Differentiated Instruction in Literacy and Allowing Self-Selected Texts for Student Reading Engagement

By

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Abstract

This Master of Teaching Research Project is a qualitative study that addresses the topics of differentiated instruction in literacy, specifically allowing students to self-select their own texts and providing choice. The existing literature is limited on how teachers are currently differentiating their literacy instruction and what benefits have been seen when allowing students to select their own texts. However, the literature that is present suggests that when students are provided with choice in what they are reading, they are more likely to be engaged with a text, be motivated to read, and to comprehend better than when texts are chosen for them. This study aims to look at how two teachers achieve differentiated instruction in their literacy classrooms, guided by the following question: How is a sample of K-6 teachers differentiating their literacy instruction by incorporating choice in student selection of reading texts and what outcomes do they observe for student engagement in literacy? Overarching themes include participants’ experiences learning from their students, considering students’ interest and abilities, teaching experiences and availability of resources, and how teachers respond to challenges regarding differentiated instruction. I am eager to share strategies that some teachers use to differentiate their literacy instruction in order to engage disengaged readers and how some teachers assist students who struggle with reading comprehension, specifically.

Key Words: Differentiated Instruction, Literacy, Engagement, Reading Comprehension, Self-Selected Text, Choice
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# Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 3

Table of Contents 4

Chapter 1 – Introduction 7
1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem 7
1.1 Purpose of the Study 11
1.2 Research Questions 11
1.3 Background of the Researcher 12
1.4 Overview 13

Chapter 2 – The Literature Review 14
2.0 Introduction 14
2.1 Differentiated Instruction 15
  2.1.1 Conceptualizing differentiated Instruction 15
  2.1.2 Key challenges when implementing differentiated instruction 17
  2.1.3 Effective practices for differentiated instruction to foster reading comprehension 18
2.2 Reading Comprehension 19
  2.2.1 Conceptualizing reading comprehension 20
  2.2.2 Struggles students face with reading comprehension 21
  2.2.3 Practices that respond to some of the challenges students are facing with reading comprehension 22
  2.2.4 Challenges teachers face developing students reading comprehension 24
2.3 The Element of Choice and Engagement 24
  2.3.1 The relationship between reading engagement and comprehension 25
  2.3.2 How do we get students to become engaged and motivated in reading? 26
  2.3.3 Choice as a pathway to comprehension, engagement, and motivation 27
2.4 Conclusion 28

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology 29
3.0 Introduction 29
3.1 Research Approach and Procedures 29
3.2 Instruments and Data Collection 30
3.3 Participants 31
  3.3.1 Sampling criteria 31
  3.3.2 Recruitment 32
  3.3.3 Participant biographies 33
3.4 Data Analysis 34
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures 35
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths 36
3.7 Conclusion 37
Chapter 4 – Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter 38

4.1 Participants’ Experiences Learning From Their Students Helped Them Develop Confidence in Applying Differentiated Instruction in Literacy Instruction and Reading Engagement 39

4.1.1 Participants learned through their teaching experiences that all students learn differently and teachers must teach to these differences 41

4.1.2 Participants learned that being pro-active in differentiating instruction in literacy avoided challenges in the classroom 41

4.1.3 Participants indicated that being willing to try new strategies can help students be successful 42

4.2 Participants Indicated That They Considered Their Students’ Interests and Abilities, As Well as Their Preferred Instructional Strategies, When Accessing Texts for Students 44

4.2.1 Participants indicated that they considered their students’ interests and abilities when accessing texts for students 44

4.2.2 Participants indicated that they considered self-selection as a teaching strategy when accessing texts for students 46

4.3 Participants Indicated That Their Teaching Experiences and Availability of Resources Supported Them in Effectively Differentiating Their Literacy Instruction 47

4.3.1 Participants’ access to a variety of books and resources supported them in differentiating their instruction and providing choice in text selection 48

4.3.2 Participants indicated that providing students with authority and autonomy in their text-selection supports them in effectively differentiating their literacy instruction 49

4.4 Participants Indicated That Differentiation is Not Always Effective or Fully Supported by Schools, But That They Respond to These Challenges by Maintaining Flexibility in Their Teaching 51

4.4.1 Participants indicated that differentiated instruction is not always effective for some students who need further support 51

4.4.2 Participants indicated that sometimes schools and teachers lack support or interest in differentiated instruction 53

4.4.3 Participants respond to these challenges by being flexible in finding ways to best support their students’ needs 54

4.5 Conclusion 56

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter 57

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance 57

5.2 Implications 59

5.2.1 The educational research community 59

5.2.2 My personal identity and practice 60

5.3 Recommendations 61

5.4 Areas of further research 63

5.5 Concluding comments 63

References 65
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Appendix B: Interview Questions
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

No two people are ever the same, especially when it comes to how they learn. Some people learn best visually, others learn best by verbally communicating, and some learn at their fullest potential kinaesthetically. These are only a few of the different ways that students learn. If people all learn differently, it is important that teachers incorporate differentiated instruction (DI). The Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) explains that differentiating instruction is a priority in this province and that it includes, “providing alternative instructional and assessment activities; challenging students at an appropriate level; and using a variety of groupings to meet student needs” (2004b, p.1). They also explain what DI is not, including not doing something completely different for every student, having an undisciplined classroom, using static groupings, and never engaging in full class activities.

It is essential for teachers to start and/or continue differentiating their instruction because every student deserves the chance at being successful regardless of how they learn. Research has found that differentiating instruction and materials for all students is the best practice for benefitting all ability levels for students (Hong, Corter, Hong & Pelletier, 2012). An area that requires more attention in differentiating instruction in literacy is with reading engagement. Implementing differentiated instruction assists to engage disengaged readers. Research has found that there is a lack of reading engagement in the elementary years (Gambrell, 2011). When students are deprived of ownership in their reading selection they tend to be disengaged (McRae & Guthrie, 2009). As well, not being accountable for what they are reading leads to information being forgotten about as soon as they are done reading (McRae & Guthrie, 2009). One strategy to increase student-reading engagement is allowing choice in students’ text selection (Anderssen,
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

The value of providing choice in text selection is significant. When students are given the opportunity to choose their own texts they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their reading. (Gambrell & Barbara Marinak, 2009). Dr. Ivey, a professor of reading education at James Madison University in Virginia was involved in a project where 300 Grade 8 English students were allowed full choice over their reading (Anderssen, 2010). Dr. Ivey said, “We couldn’t keep up with the need for books. Even in classes with struggling readers, students read an average of 42 books over the course of the school years, some as many as 100” (Anderssen, 2010). Research shows that allowing students to select their own texts can produce many positive outcomes for students. Some of these outcomes include: valuing their decision-making ability, fostering their ability to choose appropriate texts, gives them confidence and ownership, improves reading achievement, and encourages them in becoming engaged readers (Johnson & Blair, 2003).

As well, grouping students homogenously based on ability levels, for example, has been found to benefit medium-ability students, not harm low-ability students’ self-esteem, and improve high-ability students’ self-concepts (Hong et al., 2012). When it comes to literacy, and reading engagement more specifically, research has identified a range of ways that teachers can differentiate their instruction to meet students’ diverse learning style preferences (Knowles, 2009). Some of these practices include allotting time to discuss books with peers during class time, selecting one’s own literature, and teaching students how to choose a ‘just right’ book for them (Ibid). Providing genuine individualized choices for students increases their effort and commitment to reading (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009). As well, according to Gambrell (1996), small group discussions on books provide students with active learning where they have opportunities to speak, interact, and exchange points of view.
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

There is evidence that shows when teachers provide all students with the same literacy instruction, it can be detrimental to student achievement (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). Thus, differentiating literacy instruction is needed to help support student achievement. Exemplary literacy teachers have been found most often to instruct their literacy classes in small groups through scaffolding, which involves prompting students to use many different strategies as they are engaged in reading (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). Materials used in each small group reading lesson must be differentiated and the amount of time that is spent in each small group is also differentiated. The decisions about the length and frequency of lessons are based on the students’ needs in each group. True and good differentiation comes from developing each lesson based on the needs of the learners and there is not one simple solution to differentiate reading instruction – it depends on the students (Ankrum & Bean, 2008).

Despite the emphasis on the importance of differentiating instruction in curriculum policy and research, many teachers do not enact this practice. Some of the reasons for this that have been identified through research including teachers not always knowing how or wanting to differentiate their instruction (Tobin & McInnes, 2008). In one study, approximately 50% of participating middle school teachers reported that they did not differentiate their instruction because they saw no reason to do so (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014). Research suggests that teacher education plays an important role in this predicament. Research has found that many teacher candidates believe the courses they take to learn to become teachers are very theoretical and do not teach specific strategies to use practically in the classroom (Stewart, 2015). Teacher candidates commonly also feel “confused and overwhelmed” by the vast amount of resources and expectations that they have to uphold in order to teach literacy, specifically, using differentiated instruction (Stewart, 2015, p.7).
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

It is common for school boards to offer professional development workshops for teachers to learn how to differentiate their instruction. However, just like any presentation, conference, or workshop, not all teachers take what they learn and apply it in practice. Workshops can also be limited in that they typically try to fit in a lot of information in as little as a half-day session that provides teachers only with minimal understanding of DI (Dixon et al., 2014).

