learner-Centred Approaches

The study's findings suggest a tendency among educators to favour teacher-centred approaches over learner-centred ones. Teacher-centred methods, characterised by direct instruction and minimal student engagement, undermine the potential for authentic and self-directed learning experiences.⁶⁶ This practice limits the ability of learners to take ownership of their learning, as advocated in Rogers' facilitation theory.⁶⁷ The lack of consideration for learner diversity in lesson preparation demonstrates a significant gap in the educators' understanding of framing content to cater to varying learner needs, an insight corroborated by Onyishi and Sefotho.⁶⁸ Games and practical application serve not only as a method for enhancing engagement but also as a means of facilitating the essential scaffolding needed for learners to progress in their understanding.⁶⁹ The findings thus indicate that a closer alignment with learner-centred instructional strategies could improve the effectiveness of differentiation efforts.

Challenges to Effective Implementation

The barriers identified, notably time constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of professional development, coincide with the findings of numerous studies that indicate that contextual factors heavily influence the implementation of differentiated instruction.⁷⁰ Teachers expressed apprehensions regarding the time and effort required to implement differentiation, echoing Westwood's observation that many educators mistakenly perceive differentiation as synonymous with individualized instruction.⁷¹

Moreover, the research underscores the impact of inadequate training and professional support on teachers' ability to execute effective differentiation strategies.⁷² The need for targeted workshops and ongoing mentorship is crucial, as it has been determined that teacher understanding directly correlates with successful differentiation outcomes.⁷³

Benefits of Differentiated Instruction

Though some participants reported positive outcomes associated with differentiation, such as improved learner understanding and collaboration, the reluctance of a larger percentage to embrace differentiated practices underscores the necessity of systemic change. Joseph et al. (2013) assert that differentiated instruction cultivates an environment of inclusion that not only enhances learner achievement but also bolsters teacher-student relationships.⁷⁴ Consequently, fostering a culture that embraces differentiated practices will likely necessitate a shift in mindset at both the educator and systemic levels.

Discussion Summary

The difficulties and achievements faced by Grade 6 teachers in the Amathole District as they work to apply differentiated instruction (DI) in mixed-ability classrooms are crucially illuminated by this study. The results show significant gaps in the application of learner-centered techniques, while also highlighting a preponderance of group work as a differentiation tool. These results highlight the critical need for detailed instruction and ongoing support to improve instructors' ability to apply DI successfully.

⁶⁶ Darsih, "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective."

⁶⁷ Rogers, "The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning."

⁶⁸ Onyishi and Sefotho, "Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms: Implication for Teacher Education."

⁶⁹ Sadhana Puntambekar and Roland Hubscher, "Tools for Scaffolding Students in a Complex Learning Environment: What Have We Gained and What Have We Missed?," *Educational Psychologist* 40, no. 1 (2005): 1–12.

⁷⁰ Ledwaba, "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme"; Govender, "South African Teachers' Perspectives on Support Received in Implementing Curriculum Changes."

⁷¹ Peter Westwood, *Inclusive and Adaptive Teaching: Meeting the Challenge of Diversity in the Classroom* (Routledge, 2018).

⁷² Aldossari, "The Challenges of Using the Differentiated Instruction Strategy: A Case Study in the General Education Stages in Saudi Arabia."; Shareefa et al., "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers."

⁷³ Brentnall, *Believing Everyone Can Learn: Differentiating Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms*.

⁷⁴ Joseph, "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and in-Service Trained Teachers."

