



Teachers' perspectives on the integration of curriculum differentiation in Grade 4 inclusive classrooms for English First Additional Language

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum differentiation is essential in Grade 4 inclusive classrooms to support English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While Tomlinson's theory of differentiated instruction provides a framework for addressing learner diversity, teachers' perspectives on its integration remain underexplored. The study investigated Grade 4 teachers' perspectives on integrating curriculum differentiation in inclusive classrooms for EFAL learners, focusing on challenges, effective strategies, and areas for improvement in instructional practice. A qualitative interpretive design was employed. Participants included four Grade 4 teachers, two learning support educators, and two English departmental heads from one full-service and one mainstream school, selected through non-probability convenience sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and field notes, and analysed using thematic analysis. Teachers acknowledged the importance of curriculum differentiation in promoting engagement and inclusion among EFAL learners. Key challenges identified were inadequate training, limited resources, and inflexible curriculum frameworks. Effective strategies included collaborative planning, the use of visual and linguistic scaffolds, and adapting instructional materials to learners' readiness and interests. While teachers demonstrated commitment to inclusive practices, systemic constraints limited effective implementation. Strengthening EFAL instruction in Grade 4 inclusive classrooms requires targeted professional development, adequate resources, and flexible policy support through district-based teams. This study provides insights into teachers' perceptions of curriculum differentiation for EFAL learners, offering guidance for policymakers, teacher educators, and practitioners seeking to enhance inclusive language instruction.

Keywords: Curriculum differentiation, EFAL instructional strategies, inclusive education, professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum differentiation is widely recognised as a key pedagogical strategy for addressing learner diversity in multilingual and inclusive classrooms. By adapting content, process, product, and the learning environment to learners' readiness, interests, and profiles, differentiation promotes equitable

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access to the curriculum and supports meaningful participation.¹ This approach is particularly critical in Grade 4 inclusive classrooms, where learners transition from foundational literacy to more abstract academic content, often in a language they are still acquiring.² For English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners, engaging with cognitively demanding material in a second language presents significant barriers, making curriculum differentiation essential rather than optional.³ Tomlinson's framework highlights the importance of tailoring instruction to learner characteristics to foster academic growth, social inclusion, and equity in diverse classrooms.⁴

Despite its potential, teachers often struggle to implement curriculum differentiation effectively in Grade 4 EFAL inclusive classrooms. Challenges include insufficient training in inclusive education, limited resources, and rigid curricula that restrict instructional flexibility.⁵ Systemic barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching time, inadequate policy guidance, and insufficient support from district-based support teams further complicate implementation.⁶ These issues are particularly pronounced in under-resourced schools, where support for multilingual learners remains minimal.⁷

This study investigates the experiences and perceptions of Grade 4 teachers regarding curriculum differentiation for EFAL learners. Grounded in Tomlinson's theory of differentiated instruction, it examines the contextual factors shaping instructional decisions, documents effective practices, and presents evidence-based recommendations.⁸ By emphasising teacher agency, the research contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education in multilingual classrooms and advocates for equitable learning opportunities for all learners.⁹ The rationale for the study lies in the considerable variation among Grade 4 EFAL learners in language proficiency, literacy, and cognitive development, often exacerbated by socioeconomic constraints that limit access to resources and widen achievement gaps. Existing research highlights the potential of curriculum differentiation to enhance equity.¹⁰ Limited empirical evidence exists on its application in Grade 4 EFAL inclusive classrooms.

¹ Tinashe C Matiyenga and Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani, "Integrating Differentiated Instruction into Pre-Service Teacher Curriculum: In Pursuit of Equity and Inclusion in English Language Education," *Social Sciences and Education Research Review* 11, no. 1 (2024): 285–94; Carol A Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms* (Ascd, 2017).