Furthermore, differentiating instruction alone is not sufficient. The quality of differentiation makes a difference for student learning, and research to date has found that while many teachers will report differentiated instruction as a core practice, the quality of how they differentiate their instruction varies significantly (Valinande, Kyriakides, Koutselini, 2011). Research has found that implementing differentiated instruction occasionally is no better than not implementing it at all (Hewitt & Weckstein, 2012). Differentiated instruction is only effective for student achievement when it is practiced in all subject areas, and at all times (Hewitt & Weckstein, 2012). The extreme effort that teachers must put into implementing appropriate DI can also be overwhelming (Hewitt & Weckstein, 2012). While research suggests that DI is crucial for student learning and achievement and while The Ontario Ministry of Education and teacher education programs are prioritizing the significance of DI, research is finding that DI is challenging for teachers and the quality of differentiation matters. Researchers have proposed some ideas as to why differentiated reading instruction may not be happening. The process of reading is a very complex process and therefore might be too complex for some researchers to tailor their instruction to individual needs (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). Another possible explanation for why teachers may not differentiate their reading instruction is due to classroom management and being worried the class would be too chaotic (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). However, there is a
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

gap in research on the challenges that get in the way of teachers differentiating their reading instruction and providing choice in text selection.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover the practices of primary and junior teachers that support differentiated instruction in literacy education. The goal of my research is to learn how teachers are differentiating their literacy instruction to make it relevant to students’ interests and preferred learning styles by offering students’ choice in the selection of their reading materials. Literacy is a foundational subject that begins getting taught at an early age and continues throughout life. Thus the primary and junior grades are of particular relevance because it is here that students need to learn important strategies when reading. It is essential that primary and junior teachers find differentiated ways to motivate and engage students in literacy. I have learned from research and other teachers how to use different forms of instruction by allowing choice when teaching literacy and fostering reading engagement. I learned this to inform my own and others’ practices so that all learners can become engaged with reading and work to their greatest potential. An intensive search in challenges that get in teachers’ way in providing choice for students when it comes to text selection has revealed that little research has been conducted in this area (Anderssen, 2010; Knowles, 2009; Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). This is a gap that needs to be filled and I hope that my research will contribute towards filling this gap.

1.2 Research Questions

The primary question guiding this study is: How is a sample of K-6 teachers differentiating their literacy instruction by incorporating choice in student selection of reading
texts and what outcomes do they observe for student engagement in literacy? Sub-questions to further guide this inquiry include:

- How have teacher’s experiences prepared them to confidently apply DI in literacy instruction, and for reading engagement specifically?
- What challenges have teachers faced enacting their commitment to differentiating literacy instruction and providing choice in text selection for students and how do they respond to these challenges?
- What resources and factors support them in this practice?
- What considerations do these teachers make when accessing a variety of texts for students to choose from?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

As someone who has experienced feeling discouraged and frustrated due to difficulties with literacy and comprehension, I developed a strong interest in learning how I can better support my future struggling literacy learners through inclusive differentiated instruction. I feel as though if I was given the opportunity to choose the books that I read starting from a young age I would have been more engaged and motivated to read. It is essential to develop a good connection with your students in order to find out their interests and assist them in finding texts that fit their interests.

I also do not remember being given allotted time during the day to read. I can clearly remember writing in my agenda every day “Read for 30 min.” and I dreaded that piece of homework every night. I remember sitting with my mother and reading out loud to her every night and she would ask me after I finished a few pages what I had just read about. Frustration
constantly consumed me when I could not recall anything that I had just read. I did not have time
during class to read either, which did not help the matter. My teachers never knew what I was
reading outside of class and I did not learn strategies to help me learn how to comprehend text. I
was always given the same text as either the whole class or a reading group and I never found
any of those texts to be interesting.

Other than writing down in a reading log what book I was reading and for how long each
night, I was not held accountable for anything I read. I was never given a chance to talk to my
peers or have conferences with my teacher about books I was reading. All I can remember is
doing DRA tests when I read a levelled book that had nothing to do with what I was reading on
my own time. I recall very little differentiated instruction when it came to reading. My teachers
gave us a book to read for assignments and when it came to homework, we were just told to read
for a certain amount of time. I was never given strategies on how to learn how to comprehend
text, such as rereading, picking books that best suit my interests, or talking to peers in order to
increase my motivation and reading comprehension achievement. Due to my struggles as a
literacy learner, I am interested in finding out what teachers are doing now to differentiate their
literacy instruction and engage learners so that they are motivated to read, leading to
comprehension achievement. This project also aims to raise awareness of the importance of
differentiated instruction, and inspire teachers to be mindful of the many different learning styles
of students in their classrooms.

1.4 Overview

To respond to the research questions, I have conducted a qualitative research study using
purposeful sampling to interview three teachers about their instructional strategies for
differentiating their literacy instruction by creating opportunities for choice in text selection and being responsive to students’ interests and preferred learning styles. In Chapter 2 I review the literature in the areas of differentiated instruction, literacy learners, engagement and motivation, and self-selecting text. Next, in Chapter 3 I elaborate on the research design. In Chapter 4 I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature, and in Chapter 5 I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.

Chapter 2: The Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas of differentiated instruction (DI), reading comprehension, and the element of choice and engagement. More specifically I review themes related to differentiated instruction and how teachers that provide students with choice in selecting literature commonly results in higher levels of engagement, as well as assists with reading comprehension. I start by reviewing the literature in the area of challenges that teachers face when implementing DI and effective practices that they use. Next, I look at some of the struggles that students face with reading comprehension in order to understand how DI can impact those students’ success. Finally, I look at the relationship between student engagement and reading comprehension, and how text selection helps increase engagement.
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

2.1 Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is a term that is heard by teachers and educators all throughout North America, but the issue is that it is sometimes only heard about and talked about, rather than implemented in classrooms. Differentiated instruction is implementing different forms of learning and assessment in a classroom (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). All students learn differently and it is up to teachers to become aware of these differences and design lessons that fit the learning needs of each individual student. In this section, I discuss the different ways that researchers talk about differentiated instruction. Then, I go on to explain the challenges that teachers face when implementing differentiated instruction in their classrooms, such as not having enough professional development time, or not seeing the need to do so. Next, I discuss effective differentiated instruction practices that teachers use to assist students who struggle with reading comprehension and reading engagement.

2.1.1 Conceptualizing differentiated instruction

There has been a lot of conversation regarding DI within the last few years (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). DI allows for teachers to design engaging lessons for each individual student’s needs so that there is an equal chance for every student to reach his or her own full potential. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2013) defines DI as being able to “recognize students’ varying levels of background knowledge, readiness to learn, language ability, learning preferences, and interest, and to react responsively” (p.17). Thus, the educators’ reaction to a learner’s needs is the main idea when it comes to DI in the context of education (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). An important component of this work is for educators to get to know their students before implementing DI strategies. The curriculum for each grade is
what is expected of all teachers to implement. However, there is a multitude of ways to teach all aspects of the curriculum and it is up to teachers and educators to observe and recognize different learners and react by differentiating instruction.

DI can be useful and beneficial for all learners regardless of class, race, religion, or background. Stavroula, Leonidas & Mary (2011) found that DI could maximize learning outcomes for all students regardless of socioeconomic background. Implementing DI effectively has been found to promote equity by giving an opportunity for all students to improve their learning and achievements regardless of their background (Stavroula et al., 2011). Stavroula et al (2011) looked at mixed ability classrooms where differentiated instruction was being utilized and compared this to a control group that did not receive differentiated instruction. The researchers found that differentiated instruction can promote equity and quality education for all, in mixed ability classrooms (Stavroula et al., 2011).

The way in which DI can be best implemented has come down to three basic elements. The three elements that research has noted are content, process, and product. The content is what students need to learn; process is how students are going to learn; and product is how they are going to demonstrate what they have learned (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000; Knowles, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2013). The Ministry of Education (2013) adds a fourth element, which is the affect/environment of learning. This is where the learning takes place and the environment where students learn.

Teachers who use these four elements start by assessing where their students are at academically. Then they can design and provide lessons in a way that best suits each child’s interests, learning style, and needs. DI is an ongoing flexible process that comes from continual and effective student assessments, flexible groupings, multiple activities and learning
arrangements, and students and teachers both being collaborators in the learning process (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

2.1.2 Key challenges when implementing differentiated instruction

Differentiating instruction for all students is not a simple task. A lot of time and effort must go into designing and preparing lessons for all students and making sure that they fit the needs of all learners. There are professional development workshops and courses for teachers to take to assist them in learning how to best differentiate instruction. Many of these workshops, however, try accomplishing too much in a half-day session that provides teachers with some understanding of DI but does not allow time for teachers to practice differentiating their lessons for when he or she returns to the classroom (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014). As cited in Dixon et al., (2014) researchers Moon, Tomlinson, and Callahan (1995) conducted a study of middle school teachers where about 50% of them did not differentiate their instruction because they did not see a reason to do so. Many teachers will differentiate their instruction occasionally when they find the time, or when they feel that it would be easy for them to do so. Research has found that “…moderate or occasional implementation was no better than implementation that was completely absent. Reeves (2009) argued, “Only deep implementation has the desired effect on student achievement” (as cited in Hewitt & Weckstein, 2012, p. 36). This is similar to the idea that the overall effort required to differentiate instruction at all times might just be too overwhelming for teachers (Dixon et al., 2014).

Planning to differentiate instruction might also make teachers feel uncomfortable because of differentiating the opportunities. Tomlinson & Allan (2000) found that some teachers do not know how to be fair while responding to all of their different learners. Their research suggests
that teachers are concerned about giving some students an opportunity that others are not receiving. Research also suggests that it is a challenge and concern for teachers to plan and manage differentiation and many fear that they will receive little administrative support (Reis, McCoach, Little, Muller & Kaniskan, 2011). If teachers do not feel supported by their principal, other education administration, or their colleagues, it is unlikely they will take part in differentiating their instruction. Differentiating instruction can increase the many challenges teachers face every day, and many educators have reported feeling “helpless and unable to meet the needs of all their students” (Schmidt, Rozendal, Gretchen, Greenman, 2002, p. 136). In addition, many teachers express that meeting the needs of all their learners is one of the greatest challenges they face because of their lack of knowledge on how to adapt the curriculum and how to adjust learning strategies effectively without disrupting the learning of all students (Tobin & Tippett, 2013).

2.1.3 Effective practices for differentiated instruction to foster reading comprehension

There is limited research on the effective differentiated instruction practices teachers use to enhance student reading comprehension. Differentiated instruction literature focuses on motivation and engagement, but provides few strategies for reading comprehension. These strategies typically focus on social learning. One known practice is that students need to have a sufficient amount of time allotted to discussing books that they read with their peers, in small groups, in pairs, and in the form of book talks (Knowles, 2009). Holding students accountable for their reading by having conversations about books has been found to encourage students to focus and take more of an interest in what they are reading (Knowles, 2009). Gambrell (2011) argues that social interaction also encourages students to read, thereby fostering reading
comprehension in three ways. First, peer opinions can develop student’s curiosity. Second, when students observe their peers’ progress it can influence their own confidence in their ability to succeed. Third, when students work together it promotes interest and engagement (Gambrell, 2011). Gambrell (2011) suggests that many studies have reported that teaching that incorporates social interaction with regards to reading increases student motivation and reading comprehension achievement.