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to promote equal educational results and improve the standard of teaching and learning, these disparities must be addressed. Given the results, the study suggests establishing supportive learning environments, encouraging flexible grouping techniques, and putting in place continuous professional development programs centered on learner-centered pedagogies. To design a responsive and inclusive teaching strategy that meets the various requirements of every student, several interventions are essential. The interventions should include school based communities of practice where teachers share ideas on how to differentiate instruction in diverse settings. The Department of Education, through subject advisors, should design workshops tailored to the different approaches that are grade and subject-specific on DI approaches. More SACE-accredited workshops on differentiated instruction approaches should be offered to teachers so that they can also receive CPTD points for promotion purposes. Additionally, the study shows that teachers' ability to accommodate the range of academic skill levels in their classes is greatly improved by the successful application of DI. Learners with varying abilities can engage in the learning process in meaningful ways using strategies that include modifying the course contents, utilizing alternative group arrangements, and using a variety of assessment techniques. Learners consequently exhibit better understanding, higher levels of engagement, and superior academic results on an individual basis.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the strategies employed by Grade 6 teachers in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, to differentiate instruction within mixed-ability classrooms. The findings indicate a predominant reliance on group work as a differentiation strategy and a notable absence of varied and learner-centered instructional methods. Teachers reported limited benefits from differentiation due to pressures of content coverage and insufficient understanding of individualised approaches. The study also demonstrated that differentiated instruction is a successful pedagogical strategy to advance inclusive education. Regardless of a student's skill level, DI promotes a more responsive and fair learning environment that supports their academic growth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abodey, E., and J. A. Ansah. "Differentiated Curriculum: The Perspectives of the Special Educationist." *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 7, no. 21 (2017): 38–45.
- Aldossari, Ali Tared. "The Challenges of Using the Differentiated Instruction Strategy: A Case Study in the General Education Stages in Saudi Arabia." *International Education Studies* 11, no. 4 (2018): 74–83.
- Bremner, Nicholas. "From Learner-Centred to Learning-Centred: Becoming a 'Hybrid' Practitioner." *International Journal of Educational Research* 97 (2019): 53–64.
- Brentnall, Kevin. *Believing Everyone Can Learn: Differentiating Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms*. College of Saint Elizabeth, 2016.
- Creswell, John W., and Vicki L. Plano Clark. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Sage Publications, 2017.
- Darsih, Endang. "Learner-Centered Teaching: What Makes It Effective." *Indonesian EFL Journal* 4, no. 1 (2018): 33–42.
- Department for Education. *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy*. Report to Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy, 2019.
- Doubet, Kristina J., and Jessica A. Hockett. *Differentiation in the Elementary Grades: Strategies to Engage and Equip All Learners*. ASCD, 2017.
- Fleer, Marilyn, and Mariane Hedegaard. "Children's Transitions in Everyday Life and Institutions," 2019.
- Gentry, Ruben, April P Sallie, and Carrie A Sanders. "Differentiated Instructional Strategies to Accommodate Students with Varying Needs and Learning Styles." *Online Submission*, 2013.
- Golder, Joydip, and W. Bengal. "Constructivism: A Paradigm for Teaching and Learning." *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 5, no. 3 (2018): 678–86.