² Liziwe Fesi and Vusumzi Mncube, "Challenges of English as a First Additional Language: Fourth Grade Reading Teachers' Perspectives," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (August 31, 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n3a1849>; Mots'elisi Lilian Malebese and Moeketsi Freddie Tlali, "Teaching of English First Additional Language in Rural Learning Environments: A Case for Problem-Based Learning," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 24, no. 14 (December 5, 2020): 1540–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1544300>.

³ Department of Basic Education, *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)*. (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2014).

⁴ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*; C Coubergs et al., "Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiation in Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review," *Educational Review* 73, no. 1 (2021): 1–21; T. Hall, "Meeting Diverse Needs: Revisiting Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 24, no. 4 (2020): 345–59.

⁵ Luis Miguel Dos Santos, "The Discussion of Communicative Language Teaching Approach in Language Classrooms," *Journal of Education and E-Learning Research* 7, no. 2 (2020): 104–9, <https://doi.org/10.20448/journal.509.2020.72.104.109>; Katharina-Theresa Lindner and Susanne Schwab, "Differentiation and Individualisation in Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 29, no. 12 (October 15, 2025): 2199–2219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1813450>; Thembi Phala and Anna Hugo, "Differentiated Instruction for Grade 3 Reading Challenges: South African Teachers in Full-Service Schools," *African Journal of Disability*, May 16, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v14i0.1549>.

⁶ Jacomina Motitswe, "Teachers' Perceptions on Including Learners with Barriers to Learning in South African Inclusive Education System," *African Journal of Disability* 14 (May 31, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v14i0.1543>; Blanche Ntombizodwa Ndlovu, "Curriculum Differentiation for Diverse Learners," in *Curriculum Theory, Curriculum Theorising, and the Theoriser* (BRILL, 2020), 335–53, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004447943_018.

⁷ Anna V Osipova and Ravy S Lao, "Breaking the Cycle of Failure for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners with Exceptional Needs: Recommendations for Improvement of Teacher Preparation Programs," *New Waves-Educational Research and Development Journal* 25, no. 2 (2022): 1–25; Yolanda Mpu and Emmanuel O Adu, "The Challenges of Inclusive Education and Its Implementation in Schools: The South African Perspective," *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 2 (2021): 225–38.

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

⁹ Matiyenga and Ajani, "Integrating Differentiated Instruction into Pre-Service Teacher Curriculum: In Pursuit of Equity and Inclusion in English Language Education"; E Walton and P Engelbrecht, "Inclusive Education Policy and Practice in South Africa," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 26, no. 2 (2022): 1–15.

¹⁰ 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>; Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

Guided by this framework and rationale, the study explores teachers' perspectives on the integration of curriculum differentiation in Grade 4 EFAL inclusive classrooms. It focuses on the strategies teachers employ to meet diverse learning needs, their perceptions of the challenges and benefits of differentiation, and the professional development opportunities and support they identify as necessary to strengthen implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum differentiation is central to inclusive teaching because it enables teachers to respond to differences in learners' readiness, interest and learning profiles by adapting content, learning processes, assessment products and the classroom environment. Rather than reducing academic expectations, differentiation provides varied pathways through which learners can access common curriculum goals and participate meaningfully in learning.¹¹ This approach is particularly relevant in multilingual classrooms, where linguistic diversity interacts with differences in prior knowledge, literacy development and learning needs.¹² In the South African context, however, differentiation must be understood within classrooms shaped by linguistic diversity and unequal access to educational resources, requiring approaches that are both responsive to learner diversity and feasible within existing school conditions.¹³