It is evident that some work is being done in the area of differentiating instruction to assist students with reading comprehension. However, work in this area is vague, and does not include a “path” for teachers to follow if they want to effectively differentiate for reading comprehension. Therefore, there is still a gap in understanding what specific practices can assist in advancing reading comprehension levels. Work in this area focuses on social interaction. There is very little research that engages individual practice.

2.2 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a tough concept to teach as well as learn. Many teachers struggle with teaching reading comprehension because it is not a concrete concept, but instead it is teaching how to understand what you are reading. Using different methods, such as differentiated instruction, and student-choice when reading, can assist with reading comprehension. I begin this section of my literature by discussing some ways that research has found reading comprehension to be an integral part of a student’s learning process. I then look at the specific struggles that some students go through with reading comprehension, such as lack of metacognitive skills and limited knowledge of strategies to assist themselves when comprehending text. Next, I discuss some of the practices that teachers use to assist students who
struggle with reading comprehension. Lastly, I look at the struggles that teachers face when assisting students with reading comprehension.

### 2.2.1 Conceptualizing reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is not an easy task to teach. It is however, something educators do need to teach, even though many teachers believe it is something that students learn on their own (Mason, 2004). Reading comprehension is integral in a student’s learning because it is a foundation that they will use throughout life. Research has found that reading comprehension is the most crucial academic skill that is learned in school (Mason, 2004). This is why it is important for teachers to teach comprehension in a differentiated way and be aware that it is something that must be taught and not avoided. Thus, it is a teacher’s responsibility to assist students in finding books that best suit their interests. A study done by Dargian et al., (2002), found that ‘the interestingness’ of a text was 30 times “more powerful than the readability of text when it comes to comprehension and recall” (Johnson & Blair, p. 185). They found that if a student is not interested in what they are reading it is more unlikely that they will comprehend the text. They also found that giving a student a book only once in a while that they are interested in would not make the difference in comprehension achievement. They argue that students should continuously be given books that they are interested in so that they can practice and become better independent readers. Richard Allington (2001) states that reading practice with the sole purpose of just reading is one of the most influential practices when it comes to accuracy, fluency, and reading comprehension (Johnson and Blair, 2003).
2.2.2 Struggles students face with reading comprehension

It is a skill to be able to read words on a page and focus on what the words are actually meaning. As stated previously, some research has found that teachers tend to focus very little on teaching reading comprehension (Mason, 2004). Research has found that challenges with reading comprehension usually stem from students’ lack of metacognitive skills in order to comprehend when they read and the strategies that help fix comprehension when it breaks down (Mason, 2004; Whitbeck, 2010). Struggling students may rely on simpler strategies when trying to understand what they are reading about. Average and above average-achieving students tend to be proactive about their strategies to comprehend well when reading; but struggling students use “ineffective, reactive methods” (Mason, 2004, p. 283). When reading comprehension is a challenge for students, it not only affects their literacy grade, but also ultimately leads to frustrating learning opportunities. Whitbeck (2010) adds that when comprehension is a challenge, pathways to learning become blocked and frustration starts, which disengages students from wanting to read.

Results from a 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that only 34% of students in fourth grade and eight graders are reading at or above a proficient level (Scammacca, Roberts, Vaughn, Stuebing, 2015). One third of the fourth graders and about one fourth of eighth graders scored below basic in their reading proficiency, which means they were less likely to be able to comprehend their grade level texts (Scammacca, 2015). Reading comprehension can be a struggle for students for reasons such as: families not wanting to be involved in their children’s literacy development, not having enough books read to them, or not being given the choice to read books that are of interest to them (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013).
2.2.3 Practices that respond to some of the struggles students are facing with reading comprehension

Many teachers are trying to come up with practices that assist students with reading comprehension. One of the most important practices to help students understand what they are reading is student choice, in selecting their own literature (Knowles, 2009; Watkins & Ostenson 2015). When selecting books, self-selection has been found to engage and motivate students to want to read more and assist with comprehension (Knowles, 2009). Not only should students be allowed to choose their own books, but there must be a level of accountability for the decisions they make as well (Johnson & Blair, 2003). Student-teacher conferences allow for teachers to continually know that the students are choosing appropriate books for themselves over time. Self-selection along with student-teacher conferences can help students learn to be accountable and take ownership of their reading process and encourage students to read often (Johnson & Blair, 2003).

A different practice that teachers are using to help respond to students who struggle with reading comprehension is homogenous groupings. In addition, grouping students based on ability benefits the average student, while not effecting low-ability students’ self-esteem, as well as improving high-ability students’ self-concepts (Hong, Corter, Hong & Pelletier, 2012). More explicitly, reading groups based on ability levels can enhance comprehension rates (Hong et al., 2012). This finding is similar to Mokhtar, Majid, and Foo’s (2008) research that looked at homogenous groupings based on dominant intelligences. These researchers found that students who were grouped with other students that had the same dominant intelligence as them produced better quality literacy work (Mokhtar et al., 2008). Homogenous student groupings based on ability level, dominant intelligences, and learning styles all have a positive effect on literacy
achievement levels. However, heterogenous groupings are important because they allow for various opinions, abilities, perspectives, and skills (Mokhtar et al., 2008). Heterogeneous groupings are not commonly suggested for reading groups because it has been found that students learn better from imitation or copying from role models common patterns of behaviour and perceptions than they do from coming up with their own views and agreeing on conclusions (Mokhtar et al., 2008).

Another practice that Knowles (2009) found in her research was assisting students with knowing how to choose a just-right book. To reinforce improvement for struggling readers, it is important to have many books in the classroom, and teaching students to know what book is “just right” for them. This is not to say that students should never read challenging books. If students successfully find a topic that they are very interested in, they are likely to be successful in reading a challenging book on that topic (Knowles, 2009). Teachers have implemented a “five finger rule” which is:

1. Choose a book that you think you will enjoy.
2. Read the second page.
3. Hold up a finger for each word you are not sure of, or do not know.
4. If there are five or more words you did not know, you should choose an easier book (Rogers, 2008).

It’s important to give students the opportunity to choose their own books. Modeling how to look through a book would also provide a good example of how to choose a just-right book (National Institute for Professional Practice, 2016). As well, the “Goldilocks” strategy is where there are 3 categories: Too Hard, Just Right, and Too Easy. The teacher would have questions for each
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

category and if the answers are “yes.” The book probably fits into that category (National Institute for Professional Practice, 2016).

2.2.4 Challenges teachers face developing students reading comprehension

Teaching reading comprehension is not an easy thing to do. Research has shown that many teacher candidates found that the courses they took to learn to become teachers were very theoretical and did not teach specific strategies to use practically in the classroom (Stewart, 2015). Specific to teaching literacy, teacher candidates had questions on how to teach literacy and were “confused and overwhelmed” by the vast amount of resources and expectations (Stewart, 2015, p. 7).

Relatedly, research has also shown that “one of the greatest challenges that teachers and administrators face with respect to reading instruction is accommodating struggling, diverse, and at-risk readers” (Schmidt, Rozendal, Greenman, 2002, p. 131). As cited in Schmidt et al., (2002) found that the most efficient strategy for reading instruction is a large amount of feedback from the teacher, time for practice with reading in the classroom, and modeling where and when to use different reading strategies so that students can monitor themselves. Many teachers are aware that their students vary in their literacy needs. However, many do not know how to accommodate student difference in their dynamic literacy classrooms, reporting that this is one of their greatest challenges as a teacher (Tobin & McInnes, 2008).

2.3 The Element of Choice and Engagement

Allowing students to choose their own books gives them the opportunity to explore the vast amount of literature that is out there. I begin this section of my literature review by
discussing the research that has found a relationship between reading engagement and comprehension. Then I look at how teachers and educators can get students to become motivated and engaged in reading. Some examples that teachers use are having a wide range of reading materials in the classroom, and allowing for students to have choice in their texts.

2.3.1 The relationship between reading engagement and comprehension

The more students are engaged in what they are reading the more likely it is that their reading comprehension will be at or above grade level (Little, McCoach & Reis, 2014). Research has found that there is a strong link between reading engagement and achievement in reading, and that student interest is what promotes higher reading achievement (Little et al., 2014). This suggests that student interest and engagement in reading leads to greater achievement in reading.

Other research too found that, “When students were provided time in school to choose books, read them, and reflect on them, they became more interested in reading and connected characters and themes in their favourite texts to their own lives in meaningful ways (Stairs & Burgos, 2010, p. 46). Guthrie et al., (2004) discuss how excellent teachers spend a great deal of time and energy in supporting students’ motivation and engagement in reading. These researchers state that a reason that motivation and engagement play a significant role in reading comprehension is that motivated students usually want to understand the text content fully and therefore, process the information with a deeper understanding (Guthrie et al., 2004). As well, a major component of engagement in reading is the cognitive strategy that is used when reading. Guthrie et al., (2004) suggest that reading comprehension instruction should include: activating prior knowledge so that students understand text that contains similar information, generating questions related to what is being read, summarizing text, searching for specific information in
texts, organizing information graphically for improved comprehension, learning the structures of stories and the themes of narratives, and monitoring comprehension during reading.

2.3.2 How do we get students to become engaged and motivated in reading?

In Gambrell’s (2011) research, she lists many ideas that teachers can use to get students to become engaged and motivated in reading. First, Gambrell (2011) discusses that students are more motivated to read when there is a wide range of reading materials in the classroom. Having lots of literature in the classroom communicates to students that reading is valuable and gives the opportunity to students to develop strong reading habits. Second, increasing allotted reading time for students over several weeks can cause students to become engaged and sustain engagement when reading for a longer amount of time.