- Govender, Samantha. "South African Teachers' Perspectives on Support Received in Implementing Curriculum Changes." *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. Supplement 2 (2018): s1–12.
- Hallberg Adu, Kajsa. "Student Migration Aspirations and Mobility in the Global Knowledge Society: The Case of Ghana." *Journal of International Mobility* N° 7, no. 1 (June 17, 2020): 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.3917/jim.007.0023>.
- Hardika, Hardika, Eny Nur Aisyah, and Imam Gunawan. "Facilitative Learning to Improve Student Learning Creativity." In *3rd International Conference on Educational Management and Administration (CoEMA 2018)*, 186–89. Atlantis Press, 2018.
- Holloway, John H. "Preparing Teachers for Differentiated Instruction." *Educational Leadership* 58, no. 1 (2000): 82–83.
- Hu, Weiping, Baojun Wu, Xiaojuan Jia, Xinfu Yi, Chunyan Duan, Winter Meyer, and James C. Kaufman. "Increasing Students' Scientific Creativity: The 'Learn to Think' Intervention Program." *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 47, no. 1 (2013): 3–21.
- Jager, Thelma de. "Guidelines to Assist the Implementation of Differentiated Learning Activities in South African Secondary Schools." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 17, no. 1 (2013): 80–94.
- Johnson, David W., Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith. "Cooperative Learning Returns to College: What Evidence Is There That It Works?" *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 30, no. 4 (1998): 26–35.
- Joseph, Stephen. "Differentiating Instruction: Experiences of Pre-Service and In-Service Trained Teachers." *Caribbean Curriculum* 20 (2013): 31–51.
- Konstantinou-Katzi, Panagiota, Eleni Tsolaki, Maria Meletiou-Mavrotheris, and Mary Koutselini. "Differentiation of Teaching and Learning Mathematics: An Action Research Study in Tertiary Education." *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology* 44, no. 3 (2013): 332–49.
- Kotob, Mazen Muhieddine, and Malak Ali Abadi. "The Influence of Differentiated Instruction on Academic Achievement of Students in Mixed Ability Classrooms." *International Linguistics Research* 2, no. 2 (2019): p. 8–p. 18.
- Leblebici, Burcu. "Learning through Differentiated Instruction: Action Research in an Academic English Class." Middle East Technical University (Turkey), 2020.
- Ledwaba, Raesetja Gloria. "Teacher Training Guidelines for Curriculum Differentiation in a Foundation Phase Programme." University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2017.
- Letzel-Alt, Verena, and Marcela Pozas. *Differentiated Instruction around the World: A Global Inclusive Insight*. Waxmann Verlag, 2023.
- Logan, Brenda. "Examining Differentiated Instruction: Teachers Respond." *Research in Higher Education Journal* 13 (2011).
- Marishane, Matseke Alinah. *Capacity Building for Curriculum Differentiation in the Teaching of Foundation Phase Mathematics in Ngwaritsi Circuit, Limpopo Province*. University of South Africa (South Africa), 2013.
- Mnyamana, Nondumiso, Samson Matope, and Clever Ndebele. "Examining Grade 6 Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding of Differentiated Instruction in O.R. Tambo Inland District in South Africa." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, May 3, 2024, 593–610. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2024553>.
- Munro, John. "Session G: Effective Strategies for Implementing Differentiated Instruction," 2012.
- Onyishi, Charity Neejide, and Maximus Monaheng Sefotho. "Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms: Implications for Teacher Education." *International Journal of Higher Education* 9, no. 6 (2020): 136–50.
- Osae, Akinyi Christine. "Differentiated Instruction in Second Language Teaching: Educators' Perspectives, Practices and Challenges in Rwanda." Unicaf University in Zambia. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, 2024.
- Plessis, Elize Du. "Student Teachers' Perceptions, Experiences, and Challenges Regarding Learner-Centred Teaching." *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 1 (2020): 1–10.