The need for differentiated support becomes particularly significant in Grade 4, where learners increasingly move from learning to read towards using reading as a means of accessing knowledge across the curriculum. For English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners, this transition requires simultaneous development of English proficiency, literacy skills and subject knowledge.¹⁴ Learners who have not yet developed sufficient proficiency in the language of learning and teaching may consequently experience restricted access to classroom instruction and academic participation.¹⁵ Curriculum differentiation therefore provides an important means of maintaining common learning objectives while adapting the support through which learners engage with curriculum content. Tomlinson's differentiation framework offers a practical basis for such responsiveness through differentiation of content, process, product and learning environment. In Grade 4 EFAL classrooms, teachers may adapt access to content through appropriate language scaffolding and bilingual resources, vary learning processes through collaborative visual approaches, and provide different opportunities for learners to demonstrate understanding.¹⁶ These strategies are especially relevant where learners enter the Intermediate Phase with differing levels of English proficiency and literacy development. Linguistically supportive and culturally responsive classroom environments can further strengthen participation by recognising learners' linguistic and cultural identities as resources for learning rather than treating difference primarily as a deficit.¹⁷

The practical implementation of curriculum differentiation nevertheless remains challenging. Teachers may experience limited preparation for differentiated instruction, curriculum demands and insufficient resources, while large classes, restricted instructional time and limited institutional support constrain their capacity to respond consistently to individual learning needs.¹⁸ These conditions are

¹¹ Pozas and Letzel-Alt, "Teacher Collaboration, Inclusive Education and Differentiated Instruction: A Matter of Exchange, Co-Construction, or Synchronization?"; Carol Ann Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (Ascd, 2014).

¹² Coubergs et al., "Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiation in Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review."

¹³ Linda Rönnberg and Helena Hinke Dobrochinski Candido, "When Nordic Education Myths Meet Economic Realities: The 'Nordic Model' in Education Export in Finland and Sweden," *Nordic Studies in Education* 43, no. 2 (2023): 145–63.

¹⁴ L. A Bower and G Skaggs, "Supporting Multilingual Learners through Differentiated Literacy Instruction," *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 18, no. 1 (2022): 45–63.

¹⁵ Osipova and Lao, "Breaking the Cycle of Failure for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners with Exceptional Needs: Recommendations for Improvement of Teacher Preparation Programs."

¹⁶ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*; Pearl Subban and Dikeledi Mahlo, "'My Attitude, My Responsibility' Investigating the Attitudes and Intentions of Pre-Service Teachers toward Inclusive Education between Teacher Preparation Cohorts in Melbourne and Pretoria," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 21, no. 4 (April 3, 2017): 441–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1197322>.

¹⁷ Hall, "Meeting Diverse Needs: Revisiting Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms"; Pozas and Letzel-Alt, "Teacher Collaboration, Inclusive Education and Differentiated Instruction: A Matter of Exchange, Co-Construction, or Synchronization?"

¹⁸ Dos Santos, "The Discussion of Communicative Language Teaching Approach in Language Classrooms"; Lindner and Schwab, "Differentiation and Individualisation in Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis"; Motitswe, "Teachers'

particularly consequential in under-resourced South African schools, where teachers may be expected to accommodate substantial linguistic and learning diversity with limited specialised support. Effective curriculum differentiation therefore depends not only on individual teacher competence and agency but also on school and system-level conditions that enable inclusive teaching practices.¹⁹

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretive paradigm to explore teachers' perspectives on curriculum differentiation in Grade 4 English First Additional Language (EFAL) inclusive classrooms. Qualitative inquiry enabled an in-depth examination of participants' experiences within their specific educational context,²⁰ while the interpretive paradigm recognised reality as socially constructed and shaped by individual and contextual factors.²¹

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participatory classroom observations, document analysis, and field notes, enabling triangulation of teachers' reported experiences, planned instruction, and classroom practices. Semi-structured interviews provided opportunities for teachers to describe their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe emerging issues.²² Eight teachers participated in the interviews, comprising four participants in Group A and four in Group B, allowing perspectives across the two contexts to be compared.²³

Classroom observation provided direct evidence of how teachers implemented curriculum differentiated through practices such as group work, scaffolding, and differentiated tasks. Document analysis of lesson plans complemented these observations by examining how instructional and assessment strategies were planned to accommodate learner diversity. Comparing lesson plans with observed classroom practices enabled the researcher to identify alignment and divergence between intended and enacted differentiation. Field notes captured contextual information, observations, researcher reflections, and emerging interpretations, thereby supporting reflexivity and providing additional contextual depth to data.²⁴

Triangulation and Data Collection Procedure

The integration of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and field notes enabled triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Together, these methods captured participants' perspectives, observed classroom practices, planned instruction, and researcher reflections, providing a comprehensive understanding of curriculum differentiation in inclusive Grade 4 EFAL classrooms.