Third, students’ working with peers promotes motivation and engagement when reading because it changes the idea of reading from being completely individual to a social activity. Fourth, students are more motivated to read when classroom incentives such as teacher praise reflect the value and importance of reading. As such, students are more engaged and motivated to read when they receive teacher praise through “verbal scaffolding, support, and direction to the students,” rather than tangible incentives such as prizes (Gambrell, 2011, p. 176).

A last major finding that was cited in Gambrell’s article was a study done by Marinak and Gambrell (2008). This study found that students who were given a book (proximal reward) and students who received no reward were more motivated to engage in subsequent reading than the students who received a token (less proximal reward) (Gambrell, 2011). This provides evidence that the use of appropriate praise and incentives leads to students valuing and understanding the importance of reading and therefore causes them to become more engaged.
2.3.3 Choice as a pathway related to comprehension, engagement and motivation

An alternative to the social differentiated practice that differentiates reading instruction and supports reading comprehension is student choice in selecting their own literature. Having students select the books they want to read has been found to cause students to get excited about what they are choosing and be interested in the book, causing them to comprehend better. As stated in Gambrell’s (2011) research, “When students make connections between the material they are reading and their lives, they become more involved and engaged in comprehending text” (p. 173). When students pick their own novels they are likely to choose something that they can connect to their lives.

Reading for pleasure and having choice has also been linked to improved academic achievement according to Erin Anderssen (The Globe and Mail, March 29, 2010). “Tina Gordon, president of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English and a resource teacher at a Winnipeg-area high school, says many teachers are trying new approaches – such as introducing one book in many different ways, or reading excerpts out loud – and seeing the value in choice in English class” (Anderssen, 2010).

Specific to reading comprehension, Gambrell (2011) agrees that independent reading (students reading by themselves to themselves) and individualized support (providing individual feedback and direction for each student) would increase motivation and engagement, but she adds to this by discussing student choice. Research has proven that the element of choice is successful to engage readers and assist with comprehension (Knowles, 2009; Stairs & Burgos, 2010; Gambrell, 2011). Gambrell (2011) also found that students who are given the opportunity to choose their own literature are, “more motivated to read, expend more effort, and gain better understanding of the text” (p. 175).
Johnson and Blair (2003) also believe that self-selection of students’ own literature is an important first step for reading engagement but they add to this point by discussing that students must also be given ample amounts of time during the day to read books that they choose. Johnson & Blair (2003) discuss how important self-section is with literature that without having it in reading programs, there will not be any real reading development. Students need to feel that they have control with their reading selection in order to become engaged. A supportive and comfortable reading environment that is made to feel inviting for students to read their self-selected books is another engaging tactic for students to want to read (Johnson & Blair, 2003).

2.4 Conclusion

In this literature review I examined research related to differentiated instruction, reading comprehension, and the element of choice and engagement. This review elucidates the extent that attention has been paid to differentiated instruction and how allowing students to choose their own literature can enhance reading engagement and, in turn, comprehension. It also raises questions about implementing differentiated instruction effectively and knowing that students are choosing appropriate books for their interests and fluency levels. The research also points to the need for further research about the effects of differentiated instruction on reading comprehension achievement in future years going into high school and post-secondary education. In light of this, the purpose of my research is to learn from a sample of teachers who feel confident doing this to lean how they do it so that other teachers can benefit.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the research methodology by identifying the various methodological decisions that I have made, and my rationale for these choices, given the research purpose and questions. I begin reviewing the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments, before elaborating more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I explain data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. Relatedly, I identify a range of methodological limitations, but I also speak to the strengths of the methodology. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of key methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, including a review of the existing literature pertinent to the research questions and purpose of the study, as well as semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with three teachers. Polkinghorne (2005) suggests that qualitative research is inquiry aimed at describing real life experiences as they appear in people’s lives. There are significant differences between qualitative data as discourse and quantitative data as numbers (Polkinghorne, 2005). In the context of quantitative research, the term data refers to bits of information that are directly from the topic and are independent of the people that gathered the information. In qualitative research, data can be oral or written and is the product of interaction between the participant and researcher (Polkinghorne, 2005).
Since the aim of the quantitative approach is to test pre-determined hypotheses and produce generalizable results (Marshall, 1996), it would be inappropriate to use this type of approach for my research. A qualitative research study is an appropriate approach to take for my study, as it will allow me to inquire and address the lived experiences of a small sample of teachers whom differentiate their literacy instruction by allowing students to self-select their text. As Marshall (1996) suggests, qualitative studies aim to provide enlightenment and understanding of more complex issues and are most useful for answering humanistic ‘why’ and ‘how?’ questions, which is what I aim to do in my research. I am not looking to make generalizations as quantitative researchers commonly look to do; I am instead looking to gain a deeper understanding through my semi-structured interviews with information-rich teachers, who can better my own and my colleague’s understandings of how to implement differentiated instruction in literacy (Sandelowski, 1995).

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection used in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). A semi-structured approach allows the research to cover a specific research interest, in a certain amount of time that is left to the discretion of the respondent (Jarratt, 1996). The open structure ensures that unexpected facts or expressions and attitudes can be interpreted and explored (Jarratt, 1996). Semi-structured interviews are usually organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, while allowing for other questions to emerge from the spoken dialogue between the researcher and respondent (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The semi-structured interview is appropriate for my research because the individual in-depth interview will allow me to obtain deep information from personal and lived experiences of
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

As Noor (2008) suggests, the value of semi-structured interviews lies in the fact that they offer sufficient flexibility to approach different respondents in a way that best suits them, while still covering the same areas of data collection. My semi-structured interview protocol will include face-to-face in depth interviews so that I can gain a deep understanding of what my respondents’ experiences have been in the field. I will organize my protocol (located in Appendix B) into four sections, beginning with the participant’s background, followed by questions about their perspectives and beliefs on differentiated instruction in literacy, then their practices of how they implement differentiated instruction in literacy, and concluding with questions regarding challenges and next steps for teachers. Examples of questions include:

- Why do you believe differentiated instruction is an important instructional tool in literacy?
- What benefits for literacy learners do you think differentiated instruction holds?
- How do you think differentiating instruction for your learners has assisted them with reading comprehension?

3.3 Participants

In this section, I review the sampling criteria that I established for participant recruitment, and I review the ways I went about finding suitable participants. I have also included a section wherein I briefly introduce each of my participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

I searched for participants who met the following criteria:

1. Teachers will have consistently differentiated their instruction in their literacy program
2. Teachers will have allowed their students to self-select their own texts as a form of differentiation
3. Teachers will have taught in the range from grades 1-6

4. Teachers will have a minimum of 2 years experience

In order to address the main research question, the participants that I interviewed have experienced running a class using differentiated instruction. These teachers have consistently used differentiated instruction in everyday practice because it shows their education philosophy. To explore the specific stream of differentiated instruction that I am interested in, teachers need to have allowed their students to self-select their own text as one form of how they differentiate their literacy instruction. This is because I am interested in learning about how student choice in text can benefit student reading comprehension. In order to collect relevant data, the teacher participants must have taught in the past or are teaching in the range of grades 1-6 because these are the most significant years for students to learn how to read. I have chosen to avoid kindergarten teachers because I believe students at that age will not have the skills to self-select their own texts to better enhance their engagement of reading. Lastly, teachers will have a minimum of 2 years teaching experience because I am interested in learning about how using differentiated instruction in literacy has assisted with student achievement and bettered their own practice over time.

3.3.2 Recruitment

Choosing a sample of participants is a significant part in the research process since it is not practical or efficient to study an entire population (Marshall, 1996). The most common research approaches are random or probability samples but these are not appropriate for qualitative studies because they are not the most effective way of developing a deep understanding of a complex topic relating to human behaviour (Marshall, 1996). I used
purposeful and convenience sampling. Purposeful sampling is the most common qualitative sampling technique, where the researcher actively looks for the most productive sample to answer his or her research question (Marshall, 1996). Convenience sampling is known as the “least desirable” selection process because this approach is not as much of a strategy as it is a convenience to the researcher to use people who happen to be available as participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). However, due to the small-scale nature of my research study and the methodological parameters, I mainly relied on convenience sampling. This is because I am in a community of teacher colleagues and mentor teachers, and I will rely on my existing contacts and networks to recruit participants.

In order to recruit participants, I contacted school boards and provided them with an overview of my study. I provided the participant criteria and asked that these individuals/organizations distribute my information to teachers they believed might fulfill the criteria. I also provided my contact information rather than asking contacts to provide me with the names and contact information of people they think would be suitable. This helped me ensure that teachers are volunteering to participate rather than feeling pressure or obligation to participate.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

As previously stated, in order to protect the anonymity of both participants, each individual will be referenced using a pseudonym.

Sarah

Sarah has been a teacher for 20 years and at the time of research she taught an SK/1 class. In the past she has taught SK, Grades 1, 2, 3, 5, has worked in the school library, and been in a
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

developmentally delayed community classroom. Sarah did her LTO at the same school that she got hired at for six years. She then resigned when she had children and then started to work again back in the school board. Sarah is dedicated to differentiating her literacy instruction to all of her learners.

Gary

At the time of the interview, Gary was in his fifth year of teaching. He was currently teaching a Grade 5/6 class. In the past Gary was an ESL SERT and the other years he taught Grades 5 and 6. Gary also took on being a numeracy lead in the school for the primary and junior divisions to assist teachers in bettering their math strategies. Gary had worked in the school that he was in at the time of the interview for four years. Gary is also dedicated to differentiating his literacy instruction for his students by providing them with choice.