- Pozas, Marcela, and Verena Letzel-Alt. "Teacher Collaboration, Inclusive Education and Differentiated Instruction: A Matter of Exchange, Co-Construction, or Synchronization?" *Cogent Education* 10, no. 2 (December 11, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2240941>.
- Prast, Emilie J, Eva Van de Weijer-Bergsma, Evelyn H Kroesbergen, and Johannes E H Van Luit. "Differentiated Instruction in Primary Mathematics: Effects of Teacher Professional Development on Student Achievement." *Learning and Instruction* 54 (2018): 22–34.
- Puntambekar, Sadhana, and Roland Hubscher. "Tools for Scaffolding Students in a Complex Learning Environment: What Have We Gained and What Have We Missed?" *Educational Psychologist* 40, no. 1 (2005): 1–12.
- Renzulli, Joseph. *The Multiple Menu Model: A Practical Guide for Developing Differentiated Curriculum*. Taylor & Francis, 2023.
- Renzulli, Joseph S. "Intelligences Outside the Normal Curve." *Reflections on Gifted Education*, 2021.
- Renzulli, Joseph S., and Sally M. Reis. *The Schoolwide Enrichment Model: A How-to Guide for Talent Development*. Routledge, 2021.
- Rogers, Carl R. "The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning." *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning*, 1993, 228–42.
- Rojo, Pablo. "Studying the Effects of Differentiated Instruction in the Science Classroom." Montana State University, 2013.
- Senthamarai, S. "Interactive Teaching Strategies." *Journal of Applied and Advanced Research* 3, no. S1 (2018): 36–38.
- Shareefa, Mariyam, Rohani Hj Awg Mat Zin, Nor Zaiham Midawati Abdullah, and Rosmawijah Jawawi. "Differentiated Instruction: Definition and Challenging Factors Perceived by Teachers." In *3rd International Conference on Special Education (ICSE 2019)*, 44–49. Atlantis Press, 2019.
- Taylor, Sasha Carine. "Contested Knowledge: A Critical Review of the Concept of Differentiation in Teaching and Learning." *Warwick Journal of Education-Transforming Teaching* 1 (2017):55–68.
- Thornton, Jenifer S., Courtney L. Crim, and Jacqueline Hawkins. "The Impact of an Ongoing Professional Development Program on Prekindergarten Teachers' Mathematics Practices." *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 30, no. 2 (2009): 150–61.
- Tomlinson, Brian. *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023.
- Tomlinson, Carol Ann. "Mapping a Route toward Differentiated Instruction." *Educational Leadership* 57 (1999): 12–17.
- Tomlinson, Carol Ann, and Marcia B. Imbeau. *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*. ASCD, 2023.
- Washburne, Carleton W. "Adjusting the Program to the Child." *Educational Leadership* 11, no. 3 (1953): 138–47.
- Westwood, Peter. *Inclusive and Adaptive Teaching: Meeting the Challenge of Diversity in the Classroom*. Routledge, 2018.

ABOUT AUTHORS



Ms. Nondumiso Mnyamana is a Master of Education graduate and a doctoral student at Walter Sisulu University. She is an academic who worked for the Pearson Marang Education Trust as a curriculum facilitator and teacher trainer in primary and secondary schools in the Eastern Cape Province. Nondumiso's research interests focus on curriculum and instructional differentiation as teaching strategies in diverse classrooms. Her passion is for how teachers vary their instructional strategies to cater to learners from diverse backgrounds. She is currently a Regional Curriculum Development Manager at Pearson Marang Education Trust for the Eastern Cape Province.



Dr. Samson Matope is an Academic Developer and Lecturer in the Continuing Professional Teacher Development Department at Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. His academic and professional interests include academic staff development, curriculum development and transformation, teaching and learning, and sustainable development in higher education. He has published in local and international peer-reviewed journals and has presented his research at national and international academic conferences, where he has also chaired conference sessions.



Prof Clever Ndebele is currently a Full Professor in the Faculty of Education at Walter Sisulu. He has extensive experience in higher education studies with more than 15 years' experience at senior management level (as Director and Senior Director) in the area of teaching and learning at several universities in South Africa. Has participated in several (NRF) research projects on academic staff development and has also been involved in Teaching Development Grant National collaborative projects (namely PGDHE for educational development practitioners and PGDHE for academics). He is also currently a member of the Council on Higher Education National Standards and Capacity Development Committee (SCDC), the Council on Higher Education Peer Advisory Group on Reconceptualising Teaching and Learning (RELATE), USAf Work Integrated Learning Strategy group, Minister of Higher Education's reference group on Extended Curriculum Programmes and is Chair of South African University Teachers (SAUT). He is also the National University Teaching Awards project leader. Prof Ndebele previously coordinated academic staff development and student academic support, the University Capacity Development Programme, the New Generation of Academics Programme, the Future Professors Programme and the National Siyaphumelela Student Success projects at Iyunivesithi Walter Sisulu.