Perceptions on Including Learners with Barriers to Learning in South African Inclusive Education System"; Ndlovu, "Curriculum Differentiation for Diverse Learners."

¹⁹ Osipova and Lao, "Breaking the Cycle of Failure for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners with Exceptional Needs: Recommendations for Improvement of Teacher Preparation Programs."; Mpu and Adu, "The Challenges of Inclusive Education and Its Implementation in Schools: The South African Perspective."

²⁰ John W Creswell and Vicki L Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (sage, 2007); James H McMillan and Sally Schumacher, "Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry," (No Title), 2010.

²¹ E. Babbie and J. Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research South African Edition* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2010); C.B. Fouché, H. Strydom, and W.J.H. Roostenburg, *Research at Grass Roots*. , 5th Ed. (Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik Publishers, 2021).

²² J. H McMillan and S Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry*, 7th ed (Pearson Education, 2014).

²³ Ben de Souza, "Curriculum and Assessment for Learner Diversity in the South African Foundation Phase: A Neurodiversity View," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 16, no. 1 (May 14, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.4102/SAJCE.v16i1.1879>; Hella M T E Moustache and Musa Makhoba, "Educators' Experiences of Teaching Learners with Hearing Loss in Inclusive Classrooms," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1358.

²⁴ Babbie and Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research South African Edition*; John W Creswell, *Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage, 2014).

Table 1: Data Collection Procedure

Step	Description
1	Appointments were arranged with the participating schools.
2	Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the School Management Teams (SMTs).
3	School A and School B were visited on separate days.
4	The study purpose and procedures were reiterated to each school principal.
5	Participants were convened in designated rooms for semi-structured interviews, with four participants from each school.
6	Participants reviewed and signed informed consent forms.
7	Ethical procedures, including confidentiality and research protocols, were explained to participants.

Participants

Participants were selected through non-probability convenience sampling based on their experience with curriculum differentiation for Grade 4 EFAL learners.²⁵ The sample comprised eight female participants: four EFAL teachers, two learner support educators (LSEs), and two departmental heads (DHs), from a full-service school (School A) and a mainstream school (School B). Pseudonyms (T1-T4, LSE1-LSE2, and DH1-DH2) were used to protect participants' identities. Participants' characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Profile of Participants for Semi-Structured Interviews

Participant	School Type	Gender	Age	Experience	Highest Qualification
T1	Full-Service School (A)	Female	28	8	B.Ed. in Inclusive Education
T2	Full-Service School (A)	Female	40	15	Postgraduate Diploma in Education
T3	Mainstream School (B)	Female	36	10	B.Ed. in Inclusive Education
T4	Mainstream School (B)	Female	40	12	B.Ed. Honours
LSE1	Full-Service School (A)	Female	45	18	Advanced Certificate in Inclusive Education
LSE2	Mainstream School (B)	Female	50	22	Certificate in Remedial Teaching
DH1	Full-Service School (A)	Female	40	20	B.Ed. in Educational Management
DH2	Mainstream School (B)	Female	50	25	B.Ed. in Educational Management

Notes: T = Teacher; LSE = Learner Support Educator; DH = Departmental Head.

Research Site

The study was conducted at two primary schools in Gauteng, South Africa: a full-service school (School A) and a mainstream school with limited resources (School B). Guided by the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy, full-service schools provided support to accommodate diverse learner needs.²⁶ The contrasting school contexts enabled exploration of curriculum differentiation under differing levels of resources and learner support provision.