3.4 Data Analysis

DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) suggest that data analysis coincides with data collection in that the questions that the researcher asks often change as they learn more about the subject. Thorne (2000) agrees that data collection and analysis happen concurrently. Thorne (2000) adds that each step in qualitative research informs the next, so it is therefore important to remember that the actual data you receive is not that different from the data analysis process. Some questions are taken out of the research process and new ones can be added. The process of data collection and data analysis will eventually lead to a point where no new categories or themes come about (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). When the data collection is complete through this process, it is referred to as saturation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). For my
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

data analysis, I transcribed interviews and coded data, as it related to my research purpose and questions. After, I identified and categorized the frequent themes or discrepancies in the findings, while also recognizing null data in the research, and discussing the significance of it.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

There are four main ethical considerations for the interview process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These issues are as follows: “reducing the risk of unanticipated harm; protecting the interviewee’s information; effectively informing interviewees about the nature of the study; reducing the risk of exploitation” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p.319). The real outcome of interview research should not be about benefiting the researcher’s career, but providing new knowledge from the participants and providing them with their own freedom (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Polkinghorne (2005) suggests that the final product needs to be honest and transparent to people who might later read it and use the findings in their own practices.

Both participants that participated in my research have been assigned a pseudonym and they were notified of their right to withdraw from participation in the study at any stage of the research study. All identities taking part in my research remained confidential as I am aware of the sensitivity and concern for my participants needs and desires (Polkinghorne, 2005). There are no known risks to participation in this study and all participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts and to clarify or retract any statements before I conducted data analysis.

DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) suggest that the process of establishing a positive relationship is a significant part of the interview process. This positive relationship includes trust and respect for the participant and the information that he or she shares (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Thus, all data that I obtained through audio recordings will be stored on my
password-protected laptop/phone and will be destroyed after 5 years. Only my course instructor and myself will have access to the data. As well, both participants were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A) giving their consent to be interviewed as well as audio-recorded. This consent letter provides an overview of the study, addresses ethical implications, and specifies expectations of participation (one 45-60 minute semi-structured interview). It is important to remember that to obtain interview data that is of sufficient quality, that I needed to engage with participants and establish a trusting, open relationship with them. As well, I focused on the meaning of the information the participants provided me with, rather than on the accuracy of his or her recall (Polkinghorne, 2005).

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

In this section I address the methodological limitations and strengths of my research study. The largest drawback to this study is that my small sample size undermined the credibility of my research findings (Sandelowski, 1995). However, as mentioned previously, the purpose of qualitative research does not always have the purpose of obtaining generalizable results. As Sandelowski (1995) suggests, “… while the sample is statistically nonrepresentative, it is informally representative in that data will be obtained from persons who can stand for other persons with similar characteristics” (p.181). The strength of my research methodology is that it allows for a meaningful and deep understanding of differentiated instruction in literacy. The ethical parameters that I had approval for allowed me to take part in interviews with teachers and learn about first hand experiences in the field that I was researching. The in-depth interviews provided a space for teachers to speak to what matters most to them when it comes to the topic at
hand. The interview created an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practices and articulate how they conceptualize differentiated instruction in theory and in practice.

Marshall (1996) states that having a small sample size will more than likely cause a large sampling error, which makes biases inevitable. Regarding the ethical parameters of my study, I was limited to only interviewing teachers, which therefore caused a bias from not having student or parent input in my research. As well, I was limited to interviewing only a small sample of teachers and I acknowledge that while the findings inform my research, they cannot generalize the experience of teachers more broadly speaking. Research shows that evidence about human experience has obvious limitations compared to observable human behaviour (Polkinghorne, 2005). The data that I collected depended on the participants’ ability to reflectively communicate their experiences and beliefs (Polkinghorne, 2005). Lastly, the capacity to be aware of or to recollect one’s experiences is limited and people do not always have a completely clear memory of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005).

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the research methodology. I began with a discussion of the research approach and procedure, delving into the meaning and significance of qualitative research, which is inquiry aimed and provides real life experiences that teachers have faced. I then highlighted some major differences from quantitative research. The term ‘data’ differs in quantitative research because the information is separate from the people that gathered the information; whereas, ‘data’ in qualitative research is the product of what the participant and research gather as information. I then described the instruments of data collecting, identifying semi-structured interviews as my primary source of data. I explained that some of the other approaches to qualitative research include purposeful and convenience sampling and spoke to
some of the benefits of semi-structured interviews. I identified the participants of my study as Sarah and Gary and then identified and listed the criteria applied to both participants. I also described recruitment procedures, which included purposeful sampling in order to maximize the richness and depth of data obtained, as well as convenience sampling due to the overall extent and scope of the research study. Ethical issues such as consent, risks of participation, right to withdraw, and data storage were also considered, and ways to address these potential issues were recognized. Lastly, I discussed the methodological limitations of the study, such as biases and generalizability, while also highlighting some of the strengths, such as first-hand accounts with teachers. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the research.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter I present my findings about how a sample of Ontario elementary teachers differentiate their literacy instruction and allow students to self-select their own text. While collecting data and analyzing the interviews, I kept in mind my research question: How is a sample of K-6 teachers differentiating their literacy instruction by incorporating choice in student selection of reading texts and what outcomes do they observe for student engagement in literacy? The findings are organized into four main themes and their associated subthemes. The findings are discussed in light of the research literature. Through my two semi-structured interviews with my participants, the four themes I identified were:

1. Participants’ experiences learning from their students helped them develop confidence in applying differentiated instruction in literacy instruction and reading engagement.
2. Participants indicated that they considered their students’ interests and abilities, as well as their preferred instructional strategies, when accessing texts for students.

3. Participants indicated that their teaching experiences and availability of resources supported them in effectively differentiating their literacy instruction.

4. Participants indicated that differentiation is not always effective or fully supported by schools, but that they respond to these challenges by maintaining flexibility in their teaching.

Within each main theme there are associated subthemes, which further examine the participants’ opinions and beliefs. In each theme I begin by explaining what the theme is, then I discuss the participants’ opinions on the topic, and finally I relate the participant data to existing literature. I conclude by summarizing my findings and begin to make recommendations for next steps.

4.1 Participants’ Experiences Learning From Their Students Helped Them Develop Confidence in Applying Differentiated Instruction in Literacy Instruction and Reading

Engagement

This theme addresses different experiences that teachers have had to prepare them to confidently use differentiated instruction in their classrooms. This is significant because the experiences that these teachers had to form their confidence in using differentiated instruction in literacy can encourage other teachers to do the same. Participants described their experiences working with different students who have individual needs, being pro-active in preparing and planning lessons for students, and being willing to try new things as being integral in preparing them to confidently apply differentiated instruction in literacy.
4.1.1 Participants learned through their teaching experiences that all students learn differently and teachers must teach to these differences.

Both participants believed that all students have individual needs and their experience teaching has prepared them to confidently apply differentiated instruction in their literacy classrooms.

Sarah spoke about what inspires her to use differentiated instruction in literacy. Sarah said, “Well every kid is a different learner. You can’t not differentiate instruction. You have to! So it’s driven from the kids, from the students, and their different abilities. Every kid learns differently and needs different instruction.” Sarah explained that she really has no choice but to differentiate her instruction. Sarah learned through her experiences that all students have different needs and their needs must be taken into account in order for them to succeed.

Gary also shared a similar experience about recognizing different students’ needs. He explained that, “As far as differentiating, every student learns differently regardless of the subject so the biggest thing on differentiation is getting to know your students.” Gary also expressed that being exposed to different strategies while being in the field and taking risks has helped him in effectively differentiating his instruction for all of his students’ needs. He also added that, based on his own experience,

Your goal is student engagement; you want to keep them engaged. So you have to be able to recognize when some students are getting bored with what you’re doing. Tying [class material] into [personal] connections for them and how they feel; getting their opinion on stuff.

Gary suggested that finding the students’ interest levels and then differentiating based on these interests has been beneficial for his students, as well as for his own teaching practice.
Stavroula, Leonidas, & Koutselini (2011) found information relevant to this research, specifically regarding how all students are independent learners with individual needs and that differentiated instruction could maximize learning for all students and improve their achievements. Both participants further enhanced my understanding of the research in this area through their explanations of getting to know one’s students first, before providing differentiated lessons. In addition, experience doing so and being willing to experiment with new strategies has aided teachers in effectively providing students with differentiated tasks and assessments.

4.1.2 Participants learned that being pro-active in differentiating instruction in literacy avoided challenges in the classroom.

Being pro-active in regards to differentiating instruction in literacy arose as a theme in both interviews. Each teacher expressed how they were pro-active in different ways; this may be due to the fact that Sarah comes from a primary background and Gary comes from Junior.

Sarah stated that it was essential to have visuals up in her classroom that spark students’ memory of strategies and skills that had been previously taught. When discussing strategies that she uses, Sarah said,

For example, I had a kid today who was writing in his journal and he’s at the end of Grade 1 and can’t even write a full sentence. So, rather than waiting for a challenge to arise I provide him with a dictionary with words for him to use – only him. Providing prompts, anchor charts, and a word wall are just some examples of visuals that I use to be pro-active and avoid the challenges that may occur.
Sarah strongly believes that having visuals up in her classroom allows for students to go back and spark their memory of things they may have learned in class that they might have forgotten about or need a refresher in.

For Gary, being pro-active meant going out of his way to approach his colleagues and ask for help. He has been teaching for five years and he says he still asks his colleagues questions and for strategies that work for them to better assist him. Gary stated,

Especially if you have someone who’s been teaching 14 years, like that’s experience and what I’ve found is all teachers are willing to share but you have to be willing to ask. So leverage your colleagues as far as different things that have worked for them.

Both participants spoke about being pro-active in different ways. Research has found that regardless of how teachers are pro-active about differentiating their instruction, it is always important for educators to get to know their students before implementing differentiated instruction strategies (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). It is in the best interest of teachers to observe and recognize learners’ needs and react accordingly. The participants made the idea of being pro-active more clear by explaining that differentiation will only work once teachers can identify the needs and interests of all learners. They further explained they think about the challenges that may occur and prevent these challenges from happening by preparing materials and differentiated instruction ahead of time.

4.1.3 Participants indicated that being willing to try new strategies can help students be successful.

Participants both spoke about the need to take risks in order to be successful in creating a differentiated classroom environment where all students’ needs are met.
Sarah did not speak to taking risks as much as Gary, however, she did speak about using lots of different strategies when it comes to differentiation. As mentioned previously, she uses visuals in her classroom. As well, Sarah stated, “Giving them success criteria and letting them know what to do. For some kids it might be more and some might be less. It depends where they are, really.” Sarah seemed to know about many different strategies that she could use to provide her students with the best quality education that they need. This likely means that she is flexible in her teaching practice and looks to take risks and try new strategies so that her students can learn in the best way that they can.

Gary believes that trial and error is the best way to try new things in order to have students be successful. Gary stated,

> It depends on the students in your class. But you have to be willing to try. My belief is that you only grow when you step out of your comfort zone. I may have certain beliefs but if I never try anything new I’m never helping myself.

Gary was very adamant about stepping out of one’s comfort zone and trying things that teachers may be uncomfortable with at first. He explained that if something does not work out the way that a teacher wanted it to that they could stop and change things.

> It is important to remember that growing and continuing to learn should be lifelong.

Anrkum & Bean’s (2008) findings were relevant to this research, specifically regarding trying new strategies. Strong and confident literacy teachers have been found most often to base their teaching off of how the students in their classroom learn. They try new strategies and take risks in order to best suit the needs of all their learners (Anrkum & Bean, 2008). Both participants agreed with this research by suggesting that trying new strategies and being uncomfortable at
times when trying new strategies is important in implementing effective differentiated instruction.

**4.2 Participants Indicated That They Considered Their Students’ Interests and Abilities, As Well as Their Preferred Instructional Strategies, When Accessing Texts for Students.**

This theme highlights what participants of the study are doing when it comes to accessing texts for their students. It is important to note some of the implications that teachers consider when accessing texts for students so that other teachers and educators can take into account these same ideas when accessing texts for their students. Both participants focus on their students’ interests and abilities as well as their own instructional strategies as tools to successfully access texts for their students. Self-selection is another teaching strategy that both participants discussed when asked about choosing meaningful texts for students.

**4.2.1 Participants indicated that they considered their students’ interests and abilities when accessing texts for students.**

Both participants spoke of their students’ interest and abilities when choosing different books to have and use in their classrooms.

Sarah spoke about having to teach her students how to select their own texts; consequently, it would not be something that would be happening in her classroom at the beginning of a school year. Choosing an appropriate book to read is something that students need to learn how to do. If a student is given complete choice to choose texts without any knowledge of their reading level, the genres the interest them, the different types of books there are, and
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

where to find certain books, the choice process would then not be beneficial. Students need to learn how to choose an appropriate book before having choice in what they read. Sarah said,

Once you know what their reading level is and what they are capable of and have read with them a few times then you have a better idea of what books you should have. Like I just started letting them choose their own texts because I think it’s important that they have to be interested in the book otherwise they aren’t going to read it. I could give them a book about dinosaurs and they couldn’t care less. They have to be engaged and there has to be a spark for them.

Sarah is suggesting that it is important that teachers do not provide just any books to their students because, especially at a young age, a student likely will not express that they are not interested in a topic. It is up to teachers to find out students’ interests and abilities when accessing texts for them. Gary agreed with what Sarah suggested about knowing students’ interests and abilities when providing them with texts. Gary stated,

It’s important because different students have different areas of interest and you don’t want to just tell them you have to read this because the disengaged student will say why do I have to do this? …[Instead] provide a choice of 4 books. Differentiating doesn’t mean you have to provide 100 choices. But it’s [saying,] “Okay, you can have A, B, or C.” Now you’ve giving them the power to choose. They’ll feel more engaged and connected because of that.

Discovering students’ interests and appealing to them, as a teacher, is essential for promoting strong reading engagement. A study conducted by Dargian et al. (2002) found that ‘the interestingness’ of a text was 30 times “more powerful than the readability of text when it comes to comprehension and recall” (Johnson & Blair, 2003, p. 185). Thus, both participants
agreed with this research because they suggest that students need to consistently be given choices of texts they are interested in for reading engagement and comprehension to be achieved.

4.2.2 Participants indicated that they considered self-selection as a teaching strategy when accessing texts for students.

Participants both spoke about having to set up the self-selection process by making sure students know how to appropriately self-select books before sending them off to do so.

Sarah spoke about going to the library with her students and showing them a section of where to choose a book from. When asked to give an example of how she introduces and enacts student self-selection Sarah stated,

When I taught grade 3, umm… it could be going to the library. This is the section of books for your grade. They may show me a book and we talk about whether or not it’s a good choice. … I think at the primary grades you have to set it up, it’s a long process.

Self-selecting is a strategy that needs to be initially teacher-directed where the teacher models for students how to choose a book. Students then need to consider their reading abilities, their interests, and their grade level. The learning would then become student-directed when students learn how to appropriately choose texts on their own that appeal to their interests. A teacher can assess whether a student has started to appropriately choose their own texts when seeing that the types of books they are choosing fit with the student’s individual reading abilities and interests.

In the junior grades, Gary uses self-selection as a teaching strategy by providing a limited selection when it comes to assessment and assignments. Gary said,

If it’s specific knowing that they comprehend what they’re reading I’ll limit the selection. I would say for more open that’s more of a writing bit because it’s providing choice to
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

just get them reading and you have a controlled environment where they’re here and you want to see them reading. But um ya I would limit the selection of text if I was focusing on assessing reading.

Gary uses self-selection as a strategy for himself to encourage the students to want to read and produce good work, but does so in a way that does not overwhelm his students with too many options. With regards to assessment, he explained that he needs to limit the selection more for reading than writing because it would be too difficult to have open-ended book choice, which would mean that he would need to know every student’s book.

It is crucial that teachers in the primary grades teach their students how to choose a book that is just right for them. Knowles (2009) found that assisting students in knowing what a “just right” book for them is will improve the abilities of struggling readers. This is a fundamental skill that students need to learn in order to engage in reading. Research suggests that many teachers believe that their students need structure or limitations for learning to take place, and that choice would hinder this process (Kohn, 1993). It supports these participants’ belief that choice does not mean open-ended complete full choice at all times, but that there does need to be some choice at all times for students to feel fulfilled and engaged in their learning. There can and should be limitations on choice for students, but choice still needs to be there because the benefits on student learning are remarkable (Gambrell, 2011).

4.3 Participants Indicated That Their Teaching Experiences and Availability of Resources Supported Them in Effectively Differentiating Their Literacy Instruction.

This theme addresses the research question about what resources and factors support teachers in differentiating their literacy instruction. This is significant because teachers can
benefit from knowing about supports that would help them in their own practice. Access to a variety of books, such as multicultural texts, levelled books, and dual language books, and allowing students to select their own texts supported them in differentiating their literacy instruction.

4.3.1 Participants’ access to a variety of books and resources supported them in differentiating their instruction and providing choice in text selection.

Having access to a wide variety of resources supported both participants in differentiating their instruction and providing choice in text selection.

Sarah mentioned that resource support with regards to book access was never a challenge in her school or in her teaching practice. She stated,

In this school, we have everything. We have the materials for self-selecting and supporting. Sometimes I’ll let them go through the bin and choose a book at their level so they can look at the different titles and pictures and choose within their range.

Having many different genres of books, as well as levels of books makes it easier for teachers to provide differentiation in literacy and allow their students to choose their own texts.

Gary also mentioned that the main resource that supported him in differentiating his instruction was having a full selection of texts in the classroom. Gary explained that gendered texts and levelled texts have appealed to students’ interests in the past. In addition, Gary spoke about having multicultural books and dual-language books for ELL students. He stated,

Having different texts for different backgrounds is important too. … We’ve had English translated books and they’ll be at a level 1 so you need primary books in a junior classroom so being aware of your classroom.
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

Again, having these resources in the classroom assist teachers when providing a differentiated classroom environment where students have choice in what they are reading.

When students pick their own novels they are likely to choose something that they can connect to their lives. Research has suggested that reading for pleasure and having choice has also been linked to academic achievement (Anderssen, 2010). This is due to students being interested in what they are reading and wanting to engage in the work that they are doing. However, if teachers are not provided with access to resources and materials to connect with all students’ interests and backgrounds, choice and differentiation will be a lot more difficult to achieve. Both participants suggested that they are fortunate to have many different types of texts to make reading meaningful to all students. Not having these resources would certainly make it more difficult to provide students with many choices in what they read.

4.3.2 Participants indicated that providing students with authority and autonomy in their text-selection supports them in effectively differentiating their literacy instruction.

Allowing students to choose their texts on their own supported both participants in successfully differentiating their literacy instruction.

Sarah spoke about providing students with a limited text-selection from about 3 or 4 books. She did this because it can be overwhelming for students to have too much choice and the choices that she did provide were individualized for each student. She was able to provide 3 or 4 choices for each student based on her prior knowledge of each student’s interests and abilities. Sarah stated,

Sometimes it can be too overwhelming if there’s a huge bin of books. Sometimes I give them a choice between 3 or 4. Or if there’s a book that they’ve read before I may put it in
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

the selection of their choices. Just so they can have some ownership. They have to have some say in it.

If students have ownership in what they are reading, teachers will have an easier time providing engaging and differentiated tasks for students. It takes getting to know the students first and teaching them how to select their own books appropriately.

Gary expressed that giving student autonomy over what they read enhances student engagement and their focus and attention. Gary stated,

They’re choosing what they’re interested in. It may be based on video games if you know your class is really into video games. One thing I did last year was teach me about Minecraft, I don’t know Minecraft but all of you are reading it or playing the game. So I want you to teach me. But ya, getting them to select what they want because when you have a follow up activity they’ll be more interested.

The participants believe that teaching based off of student interest tends to assist teachers because their lessons will be more engaging, students will want to learn, and the final products they receive from their students will be significantly better.

Research suggests that when students are not given ownership in their reading selection they tend to be disengaged (Guthrie et al., 2009). Research has also suggested that when students are not accountable for what they read, they tend to forget about the information as soon as they are done reading (Guthrie et al., 2009). Therefore, both participants believe that it is important for teachers to get to know their students in order to provide interesting opportunities for reading. As well, both participants agree with the research by suggesting that allowing students the opportunity to autonomously choose their texts will likely assist teachers at the same time as engaging students.
**4.4 Participants Indicated That Differentiation is Not Always Effective or Fully Supported by Schools, But That They Respond to These Challenges by Maintaining Flexibility in Their Teaching.**

This theme addresses what challenges teachers experience when differentiating their literacy instruction and allowing students to self-select their own text, and how they respond to these challenges. It is significant to know about the challenges teachers face when enacting this practice so that teachers can try to avoid the challenges and be proactive in their own practice. Each participant expressed that differentiating instruction may not always be effective and that some schools do not have a support system for differentiating instruction. However, teachers responded to these challenges by being flexible and finding strategies to assist their students’ needs.