²⁵ Babbie and Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research South African Edition*; K Maree and J Pietersen, "Sampling," in *First Steps in Research*, ed. K Maree, 2nd ed (Van Schaick, 2016).

²⁶ Department of Basic Education, *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)*.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes.²⁷ An iterative process of coding and theme refinement was supported by triangulation across interviews, observations, documents, and field notes to enhance the credibility of the findings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process.²⁸ Four themes emerged: (1) baseline assessment and identification of learning barriers, (2) differentiation strategies, (3) challenges and benefits of differentiation, and (4) professional development needs.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee (Certificate No. 2022/02/09/32472021/23/AM) and the Gauteng Department of Education. Informed consent was obtained from school principals and participants after they had been informed of the study's purpose. Confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without penalty were maintained throughout the study.²⁹

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The study explored teachers' and Learning Support Educators' (LSEs) perspectives on curriculum differentiation in Grade 4 EFAL inclusive classrooms. Four major themes emerged: baseline assessment and identification of learning barriers; strategies for differentiation; challenges and benefits; and professional development needs.

Table 3: Themes and Examples of Issues Presented by the Participants

Theme	Key Insights
1. Baseline Assessment and Identification of Learning Barriers	Early and ongoing assessments are critical for identifying learners' language proficiency, cognitive challenges, and learning barriers. Continuous monitoring refines instructional strategies.
2. Strategies for Curriculum Differentiation	Teachers employed visual aids, scaffolding, cooperative learning, differentiated tasks, and flexible teaching methods to support EFAL learners.
3. Challenges and Benefits of Differentiation	Challenges include large class sizes, limited resources, rigid curricula, and insufficient training. Benefits include improved learner confidence, motivation, and participation, as well as narrowing achievement gaps.
4. Professional Development and Support Needs	Teachers require targeted training, collaboration, resources, and mentorship to strengthen differentiation practices.

Theme 1: Baseline Assessment and Identification of Learning Barriers

Teachers and LSEs emphasised the importance of baseline assessments for identifying learners' language proficiency, cognitive challenges, and learning barriers. These assessments provided the foundation for targeted interventions. As T1 and T2 from School A explained, *"We need a clear understanding of where each learner stands before we can effectively support them."* Similarly, T3 from School B noted, *"Initial assessments give us a baseline to work from, so we know which learners need more focused attention."*

Participants also highlighted the necessity of continuous monitoring. T4 from School B articulated, *"Frequent check-ins help me adjust my approach and provide targeted support where it's*

²⁷ John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods* (Sage Publications., 2003); Aisha Ibrahim Ningi, "Data Presentation in Qualitative Research: The Outcomes of the Pattern of Ideas with the Raw Data," *International Journal of Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3 (March 22, 2022): 196–200, <https://doi.org/10.47540/ijqr.v1i3.448>.

²⁸ Egon G Guba and Yvonna S Lincoln, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences,," 2005.

²⁹ John W Creswell and J David Creswell, "Research Designs: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches," *California: Sage*, 2009; McMillan and Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry*, 2014.

most needed.” These practices align with formative assessment principles, ensuring instruction evolves as learners progress.

Theme 2: Strategies for Curriculum Differentiation

Teachers reported employing visual aids, scaffolding, cooperative learning, differentiated tasks, and flexible teaching methods to support EFAL learners. One participant explained, *“Visuals and scaffolding help learners grasp concepts more easily, especially when language is a barrier.”* Another added, *“Group work allows stronger learners to support those who are struggling, and everyone benefits from the collaboration.”* These strategies created opportunities for learners to engage meaningfully with the curriculum, reflecting both theoretical frameworks and practical classroom adaptations.

Theme 3: Challenges and Benefits of Differentiation

Participants identified systemic challenges, including large class sizes, limited resources, rigid curricula, and insufficient training. As one teacher noted, *“It’s difficult to give individual attention when you have so many learners and so few resources.”* Another added, *“The curriculum doesn’t always allow flexibility, and that makes differentiation harder.”*

Despite these constraints, teachers observed clear benefits. Differentiation was seen to improve learner confidence, motivation, and participation. One participant reflected, *“When learners feel supported, they become more motivated and willing to engage.”* Teachers also noted that differentiation helped narrow achievement gaps and foster inclusivity.

Theme 4: Professional Development and Support Needs

Teachers consistently expressed the need for targeted professional development, collaboration, and mentorship. One participant stated, *“We need more training and guidance on how to differentiate effectively in EFAL classrooms.”* Another emphasised, *“Mentorship and collaboration with colleagues would help us share strategies and feel supported.”*

Departmental heads reinforced this demand, highlighting that professional development is critical for sustaining inclusive practices.

Together, these findings illustrate both the promise and complexity of implementing curriculum differentiation in Grade 4 EFAL inclusive classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that curriculum differentiation in EFAL classrooms is both necessary and fraught with systemic challenges. Teachers’ emphasis on baseline and ongoing assessments aligns with Tomlinson’s framework, which stresses the importance of understanding learners’ readiness, interests, and profiles.³⁰ This practice resonates with Black and Wiliam’s conception of formative assessment and Hattie’s evidence that timely interventions enhance learning outcomes.³¹ Recent South African research further highlights this point: Hendricks and Xeketwana demonstrate that translanguaging strategies, which integrate learners’ home languages into EFAL instruction, provide differentiated pathways that validate linguistic repertoires and improve engagement.³²

The strategies reported by participants visual aids, scaffolding, cooperative learning, and flexible teaching correspond closely with established pedagogical approaches. Tomlinson and Subban & Mahlo highlight the value of varying processes and products, while Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development provides theoretical grounding for scaffolding instruction to learners’ current abilities and potential

³⁰ Tomlinson, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*; Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*.

³¹ Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, “Assessment and Classroom Learning,” *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 5, no. 1 (1998): 7–74; John. Hattie, “Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement,” *Routledge*, 2008.

³² Monica Hendricks and Simthembele Xeketwana, “Translanguaging for Learning in Selected English First Additional Language Secondary School Classrooms,” *Reading & Writing* 15, no. 1 (October 31, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/RW.v15i1.502>.

growth.³³ These findings are consistent with Coubergs et al., who argue that differentiation fosters engagement across diverse abilities.³⁴ More recent studies confirm that culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive practices remain central to effective teaching in multicultural classrooms.³⁵

However, the challenges identified large class sizes, rigid curricula, limited resources, and insufficient training mirror systemic barriers highlighted in the literature. Dos Santos, Lindner & Schwab and Ndlovu all point to structural constraints that undermine pedagogical innovation.³⁶ Motitswe and Mpu & Adu emphasise the acute difficulties faced in under-resourced schools, where multilingual learners often receive minimal support.³⁷ These findings strongly agree with Burner & Carlsen, who argue that resource-constrained multilingual classrooms require responsive practices but often lack systemic backing.³⁸ Chimbunde and Moreeng similarly note that South African teachers lack adequate preparation for multicultural classrooms, reinforcing the need for professional learning communities to build competencies.³⁹

Despite these obstacles, the reported benefits enhanced learner confidence, motivation, and participation, illustrating the transformative potential of differentiation. These outcomes align with Osipova and Lao, who caution that EFAL learners risk exclusion without differentiated support but also show that even modest efforts yield meaningful improvements.⁴⁰ Hendricks and Xeketwana further demonstrate that bilingual pedagogies narrow achievement gaps by validating learners' identities and linguistic resources.⁴¹

Finally, the strong demand for professional development expressed by teachers corresponds with DBE and recent research, which emphasise that sustained training, mentorship, and collaborative learning communities are indispensable for inclusive education.⁴² Porta argues that teacher agency must be supported by institutional commitment to ensure that differentiation is not merely aspirational but practically achievable.⁴³