**4.4.1 Participants indicated that differentiated instruction is not always effective for some students who need further support.**

Each teacher expressed that some students need further support and that differentiating their instruction may not be sufficient.

When discussing the challenge of differentiated instruction not being effective, Sarah explained that her biggest challenge was when teachers differentiate their instruction yet, the motivation to learn or the comprehension from the student is still not apparent. Sarah stated, I think that’s the biggest challenge. Like how much do you have to differentiate, how much do you have to challenge, how much – that’s the biggest challenge. It’s such a struggle, especially for the lower kids. For the higher kids it can be a struggle with them
too because it’s like you’re so concerned about those other kids that are struggling you kind of let those other kids slide a little bit more because of that.

Sarah’s concern suggested that it is difficult to differentiate for all students when some may be struggling and others may grasp a concept quickly.

There may be students in a classroom that have very little interest in their education and simply do not engage in any differentiated tasks that the teacher provides. Gary spoke about having lots of books in his classroom as well as having library periods. He stated,

[S]ometimes you have students say they don’t want to get a book because they simply do not want to read anything. I try and help them by asking about their interests, hobbies, family backgrounds, and they still just don’t want to read.

Choice is one form of differentiating by allowing all students to have a choice in a type of assignment they do, or providing different ways to showcase their knowledge (Anderssen, 2010). In Gary’s case, he provided choice to his students by allowing them to read anything they would like, but the interest to read was not there. Therefore, the students’ lack of motivation challenged the effectiveness of the differentiation process.

This demonstrates that differentiating instruction alone is not always sufficient. Research has found that the quality of differentiation is what strengthens the learning for students; however, many teachers report that they do differentiate their instruction, but how they enact the differentiation varies significantly (Stavroula et al., 2011). As Sarah suggested, it is possible that teachers get overwhelmed with how much effort needs to be put in when implementing differentiated instruction for all students, causing it to be a major challenge for teachers to successfully implement it in their classrooms.
4.4.2 Participants indicated that sometimes schools and teachers lack support or interest in differentiated instruction.

A common challenge that both teachers discussed came from a lack of support from administrators, teachers, or others in the education system to effectively differentiate their instruction.

When asked if resource support was a challenge, Sarah stated, “Teacher support can be a challenge. Reading recovery needs extra support and [the students] don’t all get serviced. Resources as in people I think is a challenge anywhere.” Sarah expressed that schools generally lack sufficient teacher support. She suggested that there are many students who have varying abilities and there are also many teachers waiting for jobs that could be in the schools assisting these students.

Gary explained that there is a need for more teachers to use their knowledge from teacher preparation and professional development. He expressed that there are teacher preparation workshops that take place but that many teachers will go to them, but then do not put that new knowledge into practice. Gary said,

You can sit in a course and get all this information. If you just come and park it on a shelf, then there’s no use for it. I always stress to the students that the most important thing is not just knowledge, it’s the use of knowledge because if you don’t use your knowledge it’s useless. So using what you know and taking those courses and anything that can take you out of your comfort zone, challenge you as a teacher, and expose you to those strategies but you gotta be willing to try it. That’s the biggest thing, translating it into the classroom.
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

Research suggests that individualized support for students would increase student motivation and engagement to read (Gambrell, 2011). There are not enough teachers in schools to support students in an individualized way so that they can get the proper support that they need. As well, it is a challenge for teachers to plan differentiated lessons for students’ individual needs because many fear they are not supported by administrators providing them with enough resources, and if teachers feel unsupported it is unlikely they will take part in differentiating their instruction (Reis, McCoach, Little, Muller & Kaniskan, 2011). As Sarah suggested, administrators could assist by hiring my resource support such as educational assistants, teachers, early childhood educators, etc. As well, providing teachers with more hands on materials with lessons on how to use them could assist teachers in feeling supporting and more effectively differentiating their instruction.

4.4.3 Participants respond to these challenges by being flexible in finding ways to best support their students’ needs.

Both participants spoke of being flexible and finding new strategies to respond to the challenges they face when incorporating differentiated instruction in their classrooms.

When Sarah was asked how she responded to the challenges that she faced and why, she spoke about the importance of collaborating with other teachers and finding different strategies that she may have never thought of before, based on the child’s needs. Sarah stated,

You beg and you plead [laughs] with other teachers. You figure it out. You can find different ways to read the book. If you didn’t have the resources you could have them go home and draw a picture about their favorite part.
Sarah also spoke of differentiating as simply being good teaching. In order for good teaching to take place, teachers must find ways to have students’ interests be met, as well as comprehension.

Gary agreed that he has to be flexible to support his students’ needs. He added to how he responds to challenges by explaining that he is proactive about it. Gary co-creates rules that assist him with the challenges that may arise in his classroom. Gary stated,

[My students] have great ideas and they want to be fair right so as opposed to me saying these are the rules, let them come up with the rules because they’ll be more engaged to follow it [sic]. So it helps with the challenges by leveraging the students you’ll get more buy in.

It was interesting that Gary spoke a lot less about having challenges in his classroom than Sarah; this may be due to teacher preparedness and thinking ahead of the challenges that could arise. It seems that Gary is more proactive than Sarah through co-learning and co-teaching that he does with his students. Less challenges arise when Gary proactively includes his students in the teaching and learning process. However, when differentiating instruction, teachers cannot always be prepared because it takes getting to know the students first before planning for their needs.

Teacher flexibility has been discussed in research with regards to differentiating instruction. Researchers (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000) state that differentiated instruction is an ongoing flexible process that works through student-centered activities, flexible groupings, differentiated activities, and having students and teachers both being part of the learning process. Teachers need to learn from their students and with their students in order to produce a successful learning environment for all. This connects to what Gary suggested about allowing the students to co-create rules with him so that they could feel that they are a part of their own learning.
4.5 Conclusion

This study found that two teachers believe that differentiating their literacy instruction and allowing students to self-select their own texts will increase reading engagement as well as reading comprehension amongst their students. This is significant because many teachers today are not differentiating their literacy instruction by allowing their students to self-select their own texts. Some teachers may not be aware of the different strategies they can use in order to effectively differentiate their instruction. Some of these strategies include: having a limited choice selection for certain assessments, providing complete open-choice for independent reading, teaching students how to appropriately select their own texts, and finally learning about student interests first and providing them with the opportunity to read and learn more about their topic of interest. These findings contribute to the existing literature by adding practical examples of what some teachers are doing in the present day to differentiate their literacy instruction. Most of the existing literature addresses the idea that many teachers are not differentiating their instruction even though there are many students who are disengaged with reading. It is important for teachers to be aware of the different strategies they can use in their classrooms to make literacy, specifically reading, more enjoyable and engaging.

These findings add new insight to the topic of differentiated instruction in literacy, and they provide implications for teachers and other educational stakeholders, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.
**Chapter 5: Discussion**

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

There are existing practices of what teachers are doing in order to provide differentiated instruction in their literacy classrooms. This research study was conducted to find out how teachers are differentiating their literacy instruction by incorporating choice in student selection of reading texts and what outcomes they observe for student engagement in literacy. In this chapter, I discuss the key findings and their significance, their implications for the educational community, as well as for my own professional identity and practice. I then make recommendations for educational stakeholders, areas for further research, and concluding comments.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

My first theme was regarding teachers learning from their students in order to confidently differentiate their instruction in literacy. Both participants demonstrated that differentiating instruction provides benefits for teachers and students, and that their experience doing so, as well as being willing to experiment with new strategies, has assisted them in effectively providing students with differentiated tasks and assessments. As well, both teachers spoke of being pro-active in order to confidently teach using differentiated instruction. Regardless of how teachers are pro-active in their practice, it was found that it is always important for educators to learn about their students prior to differentiating for them in order to teach to their students’ needs.

My second theme addressed teachers considering their students’ interests and abilities when accessing texts for them. It is important for teachers to be aware of the interests and abilities of their learners because some students may not voice whether or not they enjoy a text,
which may cause their engagement level to decrease. Both participants believed that students need to consistently have meaningful choices of texts provided to them in order for their students to engage in and comprehend what they are reading. As well, self-selection of texts was noted by both teachers to be a significant teaching strategy when accessing texts in order for students to feel a sense of autonomy in their learning.

My third theme focused on teachers’ experiences and the availability of resources they had to support them in effectively differentiating their literacy instruction. Having a wide array of resources was something that supported both participants in being able to provide choice in text selection for their students. When students are given the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of texts they are more likely to find something they can connect to their own lives. However, in some schools the resources that are available are minimal making it more difficult for students to be given choice in what they read, and providing teachers with less ways to differentiate their literacy instruction.

My final theme related to the challenges that teachers face regarding differentiation not always being effective and how the teachers respond to the challenges by being flexible in their practice. Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate for all students when there are many students who are grasping a concept at different paces. There may be students who are struggling, while other students are bored. Specific to literacy, sometimes the interest to read is completely missing even when the choice of what the students read is provided. Individualized support is one way that teachers try responding to the challenge of students being uninterested. However, participants mentioned that there are not enough teachers in schools to support each student individually. Being flexible, collaborating with other teachers, and continuously getting to know the students is what assisted both participants to successfully differentiate their instruction.
5.2 Implications

In this section I outline the implications for different stakeholders of the educational community, such as students, teachers, parents and administrators. I also include implications for my personal practice as a new teacher. In addition to these implications, I will provide my own recommendations for what action each stakeholder should take to improve feedback.