Curriculum differentiation in Grade 4 Inclusive English First Additional Language Classrooms is both necessary and beneficial yet constrained by systemic barriers. Where divergence occurs is in the extent of implementation; teachers are committed but often unable to fully realise differentiation due to structural limitations. This tension between aspiration and reality highlights the need for systemic investment in teacher capacity, flexible curricula, and institutional support to ensure that differentiation fulfils its promise in EFAL classrooms.⁴⁴

³³ Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*; Subban and Mahlo, "My Attitude, My Responsibility" Investigating the Attitudes and Intentions of Pre-Service Teachers toward Inclusive Education between Teacher Preparation Cohorts in Melbourne and Pretoria"; Lev S Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, vol. 86 (Harvard university press, 1978).

³⁴ Coubergs et al., "Teachers' Perspectives on Differentiation in Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review."

³⁵ Sharroky Hollie, *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning: Classroom Practices for Student Success* (Teacher Created Materials, 2017); Pfuurai Chimbunde and Boitumelo Benjamin Moreeng, "Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approach: Teaching Multicultural Classrooms in South African Schools," *IAFOR Journal of Education* 12, no. 3 (December 10, 2024): 41–57, <https://doi.org/10.22492/ije.12.3.02>.

³⁶ Dos Santos, "The Discussion of Communicative Language Teaching Approach in Language Classrooms"; Lindner and Schwab, "Differentiation and Individualisation in Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis"; Ndlovu, "Curriculum Differentiation for Diverse Learners."

³⁷ Motitswe, "Teachers' Perceptions on Including Learners with Barriers to Learning in South African Inclusive Education System"; Mpu and Adu, "The Challenges of Inclusive Education and Its Implementation in Schools: The South African Perspective."

³⁸ Tony Burner and Christian Carlsen, "Teachers' Multilingual Beliefs and Practices in English Classrooms: A Scoping Review," *Review of Education* 11, no. 2 (August 26, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3407>.

³⁹ Chimbunde and Moreeng, "Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approach: Teaching Multicultural Classrooms in South African Schools."

⁴⁰ Osipova and Lao, "Breaking the Cycle of Failure for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners with Exceptional Needs: Recommendations for Improvement of Teacher Preparation Programs."

⁴¹ Hendricks and Xeketwana, "Translanguaging for Learning in Selected English First Additional Language Secondary School Classrooms."

⁴² Department of Basic Education, *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)*.

⁴³ Tom Porta, "Collective Commitment to and Responsibility for Differentiated Instruction," 2025, 45–58, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-4368-4_4.

⁴⁴ Zakiyurrahman Azhari and Yetti Zainil, "Differentiated Teaching and Learning Applied in English Classes of Phase f of Senior High School," *Journal of English Language Teaching* 13, no. 1 (2024): 360–83.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study point to a set of interconnected recommendations that span classroom practice, school leadership, policy, and future research. At the classroom level, it becomes clear that embedding baseline and formative assessments into everyday teaching routines is essential. Such assessments allow teachers to identify learner needs early and to adjust strategies continuously, ensuring that instruction remains responsive rather than static. Alongside this, the use of varied differentiation strategies such as scaffolding, cooperative learning, and visual supports emerges as a powerful way to enhance EFAL learners' engagement. These approaches not only accommodate diverse learning profiles but also foster a more inclusive environment. Peer collaboration further strengthens this dynamic, as stronger learners can provide meaningful support to those facing barriers, creating a culture of shared responsibility and mutual growth.

School leadership plays a pivotal role in sustaining these practices. Structured mentorship for teachers and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) is vital, as it enables the sharing of effective strategies and builds confidence in implementing differentiation. Leadership should also prioritise the establishment of collaborative learning communities where educators can exchange resources and collectively reflect on their practice. Such communities encourage innovation and reduce isolation among teachers. Moreover, strategic allocation of resources, whether adaptive materials, classroom aids, or additional support staff, ensures that inclusive practices are not aspirational but practically achievable.

At the systemic level, policy interventions are necessary to create enabling conditions for differentiation. Investment in targeted professional development focused on EFAL differentiation and inclusive pedagogy is a critical step, equipping teachers with both theoretical knowledge and practical tools. Curriculum flexibility must also be reviewed, allowing teachers greater scope to adapt content and methods to diverse learner needs rather than adhering rigidly to prescriptive frameworks. Structural challenges such as large class sizes and uneven resource distribution cannot be ignored; addressing these issues is fundamental to creating classrooms where differentiation is feasible and effective.

Finally, the recommendations highlight important directions for future research. Investigating the long-term impact of differentiation strategies on learner achievement and inclusivity will provide evidence of sustainability and effectiveness. Equally important is exploring the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and culturally responsive pedagogy in EFAL differentiation, as these approaches may offer contextually grounded solutions that resonate with learners' lived experiences. Research should also examine how professional development models can be tailored to sustain teacher growth across diverse classroom contexts, ensuring that training is not a one-off event but part of an ongoing cycle of learning and reflection. Taken together, these recommendations highlight the need for a holistic approach that bridges classroom practice, leadership, policy, and research in order to advance inclusive education meaningfully.

CONCLUSION

This study examined teachers' and LSEs' perspectives on curriculum differentiation in Grade 4 EFAL inclusive classrooms. The findings revealed that effective differentiation depends on accurate baseline assessments, continuous monitoring, and the use of varied instructional strategies such as scaffolding, visual aids, cooperative learning, and flexible teaching methods. While teachers recognised that differentiation benefits improved learner confidence, motivation, and inclusivity, they also highlighted systemic challenges, including large class sizes, limited resources, rigid curricula, and insufficient training.

A recurring theme was the strong demand for professional development and support systems. Teachers and departmental heads emphasised the need for targeted training, mentorship, and collaborative learning communities to strengthen differentiation practices. These findings highlight the dual reality of curriculum differentiation: its potential to transform learner engagement and outcomes, and the structural barriers that constrain its implementation. Ultimately, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by affirming that differentiation is both a pedagogical necessity and a systemic challenge. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts at the classroom, school, and policy levels.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY TO SCHOLARSHIP

This study contributes to the discourse on inclusive education by providing empirical insights into how teachers integrate Tomlinson's differentiation principles to support linguistically diverse learners. It highlights the significance of baseline assessments and ongoing monitoring in identifying learning barriers and tailoring instruction accordingly. Drawing on Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and Black and Wiliam's formative assessment model, the findings indicate that a thorough understanding of learners' language proficiency and cognitive needs is crucial for effective intervention.

The research bridges the gap between theory and practice by illustrating how diagnostic tools and continuous assessment facilitate differentiation, thereby promoting inclusion and academic progress. It also presents practical strategies, such as scaffolding, visual aids, cooperative learning, and flexible teaching methods, aligned with established best practices.

Additionally, the study identifies gaps in teacher training and resource availability, advocating for targeted professional development and the establishment of collaborative learning communities. These findings inform both policy and instructional practices, particularly in English first additional language inclusive classrooms, and emphasise the importance of differentiation in promoting equitable and inclusive education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study offers valuable insights into the application of Tomlinson's differentiation principles in linguistically diverse classrooms, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research was confined to a small number of schools within a specific geographic area, which may impact the generalisability of the findings to other contexts with different linguistic or socio-economic conditions. The study predominantly relied on qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews and observations, which, although rich in detail, may be influenced by participant bias. Teachers and LSEs may have portrayed their practices in a more favourable light due to social desirability. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal data limits the ability to assess the long-term effects of differentiation strategies. Furthermore, excluding learners' perspectives restricts a comprehensive understanding of how these practices affect their experiences and academic outcomes.

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