5.2.1 The educational research community

My research indicates that teachers should allow students to self-select their own texts in the literacy classroom. As suggested by my participants previously, and as discussed in research, allowing students to self-select their own texts encourages motivation to read, increases engagement, assists with reading comprehension, and therefore heightens student academic achievement (Johnson & Blair, 2003; Anderssen, 2010; Gambrell, 2011). However, if the resources are unavailable for teachers to use, they cannot differentiate their material for all students. The province of Ontario should know that due to a lack of resources at some schools, students are not receiving the education they deserve. Thus, the findings of this study are greatly significant to the educational community.

Both participants spoke about how they provide choice for students in their classrooms. Allowing students to self-select their own texts and have choice in what they read does not mean that there always needs to be completely open-choice where there are no limits and guidelines on what students are reading. It is important to note that there are many strategies that teachers can use in order to effectively differentiate and provide choice in reading material. Some of the different strategies that the participants mentioned were having a limited choice selection from a few different books that are still individualized to a particular student, having complete open-
choice for independent reading, teaching how to appropriately self-select texts, and most importantly learning about student interests first. It is critical that the educational community learn about these different strategies that teachers are using to differentiate their literacy instruction so that teachers and educators can learn for their own practice.

Both participants also mentioned that schools could use more people as resources for supporting learners’ individual needs. In order for students to all receive a well-developed literacy education, schools should hire more teachers and educators to help assist students with individualized support. As well, more resources and books such as multicultural books, chapter books, picture books, magazines, iPads (for reading online), computers, and a variety of genres such as fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, mystery, etc., are needed in schools so that students are supported in having a meaningful literacy education.

5.2.2 My professional identity and practice

My findings suggest that there are links between allowing students to self-select their own text and academic achievement, including reading comprehension. I believe that the implications of this research further emphasize the importance of allowing students to guide their own learning through having choice in what they read and learn.

In my future practice, I will ensure that I get to know my students beyond the surface. I would like to get to know my students’ backgrounds, their opinions on important topics, their family lives, and their interests and hobbies, so that I can provide them with meaningful and differentiated choices in the literacy classroom. I will do this by explaining to my students that I am not only their teacher to teach them new content every day, but that I care about them and want to get to know each of them individually so that I can teach to their interests and needs. I
will have my students write journals or diaries that they share with me. I will also use community-building activities to ensure that all students have a voice and to create a safe classroom environment.

I will also continue to try new strategies and speak to colleagues and other educators who can help benefit my own practice. It has been made more clear through my interviews and research how important it is, as a teacher, to take risks in order to be successful. Learning about my students and learning about myself as a teacher will be a continuous, ever-changing process. As we all continue to learn and grow, the way we teach and learn from each other will constantly change. I am excited to be a life-long learner/teacher who learns from my students and other educators to continue bettering my teaching practice.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications of this study present recommendations for teachers, Ministries of Education, school boards, and teacher education through professional development. I outline three recommendations below:

1. Teachers need to be willing to take risks when differentiating their literacy instruction. They need to be confident in allowing their students to self-select their own text even though it may be more of a challenge to assess. When allowing students to self-select their own texts, it is important to remember to first get to know each student individually and then provide specific choices for each student based on the knowledge the teacher has received about their students. If teachers are closed-minded and choose to take the easier route by not differentiating they will not benefit their students or themselves. As well, all teachers should attend professional development sessions that can provide them
with new strategies to add to their repertoire on how to implement differentiated instruction and choice in text-selection in their literacy classrooms.

2. If a school lacks funding, my suggestion is for Ministries of Education and school boards to fund more reading materials such as books, magazines, computers, laptops, iPads, etc. Sharing resources within the school community is also important so that all students have the opportunity to learn from different materials. Also, one of the discoveries I made as I conducted this research study is that differentiated instruction and choice are extensive, growing topics of conversation that require much more research to be facilitated specifically in literacy and reading comprehension. There are many ways to differentiate instruction, however, Ministries of Education should gather research in this area so that school boards can learn the benefits of providing more information on how to do so in the literacy classroom.

3. Ministries of Education and school boards should require teachers to take part in more professional develop so that they can learn new strategies on how to differentiate their literacy instruction and how to allow students choice when selecting texts without having to feel overwhelmed and stressed. Professional development can reduce anxiety about trying a new strategy that a teacher may have never learned about before and it can encourage teachers to better their practice. Teacher education programs should also provide teacher candidates with more strategies on how to differentiate literacy instruction to assist students who struggle with reading comprehension.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

This study has expanded on research in the areas of differentiated instruction and literacy through allowing students to self-select their own text and have choice in what they are learning. There is a need, however, for more research in the area of differentiating instruction with regards to reading comprehension. In future practice, it is recommended that research looks into ways that teachers can differentiate their literacy instruction, specifically for students who struggle with reading comprehension. As mentioned in my literature review, differentiated instruction literature currently focuses on motivation and engagement, but provides few strategies for reading comprehension.

Due to my own experiences struggling with reading comprehension, I would like to see if there are more ways that teachers are differentiating their instruction in order to assist with reading comprehension specifically. It would also be beneficial to conduct more research on the challenges that teachers face when developing student reading comprehension. There has been some research pertaining to this idea that suggests that accommodating students in literacy is one of their biggest challenges as a teacher (Tobin & McInnes, 2008). However, more research about what makes accommodating in literacy such a challenge, and what teachers are doing to overcome this challenge would be significant.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The present study is valuable because it reinforces the importance of understanding and acknowledging the significance of getting to know and understanding each student individually in order to successfully implement differentiated instruction. The participants in this study recognize the importance that differentiated instruction plays in accompanying student success,
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

and the benefits that it can have in the literacy classroom. It is significant that more research be
done to investigate more strategies that support teachers in differentiating their instruction with
regards to reading comprehension, what the challenges and fears are that push teachers away
from doing so, and what teachers are doing to overcome these obstacles.

The findings within this study are valuable to many stakeholders within the field of
education, such as teachers, Ministries of Education, and school boards. If administrators hold a
positive mindset about differentiation in literacy and providing students with choice when
selecting texts, it is more likely that teachers will take on the challenge and support student
learning in the best way possible. Research shows that differentiated instruction is an extremely
effective method, which benefits all learners (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). In addition, it is
important for teachers to seek out professional development related to differentiated instruction
in literacy in order to better implement it in their practice. If teachers start providing their
students with more differentiated material, allowing for choice in the literacy classroom, and
having students select their own texts, students will be encouraged and excited to read, which in
turn creates more inquisitive, motivated, and successful students.
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

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Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Dear __________________,

My Name is Lacey Pastein and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how elementary literacy teachers are differentiating their instruction. I am interested in interviewing teachers who teach literacy, provide students with opportunities for self-selecting text, and have taught for minimum of two years. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Lacey Pastein
Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Lacey Pastein and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) __________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in my research study. The aim of this research is to learn how a sample of grades 1-6 teachers differentiate their literacy instruction by allowing students to self-select their text. This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes, and is comprised of approximately 22 questions. The interview protocol has been divided into 4 sections, beginning with the participant’s background information, followed by questions about their perspectives and beliefs about using differentiated instruction in literacy, then their practices and strategies for teaching with differentiated instruction, and concluding with questions regarding challenges and next steps for teachers. I want to remind you that you can choose not to answer any question, and can remove yourself from participation at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A – Background Information

1. How long have you been a teacher?

2. What grades and subject areas do you currently teach? Which have you previously taught?

3. In addition to your role as a teacher, do you fulfill any other roles in the school (e.g. coach, advisor, resource teacher etc.)?

4. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated (i.e. diversity, socioeconomic status)? How long have you taught in this school?

5. What inspires you to use differentiated instruction in literacy?
Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

a. What experiences inform your interest in this practice?

b. What experiences helped prepare you to differentiate your literacy instruction?

(Listen first, then probe re: teacher education, professional development, own experience in school etc.)

Section B – Perspectives/Beliefs About Differentiated Instruction in Literacy

1. What does differentiating instruction mean to you? How would you describe differentiated instruction to someone who does not know what it is?

2. Why do you believe differentiated instruction is an important instructional tool?

3. What are the benefits and challenges you’ve experienced with DI?

4. What do you believe is the role of differentiated instruction in literacy, more specifically?

5. What benefits for literacy learners do you think differentiated instruction holds and why?

6. As you know, I am interested in learning about your perspective and practices regarding self-selection of texts specifically.

   a. Can you tell me why you believe it is important for students to be able to choose their own texts?

   b. What do you believe allowing students to self-select their text can do that traditional teaching methods cannot?

Section C – Teacher Practices

1. Do you differentiate instruction in more subjects than literacy? How?

2. Can you give me some examples of how you have used differentiated instruction in teaching literacy?
3. If you were to focus in on how you use one of those examples, can you please provide some more detail?
   a. What grade were you teaching?
   b. What were your learning goals for the lesson?
   c. What outcomes did you observe from your students?

4. Now focusing more on how you create opportunities for students to select their texts as one form of differentiating your literacy instruction – can you relay an example for me of how you introduce and enact this practice?

5. A) Do you set rules? What are they?
   
   B) How do you facilitate students’ self-selection? For example, do you provide a range of possibilities for them to choose from? How do you choose the range of books you select? What considerations do you take into account?

6. Can you tell me more about what kinds of opportunities for learning you enact this practice in? (e.g. independent reading, guided reading, book reports etc.)

7. In your experience, how do students respond to having choice in text selection?
   
   a. What outcomes have you observed from them?
   
   b. Do you have an example you can share with me of a particular student and their experience with self-selection of texts?

8. What role, if any, does text selection have in your assessment practice?

Section D – Challenges, Supports, and Next Steps

9. What kind of challenges do you encounter when providing students with the opportunity to select their own texts for literacy teaching and learning? *Listen first but be ready to probe further if necessary re: challenges to do with teacher knowledge of texts,
facilitating guided reading using different texts, resource support (access to range of books)

a. How do you respond to the challenges you face and why?

10. What range of factors and resources support you in enacting this practice of self-selection of texts? What would further support you in this practice? (*Listen first, and then probe if necessary re: things like teacher preparation and professional development, financial resources for bigger classroom library).

11. What advice do you have for a beginning teacher who is interested in differentiating his/her literacy instruction? What advice do you have for teachers interested in providing students with choice in text selection?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.